

Multilanguage in popular music: a study of the 2022 Billboard charts.

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Abstract. The phenomenon of globalisation, intensified by contemporary mass media technology, has caused significant shifts in the consumption and proliferation of media content. One of the consequences of this is that a speaker may have access, through media content, to a variety of different languages besides their own. This enables languages to have reaches not defined by their speakers, but by media consumption. This study analysed the most popular songs of the year 2022 through the industry standard Billboard weekly song charts, listing the occurrence of different languages and comparing the contents of the North American charts to those of the Global charts, adding up to, respectively, 762 and 688 entries. These song entries were divided into four main categories, based on the use of English: songs in which it is the exclusive language, songs in which it is the main language, songs in which it is secondary to another language, and songs where it was not used. These were further divided by language used in relation to English, in the same exclusive, primary, and secondary metrics. Finally, results from the two different charts were compared, highlighting the similarities and differences between North American and global media consumption. This provided a data illustration to present cultural and mass media realities in music, marked by the prominence of English-language song in coexistence with the increased consumption, by English speakers, of different language music, notably Spanish, Korean, and Yoruba, as observed by recent studies. English has taken a stature in the music industry which makes it the most favoured language, with the common practice of non-native artists using it partial or even totally in songs, however, the global nature of mass media prevents it from being the only contender. In fact, it can be argued that English's hegemony creates demand for national-language music. With this in sight, the aim of this study is to observe and contribute to the body of research documenting the impact of globalisation and mass media in popular song, as well as in the circulation of different languages.

Keywords. Multilanguage, popular music, media consumption, language circulation.

1. Introduction

Popular music has long been a tool of cultural communication. Lyrical themes in this medium constitute discourse, which is, as described by Van Dijk [1], in equal parts a product of its circumstance and an agent in shaping it, and thus have captured and influenced reactions to every major moment in recent history. This is well exemplified by late 1960's North American rock and folk music, products of a youth in search of sexual and ideological liberation and in protest of the Vietnam War, which in turn moulded public opinions on reproductive rights, political options, and the war effort. In that sense, all popular music trends can be directly tied to the

sociocultural happenings of their times, be it the birth of hip hop and metal music in the 1970's, the rise of urban styles in the 1990's, the maximalism trend of early 2010's pop, or the comparative minimalism of the late 2010's.

Firstly, it is important to define what constitutes popular music. "Popular music has generally been regarded as the type of music form or practice that is targeted towards audience satisfaction, with crowd appeal and encompassing several styles that [are] readily comprehensible to a large proportion of the population [where] its appreciation requires little or no knowledge of musical theory" [2]. Therefore, it is a label that, unlike other types of musical classifications, does not have

a defining stylistic or lyrical aspect and includes many diverse music genres, including rock, hip hop, gospel, R&B, folk, dance, musical theatre, and more regional and language-specific genres such as country, funk, afrobeat, K-pop, and reggaeton. Instead, it considers the final reach of the music in the audience, which plays both the role of appreciator of an art form and consumer of a commodity.

Historically, popular music has accompanied the major changes to affect the phonographic industry, which have shaped the way it is conceived, recorded, distributed, and consumed. Oh and Lee [3] link FM radio and television to the rise of rock and roll in the 1950's, MTV and music videos to the spread of R&B in the 1980's, and YouTube as well as similar "free" music distribution technologies to the K-pop phenomenon starting in the 2010's. In this context, the popular music of today must be understood as consequential to the current forms of music distribution and consumption, still very much influenced by YouTube, and dominated by streaming platforms, in user and algorithm curated playlists.

As for the relevance of language choice and multilingualism in popular music, we refer to Kovačić [4]: "The choice of language in popular music is a thoroughly thought-out act; there is little spontaneity about it. A musician or music group thinks about the language while writing the lyrics, most often influenced by the awareness of other processes such as music production, promotion of the song or album, and perhaps music video production. [...] When musicians decide on the language usage in songs, they also consider the audience being addressed on the contextual and symbolic levels." User-curated streaming exposes each listener to a broad range of different languages, without the filtering applied by television or radio. Thus, an artist's choice of language when composing lyrics is of key importance in determining what audience a given song will reach, which in turn has an impact on which languages end up being popular in their use. Determining the nature of this impact is of great interest to the industry.

So far, an exact measure of multilingualism in the context of the United States has been unknown. While it is known as general fact that in recent times non-English music has been penetrating the North American market, both due to imported popular culture phenomena like K-pop, J-pop and afrobeat, and due to the large Spanish-speaking population ushering in Spanish-language music, there hasn't been a comprehensive study done showing the numbers of this effect. Therefore, this study aims to document and contribute to the body of work about language and popular music, as well as propose and utilise a method of documenting trends in music through the phonographic industry itself, understanding the relevance of these results.

For this purpose, the Billboard charts have been used as the source of data. They are here considered a reliable measure of relevance through their methods of collecting and listing song entries, clearly highlighting what is popular in the moment through the lens of the North American music market. The study lists the language choices in the most popular song entries in the United States in the year 2022 and compares them to the language choices in the most popular songs globally for perspective. This approach allows for a well-rounded view into popular trends in the music industry according to the industry itself and its own metrics of relevance.

2. Research Methods

Billboard updates the Hot 100 list considering United States-based streaming, radio play, and music sales both physical and digital. These sources have different weights in calculating the final position of a song in the chart, and despite the exact calculation being a trade secret, it is publicly available knowledge that music sales have comparatively bigger weight to reflect the decline in this form of media, while streaming has a comparative smaller weight due to its rise in popularity, with streams being ranked on whether they originate in paid subscription services, ad-supported services and programmed services, in decreasing order of significance [5]. In practice, streaming is the main agent on the charts, while physical media has an almost negligible effect. The Hot 100 also operates under the rule of recurrence, which excludes from future entry most songs that have been on the charts for 20 weeks or longer and have since fallen below position 50. This rule has been greatly relaxed in recent years, which in effect allows for older songs to chart on occasion.

The Billboard Global 200 songs chart only counts streaming data and digital music sales worldwide. It also lacks the recurrence rule, which allows individual songs to chart for longer and for older songs to rechart. The calculation of the position of each song is done with album-equivalent units, where 1 track sale (t) equals 200 subscription streams (s) which equal 900 ad-supported streams (a), resulting in the following equation (I) for determining the total number of album-equivalent units (N) used to calculate a song's position [6]:

(I)

$$N = (t \times 200) + s + \frac{a}{4.5}$$

The lists are published weekly, every Tuesday, amounting to 52 entries in the year 2022, comprising full weeks or otherwise. This study considered an individual entry to be any song listed on the charts in the year, regardless of time spent on them and position. For the sake of parity, only songs reaching positions of 100 or higher on the Global 200 charts within the year were counted. This set is henceforth

dubbed “Global 100” to differentiate it from the complete Billboard Global 200 set. In total, there were 762 entries on the Hot 100 charts (identified by the letter **A**) and 688 on the Global 100 (identified by the letter **B**) across the year 2022.

The entries were listed separately according to what chart they had appeared on. There was considerable overlap between **A** and **B**, as it is common for an entry to appear on both charts, in which case it would feature on both lists. Then, the lyrical content of these songs was analysed to divide them into five categories, compared to the total number of entries. Songs in category *Exclusive* have lyrical content exclusively in standard English. Songs in category *Primary* have lyrics which are primarily in standard English with considerable elements in other language(s). Songs in category *Secondary* have lyrics primarily in any language(s) other than standard English, with considerable elements in English. Songs in category *Absent* have lyrics in any language(s) other than standard English and do not feature any considerable elements in English. Songs in category *Instrumental* lack lyrical content altogether, although this was only matched by a single entry across the entire dataset. The results for the Hot 100 and Global 100 are represented, respectively, on **Tab. 1** and **Tab. 3** and are given in both absolute (a) and percentual (p) form.

The first challenge posed by this method was determining what counts as a “considerable element” of language which effectively constitutes relevant data. We have determined that a “considerable element” is any stretch of language with complete meaning on its own which contributes to a song’s lyrical content. This excludes single-word utterances, artist names, audio samples used as background elements and most references to lexicalised expressions (*e.g.*: *Veni, vidi, vici; C’est la vie*) in the absence of other elements in the referenced language.

Another challenge was determining the relationship of languages to each other, in the case of songs featuring more than one. This was done by volume, meaning whichever language saw the most use in number of sentences sung by the performers, including repetitions, was considered the primary. In case of equal volumes, the song’s chorus was used as a tiebreaker, and in the persistence of the tie or absence of chorus, the song’s title, which had no bearing on the result otherwise. This only went as far as determining a primary language, and in the case of songs featuring three or more languages, all non-primary ones were considered of equal, secondary prominence.

There is significance in establishing *standard* English as the focus of these categories, as well as determining what is considered *standard English*. This classification, for the purposes of this study, includes the language spoken in the Anglophone countries regardless of register, use of jargon and

dialect. It does not include English-based creoles and pidgins, which for the purposes of this study were counted as separate languages altogether. With the observing of many instances of West African pidgins on the Billboard charts, these occurrences have been grouped under the umbrella term *West African Pidgins*.

It is also opportune to state that only existing languages with native speakers were counted. A single entry on the dataset featured lyrics partially in the fictional language *Minionese*, in which case only the fragments of the song in an existing language were considered.

On the second part of this study, the occurrences of each language were listed on **Tab. 2** and **Tab. 4**, ordered by total number of appearances. There, the occurrences are measured up to the total times a given language appeared and divided into whether these uses happened as the *Exclusive*, *Primary* or *Secondary* language, following the same criteria laid out for English-language songs. The data is displayed in the absolute form. Instrumental songs were excluded from these tables.

3. Results

3.1 Billboard Hot 100 (A)

Tab. 1 – English in song lyrics.

	Total entries	Exclusive	Primary	Secondary	Absent	Instrumental
a	762	697	8	13	43	1
p	100	91.46	01.04	01.70	05.64	00.13

Tab. 2 – Language distribution.

	Total	Exclusive	Primary	Secondary
English	719	697	8	13
Spanish	46	41	2	3
Korean	12	0	10	2
West African Pidgins	4	0	1	3
Yoruba	3	0	3	0
Igbo	1	0	0	1

3.2 Billboard Hot 100 (B)

Tab. 3 – English in song lyrics.

	Total entries	Exclusive	Primary	Secondary	Absent
a	688	538	11	41	98
p	100	78.19	01.59	05.95	14.24

Tab. 4 – Language distribution.

	Total	Exclusive	Primary	Secondary
English	590	538	11	41
Spanish	80	76	2	2
Korean	39	1	36	2
Japanese	12	10	2	0
Portuguese	6	6	0	0
West African Pidgins	5	0	2	3
German	3	1	2	0
Yoruba	2	0	1	1
Italian	1	1	0	0
Telugu	1	1	0	0
Turkish	1	1	0	0
Ukrainian	1	1	0	0
Arabic	1	0	0	1
Fang	1	0	0	1
French	1	0	0	1
Igbo	1	0	0	1
Xhosa	1	0	0	1

3.3 Discussion

The data clearly indicates that there is a way higher percentage of all non-English related occurrences, adding up to 21,81%, on the Global data (**Tab. 3**), as opposed to 8,54% on the USA data (**Tab. 1**). However, English, with its respective occurrences of 78,19% (**Tab. 3**) and 91,46% (**Tab. 1**), maintains its status as the preferred language, both for native and non-native speaking musicians. In contrast, the trends observed in the high incidence of other languages reveal that it is not the only contender. This study highlights Spanish, Korean, and West African Pidgins as cases of particular interest, due to being the languages other than English that could be better observed on the Hot 100 charts, occasionally in the absence of English (**Tab. 2**). Both Igbo and Yoruba were also observed on these charts, but aside from the much smaller incidence, they were always observed in association with West African Pidgins, in songs placed in similar cultural production contexts. All the mentioned languages were also observed in the Global charts, albeit with different occurrence numbers (**Tab. 4**).

Considering this, one of the aims of the current discussion is to explore possible reasons as to why these languages have the impact that they have on the USA market and compare them to their own impact on the global stage. By also observing what other languages have a global impact but don't cross over to the United States in such a prevalent way, we can shed light on the current workings of language in the popular music stage as art form and commodity in the context of its production, distribution, and consumption.

On the global level, the dominance of English in the music industry gives way to two opposite phenomena. "The prestige attached to English around the world and its role as an international language make it a natural choice for many pop music artists in non-English speaking countries" [7]. Concurrently, it has been suggested that it has also prompted the increase in the demand for local-language music. Aleshinskaya [8] observes this effect in Russian television, noting that "local languages acquire symbolic and indexical meanings, serving as markers of ethnic and cultural identities." The same study cites Secombe and Smolicz [9], who wrote that "globalization has not led to cultural homogeneity but generated forces that have contributed to the persistence of cultural and linguistic diversity."

On the Billboard Global charts, languages with large contingents of speakers, such as Spanish, Korean, German, Japanese and Portuguese, have been appearing more common as evidenced by the data collected, amounting to 140 of the total 688 entries (**Tab. 4**). However, it must be noted that the latter three are entirely absent from the United States data (**Tab. 2**). Furthermore, languages with similarly large numbers of speakers such as Arabic, French, Telugu, and Turkish, had single Global entries in the year 2022 (**Tab. 4**), meanwhile major world languages situated further out from the Western cultural sphere such as Bengali, Indonesian, Mandarin Chinese and Russian are entirely absent from either chart. This may point to the partialities and biases which originate from Billboard's data collection methods, favouring a western audience, even outside of the United States.

Why do some of these languages "cross over" into the United States market with enough significance to show up in the songs chart? A plausible suggestion lies in how these languages are favoured by the market. Spanish, the most common language other than English, with 80 entries in the Global 100 charts (**Tab. 4**) and 46 in the Hot 100 (**Tab. 2**), mostly within the genres of reggaeton and hip hop, has a large number of speakers both in the USA and worldwide, which may represent a reason why its most common form in both charts is as the sole language in the absence of English: 95% in the Global 100 (**Tab. 4**) and 89,13% in the Hot 100 (**Tab.2**).

This contrasts with the behaviour of Korean. K-pop has become a culture and media phenomenon thanks to its use of the current landscape of music production and consumption. In a similar fashion to the rise of rock music through FM radio in the 1950's and of R&B through videoclips in the 1980's, K-pop gathered its massive influence during the 2010's through user-curated, ad-supported streaming, in particular YouTube, forfeiting the filtering of television and radio, which set it apart from Chinese and Japanese pop [3]. This provides an explanation for the number of Korean-language songs on both the Global and USA charts and their positions. It also sheds light onto K-pop's use of English: most Korean-

language songs, amounting to 92,30% on Global 100 (Tab. 4) and 83,33% on Hot 100 (Tab. 2) rely partially on English for the writing of lyrics, frequently on chorus and "hook" sections. These songs are also by default titled in both English and Korean, with the English title coming first and the Korean script following in parenthesis. Billboard only displays the Romanised section of song titles. Letters and diacritics which aren't present in English spelling were also omitted, as observed with Portuguese-titled songs. This study observed that the songs that were listed including languages that use non-Roman alphabets (Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Telugu, and Ukrainian) had received Romanised titles. K-pop's use of English can be understood as a successful manner to connect with an international audience despite the clear industry barriers placed on non-English languages.

The same, albeit on a different scale of popularity, seems to happen with Nigeria's afrobeat, in a similar way allying itself to standard English (noted the different relationship it has with English in the first place given Nigeria's linguistic landscape) to propel its own languages of Yoruba, Igbo and the various West African pidgins into international relevance. Yoruba has been described as the language most associated with afrobeat and its back-and-forth relationship of influence with American pop music [10], generating worldwide impact as shown on (Tab. 2) and (Tab. 4).

Another noteworthy phenomenon regarding the less frequently observed languages is the effect of entertainment events. Three of the languages with a single appearance in the Global charts (Tab. 4) had a song charting following a feature in a worldwide audience event: Italian in the popular *Festival della canzone italiana* in February; Ukrainian in the Eurovision song contest in May; and Arabic in the FIFA World Cup held in Qatar, in December. These events are very popular worldwide, however, their audience in the USA is proportionally much smaller, which might provide explanation for the songs not appearing in the Hot 100 charts. In turn, American entertainment events generated similar effects, with multiple songs featuring in the Global 100 charts after being performed at the LVI Super Bowl Halftime Show in February. This could not be observed at the Hot 100 charts due to the songs falling into the rule of recurrence.

3.4 Methodology observations

The method used for this study finds its advantages in allying itself to the industry standards, providing a pertinent view into what songs are perceived as relevant in the given moment, within the methods used by the market itself. It is not, however, impervious. The inconsistency of the rule of recurrence both between the two charts and within the Hot 100 itself poses a challenge to the accuracy of the data, as do the different methods of calculating the position of songs within the charts. The focus on

the USA and western markets can also prove this data collection challenging to apply with focus anywhere but the United States. Billboard does provide a version of the Global charts disregarding the USA data, but the lack of clarity as to what data is being considered and the paywall-locked nature of this version of the charts provide other obstacles. We also consider the single data font nature of this study an important limitation.

The next steps potentially involve applying this methodology to data sets collected by multiple different industry sources for a more complete picture. Seeking a manner to independently observe popular song data, albeit ambitious, would be ideal. However, despite its limitations, applying a methodology consistent with the one presented here over time would make it possible to see trends in languages which are making an impact on the popular music market, as well as their trajectory in relation to sociocultural happenings. In this way, it is possible to better observe how mass media as well as the shifts in the way the music industry works affect the languages which get global projection.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study allow for a perspective on the role English, other languages and multilanguage play in the current United States-adjacent popular music market. Understanding the nature of popular music as both art form and commodity, as well as its intrinsic relationship to media and communication which determines its production and consumption, reveals its importance as discourse reflective of current sociocultural realities. Hence, the choices made by songwriters when composing popular music are of key importance to its commercial viability, considering what has been proven as commercially viable and recognised as such by the industry. Linguistically, it is possible to observe the maintaining of English as the *status quo* language in terms of song writing, which prompts opposite movements of embracing in favour of reach – as is common in K-pop, frequently using English as a bridge to wider appeal – and rejection in favour of national-language music – as is common in reggaeton and other Spanish-language music, which was rarely observed incorporating any English – keeping up with audiences' demands and expectations both as art appreciators and consumers. This can be understood as one of the effects of current mass media technology in the music industry, with its biggest agent, streaming, which places content curation directly on the consumer as opposed to radio or television, allowing for languages to reach audiences in a more independent way.

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