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## ■ SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT IN POPULAR MUSIC AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF NON-NATIVE ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Ovaj rad ima za cilj istražiti uticaj neslaganja subjekta i predikata u popularnoj muzici na jezički razvoj neizvornih učenika engleskog jezika. Korpus koji smo koristili u radu sačinjen je od 802 pjesme sa više od 200 miliona pregleda na Jutjubu i analiza je urađena uz pomoć deskriptivno-analitičke i statističke metode. Hipoteza istraživanja jeste da u popularnoj muzici često mogu da se uoče brojni primjeri slaganja subjekta i predikata koji odstupaju od pravila standardnog engleskog. Ukoliko se ne skrene pažnja na ovakve primjere u učionici na adekvatan način, mogli bi potencijalno da oštete lingvistički razvoj neizvornih govornika i učenika engleskog jezika. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da je 396 pjesama lingvistički standardno (49.37%) a 406 nestandardno (50.62%). Pjesme sa neslaganjem subjekta i predikata (181 pjesma ukupno) su izuzeto popularne sa 37 pronađenih primjera koji su zabilježili više od milijardu pregleda na Jutjubu dok je većina zabilježila između 200 miliona i preko 5 milijardi pregleda. Pronađeno je ukupno 1506 nestandardnih elemenata u analiziranim pjesmama, 417 nestandardnih elemenata se odnosilo na neslaganje subjekta i predikata. Većina se nalazila u strofama kao i uvodnim i završnim dijelovima pjesama, a pronašli smo ukupno 142 pjesma sa neslaganjem u pomenutim dijelovima. U svega nekoliko pjesama, tačnije 38 ukupno, neslaganje subjekta i predikata je zabilježeno u refrenu. Rezultati se mogu smatrati značajnim za nastavu stranog jezika kao i za proučavanje uloge popularne muzike pri usvajanju stranog jezika. Istraživanje naglašava potencijalno nepovoljan uticaj nestandardnih lingvističkih primjera na neizvorne učenike engleskog jezika i upućuje na značaj adekvatnog pedagoškog nadgledanja pri upotrebi popularne muzike kao autentičnog i interaktivnog alata u nastavi jezika. Rad postavlja osnov za buduća istraživanja na ovu temu i doprinosi boljem razumijevanju moguće uloge koju popularna muzika može da ima pri formalnom usvajanju stranog jezika.

Ključne riječi: slaganje subjekta i predikata u engleskom, jezički osjećaj, neizvorni govornici i učenici engleskog jezika.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Prior research has suggested a range of activities for incorporating songs into language practice, including listening or singing along to songs, discussing musical themes, lyrics, or performers, conducting interviews, and practicing pronunciation, intonation, and stress (Rosová 2007). These activities provide a means of introducing topics, reinforcing language concepts, addressing common learner errors, promoting active listening, encouraging group discussions, and fostering creativity and imaginative expression, all while creating a relaxed and engaging classroom atmosphere (Eken 1996). Even though popular music lyrics were entirely excluded from foreign language classrooms due to their numerous non-standard grammatical features during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Stocker 1923; Gravenall 1949), we can say that, in later years, they were incorporated only as supplementary materials for leisurely use, without any substantial focus on linguistic instruction (Smith 2003). The use of popular music lyrics in language teaching has remained largely unaddressed, as highlighted in various studies, including Engh (2013) and Langeland Dunsire (2013). Furthermore, the incorporation of grammar instruction in song-based activities in foreign language classrooms and textbooks is limited (Keskinen 2014; Summer 2018; Tegge 2018), focusing primarily on listening comprehension and general writing tasks.

These practices and trends may hinder the development of meta-language awareness in non-native English language learners, which refers to their ability to comprehend and consciously perceive the intricacies of the language during the learning, teaching, and usage processes, with all its variations and complexities. These concerns are not lost on learners, as studies indicate that 77% of them expose themselves to authentic input outside the classroom, with only 23% abstaining from such practices. Of the learners who sought authentic input, 40% listened to music, 36% watched films, 13% watched various TV series, 9% read, and only 2% watched different TV shows (Žarković 2017; Žarković Mccray *et al.* 2021). Non-native English speakers and learners are considered intercultural communicators, demonstrating an interest in participating in real-life communication, which explains their efforts to seek authentic input regularly (Alcon Soler/Safont Jorda 2007). The impact of popular music on their linguistic development outside foreign language classrooms is a relevant research topic and problem given that popular music is a widely consumed form of entertainment and is therefore a significant source of linguistic input for many non-native speakers and learners.

Studies have shown that exposure to popular music can have a significant impact on the language proficiency and linguistic feel of non-native learners, particularly in terms of vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, sentence structures, and sociolinguistic competence by providing a rich source of input (Millington 2011; Maridueña Macancela *et al.* 2016; Kuśnierek 2016; Borisai/Dennis 2016). However, research has also shown that the linguistic input from popular music can be problematic, as it often contains non-standard grammatical features, pronunciation, and other linguistic forms (Žarković 2017; Žarković Mccray *et al.* 2021). In non-native learners of English, linguistic feel refers to their unconscious and automatic ability to use and understand the grammar of the English language accurately (Bley-Vroman 1999). Non-native learners, in contrast to native learners, may not have had the opportunity to be exposed to the language from an early

age and may have less exposure to the language in their daily lives. This discrepancy in exposure can result in non-native learners having less developed linguistic intuition and proficiency in comparison to native learners. Therefore, it is considered essential to provide non-native learners with targeted education guidance and opportunities to encounter a variety of linguistic registers and features, including both standard and non-standard, to enable them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for effective communication in real-world contexts.

The impact of such exposure needs to be addressed in both academic research and classroom instruction, especially if we add that contemporary research results state that learning is optimal when conditions for emotional or arousal and linguistic functions are fulfilled (Schön *et al.* 2008: 982). Music has an uncanny manner of activating neurons which results in relaxing muscle tension, changing pulse, and producing long-range memory (Campbell 1992). All these activities are directly related to the number of neurons activated in the experience. The primary factors influencing and moderating brainwave patterns are sound, especially music, and vibrational patterns, especially rhythm and beats. Millions of neurons can be activated in a single musical experience and through the activation of these neural connections learning takes place (Adkins 1997: 7). Music has a way of utilizing the left half of the cerebrum for language and the right for distinguishing musical intonations through integration via the corpus callosum. Functions of the two halves cannot, however, be completely separated, but that the more connections that can be made in the brain, the more integrated that experience is within memory (Campbell 1992). The inclusion of popular music lyrics in foreign language classrooms can be a valuable tool for creating a positive learning environment, developing meta-language awareness, and improving linguistic proficiency. Therefore, it is important to consider the incorporation of non-standard elements frequently present in these lyrics. The primary objective of this paper is to provide scholarly analysis and attention to popular music lyrics containing non-standard subject-verb agreement examples.

Subject-verb agreement (SVA) is a fundamental aspect of grammar that plays a crucial role in determining the clarity and coherence of a sentence. It is the most important type of concord in English because it establishes the concord of the third person number of subject and verb, i.e. a singular subject requires a singular verb while a plural subject requires a plural verb (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 755; Greenbaum/Quirk 1990: 214). Early research on subject-verb agreement (SVA) in English focused on its syntactic and morphological aspects. Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) investigated the use of SVA in written English and identified various grammatical patterns and irregularities that often occur in real-life language use. Additionally, a study by Leech (1971) explored the influence of stylistic and discourse factors on SVA patterns in English, highlighting the importance of context in shaping SVA patterns. More recent research has sought to extend the study of SVA in English to other linguistic domains, such as sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Research by Eckert (2000) explored the relationship between SVA and social identity, showing how SVA patterns can reflect the speaker's cultural and social background. Non-standard SVA examples are prominent features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and White Southern dialects, both of which are closely associated with the origins of popular music genres in the Southern United States (Wolfram/Schilling 2016). The origins of

these dialects can be traced back to regional dialects of England, as noted by Trudgill (1999). Therefore, the use of non-standard concord in popular music genres reflects not only the regional and cultural roots of these dialects in the Southern United States but also their historical development from the English language.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The initial hypothesis is that popular music lyrics exhibit a substantial number of SVA that diverge from standard grammatical rules. The paper aims to analyze the frequency and distribution of non-standard SVA examples and discuss their potential impact on the linguistic development among non-native English speakers and learners. The current analysis will not focus on the origins of non-standard subject-verb agreement examples in regional dialects or vernaculars, but rather leave this topic open for potential future research. Instead, the implications of exposure to non-standard SVA examples in popular music lyrics for second language (L2) instruction is going to be discussed. The main goal of the research is to emphasize the significance of designing language instruction that incorporates the linguistic characteristics of popular culture in order to facilitate the learners' comprehension and usage of the language.

To achieve this, a sample of popular songs with more than 200 million views on YouTube was selected, the songs that were this popular during the research period from March 2015 over July 2022.<sup>2</sup> These songs were chosen because they are widely known and have been widely viewed by a large number of non-native English learners, making them a suitable representation of the language input that non-native English learners are exposed to through popular music. The sample consisted of a variety of musical genres, including pop, hip-hop, country, rap, dance, funk, rhythm and blues and rock, to ensure a diverse representation of popular music. The selected songs, or more precisely, the lyrics<sup>3</sup>, were then analyzed for subject-verb agreement. The accuracy of subject-verb agreement was measured by counting the number of instances where the subject and verb agreed in number, and comparing this with the number of instances where subject-verb agreement was not observed. The methods utilized in the research are descriptive, analytic, and statistical methods.

For this study, a sample of 802 popular songs was examined, revealing that 49.37% (396 songs) did not include any non-standard elements, while 50.62% (406 songs) did. Of these, 181 songs exhibited non-standard SVA, which constitutes 22.56% of all songs examined or 44.58% of the subset containing non-standard elements. A detailed description and analysis of some typical examples from the corpus will follow in the following section.

## 3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The corpus of popular music lyrics was analyzed with regards to songs containing non-standard SVA. The study examined the frequency of non-standard SVA instances, the

2 We cannot say that we analyzed every music video with more than 200 million views because these numbers are updated weekly if not daily and there are no comprehensive lists that contain all videos. Our list was compiled by us.

3 We downloaded lyrics from the following websites: <https://www.azlyrics.com/> and <https://genius.com/>.

position of such instances within songs, and the number of views on YouTube for each song. The results showed that out of the 1506 non-standard elements in the corpus, 417 were related to non-standard SVA, which accounted for 27.69% of all non-standard elements. The songs with non-standard SVA ranged from 200 million to over 5 billion views on YouTube. Among the songs with non-standard elements, 37 had more than one billion views, accounting for 20.44% of the total songs with non-standard elements.

We start presenting examples and the discussion<sup>4</sup> with the most popular songs in this group, i.e. songs with more than one billion views:

1) Hello from the outside

At least I can say that I've tried  
To tell you I'm sorry for breaking your heart  
But *it don't matter*, it clearly doesn't tear you apart  
Anymore (Adele – *Hello*)

2) There goes Rabbit, he choked, he's so mad but he won't

Give up that easy, no, he won't have it, he knows  
His whole back's to these ropes, *it don't matter*, he's dope  
He knows that but he's broke, he's so stagnant, he knows  
When he goes back to this mobile home, that's when it's  
Back to the lab again, yo, this old rhapsody  
Better go capture this moment and hope it *don't pass* him, and (Eminem – *Lose Yourself*)

3) Said, "Lil bitch, you can't fuck with me if you wanted to" (ooh)

These expensive, *these is* red bottoms, *these is* bloody shoes (ooh)  
Hit the store, I can get 'em both, I don't wanna choose (bah)  
And I'm quick, cut a nigga off, so don't get comfortable, look (ooh) (Cardi B – *Bodak Yellow*)

4) My momma called, seen you on TV, son

Said shit done changed ever since *we was on*  
I dreamed it all ever since I was young  
They said I wouldn't be nothing  
Now they always say, "congratulations" (uh)  
Worked so hard, forgot how to vacation (uh-huh)  
They ain't never had the dedication (uh)  
People hatin', say we changed and look, we made it (uh)  
Yeah, we made it (uh) (Post Malone and Quavo – *Congratulations*)

5) And what's small turn to a friendship

*A friendship turn* to a bond

4 For the purpose of illustration, just a small portion of all non-standard SVA that we found in our corpus is going to be listed and discussed.

And that bond will never be broken  
 The love will never get lost (and the love will never get lost)  
 And when *brotherhood* come first  
 Then the line will never be crossed  
 Established it on our own  
 When that line had to be drawn  
 And that line is what we reach  
 So remember me when I'm gone (remember me when I'm gone)  
 (Wiz Khalifa and Charlie Puth – *See You Again*)

Non-standard SVA instances are striking for various reasons. For example, the songs *Hello* (1), *Bodak Yellow* (3) and *Congratulations* (4) contain non-standard SVA examples in the chorus, which means that the non-standard SVA is repeated many times in the most prominent part of a song. Furthermore, popular songs tend to have a story that becomes a part of popular culture, for example, *Hello* was released in October 2015 and reached one billion views on YouTube by the end of January 2016 and still counting (3 billion in January 2023), Cardi B's *Bodak Yellow* was the first song by a female rapper that reached number one on Billboard Hot 100 in 2017 without the help of any other credited artists, which was historic because it took almost 19 years since Lauryn Hill's *Doo Wop (That Way)* in 1999. Eminem's *Lose Yourself* (2) received the Academy Award for Best Original Song (the first time a rap song ever won this award) in 2003 and according to the *Guinness Book of World Records* became the longest-running single at number one for a rap song. *See you again* (5) broke YouTube record in 2017 for being the most viewed song in 24 hours and went on to become the third most viewed song in the world with 5.7 billion views (in January 2023).

In terms of the position of non-standard elements, the majority of non-standard SVA instances were found in the verses and intro/outro sections of the songs with non-standard SVA, accounting for 78.45% (142 songs). A smaller proportion of non-standard SVA was identified in the chorus, with 20.99% (38 songs) containing such elements:

- 6) I had a premonition that we fell into a rhythm  
 Where *the music don't stop for life*  
 Glitter in the sky, glitter in my eyes  
 Shining just the way I like  
 If you're feeling like you need a little bit of company  
 You met me at the perfect time (Dua Lipa – *Levitating*)
- 7) There's a time that I remember, when I did not know no pain  
 When I believed in forever, and everything would stay the same  
 Now *my heart feel like December when somebody say your name*  
 'Cause I can't reach out to call you, but I know I will one day, yeah (Maroon 5 – *Memories*)
- 8) Knew he was a killer first time that I saw him  
 Wondered how many girls he had loved and left haunted

But if he's a ghost, then I can be a phantom  
 Holdin' him for ransom, some  
 Some boys are tryin' too hard, *he don't try at all though*  
 Younger than my exes, *but he act like such a man, so*  
 I see nothing better, I keep him forever  
 Like a vendetta-ta (Taylor Swift – *Ready For It*)

9) *Who run the world? Girls (girls)*  
*Who run the world? Girls (girls)*  
*Who run the world? Girls (girls)*  
*Who run the world? Girls (girls)*  
*Who run this mother? Girls*  
*Who run this mother? Girls*  
*Who run this mother? Girls*  
*Who run this mother? Girls*  
*Who run the world? Girls (girls)*  
*Who run the world? Girls (girls)*  
*Who run the world? Girls (girls)*  
*Who run the world? Girls (girls)* (Beyonce – *Run the World (Girls)*)

All the songs are the examples of non-standard SVA in the verses except for Beyonce's *Run the World (Girls)* (9) which featured a chorus entirely composed of non-standard SVA instances. This song was included to illustrate that popular songs can have a significant impact on one's linguistic development, regardless of any interesting pop culture stories surrounding them. This very long chorus repeats twice, and at the end of the song this sentence appears in four lines. The repetition of this non-standard sentence in 29 lines of the song highlights the potential for non-native English learners to develop a weak linguistic feel if not provided with effective language instruction.

If we know that millions of neurons are activated in a single musical experience (Adkins 1997), or that the more connections that can be made in the brain, the more integrated the learning experience is within memory (Campbell 1992), or that songs can motivate learners and act as a cultural database and that songs create a positive learning environment (Krashen 1981; Millington 2011), then we can say that the input we presented is a cause for professional development. It is even more highlighted by the fact that these non-standard SVA examples sometimes repeat more than once in one song. One additional thing that is alarming is the fact that these songs are worldwide popular and have already been repeated and heard in different situations by non-native English speakers and learners. Having said all this, we think that popular music, containing standard and non-standard features, should be a part of formal second language acquisition. Motivated and engaged learners, authentic input that can be utilized as a cultural resource, and a positive learning environment can facilitate the automatization of language development, allowing educators to create a conducive setting that enables learners to use target language expressions in a truly communicative way. Early studies have demonstrated that music is often the primary means of encountering English outside of formal language learning contexts, playing a vital role in promoting language

acquisition (Little 1983; Domoney/Harris 1993). Exposure to authentic English has a direct impact on both the affective filter and automatization processes. When learners are exposed to enjoyable music, they are more likely to pursue it outside of the classroom, which may lead to increased language learning. Recent research indicates that learners typically spend three to four hours a day listening to music (Dethier 2003; Summer 2011), underscoring the importance of incorporating popular culture, particularly music, into language learning curricula to enhance non-native learners' language development.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present study aimed to examine the potential influence of non-standard subject-verb agreement (SVA) in popular music on the linguistic development of non-native English learners. The corpus that was used for the study consisted of 802 songs with more than 200 million views on YouTube, 396 songs (49.37%) did not include any non-standard elements, and 406 (50.62%) did. There were 181 songs with the non-standard SVA examples, which represents a percentage of 22.56% of all songs or 44.58% of only songs that include non-standard elements. The songs with the non-standard SVA were found to have been viewed between 200 million and over 5 billion times on YouTube. A total of 1506 non-standard instances were found in the songs, with 417 of them related to the non-standard SVA (27.69%). The majority of the non-standard elements were found in the verses and intro/outro sections of the songs, with 142 songs having the non-standard SVA in these sections (78.45%), while fewer were found in the chorus, with 38 songs, which represents 20.99%.

The results of the study confirm our initial hypothesis that popular music lyrics tend to show a high proportion of non-standard SVA instances. Additionally, the high number of views on YouTube for all of the songs in the corpus suggests that the input provided by these songs is widely exposed to non-native English learners, potentially increasing the likelihood that they will be influenced by it.

Furthermore, the position of non-standard SVA examples in the songs highlights the importance of considering the frequency and position of non-standard features in popular music. The results show that the majority of the non-standard elements were found in the verses or intro/outro sections of the songs, but we should not overlook 38 songs where the non-standard SVA examples were found in the chorus, which in both situations suggests that the non-standard examples may be more easily remembered and internalized by non-native English speakers, due to their repetition.

Non-native speakers and learners aim to participate in foreign cultures and use English proficiently and effortlessly. Their tendency to expose themselves to popular music reflects their interest in songs and cultural phenomena, which may not necessarily lead to linguistic accuracy due to the prevalence of non-standard structures. Without proper educational guidance, this approach may hinder their linguistic development. Therefore, language instructors should incorporate popular music into their instruction in a systematic and comprehensive manner that fosters critical thinking and encourages students to reflect on the language's complexities. Teachers can use this research to develop pedagogical strategies, such as listening and analysis activities, in which students identify and discuss non-standard grammar structures and their implications



for communication. Furthermore, instructors can emphasize the importance of using a variety of authentic materials, including music, to supplement their language acquisition. By incorporating popular music into language instruction, instructors can foster intercultural competence while also promoting linguistic accuracy and awareness.

In conclusion, the results of the study provide valuable insights into the nature and extent of the linguistic input provided by popular music and the potential impact of this input on the linguistic development of non-native English learners. Further research is needed to fully understand the impact of popular music on language learning and to determine the most effective strategies for incorporating standard and non-standard features of popular music and culture into foreign language classrooms.

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## SUMMARY

### SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT IN POPULAR MUSIC AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF NON-NATIVE ENGLISH LEARNERS

This paper aims to examine the impact of non-standard subject-verb agreement (SVA) in popular music lyrics and its potential effects on the linguistic proficiency of non-native English learners. A corpus of 802 songs with over 200 million views on YouTube was analyzed using descriptive, analytic, and statistical methods. The hypothesis assumes that popular music often contains numerous SVA instances that deviate from conventional Standard English usage. If not adequately addressed in foreign language classrooms, these instances could potentially impede the linguistic development of non-native English speakers and learners. The results indicate that 49.37% (396 songs) of the analyzed songs contain standard grammatical elements, while 50.62% (406) do not. Of the 181 songs with non-standard SVA, 37 have over one billion views on YouTube, with most receiving between 200 million and over 5 billion views. The study identified 1506 non-standard elements in the songs, with 417 related to non-standard SVA. The majority of non-standard SVA examples were found in the verses or intro/outro sections of the songs, with 142 songs containing non-standard SVA in these sections, while 38 songs had non-standard SVA in the chorus. The findings of this study have significant implications for language instruction and the role of popular music in language learning. The present research underscores the potential negative impact of non-standard linguistic input on non-native English learners and highlights the need for proper educational guidance in utilizing popular music as an authentic and engaging tool in language instruction. This study lays the groundwork for future investigations on the potential role popular music may play in formal language acquisition.

**KEYWORDS:** subject-verb agreement in English, linguistic feeling, non-native English speakers/learners.

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