Sociophonetics of Popular Music:
Insights from Corpus Analysis and Speech Perception Experiments

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In this talk, I will examine the flexibility and context-sensitivity of speech perception by looking at a domain not often explored in the study of language cognition — popular music. Three empirical studies are presented. The first examines the current state of sociolinguistic variation in commercial popular music, while the second and third explore everyday listeners' perception of language in musical and non-musical contexts. Summarising my previous research, I begin by arguing that the use of 'American English' in song is automatic for New Zealand singers, and constitutes a responsive style that is both accurate and consistent. The use of New Zealand English (NZE) in song, by contrast, is stylised, involving an initiative act of identity and requiring effort and awareness. The normative dialect used in song is derived from North American Englishes (AmE), but is more strongly indexed to the song context than to any geographic location. I therefore refer to this normative variety as the Standard Popular Music Singing Style (SPMSS).

The first empirical study uses a systematically selected corpus of commercial pop and hip hop from NZ and the USA to analyse a cluster of sociolinguistic variables which distinguish NZE and American Englishes: rhoticity; and the vowels of the BATH, LOT, DRESS, TRAP and GOAT lexical sets. This analysis confirms that AmE-derived SPMSS is highly normative in NZ music. Most pop singers closely follow US patterns, while several hip hop artists display elements of New Zealand English, reflecting the importance of authenticity in hip hop identities. The use of NZE in more salient variables highlights the tension between the responsive/deterministic and the initiative/social dimensions of language style, and raises questions of awareness and control.

Two perception experiments look at the same set of variables from the perspective of the general, non-musician, NZ listener. The first of the two experiments is a phonetic categorisation task. Listeners decide whether they hear the word *bed* or *bad* in three conditions: where the stimuli are set to music, or when stimuli occur in one of two non-musical control conditions. When set to music, the NZ listeners perceive the vowel according to expectations of SPMSS (i.e. expecting US-derived vowel qualities). The second perception experiment is a lexical decision task that uses the natural speech of a NZ and a US speaker, once again in musical and non-musical conditions. Participants' processing of the US voice is facilitated in the music condition, becoming faster than reaction times to their native dialect.

Bringing the results of the corpus and perception studies together, this research shows that SPMSS is highly normative in NZ popular music not just for performers, but also in the minds of the general music-listening public. Speech and song are two highly contrastive contexts of language use. By differing from conversational language across a range of perceptual and functional dimensions, language heard or produced in song is likely to encode and activate a distinct subset of auditory memories. I argue that our understanding of language cognition needs to focus not just on *social* meaning, but on all kinds of systematic co-occurrence between linguistic and non-linguistic experience.