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Gender in Pop Songs: A Diachronic Study

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Popular culture often reflects the social climate in which it is created. And as an important element of popular culture, popular music, generally reflects social climate. We believe that during the last half of the century, the socially constructed nature of gender roles has changed. Our study attempts to determine if changes in gender roles have influenced changes in the use of gender references in popular music. Therefore a linguistic analysis of the use of gender referents in popular music over time should reveal the extent to which social re-definitions of gender roles have affected popular culture.

Few linguistic studies have analyzed gender and popular music together. However, Tim Murphey (1992) conducted a general study analyzing the discourse of pop songs. Murphey sampled 50 popular songs from 1987 and analyzed them for word count, content, words per minute, readability and human interest, time, place, and gender references. Murphey states that one reason for "the vagueness of PSs [pop songs] is the lack of gender referents in the lyrics" (p. 772). He found that of his 50-song corpus, only four songs indicated the gender of both singer and listener, and only 12% of songs were "written to be sung by one sex to another" (p. 772). A telling 62% of the songs had no specific gender referents.

While Murphey's study does not specifically discuss change in gender referents, his evaluation of gender referents in 1988 serves as the foundation for our investigation of change in gender referents over time.

There are other scholars who have conducted research in the area of popular culture, specifically popular music. One such scholar, William Brooks, wrote an article in the journal *Popular Music* entitled "On Being Tasteless" (1982). In this article Brooks claims that music is a universal medium,

and everyone has access to music; therefore, music can measure a particular community's values, language, standards, etc. For our purposes, Brooks' statement "musical [lyrical] interactions are ruled by the same principals that govern human interactions" solidifies our research, and validates the connection between popular culture and human communication (16).

Finally, Keith Swanick's text, *Popular Music and the Teacher* (1968) discusses the use of popular music in the classroom, with particular attention paid to culture. Although Swanick's text does not directly relate to our analysis, we used Swanick's definition of culture to solidify a linguistic research of music. We agree with Swanick, "'culture' grows organically out of the community," and therefore popular music (whatever the time period) must reflect the community or society which creates it (34-37).

Once we solidified the need for such research, our study began. It is based on two hypotheses:

1. Gender referents in popular music have shifted over the last 20 years.
2. We expected this shift to manifest itself through a substantial change in the way that popular song artists refer to men and women. (Specifically: songs from 1968 will have more specific gender referents than songs from 1988. We expected this shift to manifest itself through the use of more gender neutral referents in 1988.)

Data for this study came from *Billboard's Hot 100 Singles Chart*. In order to limit our study, we decided to compare two decades of popular music. Thus the top twenty songs from the weeks of July 27, 1968 and July 30, 1988 were arbitrarily selected for analysis. From this sample, we were only able to analyze ten songs from each year (due to difficulty obtaining lyrics).

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In order to adequately assess the data for our analysis, we performed a word count to determine the average song length for both years. We used standard statistical procedures to determine average song length by year. After synthesizing the data, we entered it into the computer and made comparisons between gender referents from 1968 and 1988.

Data compiled for our study brought about some interesting findings, and does conclude that a change has occurred in the use of gender referents in popular music between 1968 and 1988. Of primary importance—the length of an average popular song. In 1968 the average song was 152 words long, and in 1988 that number increased to 252 words per song. Although such findings are not indicative of gender, it is both necessary and important to acknowledge such a fluctuation in song length, for such data explains why songs from 1988 have more gender referents per song, than do the popular songs from 1968.

Essentially our analysis did in fact reflect a difference in gender referent usage during 1968 and 1988. Of the songs from 1968, 60% of the gender referents used were female. While in 1988, 60% of the gender referents were gender neutral, or non-gender specific, words such as “honey,” or “baby,” are included in such a category.

Why the change? There may be a variety of reasons, but we believe that there may have been increased awareness of gender in 1968. Gender roles were strictly defined and concrete—men were the primary breadwinners, and women homemakers. Thus, our findings indicate that more songs addressed or included gender in their lyrics. In 1988 however, gender roles were more loosely defined. Men and women were both entering the workforce and taking care of the family collectively. Added awareness, or concern for “political correctness” may have some influence on this particular finding. Another reason for the manifestation of more female gender referents in 1968 may be that eight of the ten songs we analyzed were sung by males. And since a majority of songs are written by men and sung by men, it seems obvious that 1968 song subject matter often dealt with women. Finally, it may be fairly safe to assume that in 1988 women were no longer viewed solely as objects of affection, but as articulate, capable counterparts in society. Thus, the introduction of gender neutral referents in 1988 reflects this equality amongst genders. (See findings below.)

Referent	1968	1988
Male	20%	31%
Female	60%	9%
Neutral	20%	60%

Before we began our study we thought that male gender referents would be more prevalent in 1968. Yet our analysis indicated that there were more gender male referents in 1988. In 1968 there were

only four occurrences of a male gender referent (he, his, etc), while in 1988 there were twenty-one such occurrences. Such data leads us to conclude one of two things: 1) the increase in female song-writers increased the number of songs written about men; 2) male gender referents are not prevalent in 1968 because a majority of the song-writers were male. Both solutions are relevant, yet not conclusive. In order to further solidify the exact reason for the 1988 increase in male gender referents, it would be necessary to perform another study on the actual music industry itself—to see if in fact, males have dominated the field. (See figure below.)

Referent	1968	1988
Boy	0	8
Guy	4	0
He	0	5
Him	0	2
His	0	2
Men	0	4
Total	4	21

If male gender referents were more frequently sung in 1988 popular songs, it seems only appropriate that our analysis demonstrates female gender referents were sung more often in 1968. In 1968 we found twelve female gender referents, while in 1988 we found only six. Such statistics lead us to once again conclude: first, there has been a change in the gender referent usage in popular songs; second, a change has also occurred in popular culture. The increase in female gender referent usage in the 1968 popular songs we analyzed may as well be attributed to an abundance of songs sung by males about females.

We began this analysis in an effort to study popular culture's use of gender referents. Our primary concern was gender, not particularly male or female though. Although we were able to postulate some changes which have occurred in gender referent usage, our analysis reflected a variety of other gender related implications (implications which could definitely be further studied). First of all, there seems to be a change in the subject matter of music from 1968-1988. Many of the popular songs in 1968 dealt with romance, love, marriage, and sometimes sex. However, a majority of the popular songs from 1988 dealt with such subject matter. Even though there are more gender neutral referents in the 1988 popular music, this may or may not reflect a new *attitude* and *conception* of the female/male relationship in society. In other words, the change may not reflect a true change in *action*, but rather a change in *thought* only. Thus, a change in denotation does not necessarily reflect a change in connotation.

In addition to a change in subject matter, our analysis also demonstrates that word connotations may not be the same in popular songs from 1968 to 1988. Presupposing that Jim Morrison's 1968 use

of the word "baby" functions the same as Steve Winwood's 1988 use of "baby" may be an inaccurate analysis. Clearly ideologies, education, socialization processes have changed, evolved, and been eradicated over twenty years, and so the word "baby" may not mean the same thing in these two distinct decades—in fact, even if the word were similarly denoted, it is quite unlikely that each author used them in the same context. Therefore, it is somewhat difficult to assume that an increase or decrease in the word "baby" indicates a definite change in gender role perception, etc.

The actual titles from these popular songs (both 1968 and 1988) also contribute or lend themselves to gender analysis. Of the songs we analyzed during 1968, two songs had female gender references in their title ("Lady Willpower" and "She's a Heartbreaker"); four had male references in their title ("Jumpin' Jack Flash," "Pictures of Matchstick Men," "Hurdy Gurdy Man," and "This Guy's In Love With You"). Of the 1988 songs, not one title had a female gender reference, and only one had a male gender reference ("Mercedes Boy"). Even though the actual song lyrics were our primary concern, we believe that the song titles reflect our earlier discussion about gender. Gender perception

and usage has changed in popular music, which explains why popular song titles in 1988 stray from indicating gender. Although we cannot support a definitive reason for the absence of gender reference in the 1988 popular song titles, we can postulate that increased awareness of gender relations, the need to represent all people, regardless of gender, has caused such a change.

We believe that gender roles for women and men have in fact changed since 1968. The songs we transcribed from 1968 and 1988 do reflect such a change. (Change, for our purposes, being defined as a difference in usage.) Hence we support the hypothesis that, as male and female stereotypes evolve, and become less polarized, popular culture (specifically popular music) will also modify its use of the gender referent.

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