PhD Project: The Language of English Pop and Rock Music – A Study in the Sociolinguistics of Performance and Language Attitudes

Adele, Amy Winehouse, Mick Jagger – they are just few of many British artists who switch to an ‘American accent’ that diverges from their ordinary speech style when singing. This performance-based language phenomenon has not only been observed by British listeners but has also raised the interest of linguists. Trudgill (1982) and Simpson (1999) have identified a hybrid accent used by many British artists: a mixture of particular natural British and stereotypical American and Southern or African American features. Many artists in the 1950s and 60s wished to identify with the cradle of blues and rock music that lies in the American South. The admiration of those musicians has led to the imitation of their accent. Beal (2009: 223) introduced the idea of a “mid-Atlantic mainstream accent” that indexes generic mainstream music.

Since the cultural dominance allocated to America has dispersed and the two varieties (British and American English) steadily merge and/or mutually influence each other, several questions arise:

- What is actually perceived to be ‘American’ in music performances by Britons today?
- Does this perception differ from what is considered ‘American’ in non-performance contexts?
- What do linguistic features of the type investigated index in the context of British pop and rock music?

Previous studies lack a perspective on music reception and perception, therefore my project takes a perspective on these aspects by eliciting language attitudes. A multi-faceted approach including verbal/matched guise tests with music samples, questionnaires, interviews as well as a quantitative analysis is applied to hopefully give an extensive overview on language use in British rock and pop music and to get insight into folk perceptions towards language performances.

References: