Transgressive Codes in Contemporary English:
An Analysis of Lexical Creativity in the Field of Music
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Abstract

This paper reports the results of the morphological analysis of a corpus of names of singers and bands ascribed to alternative musical trends. The analysis evinces that language is a suitable instrument to convey their desire for self-assertment and their rejection of stablished commercialism; therefore, it is used to break away from the norm, and also from what is foreseeable or even politically correct. In morphological terms, this innovation through trangression is reflected in inflectional and derivational deviation (*Red Sparrowes, Unsane*), as well as in the productive use of word formation devices (*The Boredoms, Funkadelic, VNA*). Moreover, the fragile correspondence between an orthographic word, a phonological word and a lexeme is constantly challenged by a creative use of graphemes and punctuation, and semantically anomalous word combinations (*P:ano, Sixtringcanvas*). The study concludes that this domain of human interaction illustrates the invaluable capacity of language to adjust itself to the users' needs and provides further evidence on the importance of usage vs. prescription in language development.

1. Introduction

The position of English as the ultimate international language is nowadays unquestionable, not only in scientific and technological domains, but also in others more closely related to the need of human beings to express themselves. This paper focuses on the subcategory of alternative music, and it aims to explore the issue of lexical creativity by means of the morphological analysis of a corpus of 300 names of singers and bands who, in spite of their different origins or styles, choose English as their means of expression. The analysis of the items was carried out on the grounds of contributions by outstanding

scholars in the field of inflectional and derivational morphology, from seminal works to updated revisions, particularly Quirk et al. (1985), Cannon (1986; 1989), Algeo (1991), Matthews (1991), Adams (2001), and Plag (2003). The corpus was gathered from both printed and on-line sources (see References). The lists of bands and singers provided by these sources were carefully examined and morphologically deviant items were selected for analysis. Alternative sources were consulted to verify the information obtained as regards the possible origins of the names.

Alternative music is often associated with small independent companies, and alternative musicians are usually characterized by their will to keep away from commercial pop music and mainstream culture. As will be shown in the analysis, through their choice of names artists ascribed to alternative musical trends (indie rock and pop, alternative metal, anarcho-punk, gothic rock, geek rock, grunge, etc.) they turn the language into a suitable instrument to convey their desire to go against the prevailing trends, thus being different and authentic. In other words, they use language to break away from the norm and also from what is foreseeable or even politically correct. As their names are part of their image, in most cases bands and singers try to come up with denominations which define their music, pay homage to somebody or something, call up memories, images or personal associations, or relate to their immediate context. Although chance occasionally plays a part in the choice of a name (some artists –*Aconite Thrill, JarCrew*– admit that they got their names by picking up random words in a dictionary), in many cases the names are purposely devised to catch the audience's attention by appealing to the senses; in other words, they try to strike the eye and the ear by resorting to typographical, phonological and morphological deviation.

In this study creativity will be understood as either "rule-governed" or "rule-breaking" (Matthews, 1991). Therefore, rule-governed creativity –i.e. productivity– arises when the new item is the result of applying an existing rule to a new (although, in principle, legitimate) base: for example, *Semi-Death* or *Evilized*. What we find in this case is the realization of "potential English words" (Quirk, 1985: 976). By contrast, any deviation as regards the process of word formation or the category of the base will be described as an instance of rule-breaking creativity: for example, in *Abyssic Hate* the item *abyssic*

is deviant due to "token-blocking" (Plag, 2003: 65), since an existing word (*abyssal*) blocks a newly created one. Another example is *The W.O.R.S.T.,* a false initialism since the letters do not replace an expanded expression. Due to their deviant quality, some of these items would fit Quirk's characterization as "non-English words", although it must always be considered that these denominations are often deliberately devised to satisfy certain sociocultural aims. Finally, it should also be remarked that most of the items described in the paragraphs that follow could actually be located in the borderline with "nonce formations", i.e. "new formations invented for a particular occasion" (Quirk, 1985: 977) which pose doubts as regards acceptability. In this respect, although in many cases these bands are ephemeral and enjoy limited success, it is nonetheless true that some of them manage to achieve lasting popularity (for instance, *The Decemberists*).

What follows is a summary of the results obtained in the analysis of the corpus. Separate subsections are devoted to the description of the following phenomena: non-morphological deviation (typographical deviation, respellings and semantic deviation); innovation in affixation (inflectional and derivational creativity); innovation in other morphological devices (compounding, conversion and reduplication), and innovation in the margins of morphology (clippings, blends, clipped compounds and initialisms).

2. Rule-governed and rule-breaking creativity

2.1. Non-morphological deviation

2.1.1. Typographical deviation

This is an exclusively visual device which normally consists in the insertion of symbols and punctuation marks which do not affect the pronunciation of the item (*Underøath*, *Accu§*er, *§eth Project, P:ano*). A particular instance of typographical deviation is the gratuitous use of the 'umlaut' in metal-related groups to evoke the impression of darkness or the strength associated with Scandinavian peoples (Garofalo, 1997), as in *Motörhead* or *The Accüsed*. Other instances of

typographical deviation are the elision of letters, which are retrieved in the pronunciation of the item, or the addition of letters which are not pronounced: *Wckr Spgt* ("wicker spigot"), *Lo-Fi-Fnk* ("lo-fi-funk"), *Entter*. In the same way as respelling (see below), typographical deviation may be resorted to in order to avoid problems with copyright (*Redd Kross*), or just because the change in spelling makes the item look different and therefore cool.

2.1.2. Respelling

Different cases of respelling were identified and arranged along a scale of minor to major changes in the original item. Respellings involving minor changes comprise the replacement of single graphs with others which exactly or nearly correspond to the same phoneme, as well as the use of letter and number homophones: *The Klinik, Noiz Boiz, Nekromantix, Twiztid* ("twisted"), *Dizze* ("dizzy"), *X-Ceed, InDK* ("in decay"), *XLR8R* ("accelerator"). One step further in the scale of transformation consists in respellings which include existing words that replace parts of the original item, thus giving rise to word play: *DizzyEaze* ("disease"), *Chemikill* ("chemical"). Lastly, the item may occasionally undergo an almost complete respelling which might hinder its retrieval, as in *The Sinyx* ("The Cynics"), or *The Varukers* ("verrucas"), or even a complete distortion which does not leave much of the original item: *Millencollin* ("melancholy").

2.1.3. Semantic deviation

The artists' interests or the way they conceive their music may arise in their names, thus providing an explanation for the apparent semantic deviation observed in the combination of already existing words: thus *SixStringCanvas* (a metaphor for the guitar, which has six strings and is a canvas to create music) or *Stone Sour* (a type of drink containing whisky and orange juice). Behind other cases of apparent semantic deviation it is possible to find deliberate word play, homages to singers, songs, books or films, mistakes (deliberate or not), or just the intention to sound odd: for example, *Acid Brain* (cf. 'acid rain'), *Mogwai* (a character in the film *Gremlins*), *The Adjective Noun* or *Blonde Redhead*.

2.2. Creativity in affixation

As regards rule-breaking inflection, the corpus only registers one case of a double plural (*Anarkotikss:* 'anarchists' + 'narcotics'). Concerning derivation, prefixes and suffixes are extensively used in both productive and deviant ways, as shown in the examples displayed in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1. Rule-governed creativity in affixation (productivity)

AFFIX	EXAMPLE	COMMENTS
-age	*Wrathage, Stormage*	this suffix forms nouns referring to a collective entity or quantity
anti-	*Anti-Flag*	
-er /-or	*Finisher, Bastardator*	note the deviation due to blocking (*bastardate instead of *bastardize*)
-ette	*The Soviettes*	
-ist	*The Decemberists*	
-ize	*Evilized, Goatized*	the names are adjectives /participles formed out of new verbs in *-ize*
non-	*NonIron, Non-Divine*	
-oid	*Wastoid, Richard Hell and the Voidoids*	meaning: 'having the form or likeness of' *Wastoid* comes from the noun *waste*
over-	*Oversoul, OverFaith*	this prefix is usually added to verbs/adjectives with the meaning 'too much'/'more than'. However, it is also occasionally attached to nouns (*overdose*)
semi-	*Semisonic, Semi-Death*	
ultra-	*Ultrahead, Ultrathrash*	this prefix occasionally combines with nouns to refer to an extreme version of something
un-	*Unexpect*	*un-* can be added to verbs with a privative/reversative meaning (*undo*).

		Alternatively, *unexpect* could derive from *unexpected* by back formation.
under-	*Underoath, Underking*	this prefix may combine with nouns and conveys the meanings 'insufficient', 'beneath' or 'lower rank'
-y / -ie	*Fleshies*	"hypocoristic" suffix (Adams, 2001: 58) associated with informality, affection or contempt

Table 2. Rule-breaking creativity in affixation (deviation)

AFFIX	EXAMPLES	COMMENTS
en-	*Entorturement*	deviation due to blocking: *entorture instead of *torture* (a verb by noun-to-verb conversion). Note also the productive use of *-ment* with the deviant base *Entorture
-ic	*Abyssic Hate*	deviation due to blocking (*abyssic instead of *abyssal*)
-ity	*Funerality, Obliquity*	*Funerality* illustrates rule-breaking creativity, since this suffix is added to adjectives in order to form abstract nouns. In *Obliquity*, there is deviation due to blocking (*obliquity instead of *obliqueness*)
un-	*The Unsane, Unanimated,*	deviation due to blocking (*unsane instead of *insane*, *unanimated instead of *inanimate*)

The prefix *un-* deserves special attention due to its frequent occurrence in the corpus. This prefix is canonically attached to adjectives (*unhappy*), verbs (*undo*) and abstract nouns (*untruth*) although with some restrictions (Plag, 2003: 30-36), and has either a negative or a reversative /privative meaning. Adams (2001: 50) registers the use of *un-* with concrete nouns to refer to "an unconventional kind of", as in "unbook" or "uncountry". In the corpus, there are instances of *un-* attached to abstract nouns with negative meaning (*Unpain, Unmemory*), which therefore illustrate productivity, but there are also cases of *un-* +

concrete noun with negative meaning (*Unlord, Ungod*) which could be taken as examples of rule-breaking creativity, since *non-* is the negative prefix most commonly attached to this type of nouns.

2.3. Creativity in other morphological devices

2.3.1. Compounding

Due to limitations of space, this subsection will be focused on the type of compounding most frequently registered in the corpus, namely "neoclassical compounding", that is, modern compounds containing lexemes borrowed from Latin or Greek (Plag, 2003: 155). Thus combining forms such as *electro-, necro-, -cide, cyber-* or *psycho-* productively occur in items like *Electrosexual, Necroart, Necrolatry, Angelcide, Brainicide, Cyberchrist, CyberAngel, Psychonaut* and *Psychoparadox.*

2.3.2. Conversion

For the most part, the cases of conversion which occur in the corpus belong to the so-called "minor categories of conversion" (Quirk, 1985: 1014). Thus there is conversion from phrases to nouns (*FromHeadtoToe, Me First and the Gimme Gimmes*) and conversion of secondary word classes: from mass nouns to count nouns (*The Boredoms*) and from proper nouns to common nouns (*The Hollies,* after singer Buddy Holly).

2.3.3. Reduplication and rhyming noun compounds

True "compound phonaesteme formations" (Adams, 2001: 127) or reduplicatives are scarce, but there are a few items which intend to imitate sounds, such as *Beep Beep*. Most of the cases registered are in fact instances of rhyming noun compounds, for example *Ellen Allien, UK Decay,* or *Vibe Tribe.*

2.4. Creativity in the margins of morphology

2.4.1. Clippings, blends and clipped compounds

Only a few instances of clipping are registered in the corpus, among them *Dr Dre* (from *Andre Young*, a proper noun). Most of the items illustrating the process of clipping are in fact clipped compounds, or compounds of clipped elements: for example *Con-Dom* ("control-domination", note the word play with *condom*), or *BellBivDeVoe* (from the names of the components: *R. Bell, M. Bivins* and *R. DeVoe*). By contrast, blending seems to be one of the most productive word-formation devices in the corpus. The mechanism succeeds in combining the need to catch the eye with the literal and figurative idea of fusion or combination (usually connected with the musical style of the artists), although very often it is also a means of expressing humour, irony or criticism. Consider the following examples: *Soulitude* ("soul" + "solitude"), *Incinerhate* ("incinerate" + "hate"), *Llullacry* ("llullaby" + "cry"), *Dr Funkstein* ("funk" + "Frankenstein"), *Stratovarius* ("Stratocaster", a model of electric guitar + "Stradivarius"), *Flametal* ("flamenco" + "metal"), *Gorbage* ("gore" + "garbage"), or *Hellusination* ("hell" + "hallucination"). A particular case of blending is embedding, as in *Insoulence* ("insolence" + "soul").

2.4.2. Initialisms

The corpus provides examples of both acronyms (i.e. items built out of initials and read out unexpanded) and alphabetisms (items read out letter by letter), for instance, *VNA:* "Violent Noise Attack", *NIN*: "Nine Inch Nails", or *BENT*: "Beyond Every Natural Thought". A popular method to create initialisms consists in starting from an already existing word which may awaken meaningful associations and then developing an expanded expression out of the letters (for instance, *WRATH*: "With Righteous Alternative To Hell"). Although already outside the scope of alternative music, heavy metal provides some classic examples of reinterpretation, such as *Slayer* (due to their Satanic image and lyrics, the fans of *Slayer* reinterpreted the word as an acronym for "Satan Laughs as You Eternally Rot"). Ingenious deviations of the process are false initialisms, that is, words in capitals

or in small letters which are reinterpreted as initialisms, although they lack an expanded expression (*The W.O.R.S.T.*). The cryptic quality of initialisms and their potential ambiguity seem to be particularly attractive in the coinage of names. Artists take advantage of this and sometimes are not explicit about the real meaning of their names, providing alternative readings themselves: for example, *KLF* (both "Kopyright Liberation Front" and "Kings of the Low Frequencies". An outstanding case in this respect is *MDC*, since the band changes the name to a different expanded expression with every new record: "Millions of Dead Cops", "Multi Death Corporations", "Missile Destroyed Civilization", etc.

3. Conclusion

The term *alternative music* was coined in the 1980s to describe post-punk musicians who operated outside the mainstream. Alternative artists share a number of cultural and philosophical traits rather than a specific musical style: thus they are generally associated with small clubs, independent labels and a "do-it-yourself" spirit, they reject commercialism, and they are more interested in the genuine expression of the self. Together with their music, their lyrics, image and names show their wish to go against the mainstream and be different.

This study on morphological creativity verifies that language is a valuable instrument to shape this spirit of independence: language users are allowed to be different by playing with the rules and breaking them. Moreover, the study illustrates how language, users and socio-cultural environments make up an indivisible whole; in other words, messages are made up not only by considering the rules and possibilities of the code, but also the features of the context and the participants. Finally, besides demonstrating the invaluable capacity of language to express meaning beyond meaning, the analysis of this domain of human interaction provides further evidence on the importance of usage vs. prescription in language development.

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