An Australian in Nashville: Style Shifting and Authentic Performance of Country Music

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Language Ideologies and Music in Contact Situations
18-09-2014
Anglophone Music as Contact Situation

- Cultural contact
- Dialect Contact
  - American vs. British, etc.
  - Standard vs. Local
Do You Need a Country Accent to Sound Country?

CountryGirl<3 answered 5 years ago
No, Country music is made up of artists from a variety of backgrounds such as canadians Shania Twain and Dean Brody and Australian Keith Urban, all with their own distinct accents. They're all successful and loved by their fans just as much as any other country singer. It just goes to show you that pretty much any accent and background is accepted in this industry, even your great lakes accent (if you have one). All you need to sing country music is the heart.

apennsylvaniaguy answered 5 years ago
Not at all! There are many people without accents that sing country music. Shania Twain, Terry Clark, and Keith Urban are country singers that do not have a Southern accent.
Keith Urban

- Born 1967 in New Zealand, raised in Caboolture, Queensland, Australia
Keith Urban

I had a beach boys album when I was very young and loved the harmonies on the record, but as I got older I started to really appreciate the songwriting, and this track, '((Well)) God Only Knows' is one that continues to shine as an extraordinary original way to say, "I love you." It's a really masterful lyric, I think Peter Ashley was the lyricist on this track. It's hard to talk about why I love this song so much 'cause it's a very self-explanatory song so...
Keith Urban

- Born 1967 in New Zealand, raised in Caboolture, Queensland, Australia
- Recorded debut album in Australia 1991
- Moved to Nashville, Tennessee, US to pursue career
- Regarded as star within genre, popular in US, Canada, Australia
Keith Urban

I try to be

The one who knows just what to do to you to get me that smile

One chance of meetin'

You were walkin' by me on the street

And I said "Hi"

And that was the beginnin' of my heart spinnin'

Like these wheels in my head tonight

It's gonna be a long hot...
Road map

- Introduction
- Style Shifting in Anglophone Music
- What is Country Music?
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion and Context
Style Shifting in Anglophone Music

• British rock bands use several American features in their singing (Trudgill 1983)
• USA-5 Model (Simpson 1999)
  ▫ Flapped /t/
  ▫ Coda /r/ is present
  ▫ Monophthongized PRICE vowel
  ▫ Fronted TRAP vowel
  ▫ Merged LOT and THOUGHT vowels
• Also used by New Zealand singers (Gibson and Bell 2012)
Style Shifting in Anglophone Music

• Style shifting in music as referee design (Bell 1984)
  ▫ Singers performing an identity
  ▫ Reference identity through speech
• USA-5 is *default* speech in song (Gibson and Bell 2012)
Style Shifting in Anglophone Music

• Ease of singing?
  ▫ Possibly for some features (PRICE vowel)
  ▫ Not likely for others (coda /r/, LOT/THOUGHT merger)

• AmE has linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991, Preston 1993)
  ▫ Hegemonic pressure to use in song
  ▫ Result of AmE being default for song
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What is Country Music?

- Emerged ~1900 as Hillbilly Music by whites, in contrast to black Race Music
- Recordings of traditional rural American music
- Advent of radio spread it through Midwest and South
- Changed to less pejorative name in 1940s
What is Country Music?

- Values of white, Southern working-class clearly linked to genre by 1950s
- Target audience changed to middle-class, regionally broader but values remained
- Nashville, Tenn. center for recording today
  - Contributed particular style of Nashville Sound (Pecknold 2007)
What is Country Music?

- Is Nashville Sound authentic?
- For consumers, authenticity derived from values conveyed by music (Peterson 1997)
- Authentic American country must index white, Southern working-class values/identity
- Urban must somehow access these to be perceived as authentic
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Methods

- Corpus of 8 songs across 4 albums (1997-2010)
- Podcast Interview
- Three features:
  - Coda /r/
  - Monophthong PRICE
  - (ing)
- Coded impressionistically
  - PRICE vowel double checked against spectrogram
Results: Coda /r/

- Very non-rhotic in speech
- Very rhotic in song
- Difference is significant (p<.0001)
Results: Coda /r/
Results: Monophthong PRICE

- Favors monophthong in speech, but shows variation with diphthong
- Nearly exclusively uses monophthong in song
- Difference is significant (p<.0001)
Results: Monophthong PRICE
Results: Monophthong PRICE

• Most Southerners monophthongize before voiced consonants, but not voiceless (Labov et al 2006, Bernstein 2006)
  ▫ Geographic variation
  ▫ Class variation
Results: Monophthong PRICE

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Speech

Songs
Results: Monophthong PRICE

• Most Southerners monophthongize before voiced consonants, but not voiceless (Labov et al 2006, Bernstein 2006)
  ▫ Geographic variation
  ▫ Class variation

• Urban does not show a difference based on following environment (p=3589, p=.0748)
Results: (ing)

- Nearly exclusively uses velar in speech
- Nearly exclusively uses alveolar in song
- Difference is significant (p<.0001)
Results: (ing)
Results: (ing)

- Grammatical category has an effect on (ing) production (Houston 1985)
Results: (ing)

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p-value 0.0009
Results: (ing)

- Grammatical category has an effect on (ing) production (Houston 1985)
- Noun to Verb proportion different in song and speech (p=.0009)
Results: (ing)

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Songs

Speech
Results: (ing)

- Grammatical category has an effect on (ing) production (Houston 1985)
- Noun to Verb proportion different in song and speech (p=.0009)
- Effect does show up in song (p=.025)
- Does not in speech (p=.5211)
- Difference between song and speech not attributable to this effect
Road map

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Discussion and Context

- Style shifting on these features
  - Coda /r/ American variant
  - PRICE vowel Southern American variant
  - (ing) working class variant
- Sung production of (ing), PRICE vowel match American country artists (Duncan in review)
Discussion and Context

Coda /r/ production
Discussion and Context

Monophthong PRICE production
Discussion and Context

Alveolar (ing) production
Discussion and Context

- Country music has connotations of Southern working-class
- Audience not necessarily Southern, nor working-class
- When disconnect between claimed and actual identity, accent designed to authenticate performer
- Lyrics attempt to reference and lay claim to this identity
Discussion and Context

• Lyrical content mostly vague, but rural-oriented
  ▫ “Walk in the country with me” (Walk in the Country)
  ▫ “Over at the lake and down by the river you can feel it start to rise” (Long Hot Summer)

• Compare to more specific content by American artists
  ▫ “Gonna take you all the way to Paris, Tennessee” (Kenny Chesney, “Paris, Tennessee”)
  ▫ “I was headed down to New Orleans” (Tim McGraw, “Something Like That”)
Discussion and Content

• Some lyrics reference *American* experience
  ▫ “With the moon shining bright like headlights on the interstate” (You’ll Think of Me)
  ▫ “Down the drain pipe cross the yard and through the fence/I risked a whoopin' every time I went 'Cause white boys weren't allowed/On the colored side of town
   But I was proud to call that old black man my friend” (Ghost in This Guitar)
Conclusion

- One has to *sound* country to perform country music
- Because he cannot access Southern working-class values through lyrics and experience, language use becomes vital to performance
- Urban style shifts in order to perform authentic country
- Side effect that Australian identity is hidden in performance
Bibliography

Duncan, Daniel. In review. Referee design in country music.
## Discography

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