

English and German pop song lyrics: Towards a contrastive textology

Abstract

The present contribution offers a contrastive corpus-based analysis of English and German pop lyrics. It conceptualizes lyrics as a specific text type/register and tries to identify cross-linguistic commonalities and differences. As empirical base, it uses corpora that represent the lyrics of commercially highly successful pop songs in Anglophone and German contexts. Given the similar sociocultural functions and production circumstances of English and German lyrics, the study starts from the assumption that a large-scale linguistic overlap can be traced. While indeed cross-linguistic convergence is found especially for lexical patterns in terms of topic choice, the analysis also reveals a common property of conveying a conversational feel through lexicogrammatical means. However, given the differing typological make-up of the languages contrasted, fine-grained differences emerge as regards the ways conversationality/informality is established in pop lyrics as a performed text type.

Keywords: pop culture, pop cultural linguistics, performed language, media language, music, media linguistics, textlinguistics, register study, typology, LYPOP, Songkorpus

1 Introduction

Pop music is a genre that has taken a foothold in Germany at least since after the Second World War. From a diachronic perspective, it emerges that at first it was very much an imported format with strong roots in Anglophone societies such as the UK and especially the US. Therefore, at the outset German pop performers (or rather imitators) largely sang in English (Diederichsen, 2017), and, traditionally, the percentage of English-language lyrics has been high in the German pop charts, with estimations of more than 70% of all songs for the period 1965–2006, for instance (Achterberg et al., 2011). At the same time, German lyrics have been present in the German pop charts to a considerable degree and despite the global availability and spread of pop cultural artifacts, there is even evidence for an increasing divergence of pop music markets in more recent decades, fostering the recognition of domestic (i.e. German-language) music (Ferreira & Waldfogel, 2013; Bello & Garcia, 2021). Thus, as pop music certainly has developed into a global art form, the question arises whether non-Anglophone songs and lyrics may still show some orientation towards their historical “parent” in the sense of an American or at least Anglophone art form.

Even though such relationships could be explored from various vantage points (e.g. musicology, ethnology, etc.), it is suggested here that it may be worthwhile to apply a linguistic perspective, as lyrics are a central part of almost all successful pop songs. While lyrics traditionally had been sidelined as a subject of linguistic research, the amount and scope of (corpus-

based) work have been growing, especially in the past two decades, as illustrated in the following – by necessity selective – overview (see, e.g., Schneider, 2019, pp. 228–229 or Werner, 2021a, pp. 238–240 for more comprehensive recent summaries).

Besides work on song translation (e.g. Franzon et al., 2021) and early small-scale studies (such as Murphey, 1990), analyses such as Kreyer & Mukherjee (2007), Bértoli-Dutra (2014) or Werner (2012, 2021a) deserve mention in the area of English linguistics as they offer empirical assessments of lyrics as a register or genre, focusing on similarities to and differences of lyrics from other spoken and written text types and on (register-internal) dimensions of variation. Occasionally, regional differences between lyrics are highlighted (e.g., Werner, 2012). Brett & Pinna (2019) are to be credited for developing a contrastive analysis of different pop subgenres based on keywords, while there are also several studies with an explicit language-educational concern (e.g. Bertóli, 2018; Summer, 2018; Werner, 2019b, 2021b, 2021c).

By comparison, linguistic work on German pop lyrics has been scarce. Noteworthy exceptions to this are (i) the publications by Schneider and colleagues based on the *Songkorpus* (see Section 2), in which aspects such as the position of lyrics on a written-spoken/formal-informal cline (Schneider, 2022a; see also Broll & Schneider, this issue), the discursive representation of socially salient topics in lyrics (Schneider et al., 2022), or the occurrence of idioms (Amin et al., 2021) are treated, and (ii) sociolinguistic work on German rap (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2003; Bohmann, 2010; Wiemeyer & Schaub, 2018), occasionally also involving a contrastive German-English perspective (Lüdtke, 2006).¹

The foregoing review suggests that there has been increasing linguistic engagement with a focus on either English or German lyrics. However, what is largely lacking to date is a contrastive perspective that takes account of the fact that language usage is highly reflective of cross-cultural similarities and differences. To address this gap, the present study offers a contrastive view of German and English pop lyrics. More specifically, it conceptualizes lyrics as a specific text type/register and tries to identify commonalities and differences of this text type in both languages. It can broadly be situated in the contexts of cross-linguistic register studies (see, e.g., Neumann, 2013, 2016) and contrastive textology (see, e.g., Androutsopoulos, 1999; Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2002) and employs corpora that represent the lyrics of commercially highly successful pop songs in German and Anglophone contexts (see further Section 2). Given the similar sociocultural functions and production circumstances of English and German lyrics and their historical “parent-child” relation (see above), the starting assumption would be large-scale linguistic overlap. However, due to the differing typological layout of the languages involved, there may also be differences at a micro-level, for instance pertaining to how conversationality/informality is realized in pop lyrics as a performed text type. To

¹ For the sake of completeness, note that corpus-based approaches to German lyrics have been used in other disciplines such as musicology and the psychology of music (see Ruth, 2019 for a pertinent example).

address the aforementioned aspects, the present study will tackle the following research questions:

- Can we find similarities and differences between English and German lyrics as regards topic choice and usage of other content words and phrases?
- How is conversationality/informality established in English and German lyrics, respectively?

The remainder of the present study is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the notion of “contrastive textology” and thus situates the present work as a cross-linguistic register analysis. It further presents the English and German lyrics corpora used. Section 3 offers a situational analysis of lyrics discourse to establish basic principles regarding the communicative context surrounding this text type. While the preceding sections serve to pave the way for the analysis, Section 4 contains the main results pertaining to lexical and phrasal (Section 4.1) and lexicogrammatical (Section 4.2) aspects, establishing areas of cross-linguistic convergence and divergence. The concluding Section 5 serves to contextualize the overall findings and identifies areas for future research.

2 Approach and data

As mentioned in Section 1, the present study can be viewed as an instantiation of cross-linguistic (English-German) register analysis as conceptualized by Neumann (2016).² Specifically, it could be categorized as Neumann’s type 3, that is, as a study that “takes register as the main object of research [...] with features [as] indicators used to characterize the contrastive registers” (Neumann, 2016, p. 43). Such an approach facilitates the establishment of similarities and differences of the register/text type that is contrastively compared. While she acknowledges that there is no “optimal solution” (Neumann, 2016, p. 43) when it comes to the cross-linguistic comparability of registers/text types, it is assumed that both English and German lyrics are sufficiently similar in terms of their genesis and usage contexts (see Section 3) to permit a contrastive view.

²To avoid any potential terminological confusion, note that Neumann’s approach is different from multi-dimensional (register) analysis (MDA) as established in Biber (1988, 1989) and the associated cross-linguistic study of universals of register variation (see Biber, 2014). Neumann (2016, p. 42) submits that an MDA approach is too un-specific as it is “only suited for general claims about the range of register variation in contrasted languages [but] does not allow individual comparisons of contrastive register pairs”. Indeed, Biber (2014) succeeds in establishing similar dimensions of variation (such as clausal/oral vs. phrasal/literate or narrative vs. non-narrative discourse) across several languages but does not offer contrastive analyses of specific registers. Note also that unfortunately no MDA implementation is available for German yet. For examples of (non-contrastive) MDAs of English lyrics, see Bertóli (2018) or Werner (2021a).

In this regard, it is worth noting that the current study could also be seen as a contribution to what has been termed “contrastive textology” (Androutsopoulos, 1999, p. 256) or “contrastive genre analysis” (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2002, p. 3). The basic conjecture here is that “processes of cultural evolution can be described as discourse processes, in the sense that they are manifested in particular discourse practices and objectified in specific text types (genres)” (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2002, p. 3). The main implications that follow from this perspective are (i) that relevant genres (such as pop lyrics) share properties cross-linguistically, while (ii) there may also be differences between individual speech communities (English vs. German pop performers), which altogether motivates a contrastive analysis. Importantly for the current purposes, Androutsopoulos (1999, pp. 237–238) further implies that genre convergence is prominent in text types connected to everyday culture and especially in (mass-)mediatized texts that are potentially spread globally. Therefore, he argues for the explicit study of such texts to overcome the bias toward exploring “high registers” (e.g. academic writing, press texts) in order to determine the actual presence of cross-linguistic similarities and differences (e.g. also in terms of the usage of nonstandard features) in genres subject to similar communicative conditions. Pop music lyrics clearly qualify as a relevant text type in this regard (see Section 3).

A contrastive analysis of pop lyrics along the lines theorized in the foregoing passages requires representative corpus data. As lyrics, despite their potentially extensive social impact (see, e.g., Kreyer & Mukherjee, 2007; Bell & Gibson, 2011), commonly are not available as parts of larger monitor corpora, their analysis has to rely on specially compiled corpora. In that regard, a fundamental question that may arise is that of how to define the “pop” in pop lyrics, also with a view to ensure cross-linguistic comparability as discussed above. The approach taken here follows precedence set in previous studies (such as Kreyer & Mukherjee, 2007; Werner, 2012, 2021a; see also Werner, 2018, 2022) and relies on commercially successful material that apparently possesses high appeal to a large audience. At the same time, it is worth noting that “pop” thus defined comprises a multitude of musical (and not necessarily textual) subgenres, which commonly are subjectively defined across various chart platforms, for instance.³

The aforementioned commercial appeal can be operationalized through high-ranking chart positions, as is the case for the two corpora used for the present study. For English pop lyrics, it relies on an extended version of LYPOP, a corpus that has been used in several previous analyses with descriptive and applied foci (Werner 2019a, 2019b, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). The current version of LYPOP contains all the lyrics from the top ten albums of the year-end charts

³ Van Venrooj & Schmutz (2018) provide an insightful cultural perspective on the inherently fuzzy and culturally determined nature of musical genre boundaries, while Brett & Pinna (2019) provide evidence on the severe constraints operating when trying to assign musical genre designations based on linguistic information from the lyrics.

from the period 2001 to 2021 as determined by the *Official Charts Company* (www.official-charts.com), a British music-industry related organization that compiles chart synopses based on the collection and analysis of record sales and information from streaming services. This corpus comprises 2,387 lyrics (745,287 word tokens/20,330 word types).⁴

For German lyrics, the analysis relies on the “Chart Songs” (CS) section of the *Songkorpus* (www.songkorpus.de). As already introduced above (see Section 1), the *Songkorpus* has served as empirical basis for several studies (Amin et al., 2021; Schneider 2019, 2020, 2022a; Schneider et al. 2022) and is exceptional in that its data can be searched through an online interface. The CS section comprises the lyrics of successful German-language songs from the German top 100 single charts from the period 1970 to 2022 as determined by *Chartsurfer* (www.chartsurfer.de), a website dedicated to providing various chart synopses. The CS section totals 1,962 lyrics (588,081 word tokens/30,005 word types).⁵

Despite minor differences in terms of compilation principles and temporal scope, it is evident that LYPOP and CS may serve as an adequate pair of resources for the contrastive analysis intended as they both represent lyrics of commercially successful pop songs in the respective languages and are of a comparable size.⁶

3 Situational analysis

This section presents a succinct overview of the situational characteristics of lyrics with a dual aim: first, to define the properties of the text type under scrutiny and to acknowledge the special character of lyrics as a performed, written-to-be-sung text type (see Kreyer & Mukherjee, 2007; Werner, 2012, 2021d) that has regularly been ignored in linguistic analysis compared to other registers; and second, to provide some more background on the issue of the comparability of English and German pop lyrics, as it is suggested here that they converge in terms of their genesis and usage contexts. The overview is loosely based on previous descriptions such as Biber & Egbert (2018, pp. 178–179) and Werner (2021a, pp. 245–248), who

⁴ Word count as determined by *AntConc*. For detailed information on pre- and post-processing the data, please refer to Werner (2021a, p. 241).

⁵ Word count as determined by *AntConc*. For detailed information on pre- and post-processing the data, please refer to Schneider (2022a, pp. 44–45).

⁶ A first minor contrastive finding that emerges from a look at the numbers is that the English lyrics apparently are more repetitive (type/token ratio of 0.03) than the German ones (type/token ratio of 0.05). As the type/token ratio may vary as a function of text length, it should be clear that it is a crude measure if we wanted to make a statement on lexical density or diversity. While a diachronic analysis could provide valuable insights into the development of lexical diversity of lyrics over time (potentially also using alternative measurements, see, e.g., McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010; Kyle et al., 2021), this is outside of the scope of the present contribution (but see, e.g., Walker, 2016; Meindertsma, 2019).

Participants	Addresser/speaker	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. (Team of) lyricist(s) 2. Singer(s) or their persona(s) as animator (<i>sensu</i> Goffman, 1979) or authority of the performance (<i>sensu</i> Eckstein, 2010) as lyrical <i>I</i>
	Addressee	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Narrow view/intended listener: A (fictional) single or plural unspecified <i>you</i> 2. Broader view: The pop music audience (potentially large); also as on-lookers (when consuming lyrics unintentionally)
Relation among participants	Interactiveness	Monologic, no backchannelling (unless live concert)
	Social roles	Hierarchical relationship (star system), high social distance between performer and audience, no personal relationship
	Shared knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Some shared world knowledge between singer and audience 2. Potentially some “insider” knowledge between singer and audience
Channel	Mode of communication	Hybrid (written-to-be-sung)
	Permanence	Hybrid (transient in performance as sound waves; permanent in printed/electronic form)
Production/reception circumstances	Planning	Usually carefully planned (e.g. to fit the musical structure), revised and edited, unless spontaneous (e.g. in improvised battle rap)
	Reception	<p>Real-time: Simultaneously heard and understood</p> <p>Printed/electronic text: Complete reader control</p>
Setting	Private/public	Both possible
	Shared time and place of participants	Commonly spatial and temporal distance, unless live performance
Communicative purposes	General purpose	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Broad view: Entertainment 2. Narrow view: Various purposes (narration, expression of attitudes, persuasion, etc.)
	Factuality	Mixed
	Stance expression	Overt expression of personal attitudes and epistemic stance
Topic		Variable (potentially ‘love’ as a salient subject)

Table 1: Situational properties of lyrics.

follow the general framework for the description of situational characteristics provided in Biber & Conrad (2019, pp. 39–40). Table 1 summarizes the central aspects, concurrently highlighting the complexity and hybridity of the communicative situation.

4 Results

4.1 Topics and n-grams

A first comparison relates to the topic choice of English vs. German lyrics. To this end, the top 15 content words as determined through the wordlist function of *AntConc* (Anthony, 2022) are contrasted, as presented in Table 2. As the focus here is on the popularity of topics as embodied by the ranking, absolute frequencies are presented only.

LYPOP				CS		
Rank	Item	Freq	Range	Item	Freq	Range
1	<i>love</i>	3,263	657	<i>Liebe</i>	1,482	483
2	<i>baby</i>	2,610	631	<i>Leben</i>	1,540	595
3	<i>time</i>	2,371	935	<i>Nacht</i>	1,194	503
4	<i>way</i>	2,089	782	<i>Welt</i>	1,176	501
5	<i>heart</i>	1,704	679	<i>Zeit</i>	1,072	506
6	<i>thing(s)</i>	1,447	717	<i>Tag</i>	923	456
7	<i>life</i>	1,398	600	<i>Herz</i>	860	371
8	<i>girl</i>	1,298	398	<i>Baby</i>	853	211
9	<i>man</i>	1,240	424	<i>Mann</i>	645	316
10	<i>night</i>	1,195	492	<i>Augen</i>	565	305
11	<i>day</i>	1,023	476	<i>Sonne</i>	514	239
12	<i>world</i>	975	423	<i>Kopf</i>	438	221
13	<i>eyes</i>	909	490	<i>Glück</i>	432	250
14	<i>mind</i>	873	442	<i>Mädchen</i>	423	165
15	<i>head</i>	647	338	<i>Stadt</i>	379	193

Table 2: Top 15 content words (nouns); equivalents marked in same color.⁷

⁷ A methodological note is in order here as regards the most frequent item *love/Liebe*. While it is easy to discern between verbal and nominal usages in German through a case-sensitive corpus query, the verb and the noun are exact homonyms in English. To approximate the numbers of verbs and nouns, a random sample of 500 occurrences of *love* was manually annotated to identify the percentage of verbal (44%) and nominal (56%) usages, and absolute numbers, displayed in in Tables 2 and 3, were calculated accordingly.

From the data in Table 2 it emerges that only two items (*love/Liebe; man/Mann*) cover the exact same ranks; yet, it is striking that 12 out of 15 items are contained in both the English and the German list. This suggests that the convergence in terms of genesis and usage contexts (see Section 3) results in large-scale overlap as to choice of words (and thus topic choice to a large degree) and that the situational properties apparently have a substantial cross-linguistic effect in this regard. As a side-note, it is worth mentioning that the German list with *Baby* features an Anglicism that also ranks highly in the English data. The occurrence of this word could be interpreted as one instance where an English pattern is adopted to fulfill a similar function as a vague address term to an unspecified fictional addressee (see Section 3), as shown in examples (1) and (2).

- (1) I don't like nobody but you, **baby**, I don't care (Ed Sheeran: I don't care)
 (2) Das wird unser Tag, **Baby**, wenn wir **aufsteh'n** (Seefeld: Aufsteh'n)

LYPOP				CS		
Rank	Item	Freq	Range	Item	Freq	Range
1	<i>get/</i> <i>got</i>	6,492	1,886	<i>will/</i>	2,012/	660/
				<i>willst</i>	521	239
2	<i>know</i>	5,330	1,459	<i>komm'/'</i> <i>kommt</i>	1,350/ 762	498/ 367
3	<i>like</i>	5,056	1,266	<i>geht/</i>	1,292/	549/
				<i>geh'/'</i>	1,083/	409/
				<i>gehen</i>	616	308
4	<i>go</i>	2,958	969	<i>weiß/</i>	1,255/	567/
				<i>weißst</i>	491	266
5	<i>love</i>	2,564	516	<i>lass''</i>	1,159	395
6	<i>say</i>	2,422	869	<i>sag'/'</i>	914/	378/
				<i>sagt/</i>	532/	237/
				<i>sagen</i>	478	266
7	<i>want</i>	2,240	710	<i>mach'/'</i>	761/	340/
				<i>macht/</i>	734/	390/
				<i>machen</i>	422	213
8	<i>see</i>	2,225	941	<i>seh'/'</i>	721/	372
				<i>sehen</i>	398	/242
9	<i>let</i>	2,064	720	<i>gib''</i>	524	144
10	<i>make</i>	2,017	750	<i>glaub''</i>	440	230
11	<i>come</i>	1,993	724	<i>bleibt/</i>	420/	218/
				<i>bleib''</i>	362	173
12	<i>take</i>	1,896	728	<i>meinen</i>	397	216
13	<i>need</i>	1,840	611	<i>steh''</i>	353	201
14	<i>feel</i>	1,838	712	<i>hör''</i>	392	188

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15	<i>give</i>	1,332	498	<i>liebe/</i>	389/	123/
				<i>lieb'</i>	353	124

Table 3: Top 15 content words (verbs); equivalents marked in same color; *be/have/do* and modal usages (e.g. *wanna*) excluded.

A similar picture as for nouns emerges from Table 3, which shows the most frequent content verb forms appearing in the two chart corpora. In this perspective, we find overlap for 10 out of 15 verbs, again with two items (*say/sagen; see/sehen*) covering exactly the same ranks. Table 3 also highlights the presence of clipped forms, specifically apocopes, in the German data. These high-frequency forms, which can be considered as markers of informal face-to-face communication (see Schneider, 2022a), outnumber the full realization in most instances (e.g. *komm', lass', glaub', etc.*). Further, the German lyrics data yield an extended amount of syncopes ($n = 5,717$), as illustrated in (2) to (4).

- (3) Sie wird heut' Nacht nicht **untergeh'n** und die Welt zählt laut bis zehn (Rammstein: Sonne)⁸
 (4) Hallo Zeit, lang nicht mehr **geseh'n** und nein, ich will noch nicht nach Hause **geh'n** (Trettmann feat. Alli Neumann: Zeit steht)

As English lacks the opportunity for apocope and syncope in the one-syllable verbs that are pervasive in the lyrics, it may rely on other linguistic means to index informality/conversationality (see Section 4.2 and Werner, 2021a).

In the next step, the scope will be extended beyond the single-word unit to establish further linguistic features of pop lyrics from a contrastive perspective. To this end, frequent trigrams were extracted from LYPOP and CS. The results are shown in Table 4.

LYPOP				CS		
Rank	Type	Freq	Range	Type	Freq	Range
1	<i>oh oh oh</i>	1,789	167	<i>la la la</i>	1,490	57
2	<i>yeah yeah yeah</i>	667	104	<i>na na na</i>	705	39
3	<i>la la la</i>	488	32	<i>oh oh oh</i>	277	43
4	<i>na na na</i>	472	18	<i>da da da</i>	250	12
5	<i>I don't know</i>	440	189	<i>le le le</i>	202	15
6	<i>I love you</i>	338	128	<i>ja ja ja</i>	182	34
7	<i>I don't wanna</i>	308	126	<i>wenn du mich</i>	170	55

⁸Note that the use of the syncope in this example is also due to rhyming/rhythm constraints.

8	<i>do do do</i>	303	14	<i>so wie du</i>	157	37
9	<i>ah ah ah</i>	272	25	<i>ich liebe dich</i>	154	55
10	<i>I know you</i>	262	120	<i>du bist mein</i>	122	42
11	<i>no no no</i>	262	55	<i>ich hab' dich</i>	118	61
12	<i>I know that</i>	252	137	<i>ich will dich</i>	118	45
13	<i>you and I</i>	244	109	<i>du mit mir</i>	116	26
14	<i>the way you</i>	243	87	<i>alles was ich</i>	115	57
15	<i>I know I</i>	235	101	<i>du bist so</i>	114	37
16	<i>I need you</i>	234	78	<i>ba ba ba</i>	108	4
17	<i>and I know</i>	223	111	<i>wo bist du</i>	107	29
18	<i>and I don't</i>	221	115	<i>ich bin der</i>	101	43
19	<i>da da da</i>	219	13	<i>ich bin ein</i>	101	40
20	<i>I want you</i>	214	73	<i>uh uh uh</i>	101	11
21	<i>you love me</i>	212	61	<i>du und ich</i>	100	57
22	<i>I want to</i>	208	95	<i>yeah yeah yeah</i>	100	18
23	<i>you make me</i>	199	50	<i>ich will nur</i>	98	28
24	<i>in love with</i>	198	63	<i>dass du mich</i>	97	37
25	<i>I don't want</i>	194	98	<i>tut mir leid</i>	97	45

Table 4: Top 25 trigrams; equivalents marked in same color.

A first striking result emerging from Table 4 is that both lists contain items that have been termed “non-lexical vocables” (Tegge & Parry, 2020, p. 7) or “musical tropes” (Werner, 2012, p. 25). These items do not carry any semantic meaning but are used (repetitively) for vocalization. Thus, they are present for aesthetic reasons and are indicative of the situated nature (language set to music) of lyrics (Werner, 2021a). Therefore, they could be categorized as register markers, defined as “distinctive linguistic constructions that do not occur in other registers” (Biber & Conrad, 2019, p. 54).

There is some overlap as regards the high-frequency items *la la la*, *na na na*, and *oh oh oh*, which possibly could qualify as universal pop lyrics vocables, and thus cross-linguistic register markers. Another potential candidate for a universal vocable is *yeah yeah yeah*. It is less salient in the German data (rank 2 in LYPOP; rank 22 in CS) but exemplifies another Anglicism. By contrast, the lyrics from both languages appear to have diverging inventories of ad-

ditional vocables given their different phonological systems. This is indicated in the transcriptions, with English furthermore featuring *do do do*, *ah ah ah*, and *no no no*, while the German list comprises *da da da*, *le le le*, *ja ja ja*, *ba ba ba*, and *uh uh uh*.

As regards other items in the trigram list, for English the present results tie in with Werner (2021a), who noted a high incidence of mental verbs used to express personal stance, a property typically assigned to conversation. In the German data, some of these also occur (e.g. *I love you/ich liebe dich*; *I want you/ich will dich*), and a high incidence of first and second person singular pronouns can be found for both languages (see also the overlapping combination *you and I/du und ich*), which can be viewed as an indication of informal/conversational usage (see further Section 4.2; Werner, 2012; Schneider, 2022a). In lyrics from both languages, the singer's persona (animator) as an *I/ich* as well as an intended listener as a (fictional) unspecified *you/du* are in focus (see Section 3). By contrast, in the German lyrics there also appear several high-frequency combinations involving the stative verb lemma *sein* ('be'), as in *du bist mein* ('you are my'), *du bist so* ('you are so'), *wo bist du* ('where are you'), *ich bin der* ('I am the'), and *ich bin ein* ('I am a').

4.2 Markers of informality and non-standard features

Previous studies such as Lütke (2006), Kreyer & Mukherjee (2007), Werner (2012, 2021a), and Schneider (2022a; see also Broll & Schneider, this issue) have highlighted the hybrid nature of pop (and rap) lyrics in terms of their position on the continua between informal conversation/speech and formal writing (language of immediacy vs. language of distance *sensu* Koch & Oesterreicher, 2012; see also Werner, 2021d). From a production perspective (see Section 3), it is relevant to explore strategies how lyrics (or rather lyricists) attempt to convey a "conversational feel", given (i) the actual production circumstances, (ii) audience expectations as regards the level of (in)formality of lyrics (see, e.g., Squires, 2019), and (iii) the differing structural layout of the two languages contrasted. To this end, it is considered useful to take a more qualitative perspective and to synthesize and assess the claims of previous studies as regards lexicogrammatical items with the help of the present data.

While the presence of clipped forms in German lyrics was already discussed in Section 4.1., related markers of informality also appear in English lyrics, albeit in different contexts. Such clipped forms comprise instances of *g*-dropping, as in (5), contracted modals, as in (6), (7), and (11), apheresis, as in (8) and (9), as well as contractions of the type noun/verb/pronoun + preposition, as in (9) to (11).

(5) Do you ever feel like **goin'** back? You know I spent some time in Hollywood **tryin'** to find **somethin'**
(Lewis Capaldi: Hollywood)

(6) I don't ever **wanna** be like them (Stormzy: 21 gun interlude)⁹

⁹ See also Table 4.

- (7) I **gotta** be cool, relax, get hip and get on my tracks (Queen: Crazy little thing called love)
 (8) **'cause** from here it looks the same (Ed Sheeran: Save myself)
 (9) What I realised **'bout** who I am is that, you're **kinda** [*kind + of*] taught (Dave: Survivor's guilt)
 (10) Stop **tryna** [*tryin(g) + to*] change me (Olly Murs: Stop tryna change me)
 (11) I **gotta** [*got + to*] get **outta** [*out + of*] here (Sam Smith: Reminds me of you)

These examples illustrate the value of ellipsis for conveying informality in a genuinely scripted and edited text type, and some of them, such as *g*-dropping, have even been viewed as trademark features of lyrics (Lindsey, 2019).

For German pop lyrics, Schneider (2022a) has identified further contractions besides apocope (see Section 4.1 and (12)), which appear to be particularly salient in the domains of determiners, as in (12) and (13), forms of *sein* ('be'), as in (13) and (14), and possessive pronouns, as in (15) to (17). Also, contractions of infinitive forms (with *-en* in German; see also Section 4.1), as in (14) and (18) and of two words, regularly involving the third person neuter pronoun *es* ('it'), as in (18) and (19), appear.

- (12) Denn ich **kauf'** mir **'ne** Villa in Berlin, danach **'ne** Villa in Paris (Katja Krasavice: Onlyfans)
 (13) Sicher, Dicker, **is' 'n** Party-Track, leg den hier auf, **is'** deine Party weg (Das Bo: Türlich, türlich)
 (14) Du hattest schlechte Zeiten und wir **war'n** auch dabei (Die fantastischen Vier: Troy)
 (15) Sie schläft in **mei'm** Hoodie (Civo: Weg von mir)
 (16) Da tippt der Kleine mich mit **sei'm** Leuchtfinger an (Willem: Wat)
 (17) wir machen Rave in **dei'm** Schlafzimmer (Romero: Sie liebt Techno)
 (18) Auch **wenn's** nicht so einfach war wie für dich, versteckt und verkrochen (Curse: Was ist jetzt)
 (19) Und obwohl **du's** nicht zeigt, dass es dich grad zerreißt, ich **kann's seh'n**, kann dich seh'n (LEA: Wenn du mich lässt)

Other studies have drawn attention to non-standard features appearing in rap specifically. This is relevant as rap has developed into an important genre within pop music. For English, Werner (2019a) has highlighted the use of items associated with African American English. Such forms also appear in LYPOP, for instance the negator *ain't* and copula absence, illustrated in (20), completive *done*, as in (21), or invariant present tense forms, as in (22).

- (20) A local hero, yo, but now he **ain't** unsung, Jimmy brought rum, he **ø** looking for clean cups (Faithless: Reasons)
 (21) Asking how I **done** it, man, I did it by the grace (Stromzy: Pop boy)
 (22) She **don't** wanna talk 'bout friendships (Dave: Heart attack)

Lüdtke (2006) has emphasized the conversational nature of German rap and lists features such as *am* + base form to express imperfectiveness, as in (23) and (24), *weil* + main sentence, as in (25), as well as dialectal forms, as illustrated in (26) to (28).

- (23) Bratan, roll' den Saruch und ich bin **am schweben** (Capital Bra feat. Ufo361: Na na na)
 (24) Bro, guck, ich bin **am ballen** (Luciano: La haine)

- (25) Danke, mir geht's gut, **weil ich bin high** (Bonez MC: Shotz fired)
(26) Dat is Fettes Brot op Platt inne Disco (Fettes Brot: Nordisch by nature)
(27) Und **wat** da so bei 'rauskommt, ja, **dat** werden **wa ma** seh'n (Culcha Candela: Hamma)
(28) Zuzusehen, dass **net** andauernd Frauen bei dir stehen (Sabrina Setlur: Ich leb' für dich)

While the aforementioned features are present in rap lyrics that form part of CS, it is evident that they are comparatively rare (*dat* n = 77, *wat* n = 207, *net* n = 56), with the standard variants strongly preferred (*das* n = 6,155, *was* n = 3,993, *nicht* n = 7,423)¹⁰ in German lyrics. Naturally, dialectal forms are pervasive in lyrics produced completely in regional dialect (e.g. by bands such as BAP or Spider Murphy Gang), in which they are used to style authenticity.¹¹ Other vernacular forms that Lüdtké (2006) lists, such as the German *Super(plusquam)perfekt* (e.g. *Ich war gestern dort gewesen/Er hat das gesagt gehabt*) and further contracted forms such as *brauchta* (*braucht + ihr*) and *kannste* (*kannst + du*; cf. *tryna* in example (10)) could not be found at all in the data. These apparently seem to be more characteristic of rap discourse than of pop lyrics discourse in general.¹²

The preceding overview has shown that a multitude of features associated with informal and non-standard usage appear in both English and German pop lyrics and it was suggested that these features are consciously used to convey a “conversational feel”. At the same time, it is clear that lyrics largely lack other highly characteristic informal/conversational items, such as false starts or hesitation markers. Just as one case on point, note that the data hardly contain any instances of the latter (CS: *ähm* n = 10, *äh* n = 8; LYPOP: *uhm* n = 6, *uh* n = 43).¹³ Given the scripted and edited production of the lyrics as well as the (as a rule) spatial and temporal distance between speaker and audience and the genuinely monologic/non-interactive nature of the discourse (see Section 3), such devices lack a communicative function and thus are absent. This could be related to the concept of the “performance filter” (Werner, 2021d, p. 568) in the sense that only selected items associated with conversationality (or the language of immediacy *sensu* Koch & Oesterreicher, 2012) are (consciously) used to index informality of lyrics discourse and that lyrics therefore are “not as conversational as conversation” (Werner, 2021, p. 256a). The present data suggest that this principle holds cross-linguistically.

¹⁰ CS also contains 149 occurrences of the apocope form *nich'*.

¹¹ On the issue of language choice in German pop music, see Larkey (2000) and Die-derrichsen (2017).

¹² *Kannste* appears in the full version of the Songkorpus, though. Note also that related contracted forms that follow the pattern verb_{second person singular present tense} + reduced *du*, such as *willste* (*willst + du*), *kommste* (*kommst + du*) or *darfste* (*darfst + du*) appear in CS.

¹³ The majority of the instances of *uh* actually is used as a vocable (see Section 4.1).

The mirative marker *uh oh* appears 15 times, the positive response marker *uh-huh* (and its spelling variants *a-ha* and *aha*) 128 times in LYPOP. Arguably, many of the occurrences of the latter also qualify as vocables.

5 Conclusion

The present contribution, which can be embedded into the larger context of contrastive textology/cross-linguistic register analysis (see Section 2) was based on the premise that English and German pop lyrics as one instantiation of a performed text type are subject to similar contextual constraints and share a similar sociocultural and communicative purpose (Section 3). Therefore, a starting assumption was large-scale linguistic convergence, which was tested using a corpus-based approach.

Overlap indeed was traceable in the corpus data with regard to (i) salient content topics of the lyrics as well as (ii) usage of content verbs (Section 4.1), which therefore could be considered “pop lyrics universals”. Lyrics from both languages also showed considerable congruence in the domain of register markers, notably the presence of (repetitive) non-lexical vocables. While the inventory of high-frequency items (e.g. *na na na*) was found to be similar, due their different phonological systems data from both languages also featured variation for other items (Section 4.1). Another difference at the lexical/phrasal level that emerged from the analysis of high-frequency trigrams pertained to the choice of verbs (mental verbs in English vs. forms of *sein* in German lyrics).

Further, it was hypothesized that there may also be differences at a micro-level, for instance as to how conversationality/informality is realized through lexicogrammatical means. The analysis of markers of informality and non-standardness suggested that both English and German lyrics attempt to convey a “conversational feel” through employing selected sets of relevant features, illustrating the presence of a performance filter as theorized in earlier work. These sets, however, were found to be diverging due to the differing typological structure of English and German, and fine-grained differences, for instance as regards contraction patterns in lexical and modal verbs (Sections 4.1 and 4.2), could be identified.

While the present study has provided a first contrastive insight into cross-linguistic differences and similarities of pop lyrics as a register, the scope of the data would allow several additional routes to be pursued in the future. These comprise a corpus-based contrastive look at cognitive aspects such as conceptual metaphors regarding high-frequency items like *love/Liebe*, where a quick search of the present corpus data yields various patterns (e.g. *love is... a losing game/a losing hand/pain/like a ship/dream/grain of sand/rocket/shadow/brick/ the sea/rain/fate* vs. *Liebe ist... ein Fluch/ein Schild/eine Sucht*, etc.) that could be subject to further scrutiny as regards variation and linguistic creativity (see also Kreyer, 2012; Climent & Coll-Florit, 2021).

Another aspect ignored in the present analysis relates to the presence of Anglicisms in the lyrics. This may be especially worthwhile in view of the fact that German pop lyrics have been viewed as the “child” of an Anglo-American cultural tradition (see Section 1). Relevant examples are given as (29) to (32).

- (29) Aha, und alle anderen **Girls** wären gern wie du (Cro: Traum)
- (30) Jede Profilneurose bekam 'n **Deal**, und dazu noch 'n Starproduzenten (Absolute Beginner: Es war einmal)
- (31) Ohren explodieren langsam, weil diese **Bitch-Niggas** mir viel zu viel reden. Zu viel reden. **Stage** am **shaken** wie Erdbeben. Früher viel **Shit** gemacht, Kugeln auf Boden, als gäb' es ein'n Regen (Pajel: 10 von 10)
- (32) Schmeiß' die **Bitch** raus, wenn sie ihren **Mood changt**. Ja, dein **Outfit** kostet so viel wie mein **Shoelace** (Ufo361 & Bonez MC: 7)

Many of these examples are from rap and it could be further discussed whether they are instances of imitation of US rap as a “mother culture” (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2002) to create genre-appropriate authenticity. Notably, individual items have been adapted into the linguistic system of German, both as regards their capitalization as nouns (*Girls, Deal, Bitch-Niggas, Stage, Shit, Mood, Outfit, Shoelace*) and as regards their adaptation into German morphological patterns (*shaken, changt*), at least as indicated by the transcriptions.

On a related note, it may be worthwhile to explore the issues of multilingualism and language mixing/code-switching, as exemplified in (33) and (34).

- (33) Heh, du willst **Dollar-Sign? Baby, valla** nein! (KC Rebell & Summer Cem: Valla nein)
- (34) **Never, never go to work**, lieber plantschen und sich anzieh'n fein, **look the girls on the Po** by the tolle **sunshine** (Helge Schneider: Sommer Sonne Kaktus)

Example (33) is trilingual as it involves German, English and Turkish lyrics, arguably with the intent to create (rap) authenticity through establishing multiple cultural connections, crucially not restricted to an US-American one. Alternatively, such examples could be interpreted as exemplifying “glocal” forces in rap (see, e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2003; Barone, in press). The German-English example (34), by contrast, illustrates language mixing for humorous purposes.

Further extensions of the present work are conceivable in terms of (i) developing more detailed quantitative and qualitative contrastive analyses of additional devices associated with informal conversation and strategic use to convey conversationality in written texts, such as discourse markers (e.g. *you know/ich mein*'), for instance (Imo, 2017; Schourup, 1999), and (ii) considering aspects related to language education, for instance how lyrics as highly motivating input material could be exploited to introduce conversational grammar and to develop language awareness (see, e.g., Esa, 2008; Schneider, 2022b; Werner, 2019b, 2021c).

Still, the preceding list is not exhaustive, so there will be many additional options to engage with the language of lyrics from a contrastive and other linguistic perspectives, with the present study serving as a possible point of departure. The availability of relevant corpus material (also going beyond the language pair English-German) will be crucial for such endeavors. As a final general note, it is argued that the present study also has illustrated the potential of “pop

cultural linguistics” (Werner, 2018, 2022) as an emerging research subfield that takes socio-culturally relevant pop cultural artifacts seriously as an object of linguistic study.

6 References


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