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# “Guess who’s back, back again”: Stylistic development in Eminem’s lyrics

Valentin Werner

## Abstract

Eminem has been labelled the most successful rap artist worldwide, looking back to a musical career of 25 years. In addition to his commercial success, he has been characterized by his ability to variously position himself as an *enfant terrible* of rap, as a hatermonger, and – lately – as one of the “older statesmen” of rap that has moved from nihilistic to socially conscious rap. The present study tackles whether the aforementioned characterizations can also be mapped linguistically through a diachronic corpus-stylistic analysis. It is based on a self-compiled corpus that comprises all the lyrics of Eminem’s albums (1996–2020), which have been subdivided into three distinct artistic phases by music critics. A combined quantitative-qualitative approach is taken that relies on information on key words (vs. North American rap in general) and semantic domains. Thus, by providing an insight into whether and how Eminem’s language style varies over time, and in which respect it is different from rap discourse at large, the present study complements previous analyses of rap more broadly and Eminem specifically through the longitudinal stylistic lens.

## 1. Introduction

Rap, defined as “the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats” (Alim 2012: 388) or even praised as “nothing less than modern day poetry set to a beat” (Dallam 2007: 84), is a musical form that is a dominant part of hip-hop (which also includes DJ-ing, breakdancing, graffiti writing, clothing, etc.) as a wider mass- and pop-cultural phenomenon (Werner 2018). The sociocultural (and commercial) impact of rap can be inferred from the fact that rap/R&B, which are treated as a unified genre in the music industry, currently is the category with the highest contribution to overall revenue in the US music industry (Nielsen Music 2021: 53). Given this reach, rap has also attracted an “abundance of scholarly attention” (Roks 2021: 272), with linguistics being no exception (see, e.g., Alim 2006, 2012; Caldwell 2012; Álvarez-Mosquera 2013, 2015; Kreyer 2016; contributions in Ross & Rivers 2018; and the literature reviewed below).

It has previously been noted (i) that rap practices are strongly rooted in Afro-American and Caribbean oral traditions, (ii) that rap mainly emerged in marginalized urban African-American and Latino communities, and (iii) that in (North American) rap practice African Americans have represented the vast majority of artists and are considered to be the main innovators (Smitherman 2000: 269; Mitchell 2015: 227). Against this traditional “normative Blackness” (Cutler 2009: 80), it is striking that the most successful rap artist of all times, Eminem, is actually white. Eminem is the initial-derived (“M & M”) stage name of Marshall (Bruce) Mathers III (b. 1972), a Detroit-based rapper, who is also professionally known as Em and Slim Shady.<sup>1</sup> While his success and “international significance” (Dallam 2007: 87) may arguably be difficult to measure in fully objective terms, it is to be noted that his releases cover ranks two and three among the top ten rap albums most often sold globally (Popkultur 2019), that he is among the top ten musicians streamed in the US (Alpha Data 2020), and that he is listed among the top ten highest earning rappers worldwide (Forbes 2019). In addition, he has an extensive potential influence via social media in terms of follower numbers; for instance, he covers rank three among *YouTube*’s music channels

(HitchOn 2019), while his *Facebook* page is among the global top ten overall (Trackalytics 2020a) and covers rank two among musicians (Trackalytics 2020b).

Besides his commercial success as a musician,<sup>2</sup> which also includes the first ever Academy Award for best song (“Lose Yourself”) in a film being given to a rapper (Keyes 2014: 271), Eminem has been characterized by his ability to variously position himself as an *enfant terrible* (both against mainstream culture and relating to the fact that he succeeded as a white rapper; Stephens 2005: 25), as a hater (relating to the controversial content of his lyrics), and – lately – as one of the “older statesmen” (Bowler 2020) of rap that has moved from nihilistic gangsta to socially conscious rap that conveys political messages (Petridis 2017). In addition, Eminem was – at least in the early phase of his career – considered to be a “kind of cultural locus” (Petridis 2017) surrounded by intense public and media debate, and his broader cultural impact can also be inferred from the fact that one of his lyrical characters (*Stan*: ‘An overzealous or obsessive fan, esp. of a particular celebrity’) has merited its own entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 2020) due to its general usage.<sup>3</sup> What is further particularly remarkable about Eminem is the longevity of his career in a generally short-lived business.

For further contextualization and with a view to informing the analyses presented below, it is worthwhile to first briefly review previous scholarly work on Eminem, both from non-linguistic and linguistic perspectives. A first issue, repeatedly addressed in cultural studies, is the ostensible paradox that “a single white rapper has earned sustained credibility with the rap listening public” (Verstegen 2011: 872). There is some controversy whether Eminem should be viewed as guilty of white cultural appropriation or whether his performances should be viewed as a successful construction and authentication of a “white trash” (Wray 2006) identity, that is, a representation that exalts the social marginalization and stereotypes associated with lower-class whiteness (see, e.g., Hess 2005; White 2005; Rodman 2006; Grealy 2008; Lee 2008; Fraley 2009; Kajikawa 2009;

contributions in Parker 2014). Other case studies take a feminist perspective and present analysis and critique of individual albums (Calhoun 2005) or songs (Enck & McDaniel 2012) or of Eminem's various lyrical personae (Hickey Moody 2009). All of the aforementioned studies refer to the content of Eminem's songs,<sup>4</sup> and further points of debate include whether Eminem overuses violent, misogynistic, and homophobic lyrics, a trademark feature of (gangsta) rap,<sup>5</sup> to linguistically compensate for his being racially not qualified as a serious rapper (cf. above; see also Armstrong 2004; Verstegen 2011) and for commercial gain (Stephens 2005: 21). Others have suggested that his "lyrical ballistics" (Kajikawa 2009: 356) are to be viewed as "strictly virtual" (Newman 2005: 412) or a mere surrealist parody (Hancock Rux 2003: 29; see also Clarke 2005). Yet others have drawn attention to the need of looking at individual songs in order to be able to discern nihilistic gangsta and status/diss rap from conscious (or "progressive") rap that provides social commentary, if some of the ambivalence of themes and attitudes in Eminem's lyrics is to be resolved (Dallam 2007).<sup>6</sup>

While there is ample work on Eminem from cultural studies perspectives, linguistic analyses are comparatively scarce.<sup>7</sup> Exceptions are Armstrong (2004), who connects cultural and linguistic aspects and explicitly ventures to "explore [...] the distinctive elements of Eminem's gangsta rap [focusing on] the dimensions of Eminem's annunciations of authenticity through his words" (Armstrong 2004: 335–336). He bases his study on interview responses, autobiographical statements, and the lyrics of Eminem's first three solo albums as well as on his contributions to the album *Devil's Night* by the Detroit rap collective D12. With the help of a mainly qualitative analysis, Armstrong claims that the lexical content of the lyrics, characterized by many announcements of his whiteness and by expressions of violence and misogyny, serves to construct Eminem's identity as "authentic gangsta" and "being real", notably to increase marketability to a white suburban audience (Armstrong 2004: 336–337). Given that Armstrong (2004) only relies on

lyrics from Eminem's early, arguably gangsta, career phase (cf. above), it will be worthwhile to explore any potential longitudinal developments in the lyrics.

More recent linguistic analysis has been provided by Febriyanti et al. (2019), who take a qualitative look at figurative language use in a selection of Eminem's lyrics, and notably Flynn (2014), who establishes a combined socio-/psycholinguistic perspective. The latter study is concerned with the issue of whiteness/authenticity (see above) and establishes that while Eminem "has a distinctly black accent" (Flynn 2014: 75), his usage is characterized by features of both Detroit African American English (AAE), such as copula absence or omission of third person *-s*, and white informal/uneducated English. Remarkably, in quantitative terms Eminem does not overuse AAE features to purportedly achieve greater authenticity (Flynn 2014: 71–75). Flynn further looks into Eminem's linguistic creativity in the form of skillful employment of priming (as a psycholinguistic effect to potentially stimulate audience responses) and homophones (Flynn 2014: 78–79; see also Alim 2006: 153).

In addition, there are contributions that focus on rap lyrics more broadly and provide statements on Eminem's lyrics in passing. In her sociolinguistic studies, Cutler (2007, 2009, 2010) notes that AAE features regularly occur in white rappers such as Eminem and she provides quantitative information on his usage rates of selected features such as non-rhoticity and *t/d*-deletion. Eberhardt & Freeman (2015: 314–315) observe that AAE features such as copula absence are rare in Eminem's lyrics and absent from his interview speech, which leads them to conclude that for his identity construction he does not rely on AAE features. This stands in some contrast to both Flynn (2014: 71) and Werner (2019: 679), who found that Eminem's usage of AAE features quantitatively maps those of both Detroit AAE speakers as well as of black rappers.<sup>8</sup>

While it is evident from the foregoing review that a broad range of academic engagement with Eminem exists, it is also clear that a stylistic approach to date is missing. This is where the present paper ties in. It can therefore be seen as part of an emerging broader trend in stylistics to expand the canon beyond literature and to engage with the language of lyrics specifically (see, e.g., Jansen & Westphal 2017; West 2019; Jansen & Gerfer, this volume).

A first concern of the present study is to identify linguistic characteristics of Eminem that make him distinct from other successful rappers and, where possible, to relate this to statements in the extant linguistic and non-linguistic literature. Second, it is worth noting that (short-term) longitudinal stylistic studies, for instance on individual artists (e.g. Flanagan 2019) or genres (e.g. Bridle 2018), including rap (Werner 2019), have been undertaken. A longitudinal stylistic approach also seems particularly apt for Eminem, given (i) his sociocultural impact as described above, (ii) the longevity of his career, which spans a period of 25 years, and (iii) his productivity, comprising eleven studio albums (sometimes with longer hiatus between releases, arguably marking different artistic phases). This will allow an insight into potential long-term stylistic developments within his lyrics, possibly indicative of his changing characterizations as described above. A third aspect to be assessed are the allegations that Eminem's lyrics are particularly violent and aggressive and therefore, in linguistic terms, rely on an extensive number of profanities that serve to express verbal aggression. It will be interesting to see how Eminem's lyrics fare compared to those of other rappers and whether any longitudinal change is traceable. With these three central foci in mind, the present contribution is to be viewed in the spirit of McIntyre & Walker (2019: 273), as it applies a corpus-stylistic approach with the ultimate aim to arrive at empirically supported and generalizable claims regarding the longitudinal stylistic development of Eminem's lyrics, also in contrast to rap discourse more generally.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the corpus data and details methodological aspects. Section 3 presents the results of the corpus-stylistic analysis. Section 4 provides an overall discussion and contextualization of the findings and offers some concluding remarks as well as an outlook on areas for further study.

## 2. Data and method

The *Eminem Corpus* (henceforth, EMCORP), which serves as basis for the present study, contains all lyrics from Eminem’s eleven studio albums and thus represents his “official” oeuvre. There are several further sources that could have been considered, for instance the early independent albums *Infinite* (1996), which was considered a commercial failure, and the *Slim Shady EP* (1998), which was excluded as it has some overlap with the later production *Slim Shady LP* (1999). For the same reason, the greatest hits album *Curtain Call* (2005) was ignored. Note that EMCORP further does not contain lyrics from samplers such as *Shady XV* (2014) and from the bootleg albums *Straight from the Lab* (2003) and *Straight from the Vault* (2011). Table 9.1 provides an overview of EMCORP, which consists of the lyrics of 211 songs and totals 147,587 word tokens.

**Table 9.1.** Overview of EMCORP; counts as provided by *AntConc* based on raw text data; items with clitics such as *ain’t*, *don’t*, etc. counted as one word; spelling variants preserved.

<TABLE 9.1 HERE>

There are two gaps of several years between some of the albums, notably 2004–2009 and 2013–2017, which have been related to personal drug- and family-related struggles and have been interpreted as transitions between his artistic phases (see first column of Table 9.1) by music critics. While the controversial lyrics content of Phase I was already explained above (see Section 1), critics claim, for instance, a switch from his “previously shock-oriented lyrics to more emotional subject matters” (Genius 2021), notably family issues, characterizing Phase II, and a

more “modern-style” and “serious direction” (Genius 2021) in terms of socially relevant topics treated in the lyrics associated with Phase III. It is clear that this categorization into phases is a post-hoc abstraction to a certain degree and that it may be criticized as impressionistic and subjective. However, this change from more nihilistic rap to politically conscious rap is also reflected in analyses that diagnose an apolitical nature of Eminem’s early productions (see, e.g., Kajikawa 2009: 358; cf. Newman 2005: 434) and the emergence of a “woke [i.e. ‘highly alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice’] Slim Shady” (Petridis 2017), and “Mathers at his most vulnerable” (Bowler 2020) in more recent lyrics. Thus, it will be even more interesting to trace whether differences between these phases can be confirmed through corpus-stylistic techniques.

In order to be able to highlight the specificity of Eminem’s lyrics, it is necessary to compare EMCORP to a suitable reference corpus. To this end, an extended version of LYRAP (see Werner 2019: 675–677) was chosen. This corpus covers the period 1991–2020 and contains lyrics of the North American (predominantly US) rappers 50 Cent, Drake, Jay Z, Kanye West, Lil Wayne, Ludacris, Nas, Nicki Minaj, Notorious BIG, Snoop Dogg, T.I., Tupac, Tyga, and Wiz Khalifa.<sup>9</sup> This corpus, which serves as a baseline of mainstream North American rap, totals 4,038 songs and 2,340,719 word tokens.

Following an approach developed in Culpeper (2009: 35) and applied in lyrics-based studies such as Kreyer (2016), Motschenbacher (2016), or Werner (2019), the choice of LYRAP as a reference corpus was deliberate as it is a “close relative” reference corpus. This means that as data are from the same genre, a comparison of the two corpora will most likely lead to the identification of highly typical characteristics of EMCORP, the target corpus representing Eminem’s lyrics.

A few notes on data retrieval are in order: The source for the lyrics of both EMCORP and LYRAP is the online database *AZlyrics* ([www.azlyrics.com](http://www.azlyrics.com)), which has been used in several previous linguistic studies of lyrics (e.g. Kreyer 2016; Motschenbacher 2016; Werner 2021). One of its strengths is its inherent quality control. As described in Werner (2019: 675–676), users have to specify their source (CD booklet, another website, lyrics video, own transcription, other) when submitting their transcriptions of lyrics. In addition, in a wiki-like fashion, multiple corrections by other users are possible. Thus, *AZlyrics* contains a dynamic feature to enable users to improve transcriptions already stored, a feature that apparently is employed regularly, as the number of acknowledgements for corrections for the individual songs shows. Spot checks (matching the lyrics as performed on recordings against the transcription) suggest that the input of the lay transcribers is generally accurate (see further Queen 2018 for comparable approaches to other types of pop-culture related material).

The retrieval of the individual lyrics files was facilitated by the *DownThemAll!*-browser plugin, and several additional preparatory steps were undertaken to ensure compatibility with the corpus tools used. These comprised (i) removing file doublets caused by the inclusion of the same song in more than one release or by the presence of remix versions (for LYRAP); (ii) extracting the lyrics proper from the HTML files downloaded from *AZlyrics* with regular expressions in *Notepad++*; (iii) deleting unwanted meta-annotation potentially interfering with analyses (artists' names or structural indications, e.g. *chorus*, *verse 1*, etc., which regularly appear between square brackets), and (iv) correction of individual symbols (e.g. <'> for <'> in items such as *don't* or *it's*).

Corpus tools used are the offline application *AntConc* (Anthony 2020) for the creation of wordlists and keyword analysis<sup>10</sup> and the online environment *Wmatrix* ([ucrel-wmatrix4.lancaster.ac.uk/wmatrix4.html](http://ucrel-wmatrix4.lancaster.ac.uk/wmatrix4.html); Rayson 2008) for the establishment of semantic frequency profiles. Specifically, *Wmatrix* incorporates the USAS tagger, which assigns broader

(e.g. category F “Food and farming”) and finer semantic categories (e.g. category F3 “Cigarettes and drugs”) to words and phrases in the corpora (see Archer et al. 2002 for the complete scheme). While it allows the establishment of the “aboutness” of corpora or parts thereof beyond mere lexical profiles, it has to be acknowledged that the tagger may suffer from some inaccuracies in terms of mismatches due to ambiguous words and homonyms (e.g. *hoe*<sup>1</sup> = ‘farming tool for cultivating soil’; *hoe*<sup>2</sup> = ‘promiscuous woman/ritualized insult for women in rap’), as described in Kreyer (2016: 92–93). Further ambiguous cases in the present data will be mentioned during the presentation of results (Section 3). Such findings are indicative of the limits of automatic annotation and imply that a manual look at individual concordance lines is vital.

A combined quantitative-qualitative approach has been fruitfully employed in previous studies such as Bridle (2018). The identification of key words and semantic domains allows the detection of (i) aspects that are quantitatively foregrounded in Eminem’s lyrics, which then may be subject to further qualitative scrutiny. The concept of (literary) foregrounding was originally introduced for the domain of literary linguistics (see, e.g., Leech 2008: 54–69) and, generally speaking, considers deviation in linguistic patterns that may have some kind of (literary) significance. In the present case, the focus lies on lexical foregrounding as regards the deviation of Eminem’s lyrics from North American rap more generally (EMCORP vs. LYRAP) as well as on differences between the individual phases as outlined above to establish any potential stylistic development over time.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. The global picture**

Linguistic analyses of rap discourse with a broader focus have argued that rap lyrics are intended to “promote a ‘bad boy’ image of the artist” (Kreyer 2016: 94) and that lexical choices are essential to establish a street-conscious identity or “cultural realness” (Edwards & Ash 2004: 175) in terms

of content choice and associated vocabulary (Werner 2019: 682). Key domains emerging in relevant studies include drugs, crime, law and order, warfare, weapons, and money (Kreyer 2016: 94). Keyword analyses have indicated a high salience of expressions that are related to the broader notion of “ghettocentricity” (Scharenberg 2004: 25), which, in addition to the aforementioned areas, comprises aspects such as self-conscious blackness as well as profanities and sex-related terms (Werner 2019: 685–686). Against such findings, the following passages provide an assessment of the specificity of Eminem’s lyrics as represented by EMCORP. To this end, the EMCORP data will be contrasted with LYRAP and the focus will lie on items that are especially salient because of either their overrepresentation (positive keyness) or underrepresentation (negative keyness) in EMCORP.

**Table 9.2.** Top 30 positive keywords (EMCORP vs. LYRAP); function words and phonesthetic devices excluded; values rounded to second decimal; all items displayed lowercase.

<TABLE 9.2 HERE>

Table 9.2 shows the top 30 positive keywords in EMCORP. While it is clear that for reasons of space not all items can be discussed individually, and some are mostly due to their repeated appearance in one song (e.g. *zombie*, *stepdad*, *Cinderella*, *legacy*, *puke*, *darkness*, *darling*, *adrenaline*, *offended*), a general observation is that Eminem in his lyrics in contrast to North American rap at large appears to employ a more “nouny” style.

Another finding that is not too surprising is that self-referential items such as *Mathers* (rank 3), *Shady*(’s) (ranks 6 and 20), *Marshall* (rank 8), and *Eminem* (rank 15) are to be found, as well as *Stan* (rank 24), the lyrical character that has made it into the *OED* (see Section 1), and *Hailie* (rank 2), the name of Eminem’s daughter, to whom several of his songs are dedicated (e.g. “Hailie’s Song” or “Mockingbird”). In addition, the keyword list features people that are or were relevant

to Eminem's career, *Dre('s)* (ranks 13 and 30), referring to producer Dr. Dre, and *Doody* (rank 5), a nickname for the deceased rapper Proof, as well as items such as *trailer* (rank 14) that are related to the establishment of Eminem's "white trash" identity (see Section 1), as exemplified in (1)

- (1) Fame was a switch, but I was grateful to trade this shit for the *trailer* with a hitch ("Higher")

While drugs are a regular theme in rap (see above), *valium* (rank 4) is noteworthy as an item that apparently does not seem to feature very much in rap discourse in general as represented in LYRAP. Valium is a legal prescription medicine rather than a lifestyle drug and is connected to apparent substance abuse by Eminem's mother, as illustrated in (2) and (3). On a related note, *relapse* (rank 18) appears, referring to personal drug-related problems, as expressed in (4).

- (2) *Valium* was in everything, food that I ate ("My Mom")
- (3) Mom fed me *Valium* like air ("Gnat")
- (4) Fucking doctor, I didn't understand a damn what he said I planned to *relapse* the second I walked out of that bitch ("Underground")

From Table 9.2, it is further clear that Eminem's lyrics are characterized by a high incidence of specific profanities, notably *fuck's* (rank 27), regularly in the combination *what/who the fuck's X* (see (5) and (6)), *prick* (rank 28), *cunt* (rank 29), and the idiosyncratic item *fack* (rank 1), which occurs in one song ("Kamikaze") only.<sup>11</sup> The issue of profanities will be revisited in Section 3.3.

- (5) *Who the fuck's* Milo? ("Normal")
- (6) *What the fuck's* this guy's problem on the side of me? ("Kim")

To complement the foregoing look at positive keywords, it is instructive to consider negative keywords, as shown in Table 9.3. This will provide some more evidence where Eminem's lyrics deviate from rap discourse more broadly as represented by the LYRAP data. Note, first, that among the top negative keywords (not shown in Table 9.3 due to exclusion criteria), several function words (e.g. *tha* ("the"), *dem* ("them")) occur in which AAE pronunciation patterns are indicated in the spelling (see Olivo 2001).

**Table 9.3.** Top 30 negative keywords (EMCORP vs. LYRAP); function words and phonesthetic devices excluded; values rounded to second decimal; all items displayed lowercase.

<TABLE 9.3 HERE>

It is immediately evident from Table 9.3 that many items strongly underrepresented in EMCORP can actually be related to the notion of ghettocentricity as introduced above. In turn, this means that many of the lexical items typically used to create authenticity in general North American rap discourse are missing from Eminem's lyrics. It is to be noted that some of the words, such as *pimp(in)* (ranks 1 and 9) or *nigga(s/z)* (ranks 5, 6, and 7) do not occur in Eminem's own lyrics. If they do, the relevant passages are performed by black rappers featured in his songs, for instance Snoop Dogg, as in (7), or Kon Artis, as in (8), who can credibly do so without compromising their authenticity.

(7) Just let me lay back and kick some mo' simplistic *pimp* shit on Slim's shit ("Bitch Please II")

(8) Got a reputation for havin' *niggaz* runnin' they funds ("Under the Influence")

Such findings substantiate previous individual observations about Eminem's "refusal to say 'nigga' in any of his songs" (Armstrong 2004: 336). In fact, the EMCORP data suggest that he does not simply avoid *nigga*, the "lynchpin" (Armstrong 2004: 336) of rap discourse (see also Werner 2019: 683), but all kinds of items possibly related to the notion of ghettocentricity and self-conscious blackness.

On a related note, the emergence of another set of negative keywords, namely those related to monetary success (e.g. *Benz, cash, dough, money*) confirms Flynn's observation that Eminem in his lyrics "doesn't overly flaunt his riches, unlike many rappers" (Flynn 2014: 74), at least in his lyrics. The previous findings can be interpreted as indicative of Eminem establishing his "cultural realness" (see above) through different means than other (predominantly black) North American

rap artists, who may regularly resort to “Blinglish” (a blend of the slang term *bling* ‘jewelry’ and *English*; see Jansen 2012; Werner 2019: 672) to overtly display their material wealth.

### 3.2. Artistic phases

This subsection addresses the issue of whether the longitudinal stylistic development and especially the distinction into artistic phases claimed for Eminem’s lyrics (see Section 1) can be traced. To this end, the most frequent semantic domains of the respective phases are presented and compared.

<FIGURE 9.1 HERE>

**Figure 9.1.** Parallel coordinates plot of the top 30 semantic domains in EMCORP according to artistic phases; bottom line (“31”) comprises categories outside of the top 30; grammatical items (e.g. Z5/Z8), discourse markers (Z4), and unclassified items (Z99) excluded.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 9.1 displays patterns as regards semantic domains across the three artistic phases. Semantic tags that appear just in one phase or for which a marked increase is due to one or two particular songs will not be discussed. An example would be the tag S2.2. (“People: Male”), whose high incidence in Phase II is caused by repetitive use of *man* in “Cinderella Man” and “Forever”. As regards the patterns that are considered, for instance, the semantic tag A3+ (“Being”) is the most frequent one in Phase I and continually in Phase I and Phase II, so there is no real development. By contrast, the tag O2 (“Objects generally”) sees a steep increase from Phase I (rank 16) to Phases II and III (rank 10), suggestive of a marked change in thematic concerns of the lyrics and thus a domain that merits a closer look. A general pattern is that there is not much development among the highest-frequency domains (ranks 1–7). This is not too surprising as they cover very generic domains such as A3+ (“Being”), which is inclusive of the lemma BE, or A7+ (“Definite”), which includes modal verbs. These high-frequency domains further represent categories that are

potentially assigned to a multitude of high-frequency words and phrases, such as A9+ (“Getting and giving; possession”), representing KEEP, GET, TAKE, HAVE, or A1.1.1 (“General actions, makings”), comprising DO and MAKE as well as many other verb lemmas.

To assess potential differences between the phases, it is useful to look further down Figure 9.1 and to take a closer look at the “messy” part; that is, domains in which marked change occurs (i.e., a change of at least three ranks up or down), including domains that feature only in one or two of the phases, while several other domains, for instance N1 (“Numbers”) are ignored, as they are highly generic and thus difficult to interpret. Among the semantic domains exclusive to Phase I we find S4 (“Kin”, rank 17), which can be considered surprising in view of statements that claimed a turn to more family-related topics in Phase II (see Section 2). However, this finding supports suggestions that talking about family-related matters enables Eminem “to manoeuvre [sic] identification with an American underclass” (Clarke 2005: 82) and thus to establish his cultural realness and “white trash” authenticity. This is especially clear from a look at examples such as (9) or (10), which can be considered instances of disses [‘disrespectful statements to verbally attack someone commonly found in rap’] involving his family members (with his mother being the most frequent target) and/or reflections on family struggles, as in (11).

- (9) Woe is me, there goes poor Marshall again whinin’ about his millions and his mansion and his sorrow he’s always drownin’ in, from the *dad* he never had, and how his *childhood* was so bad, and how his **mom** was a dope addict, and his **ex-wife** how they go at it (“Evil Deeds”)
- (10) My fuckin’ bitch *mom*’s suin’ for ten million, she must want a dollar for every pill I’ve been stealin’ (“Marshall Mathers”)
- (11) *Mom* and *dad* was arguin’ a lot so *momma* moved back on the Chalmers in the flat one bedroom apartment, and *dad* moved back to the other side of 8 Mile on Novara, and that’s when *daddy* went to California with his CD and met Dr. Dre, and flew you and *momma* out to see me, but *daddy* had to work, you and *momma* had to leave me, then you started seeing *daddy* on the T.V. and *momma* didn’t like it (“Mockingbird”)

Increase of the tag O2 (“Objects generally”) from rank 16 in Phase I to rank 10 in Phases II and III can be taken as indicative of Eminem’s style becoming increasingly nominal over time (see also Section 3.1). While it is not possible to look into all nouns individually for reasons of space,

a look at the most frequent items is telling. While *knife*, as in (12) and (13), and *needle*, as in (14), are among the top 5 most frequent items among the O2 category in Phase I, they drop to lower ranks in Phases II and III.

- (12) I'll stab you with the sharpest *knife* I can grab ("Still Don't Give a Fuck")
- (13) I light a candle and place it up on the mantle, grab a *knife* at the blade and stab you with the fuckin' handle ("Under the Influence")
- (14) You're a fuckin coke-head slut, I hope you fuckin' die, I hope you get to hell and Satan sticks a *needle* in your eye ("Puke")

Arguably, this finding supports analysts such as Kajikawa (2009: 356), who argued that Eminem rather than relying on tropes of gangsta rap uses those derived from horror movies for "violent signifying" and that there is a surreal and parodic nature to the expression of violence, as in (13). Such concerns, however, apparently seem to be less and less prominent in the lyrics.

Another tag that shows a marked longitudinal increase is X7+ ("Wanting; planning; choosing"), which climbs from rank 23 (Phase I) over rank 18 (Phase II) to rank 15 (Phase III). While it could be argued that this is a very broad category, it is noteworthy that the increased importance of this semantic domain is accompanied by a broadening of options how it is realized, with 29 types (i.e. different word forms) in Phase I, 38 types in Phase II, and 47 types in Phase III. This could be interpreted as an increased range of expression that has emerged over Eminem's career.

A further item with longitudinal increase in terms of ranking is E3- ("Calm/violent/angry"), with rank 25 in Phase I, rank 21 in Phase II, and rank 16 in Phase III. For this category, the most frequent item across all phases is *hit*, which is not always used in its violent sense, though, as in (15) to (17), and may be used metaphorically, as in (18). Thus, the data do not support an interpretation in the sense of increasingly violent lyrics over time, even though a superficial look at the quantitative patterns may suggest otherwise.

- (15) By the time they *hit* fourth grade they got the Discovery Channel, don't they? ("The Real Slim Shady")

- (16) He makes it look so easy, girl you just *hit* the lottery (“Hell Breaks Loose”)
- (17) Soon as I’m through with the Unisom I’m a *hit* the snooze alarm (“Discombobulated”)
- (18) But I don’t care, I barely can wait to *hit* them with the snare and the bass (“Venom”)

An item that does not appear among the top 30 semantic domains in Phase I but covers ranks 23 and 24 in Phases II and III, respectively, is the tag F1 (“Food”). The appearance of this category seems counterintuitive at first but can be explained by the occurrence of slang words such as *beef* (‘trouble’, ‘argument’) as in (19), informal items such as *nut(s)*, as in (20) or (21), and the miscategorized *faggot* (intended as profanity for ‘gay male’, alternative meaning: ‘traditional British meatball dish’). *Faggot* features among the top 3 individual items in category F1 in Phases I and II, but there is only a single instance left in Phase III. The appearance in “Fall” caused public controversy, however (see, e.g., Bote 2018).

- (19) And let’s clear this up too I ain’t got no *beef* with him either (“Rain Man”)
- (20) I am *nuts* for real, but I’m okay with that (“The Monster”)
- (21) Would you excuse me while I feel my *nuts* (“Ridaz”)

A category exclusive to the top 30 semantic categories in Phase III is E2+ (“Liking”), notably emerging through the presence of the verb lemmas LIKE (15% of relevant instances) and LOVE (16% of relevant instances). However, an interpretation in the sense of a more positive way of expression in Phase III is problematic as many instances of LOVE are due to repetition in one song, and there the item is used in an ironic sense, as the passage presented as (22) shows. In addition, the automatic tag count included negativized occurrences of LIKE, as in (23). Therefore, it would be misleading to diagnose a generally more positive outlook on life in the most recent artistic phase.

- (22) She *loves* me, she *loves* me not, for who I am, but what I got, but she *loves* me, she *loves* me not (“She Loves Me”)
- (23) Why you waste time just to comment on shit? Especially shit you *don’t like* (“Book of Rhymes”)

The pattern for the tag A2.2 (“Affect, cause, connected”) is conspicuous as there is a small drop from Phase I (rank 14) to Phase II (rank 16), but then the category drops out of the top 30 in Phase III altogether. The main items responsible for this tag are the adverbial *why* used to form questions,

and the informal adverbial/conjunction *'cause* ('because'). While no conclusive explanation can be offered here, Eminem's lyrics over time apparently are increasingly less concerned with asking for and explaining reasons.

Items with the tag B2- ("Health and disease") only occur among the top 30 in Phase I. The most frequent individual words (with a negative implication) associated with the category are the adjectives *crazy* and *sick*. The former often is self-referential, as in (24) or (25). Note also that further items from the same semantic field (*maniac*, *lunatic*) occur in (24).

(24) You make me *crazy*, you make me act like a *maniac*, I'm like a *lunatic*, you make me sick ("Crazy in Love")

(25) I may be wrong, I keep thinkin' these *crazy* thoughts in my cranium ("Remember Me")

Werner (2019: 686) noted that semantic shift in terms of a subversion of negative connotations is a typical feature of rap, affecting items such as *ill* or *sick*. In the EMCORP data, however, *sick* regularly is used in its original, negatively connoted sense, as in (24) above, (26) or (27). This seems to be a distinctive property of Eminem's lyrics.

(26) You don't know how *sick* you make me, you make me fuckin' **sick** to my stomach ("Puke")

(27) And I'm *sick* of working dead end jobs with lame pay ("Rock Bottom")

Another interesting tag is S3.2 ("Relationship: Intimate/sexual"), which shows a slight rise from Phase I (rank 19) to Phase II (rank 17) and a marked subsequent drop in Phase III (rank 27). Apart from an apparent shift away from this topic area in general, it also insightful to consider the shift in items that are associated with this category, as shown in Figure 9.2.

<FIGURE 9.2 HERE>

**Figure 9.2.** Share (percentage) of selected items among the top 5 associated with the semantic tag S3.2.

Above all, Figure 9.2 suggests a constant decrease of the profanity-related lemma FUCK (see further Section 3.3), while romantic LOVE appears to play an increasingly relevant part with a peak in Phase II. The widely criticized tendency of Eminem's to broach and ridicule the issue of homosexuality (see Section 1) seems to have disappeared in the most recent artistic phase (but cf. the remark on *faggot* above).

<FIGURE 9.3 HERE>

**Figure 9.3.** Share (percentage) of selected items among the top 5 associated with the semantic tag X2.1.

A final observation is in order for the semantic domain X2.1 ("Thought/belief"), which shows an A-shaped pattern in Figure 9.1 (Phase I: Rank 18, Phase II: Rank 9, Phase III: Rank 14). As regards the distribution of associated items, as displayed in Figure 9.3, it could be argued that while the lemma THINK is the majority variant in all phases and BELIEVE and IMAGINE seem to lose ground over time, Phase III and particularly Phase II also see substantial proportions of GUESS and especially FEEL. This finding supports the notion of a move towards a more reflexive and personal tone in his later works (Bowler 2020; Genius 2021), as selectively illustrated in (28) and (29), while it has to be conceded that not all relevant instances can be viewed as examples of reflective emotionality, as (30) illustrates.

(28) Sometimes I *feel* so alone, I just don't know, *feels* like I been down this road before  
("Déjà vu")

(29) I love you, Doody, without you I *feel* so incomplete ("Don't Front")

(30) *Feel* like I might just strike first and ignore the replies ("Evil Twin")

### 3.3. Profanities longitudinally

This subsection focuses on the issue of profanities, as one of the characteristic allegations brought forward against Eminem's lyrics is their violent and obscene nature (operationalized through the extensive reliance on profanities to verbally express aggression), arguably consciously used to

increase marketability to white suburban audiences (Armstrong 2004: 336; see also Roks 2021: 276). The following analysis attempts a linguistic assessment of such claims. Again, the perspective taken is contrastive (How do Eminem’s lyrics fare in this regard compared to those of other mainstream North American rappers?) and longitudinal (Can any change be observed over the 25-year period studied?).

The analysis adapts the approach taken in Werner (2019: 688–690), who calculated the incidence of highly salient profanities (*nigga(s/z)*, *shit*, *bitch(es)*, *fuck(ed/ing/in/s)*, *ass(es)*, *hoe(s)*, *puss(y/ies)*, *dick(s)*) in pop vs. rap lyrics across a 25-year span and found that rap has much higher profanity incidences. For the present purposes, the normalized frequencies (per 1,000 words) are provided for those years that saw the release of one of Eminem’s albums (both from EMCORP and LYRAP) to allow a direct comparison.

<FIGURE 9.4 HERE>

**Figure 9.4.** Profanity rates (normalized frequency per 1,000 words) in EMCORP (filled black circles, solid black line), the extended LYRAP (empty black circles, solid black line) and LYRAP-N (empty grey circles, broken grey line) with 95% confidence intervals; red lines indicating borders between artistic phases.

A first global observation transpiring from Figure 9.4 is that the level of profanities for all years considered is lower in EMCORP compared to rap discourse at large as represented by LYRAP (but note the overlapping confidence intervals for 2002 and 2010). This is striking in view of allegations (see above and Section 1) that Eminem’s lyrics are particularly profanity-ridden. In fact, rap discourse overall (with more than 27 profanities per 1,000 words on average) seems to be much more aggressive than Eminem’s lyrics (approximately 17 profanities per 1,000 words on average). An alternative overall perspective emerges if the tokens for *nigga(s/z)* are excluded from

the counts, as these items have been found to be completely avoided by Eminem as a marker of “cultural realness” due to his racial background (see Section 3.1). Another rationale for excluding *nigga(s/z)* is that in many cases these items may have been subject to semantic shift so that they can be used without their original negative connotation (see Smitherman 2000: 279–280; Werner 2019: 686). To this end, profanity rates were recalculated and patterns are shown by the broken grey line labeled “LYRAP-N” in Figure 9.4. It is evident that Eminem’s lyrics in this perspective could be considered profanity-ridden especially during his first artistic phase (1999–2004), but note that there is no overlap of the confidence intervals between EMCORP and LYRAP-N just for the years 2002 and 2013. For all other years, the profanity values for Eminem’s lyrics align with those for rap discourse at large, so an overall heightened incidence of profanities of Eminem’s lyrics cannot be traced, even when rap lyrics “normalized” for the most salient (but commonly semantically shifted) racial slur are taken as a baseline.

However, it is clear from Figure 9.4 that there is longitudinal development. The level of profanity usage in LYRAP (the outlier 2013 apart) has remained fairly stable since 2004, preceded by a downward trend since 2000. By contrast, the data suggest a continuing decrease of profanities in Eminem’s lyrics in the course of his career. While the average normalized frequency of profanities in Phase I (1999–2004) is 19 (with the 2000 *Marshall Mathers LP* and the 2002 *Eminem Show* having values of 23.5 and 24 respectively), it decreases to 16.5 in Phase II (2009–2013) and to 14 in Phase III (2017–2020). Naturally, there is some variation if individual albums are considered. For instance, the 2004 release *Encore*, with an incidence of 13, is conspicuous in Phase I. This finding ties in with generic observations that this is “his lightest album [in which he] put his all into comedy” (Weiss 2017). The album with the lowest occurrence rates of profanities overall (9.5) is the 2017 (Phase III) release *Revival*. Here, music critics have noted that the album is characterized by political and personal topics (Weiss 2017; Bowler 2020), and this focus seems to translate to reduced profanity rates. Note further that the profanity rate for the 2009 (Phase II)

album *Relapse* with 14 is comparatively low. This is surprising as observers for this release have suggested “a return to Eminem’s earlier [i.e. Phase I] style and form” (Holdship 2017: 354). This “return” does not translate into resurging profanity rates, however.

In sum, then, there is some truth to claims about an extensive use of profanities in Eminem’s earlier works (see Armstrong 2004), even though the comparison with rap discourse at large as represented by LYRAP has shown that Eminem’s profanity rates align or even can be considered much lower if the salient item *nigga(s/z)* is taken into account. What is clearly observable is a longitudinal tendency toward less profanity-ridden lyrics.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

The present study presented an analysis of Eminem’s lyrics and thus, in the spirit of McIntyre and Walker (2019: 309), overall was intended to show the benefits of applying a corpus-stylistic approach beyond (literary) text types traditionally addressed in the field. The main intent was to look at foregrounded themes with the help of a quantitative-qualitative contrastive approach and to relate the linguistic findings to statements found in cultural studies and music criticism, for instance.

A first starting point was the particular position that Eminem covers within the normatively black rap sphere, in which he succeeded as a white artist. To identify specific features of his lyrics, a keyword analysis against LYRAP, a corpus of general rap lyrics, was conducted (see Section 3.1). As shown by the list of top negative keywords, it emerged that – unlike many contemporary North American rap lyrics in general (see also Kreyer 2016; Werner 2019) – Eminem’s lyrics are not characterized by the notion of ghetto-centricity, so that he apparently establishes his authenticity as a rapper in unconventional ways. This finding corroborates previous broad observations that he avoids portraying himself as an archetypical gangsta rapper (Kajikawa 2009: 356; *pace* Armstrong

2004). Instead, the occurrence of several items (e.g. *Hailie, trailer, valium, Doody*, etc.) among the list of positive keywords can be interpreted as indicative of another general tendency of rap lyrics, namely to use first-person narratives to relate personal experiences (Roks 2021: 273). These personal experiences, which can be traced quantitatively when EMCORP is contrasted with LYRAP, apparently are quite different for Eminem compared to other mainstream, and predominantly black, North American artists (see also Holdship 2017: 362). In connection with his racial background, they may motivate his self-representation as “white trash”, as widely discussed in previous analyses (see Section 1).

A second concern was the determination of potential long-term stylistic developments within Eminem’s lyrics (Section 3.2), motivated by statements that posited development in terms of content choice over Eminem’s career phases and a general development from nihilistic “shock” or arguably gangsta rap (cf. Section 3.1) to more emotional and conscious rap. A longitudinal perspective was developed through a comparison of semantic domains featured in the respective career phases. The overall picture that emerged was complex, with several general tendencies to be deduced. For instance, the data did not support a particularly high incidence of family-related terms in Phase II (cf. Section 2), while there were some indications for lyrics becoming less violent, sexually explicit, and homophobic. In addition, usage patterns of verbs associated with the expression of thought and belief can be interpreted as a more personal and reflective tone emerging over time. However, a higher salience of explicitly political topics, which could have been inferred from a marked increase of relevant semantic tags such as G1 “Government, politics, and elections” (see Archer et al. 2002: 12), did not occur. Neither could a complete avoidance of more contentious topics be observed. This would have unambiguously supported claims of Eminem having turned to a fully socially conscious artist highly alert to topics such as racial or social discrimination (see, e.g., Petridis 2017). Rather, Eminem in his latest productions seems to have broadened the scope of his work beyond nihilistic rap, a feature recognized by observers.

While it already emerged in the analysis of keywords (Section 3.1) that Eminem’s lyrics are characterized by a high incidence of specific profanities, Section 3.3 allowed an assessment of (i) general allegations against Eminem’s lyrics of being overly aggressive and obscene as well as (ii) whether there is longitudinal development. It transpired that in contrast to North American rap discourse at large, as represented by LYRAP, Eminem’s lyrics are not particularly profanity-ridden, even if tokens for the items *nigga(s/z)*, a typical marker of ghettocentricity avoided by Eminem, are ignored. The results for an alignment of profanity usage rates with general (black) rap discourse are also noteworthy as they map comparable quantitative results for the area of grammar, as presented in Flynn (2014: 71–75). Thus, profanities apparently are not used to compensate for a lack of (racial) authenticity (cf. Armstrong 2004). Rather, Eminem’s lyrics can be viewed as being in line with the general adverse stance expressed in rap lyrics, of which polemics and profanity usage form conventional core elements (see, e.g., Clarke 2005: 81; Newman 2005: 412; Roks 2021: 276). Additionally, the EMCORP data are indicative of (i) the need to consider individual albums (e.g. *Relapse* and *Revival*) and their thematic foci on their own, as well as of (ii) a longitudinal trend toward less profanity usage. The quantitative findings map commentators’ voices that associated his early work with more nihilistic rap (e.g. Dallam 2007: 85) and that later noted a change towards more emotional and conscious rap (e.g. Petridis 2017; Bowler 2020), where profanities and polemics apparently have lost their importance. This further ties in with critics’ evaluations of the increasingly “mature” nature of Eminem’s rap (see, e.g., Holdship 2017: 360).

In sum, the present study was intended to show in which respects a corpus-stylistic analysis can (and cannot) complement previous linguistic and non-linguistic work on a rap artist’s oeuvre. Flynn concludes his research on Eminem with the line that “some fans may find themselves reading what they already [intuitively] know” (Flynn 2014: 65). In the same vein, the present

contribution could be closed with a line that some *music critics* and *cultural analysts* may find themselves reading what they already know. However, it should be noted that the corpus-stylistic analyses have partly served to put some commonly held views (e.g. on profanity levels and the salience of themes) into perspective, while they provided empirical support for others. Therefore, the present study also hopes to have shown what can be gained from a stylistic approach toward pop cultural artefacts to inform the study of performed language as well as of cultural, media, and sociological studies at large (Werner 2018: 12; see also Werner & Schubert, this volume).

At the same time, it is evident that through merely looking at language (and lexical/content aspects specifically), there are several gaps left for future stylistic research on both Eminem's lyrics specifically and rap discourse generally. Among them, a multimodal analysis that relates linguistic, musical, and potentially visual (music video) aspects is conceivable (see, e.g., Stephens 2005: 24; Dietrich 2015; McKerrell & Way 2017). Such an approach will help to extend the angle to a "musical stylistics" (Morini 2013: 283) and eventually to establish a holistic perspective on the overall communicative event that rap is. While this was in parts reflected in the semantic analysis presented above (esp. Sections 3.2 and 3.3), it is also imaginable to implement a text-mining study on EMCORP to identify sentiment structures in Eminem's lyrics, a quantitative approach that has been fruitfully used for the description of pop lyrics (see, e.g., Napier & Shamir 2018). It is also possible to zoom in on the lyrics and shift the attention to stylistic patterns and changes either as regards individual themes (see, e.g., Dallam 2007, who focuses on religious messages in Eminem's lyrics) or as regards the role of different narrators and viewpoints (Gregoriou 2009: 63–78), for Eminem notably represented by his lyrical personae (Hickey Moody 2009; Dawkins 2010: 471). For such endeavors, EMCORP could be used to develop updated pictures.

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<sup>1</sup> Slim Shady is the name of Eminem’s ill-natured alter ego that features on several of his albums (see, e.g., Dallam 2007: 86; Dawkins 2010: 471). On this “double-voiced discourse”, see further Clarke (2005: 85).

<sup>2</sup> Eminem has also been critically acclaimed for his performance as an actor in his semi-autobiographical 2002 movie *8 Mile* (see Armstrong 2004: 335) and is active as a music producer. For further information on Eminem’s life, see his (now somewhat dated) autobiographies *Angry Blonde* (2000) and *The Way I Am* (2008) as well as the biographies by Bozza (2003, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the following examples from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA): *Ultimate Shrek stans can snag this mug which sports the entire script for just \$14.95 to woo their office pals* (COCA MAG Mashable 2019); *That’s what Selena fans do when you Miley stans come into her posts and dump a turd about how she leads her life* (COCA BLOG 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Note also Cobb & Boettcher (2007), which is a study in social psychology that – based on the moral panics surrounding Eminem’s lyrics in the early 2000s – tested whether exposure to a misogynistic Eminem lyric (“Kill Yourself”) leads to increased sexist attitudes (see further the review Warburton 2012). Indeed, evidence for higher sexist attitudes was found for male participants. However, the qualitative responses of female participants provided “some support for the argument that his lyrics are so absurd that his Slim Shady character essentially becomes a parody of unacceptable behavior” (Cobb & Boettcher 2007: 3037). This ties in with some of the discussions in cultural studies on the parodic and surreal nature of the lyrics.

<sup>5</sup> See Richardson & Scott (2002) and Flynn et al. (2016) for cultural as well as Aleshinskaya (2013: 434), Napier & Shamir (2018: 172), Werner (2019), and Tegge & Coxhead (2021) for linguistic analyses of rap at large.

<sup>6</sup> A further complication that comes into play is the use of the different personae Eminem vs. Slim Shady vs. Marshall Mathers (see Dawkins 2010: 471; Holdship 2017: 361).

<sup>7</sup> One potentially relevant study, Dougherty (2007) unfortunately could not be retrieved.

<sup>8</sup> From the foregoing overview of non-linguistic and linguistic work, it is also evident that only very few individual rap artists have received scholarly attention comparable to Eminem. A case in point to mention here is Tupac (aka

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2Pac aka Makaveli; born as Lesane Parish Crooks, 1971–1996; see <https://www.biography.com/musician/tupac-shakur>), whose lyrics and language usage have been assessed linguistically against the concepts of authenticity and identity (e.g. Edwards 2002; Edwards & Ash 2004; Gilbers 2018).

<sup>9</sup> The original version of LYRAP comprised the period 1991–2016 and contained Eminem’s lyrics, which were excluded in the extended version. Note that the extended LYRAP version does not include the religious rap albums of Kanye West and Snoop Dogg.

<sup>10</sup> *AntConc* settings: Log likelihood as keyword statistic, log ratio as effect size, results sorted by effect size, statistic threshold  $p < 0.05$  + Bonferroni correction, minimum frequency 10 (for positive keywords).

<sup>11</sup> Apparently, the transcription here was inspired by the one of Eminem’s songs (“Fack”) not part of the present analysis as it only appeared on the best-of album *Curtain Call* (see Section 2). *Fack* represents a non-standard spelling variant of *fuck*.

<sup>12</sup> Pluses and minuses after the semantic tag number indicate positive or negative position on a semantic scale. For example, the tag L1- (“Life and living things”) may be assigned to items such as *assassinated*, *deceased*, *fatal*, *kill*, *let him have it*, etc. (Archer et al. 2002: 16).