Non-Standard English Features in the Song Lyrics of Best Selling Music in Sweden

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English C
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Supervisor: Tore Nilsson, Ph D
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1. **Introduction**

Ever since the days of Elvis and Beatles, rock and pop(ular) music has widely been considered as something which might attract young people and a voice with which they can identify themselves. On the inside of an LP cover of Elvis’, W. Burkhardt wrote “…They had found a rebellious voice of their own.” (*A Portrait in Music, RCA, SRS 558*) If the Beatles had followed Paul’s father’s advice, I believe it was, then the lyrics would have gone, *I love you, yes, yes, yes*; Standard English, but not the voice of adolescents. It seems that the language in music needs to have a certain element of danger, not too polished, not too correct, to appeal to young people. Breaking up and becoming a more independent individual, rebelling against the norms of society and its language, is something that most teenagers do to some extent. I believe there is a strong possibility that teenagers adopt certain non-standard features in a prestigious target language, in this case English, by listening to music.

1.1 **Aim and Scope**

The aim of this essay is to investigate to what extent Non-Standard English features are used in the lyrics of popular music in Sweden today. I will discuss youth language and language prestige. Music is known to be played and sung by both men and women of all ages throughout the world, and I want to see to what extent men and women contribute as lyric writers of popular music. From a linguistic approach, does the language in the lyrics of pop music show any signs of Non-Standard English, and if so, to what degree? My hypothesis is that there are plenty of non-standard expressions in popular music. Possibly, if exposed to repeatedly, these N-SE features may influence listeners’ language.

Wardhaugh (2003) discusses the British Sociolinguist Basil Bernstein and his work. He says that “Bernstein regards language as something which both influences culture and is in turn influenced by culture” (2003: 336). Furthermore, Wardhaugh argues that linguistic behaviour and social structure reproduces itself from
If music can be considered to be part of a culture, then the song lyrics would also be a part of it. If children and teenagers are influenced by the language used in music and adopt Non-Standard words and expressions from there into their vocabulary, then song lyrics can be said to have a part in the process of creating and sustaining something that Bernstein refers to as restricted code. In short, restricted code is supposed to be something that exists among friends and families; “It is Bernstein’s view that every speaker of the language has access to the restricted code because all employ this code on certain occasions; e.g., it is the language of intimacies between familiars” (2003: 337). Restricted code, which includes several non-standard features, is considered to be used by lower working class families, according to Bernstein. People who only have access to restricted code may be in a disempowered position when it comes to education since the schools employ elaborated code. Elaborated code is associated with middle class environments and Standard English, a variety of English which is used in formal situations, such as education, courts, and official positions. (Bernstein 2003: 337) Song lyrics with or without N-SE features are a part of Western culture, but do they also have any role to play in the social environment and in the reproduction process of restricted code and perhaps elaborated code as well since they co-exist side by side?

The scope of this study is not restricted to any specific style of music; rather it is a mix of popular individual songs listed according to how many copies are sold and the lyric writers’ gender. The present investigation is merely an effort to contribute in the research of this fairly unexplored field of linguistics. Other areas closely related to song lyrics would be: movies, TV series, computer games etc.

1.2 Previous Research

Although there is a paucity of research on non-standard features in song lyrics, several studies have treated the issue of linguistic variation based on age groups. Trudgill (1972) was one of the pioneers in this field and in his Norwich study he found that the young women of Norwich had shifted away from standard English to
non-standard in a way that middle-aged women had not, which indicates a rise in favor of vernacular variants among young women.

Eckert’s study in Detroit of ‘jocks’ and ‘burnouts’ at Belten High, a high school, suggests similarly; young women are at the frontier of both vernacular use (burn-outs), but they are at the same time maintaining SE (jocks). The study was based on phonological variation in speech. (Eckert & McConell-Ginet 1999: 195, cited in Coates 2004: 59-61)

Even more interesting is that Beasley and Chuang (2005-2006) have conducted research on what effect listening to songs has when it comes to learning English. The study consisted of four groups of Taiwanese students who listened to songs with English lyrics. Only the groups with the proper amount of help increased their vocabulary and cultural acquisition. Online listening without written lyrics did not improve the students’ English language abilities significantly.

From a learner perspective, defining what is Standard English and what is not is not as straightforward as one might think. Estling Vannestål (2007: 31) discusses this in her book, *A University Grammar of English*. Because there is no language academy setting the norms and trying to unify the wide-spread English language as there is in Sweden, Svenska Akademien, people have to look for guidance elsewhere, as in grammar books, dictionaries and style guides for journalists from newspapers. Estling Vannestål defines SE with “Three characteristics of standard English are that it is does *sic!* not contain dialectal features (i.e. cannot be associated with a certain part of a country), that it has more prestige than other varieties, and that it is mainly found in writing.” (2007: 31-32)

2. **Material and data**

A quantitative, as well as a qualitative approach is used throughout in my analysis. The data used in the study was extracted from the material by following these steps:
1. Analyzing Sverigetopplistan, which charts the 100 best selling singles of every year. Placements on the list decide which songs to include in the study and which ones to exclude.

2. Searching for the song texts in music books, with the music and lyrics transcribed. In order for a song to be included in the study it must be in the top half or higher of Sverigetopplistan and published, as in Hits 2008.

3. Digitalizing the published lyrics from the song books. Data extraction from the corpus-based material in a quantitative manner. Then, analyzing the features in the data, the gender of the lyric writers, comparing and looking up lexemes in secondary sources, such as, dictionaries and previous studies on related topics.

## 2.1 Material

The primary material used in the present study consists of three song books, Hits 2007, Hits 2008 and Schlagerfinal 2009, with music sheets and texts of selected songs from the most sold singles in Sweden in the respective year. The songs, or rather, the lyrics were then selected depending on whether they have made it to a relatively high position in the Swedish top list chart, Sverigetopplistan singlar, 2007, 2008, and March 2009, respectively. Sverigetopplistan ranks the 100 best selling singles each year in Sweden.

In order to make them easier to work with, all the lyrics were then digitalized in the computer program Word. 11 lyrics were chosen from 2007, 11 from 2008, and 8 lyrics from 2009. A total of 30 lyrics have thus been analyzed. Of these, 28 songs are published in the three previously mentioned books and the remaining two lyrics, Trying to Recall, and This Is the Life, have been copied from internet sites, the former from an unreliable source, but the text seems to be identical to the song, and the latter from the artist’s official home page, which would suggest some sort of reference stability, though not as high as the other texts which are published in Hits 2007, Hits 2008 and Schlagerfinal 2009.
The songs reached places on the charts ranging from 1st to 36th place. The reason why the span of the selected songs, numbers 1 to 36, is larger than the number of the songs chosen, 12, is because not all 100 songs from the charts are published each year, that is, in the same song book, but only a selection and with various placements. For reasons of convenience and economy, fewer song books/primary material have been a priority, with the consequence of songs being taken from diverse placements on the charts. Needless to say, having reached numbers 1 to 36 on the charts, all songs chosen have had a high exposure on the air on radio stations throughout Sweden, because placement and amount of air-play interact; the more copies sold of a single, the more it is broadcasted on radio stations and vice versa, generally.

2.2 Gender issues

When analysing the primary material, only three song lyrics were written by one or more women, and these are: Sahara Hotnights’ Cheek to Cheek, Marie Lindberg’s Trying to Recall, and Amy McDonald’s This Is the Life. 16 songs were written by men, and the remaining 11 were written by men and women together. When selecting the songs, female writers were premiered to a certain extent, because it was soon apparent that they were less represented in Sverigetopplistan. This means that the female representation in this study is not random, rather it is actively chosen. Confirmation of the text writer’s gender was conducted through search engines on two sites available on the Internet: one from the U.S., ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), and the other from the Swedish equivalent, STIM† (Svenska Tonsättares Internationella Musikbyrå), where you need to be a member to use that specific function. In a few cases, it was hard to decide whether the writer was a man or a woman simply by looking at their names. In such circumstances, the Google internet search engine was used, and in all cases but one, some information was available on Wikipedia or through music fans’ home pages

† N.B. STIM register and display lyrics and music writers separately; ASCAP does not, it seems.
that remedied that problem. This one anomaly, Harrell Thaddis Laphonia Jr., explains why there is an uncertainty on whether there is a woman involved in the song Umbrella or not, and it is therefore marked with a question mark in the writers column in Appendix 1. This has in reality only a minimal significance since a majority of the Umbrella lyrics, as well as the others, was written by men anyhow.

2.3 Data and analytical framework

The data extracted from the material in the present study consist of all Non-Standard English (N-SE) features, which is the focal point in the investigation. I assume that the vernacular items found can be said to vary on a scale from mild to more typical vernacular English, as in ev’ry versus ain’t. The N-SE items will here be displayed in six groups. The categorization is specifically set up for this study. The spread of these six groups range from morphology to syntax and they are homogeneity.

1. The first group deals with contraction and/or assimilation in lexemes used in different varieties of English, which in Standard English would need two or more words to express the same meaning. The morphemes in this group are: ain’t, gimme, gonna, gotta and wanna.


3. Group three deals with elision in the following words: ev’ry, ev’rybody, ev’rybody’s, ev’ryone, ev’ryone’s and ev’rything.

4. The fourth group has lexemes with assimilation in their first syllable: (a)’bout, (a)’round, (be)’cause, and (th)’em.

5. In the fifth group of words, various other non standard features are collected: bestest, damn, pop, scooch, ya, yeah, and washed up.

6. The sixth and final group concerns syntax: vernacular phrases and dependent clauses, as in: we gone and I ain’t gonna let you be.
2.4 Male and female authorship

The 11 hit songs of 2007 comprise 3242 words, while 2008 have 3448 words in 11 hit songs, and finally, there are 1907 words in the 8 songs of 2009. These 30 lyrics comprise a total of 8597 words, see Figure 1. Non-Standard English features occur 197 times in those lyrics. This gives a ratio of 22.9 non-standard items per 1,000 words.

![Figure 1](image)

The 11 song lyrics of 2007 have mainly been written by men; they have written 1543 words compared to women’s 405 words. Men and women have together\(^2\) produced 1294 words. Men might have contributed with 900 of these 1294 co-written words, and women may have written the remaining 394 words. Altogether, men have in the end written 2443 words while women have produced 799 words, possibly incorrectly estimated, but quite as near as it is possible to get with these data.

Of the 11 songs from 2008, men have produced 2454 words and a woman 342 words. Men and women working together with lyrics have produced 652 words. If calculating the words written by women and men in cooperation, then men have

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\(^2\) N.B. the song *Umbrella*, which might have had one woman co-writing the lyrics, that possibility is given the benefit of doubt here, estimating that 25 percent of the text is written by a woman.
approximately contributed with 348, and women with 304 words. In sum, men have written ca. 2802 words, and women ca. 646 words.

Men have written 1037 words in the songs of 2009. Men and women collaborating have written the remaining 870 words. If one divides these 870 words between the two genders, which would be 435 each, then men have written 1472 words and women 435 words, roughly. Of these 8 lyrics, none was written exclusively by a woman.

All in all, the data from the primary material show us that men have produced 5034 words or 58 percent, and possibly as much as 6717 words, which would be 78 percent, as Figure 1 illustrates. Women have produced 747 words or 9 percent, and possibly as much as 1880 words, which would translate into 22 percent. Collaboration between the sexes has produced 2816 words, which is 33 percent (remember the possible anomaly in the song, *Umbrella*). In Figure 2, a possible number of words produced by men, and a number which might be produced by women are presented.

**Figure 2**

![Figure 2](image)

Figure 2 illustrates a conclusion of the words written by men and women separately, and cooperatively working together. The actual distribution of words in the lyrics of
2007 to March 2009 is probably not possible to calculate correctly. This is because even among the writers themselves, they could probably not give a 100 percent secure answer about who contributed specific words to any given song. A reasonable estimation is therefore given.

3. Results

If not otherwise specified, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed.* has been used as a reference to define the Non-Standard English features from the data.

3.1 Analysis of the data

1. In group 1, all but the first lexemes are contracted. These can be seen as social markers and may therefore function as social barriers as a way to keep social dialects and groups apart. Yule (2003) states that “Although AAE speakers continue to experience the effects of discrimination, their social dialect often has covert prestige among young speakers in other social groups, particularly with regard to popular music, and certain features of AAE may be used in expressions of social identity by many who are not African American.” (p. 212) The following five contracted features are not only associated with Afro American Vernacular English, but also with other varieties of English.

- **Ain’t** – “1: am not: are not: is not 2: has not: have not 3: do not: does not: did not – used in some varieties of Black English.” M-W’s (p. 27). Considered as non-standard, although in wide use by Americans in the first two senses. In the song, I’m Yours, it is used as: is not, as in “…there ain’t no better reason…” This would in Standard English (SE) translate into: *there is not any better reason*. In the lyrics, a double negation is also used, “ain’t no”, or: in SE, *is not no*.

- **Gimme** – contraction of *give me*, M-W’s (p. 528). “True Believer” has this sentence: “Gimme, gimme everything you got”. This would in SE correspond to, *give me, give me everything you have got*. Notice the addition of *have*.  
• **Gonna** – contraction of *going to*, M-W’s (p. 535). In Amy McDonald’s, “This Is the Life”, gonna is used 23 times, e.g. “Where you gonna go”. In SE: *where are you going to go*. Notice the addition of *are*.

• **Gotta** – “Distorsion of *got a*, or *got to*” (p. 538, translated), according to Norstedts (3rd ed, Eng/Swe). This is found in the “Grace Kelly” lyrics, “*gotta be green, gotta be mean, gotta be ev’rything more*”. In the sense of, *got to be…everything more (than I already am)*.

• **Wanna** – Informal for, *want to*, Norstedt’s (p. 1478) In Agnes’ song, “Love Love Love”, wanna, has 11 occurrences, as in: “I *don’t wanna wait*” and “I *wanna feel love…*”. A SE clause would be: *I do not want to wait*, respectively, *I want to feel love*, to express a similar meaning.

Figure 3 shows the occurrences of the Non-Standard English features described above in group 1:

![Figure 3](image-url)

As Figure 3 shows, the most frequently used feature of group 1 is **gonna**, which is used 64 times, followed by **wanna** with 34 occurrences, **gotta**, 14 times, while **ain’t** occurs surprisingly no more than 4 times, and finally, **gimme** which is used only twice. **Gonna** is also more frequently used by women. Amy Mc’Donald uses **gonna** as many as 23 times in the song, “This Is the Life”. See Figure 4:
As Figure 4 shows, *gonna* occurs 35 times by men in five songs. Women use *gonna* 26 times in two songs. This shows that out of the three song lyrics written by women, *gonna* is featured in a much higher degree than in men’s lyrics. See Figure 5:

The calculations are based on the lyrics written by either gender, not on those written by women and men together. The origin of 16 lyrics are male while 3 are female. If *gonna* had been distributed evenly in the male respectively female lyrics, then *gonna*
would have occurred 3.81 times per song respectively 20.33 times. Figure 6 presents the gender stratification in group 1.

![Figure 6](image)

The SE variant of the vernacular *gonna*, which is *going to*, is not used anywhere in any song. The result is identical for *wanna* and the SE variant, *want to*.

2. In the second group, lexemes with the suffix, *–ing /ŋ/*, have not been used in all songs; instead the vernacular variant, *–in’ /n/*, has been in favour. The *–in’* suffix is considered to be associated with *covert prestige*. Coates (2004: 64) argues that the non-standard form is used by those with low education to separate themselves from those with more power in society who follow the language norm (SE). The *–in’* suffix can also be said to be a social marker, as in group 1. Figure 7 illustrates the *–in’* lexemes from group 2:
Nothin’ is used six times, followed by stayin’ which is used four times. Rushin’ and runnin’ occurs twice each while tryin’, givin’ and comin’ are only featured once in the material. The prefix, a- in verbs ending in –ing form, is used three times in the feature, a ringing. The single prefix found is the a- prefixing. Jenkins (2003) describes this feature as: “In vernacular Appalachian English and some other rural dialects, an a-prefix may occur on –ing forms functioning as verbs or adverbs, e.g. ‘She was a–coming home’…” (p. 79). In the song, Viva La Vida: “I hear Jerusalem bells a ringing”, could then be considered as rural and N-SE. Another explanation of the a-marker would be that it was, and perhaps still is used in old-fashioned English in ritual and religious contexts. A third explanation could be that the present prefix is used because it sounds more musical to compress the fictive SE main clause: ‘I hear that the bells of Jerusalem are ringing’, down to what is actually used in the song, and soften the –r phoneme in the lexeme –are, and thus use the –a prefix instead. It also gives a historical and possibly biblical connotation to the lyrics.

Figure 8 illustrates the distribution of gender in writing the lyrics where the Non-standard features in group 2 are presented.
Figure 8

The three different nuances of grey symbolize the distribution of words that are written by male, female or cooperative writers and occurrences in the data. None of the lyrics written by a female has any of the Non-Standard English features presented in group 2.

3. Elision is the common denominator in the third group\(^3\); *ev’ry, ev’rybody, ev’rybody’s, ev’ryone, ev’ryone’s and ev’rything*. In these cases, when the vowel *e*, is swallowed and not pronounced, or more to the point, written as it should not be pronounced, then elision ought to occur. Elision is a term within phonology, and according to Yule (2006): “This process of not pronouncing a sound segment that might be present in the deliberate careful pronunciation of a word in isolation is described as *elision*.” (p. 49) That, he says, happens in consonant clusters but also with vowels disappearing. Figure 9 shows the distribution of the non-standard features with elision:

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3 A slight clarification of why these lexemes are considered to be N-SE is appropriate here: when pronounced orally, these six lexemes would hardly be seen as N-SE. However, when written and published (as in the data of the present study), there is a deliberate meaning with the non-standard spelling, and that is why they are included in the study.
Ev’ry is the most frequently occurring word in group 3, and it is used eight times, then follows ev’rything, used five times, and least frequently, ev’ryone/ ev’ryone’s and ev’rybody/ ev’rybody’s, which occurs three times respectively. The gender parameter is presented in Figure 10.

None of the lyrics evidently written by a female has any of the Non-Standard features presented in group 3.

4. The lexemes with their first syllable assimilated belong in the fourth group which are: (a)’bout, (a)’round, (be)’cause, and (th)’em. The colloquial pronoun
‘em (3:rd person plural), has been used for a long period of time. Etymologically, ‘em, comes from Middle English’s, hem⁴, as in hang ‘em, and before the influence of Vikings, an even older pronoun was heom and him (3:rd person singular). Despite its long history, ‘em is not accepted as SE. Figure 11 shows the distribution of words in group 4:

Figure 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>em</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>round</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cause</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bout</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The assimilated words, ‘round and ‘bout, are the least frequent features of this group; they occur once each. ‘Em, is used twice, and ‘cause, as many times as 20, which makes it by far the most common of these four words. The SE variant, because, occurs 10 times, half of the vernacular variant ‘cause’s result.

It is also possible that the correct term is closer to elision instead of assimilation, regarding some of the words in group 4. The gender parameter in Figure 12 presents the gender-based distribution of the features in group 4.

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Again, the grey-scale illustrates if the song lyrics are written by male, female or cooperative writers, and how frequently they occur in the data. None of the lyrics that are written by a female occur in group 4.

5. The three characteristics of Estling Vannstål’s definition\(^5\) of SE (2007: 31-32) is helpful regarding some of the data in this essay. It concerns two words in group five that may or may not be regional varieties since no description of them are found in Merriam-Webster’s, nor in Norstedt’s dictionaries: \textit{bestest}, and \textit{scooch}. They are probably too new and/or not used widely enough to be in those two dictionaries, yet. It is questionable if they are possible to locate geographically. Also, \textit{bestest} and \textit{scooch} cannot be claimed to be more prestigious than other alternative words with similar meaning, nor are they mainly found in writing. Another approach to analyse them would be to see them as ‘solecisms’, (s.v.), which would mean that they deviate from what is accepted as idiom, proper order of language and syntax. Either way, it is possible to claim that these two unusual lexemes are not part of SE, and therefore, since they still are expressions of English, they must be N-SE features and are qualified to be in the data. The lexeme \textit{bestest} can be analyzed.

\(^5\) See chapter 1.2, Previous research.
as an adjective with the stem, *best* + the suffix –*est*, and therefore one could argue that it is an *allomorph*. Usually, one does not inflect beyond a superlative, as in *best* (good, better, best), but in the lyrics of, *I’m Yours*, *bestest* is used creatively. The expression *scooch* is defined as an intransitive verb in an internet dictionary, and it says: *scooch*: 1.” to hunch or draw oneself up and move (through, down, etc.); scrunch she scooched through the window and unlocked the door; he scooched down in his chair. 2. to slide as with short, jerky movements scooch over and make room for me on the bench” (yourdictionary.com).

In Norstedt’s dictionary (3rd ed.), the word *ya*, is described as an informal pronoun for *you* or *your* (p.1544). Informal is here interpreted in the manner of covert prestige. A taboo/swear word is also revealed in the material: the word, *damn*. It is used in the song, *I’m Yours* in the manner of expressing surprise with a swear word, M-W’s (p. 314). Figure 13 shows the distribution of the expressions in group 5:

![Figure 13](image)

The expression, *pop my pills*, which is used in *Rock Star* means: “to take (pills) esp. frequently or habitually” M-W’s (p. 965). *Yeah*, used as an (informal) adverb for yes,

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* http://www.yourdictionary.com/scooch
M-W’s (p. 1451). *Washed up*, also from Rock Star, is an adjective that means you are no “longer successful, skillful, popular, or needed”, M-W’s (p. 1411). Looking at the features in group 5 from a gender point of view shows a dichotomy, see Figure 14.

**Figure 14**

Since no lyrics neither written by women, nor cooperatively written by women and men use any of the above words (in the data), the expressions in group 5 only reflect men’s features, with black staples.

6. In the introduction of the song “Umbrella”, a few typical Afro American Vernacular English, AAVE, features are noticeable; “*When the clouds come we gone, we rockafella, she fly higher than weather…*” Especially three features of AAVE are interesting in that textual passage: *we gone, we rockafella* and *she fly*. In the AAVE variety of English, the *are* form of *be* is usually dropped, as in *we (are) gone*. Regarding the form *be*, Wardhaugh (2003) discusses the term zero *copula*, which he considers to be most interesting. “…the rule for its use is really quite simple. If you can contract *be* in SE, you can delete in AAVE.” (p. 343) The next example has really two features of Non-Standard English: *we rocafella*. The verb form of *be* is omitted, as in: *we (are) rocafella*, (same as the previous example), and the plural –*s* is not there, as it would have been in: *we (are) rocafella(s).*
Merriam-Webster’s says that *fella* is a noun and an alteration of *fellow* and *man* (p. 461). *Roc-A-Fella* is also the name of a record label that was partially started by ‘Jay Z’, an Afro-American rap artist featured in the song “Umbrella”. Of course, it is also a word play deriving from oil magnate John D. Rockefeller’s family name. “She fly” is yet another feature of a variant of English called *invariable present tense*. *She flies* higher than weather (does), would be the SE variant, probably not as rebellious as the AAVE variant. “*I’m a stick it out till the end*” (*Umbrella*) is featured three times in the song. “*Where you at*”, is another illustration of when the *are* in *form be* is not pronounced, and the addition of the informal *at*; SE: *Where are you*. Another example of a non-standard phrase is: “*I ain’t gonna let you be*”, which is from the Swedish song, “Play It For the Girls” ⁸. There are actually quite a few Non-Standard features in that song compared to the other Swedish songs⁹.

“*Though the years have come and gone, and by now we both moved on*”, is from the Swedish song lyrics in, “I Remember Love”. This passage stands out from the otherwise ‘correct’ use of English in the song. The first clause “*Though the years have come and gone*” is dependent, and the second one, *and by now we both moved on*” is the main clause. The problem with this sentence is that there is a missing finite verb form, *have*, as in: we both *have moved on*. This might be of rhythmical reasons; a phrase needs to fit within a particular time frame before the next phrase begins, and of course, the melody itself.

Singer/ song writer Jason M’raz, wrote quite many features of colloquial English in the song, “I’m Yours”. Here is an extract from the beginning of the lyrics:

“Well, you done, done me and you bet I felt it.
I tried to be chill but you’re so hot that I melted.
I fell right through the cracks, now I’m tryin’ to get back.
Before the cool done run out I’ll be givin’ it my bestest”

⁸ Sung by the artist ‘Danny’, known from the Swedish television show, ‘Idol’
⁹ See: Appendix 1
Among other things, this passage shows examples of antonyms: *chill* and *cool* versus *hot* and *melted*. The meaning of what is being told should be quite clear for the reader. However, a few of the expressions will be analyzed explicitly: “*you done me*”, has not the finite verb form *have*, as in: *you have done me*. If M’raz had written: *you can bet your money that I felt it* instead, it would have been extensively dryer and longer than the present: “*you bet I felt it*”. The lyrics also contains the phrase: “*Before the cool done run out*”, which is creatively written; the phrase would in SE be something similar to: *before my self-control is emptied, or more informally: before my coolness is totally gone*. The special auxiliary verb use of the word *done* seems to be influenced by African American Vernacular English (AAVE), according to Wardhaugh (2006: 343). Finally, the ‘over-the-top’ superlative, *bestest* has previously been accounted for, as have *tryin’* and *givin’*.

Could this indicate that creative use of English is more musical? Is colloquial English more accepted by adolescents and perhaps also appealing to them regarding their process of liberation discussed in the introduction?

In the song, “*Love Love Love*”, the phrase: “*I don’t wanna wait any more*” is used three times but there is a variation that goes: “*I don’t wanna wait no more*”. The variation incorporates dual negation by *don’t* and *no*; *I do not want to wait no more*. According to Jenkins (2003: 79), multiple negation is common in vernacular varieties of English.

In defence of the lyric writers, there is something which Estling Vannestål (2007) calls “…poetic license, which suggests that writers are free to express themselves in any way they like, and accordingly, also oppose the system and ‘break rules’.” (p. 32) Prior to that, she suggests that one should “know the rules before breaking them.” (p.32) That may shed some light upon why certain song lyrics such as *Rock Star* and *This Is the Life*, have more vernacular features and expressions than others; they are written by writers with English as their native tongue. Many of the other songs are written by Swedes with English as a foreign or second language. Therefore, it is possible that the Swedish writers use non-standard features less
frequently, in order not to break any rules they do not know firmly, or simply by continuing the SE taught in the educational system of Sweden. There is also the possibility that anyone or all of these Swedes are fully aware of what are standard features and not, and deliberately include contemporary N-SE expressions, possibly as a way of connecting to covert prestige. If that is true, then it cannot be dismissed that some lyric writers perhaps habitually use N-SE in order for the songs to relate to the target group, the young potential buyers. This might be the case in the songs *Play it for the girls, Hope and Glory, Baby Goodbye* and several others with distinctive vernacular features.

Target tailored lyrics or not, for whatever reasons, foreigner and native speaking song writers use N-SE in their lyric writing. It is after all a music *industry*. If the buyers agree with vernacular expressions, and are attracted by an artist’s covert image, then that is what they will get, it worked with Elvis’.

To support this chain of thoughts, there are investigations done by sociolinguists and in particular Peter Trudgill (1972) who brings forward evidence that working class men in Norwich, Great Britain are aiming for the covert non-standard form of English. “Privately and subconsciously, a large number of male speakers are more concerned with acquiring prestige of the covert sort and with signalling group solidarity than with obtaining social status…” (1972: 188) He states that the upper and middle classes aim for SE and that this is true for women in all classes, with the exception of younger women who tend to follow the working class men in their traditional and sometimes innovative covert prestige speech. This seems to be common both in rural English as well as in American varieties of English. He also discusses society and its sub-cultures. Trudgill concludes his article by claiming that: “We have therefore been able to argue that ‘covert prestige’ can be associated with certain linguistic forms, and that it is possible in some cases to provide evidence to show that this is in fact the case”. (1972: 194)

In addition, some songs in the study have no N-SE, at least not any vernacular features within the scope of this study. Those are: *Stay the Night, Hero,*
Empty Room, Curly Sue and Mercy. The first four are Swedish and the last one by a native speaker of English. The first three were also competing in the Swedish song contest, Melodifestivalen.

Beasley’s and Chuang’s (2005-2006) study of online American music and its possible effects on Taiwanese students’ acquisition of the English language and culture suggests that listening to songs does not develop listening comprehension, nor vocabulary, at least in a short-term perspective. Their study suggests the opposite of what seems to be something of a general belief about music and language acquisition, but what may not have been studied thoroughly enough. Referring to Diamond & Minicz, 1994; Medina 1993, 200, 2002, 2003; Milano, 1994; Yu-Ping, 2005, they say that: “A number of ESL educators and researchers have asserted that music can be used to expand a learner’s vocabulary and assist them in gaining familiarity with colloquial expressions”. Their work would be highly interesting for the present study as they seem to be closely related. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of the present study to include and research any more material. It should be mentioned that this reference by Beasley and Chuang indicates that there is a general belief which gives some support to the topic of the present study: that there is a link between music and N-SE. However, Beasley’s and Chuang’s say that the level of understanding and adapting new vocabulary increased significantly when the students were given hypertext links to written lyrics of the song. This should be highly interesting for educators and others who see music as a vehicle for learning a foreign language. Additional aid, as studying the meaning of new words for the students also helped increasing language acquisition. Even more extra-lingual support, like recorded oral explanations, did not help the learners. On the contrary, it did not improve their skills. The same results go for lifestyle literacy, or cultural knowledge. The article writers say that: “Our findings seem to support Krashen’s ‘input hypothesis,’ which asserts that new, unfamiliar vocabulary is acquired only when its meaning is made clear to the learner (Krashen, 1982).” (cited in Beasley/Chuang 2005-2006: 469) Beasley and Chuang do on the other hand admit that long-
time exposure to music, without any written lyrics, may give some positive learning results, which seem to be in the line of educators’ intuition. Their short-term study does not, however, support that idea.

4. Conclusion

My aim was to discover the extent of Non-Standard English features in song lyrics of best selling music (in the media format: singles) in Sweden. By studying *Sverigetopplistan*, and then the primary material, *Hits 2007-2008* and *Schlagerfinal* from a quantitative perspective it is clear that there are indeed signs of linguistic usage of Non-Standard English. As presented in section 2.4, there are 197 occurrences of Non-Standard English in the material of 8597 words, or in other words, 22.9 non-standard items are present per thousand words. The items range from mild to more typical vernacular English. Some songs have quite a few N-SE items while others have only a few colloquial expressions, and only a handful of lyrics are in SE.

Analysis of individual items shows that certain vernacular variants are favoured by the lyricists: wanna, gonna, and ‘cause. Surprisingly, the two first features always occur in the vernacular variant and never in the Standard English variant: want to, going to. Amy McDonald’s, “This Is the Life”, has very high occurrence of gonna, which not only seems to be the most favoured of N-SE features by women, but also by men. Only the third one, because, occurs in the SE variant and then half as many times as its vernacular companion, see Figure 15.
The favouritism by lyric writers for certain vernacular features was surprising, especially the extreme ratio of N-SE/SE in which it occurs.

The gender parameter in the current study is unpredictable due to the limited contribution of material from female lyric writers, but suggests that men’s use of wanna and ‘cause (see Figure 16) is much higher than that of women’s.

The material and the extracted data from it are too small to come to any conclusion generally regarding gender and language use in song lyrics. N-SE items written by
women are only found in group 1, except when cooperatively written with men. If co-written, then they are represented in groups 1-4, but group 5 has no items written by women. The only thing that is possible to claim regarding the gender parameter is: even when actively chosen to be included in the material of the present study, women are apparently in minority as lyric writers of popular music in Sverigetopplistan between the years 2007 through March 2009. They are however frequently represented as artists. Men dominate the best-selling songs, both as writers of the music as well as the lyrics. I assumed that women were successful lyricists in popular music, and in a way they are, but mostly when writing together with men, it seems, at least in this material.

Even though grammatical features in N-SE are the most common in the data, as in the song, “Rock Star”, there are also a few phrases, or more informally, chunks of vernacular language use, as in the songs “Umbrella”, and “I’m Yours”. Out of the data extracted from the material, it seems as if native speakers of English are creative to a higher extent with the use of N-SE than are non-native speakers. As stated earlier, the songs “Rock Star”, “This Is the life”, “Umbrella”, and “I’m Yours” have the most non-standard items but also vernacular phrases\(^{10}\) of all the songs collected. The two latter also show some African American Vernacular English, AAVE features. The black rap artist ‘Jay Z’ uses AAVE in the song “Umbrella”, but so does the white artist and singer/song writer Jason M’raz in the song “I’m Yours”. Among the Swedish songs, “Play It for the Girls” has the most non-standard features.

I believe there is a strong possibility that teenagers adopt certain non-standard features in a prestigious target language, in this case English, by listening to music. This is something which I recommend to be investigated in the future. It seems however that the middle classes in Norwich\(^{11}\) are quite unaffected as groups when it comes to their language use, which is Standard English to a higher extent than do the working class, except for the young women, which was surprising.

\(^{10}\) “This Is the Life” excluded from phrases; it has mainly one individual item: gonna.

\(^{11}\) Trudgill 1972
Eckert’s study of jocks and burn-outs in Detroit also suggests that young women, not men, have the most frequent use of N-SE, while at the same time preserving SE, depending on what social class they are coming from.

The point is that young people from all the different social classes, not just from the working class, supposedly listen to music. Technically, it has for a long time been possible for anyone to listen to any kind of music. The body of previous studies at hand, especially Trudgill’s, does indicate that there has been a rise in the use of vernacular language. Usually, the traditional signs of language prestige: overt for the middle classes (SE), and covert for the working classes (N-SE), and women holding up the flag of SE are there. Interestingly, young women did not aim for SE, instead they held covert prestige and working class speech in high regards, as did men. If music has played any part in this is doubtful. On the other hand, Trudgill’s research did not have music as a variable, and it covers only a limited amount of space geographically. The young people of Norwich from that time (the 70’s) are now middle-aged, which means they have children of their own who have listened to other, more contemporary music than the older generations have. More research needs to be conducted before any conclusions can be drawn about whether music affects people’s language or not, there or elsewhere.

The result of Beasley’s and Chuang’s study (2005-2006) on Taiwanese students does not directly support my hypothesis. Indirectly, it actually does; if songs come with written lyrics, music would significantly raise students’ vocabulary and culture knowledge of the foreign language, in this case English. In that investigation, a clear indication of the power that music has in language acquisition is revealed, perhaps for the first time in a scientific study. Nevertheless, it is based on short-term exposure to music, in which the outcome could be different if measuring long-time exposure to students’ own chosen favourite music, to songs which they also may repeatedly sing or hum along to. Taiwan is also another country on another

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continent with a totally different culture and people, very much unlike Sweden and Europe, which also may affect a study’s outcome. Beasley and Chuang mention in their article that there are other researchers of contrary beliefs, in which the material seem to agree with the subordinate part of my hypothesis: music containing N-SE may influence English learners’ language if exposed to repeatedly.

Scientific data regarding linguistic change can be used or misused. I am of the opinion that minimal actions should be taken in order to preserve the use of any standard language, since a language itself is a living thing and in constant change. Which individual or what authority could have the right to judge what is correct and/or incorrect use of a language; cannot any speaker with English as mother tongue claim ownership over her or his language. Analyses of language, for instance, in songs, are a positive action and can be rewarding. Censorship is a completely different matter. As always, it is up to the individuals to find their own vocabulary, with some guidance by their parents and teachers. Adolescents still need to have a voice of their own, because it is a part of the process of liberation. Nevertheless, it is an interesting topic to study.
Final references

Primary sources:

Secondary sources: