



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Grammar Gaffes in Popular Music

Is Grammar in Popular Music Deteriorating?

Ritgerð til <B.A.-prófs

Ragnar Tómas Hallgrímsson

Maí, 2009

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Enska

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Grammar sticklers will always be vocal about their concern for the English language. Some of them claim that the speakers of English are slowly letting good usage slip through their fingertips, and at times, and at certain extremes -- it is as if they fear a total regression to primitive grunts and howls. They belittle street vendors for putting up signs that read, “five apple’s for 1 dollar,” they are horrified by people who say, “that will be between you and I,” and they scoff at individuals who ask “can I go to the bathroom?” Recently I have also become aware of a growing concern for good grammar in popular music. With song titles like *The Way I Are* by Timbaland, and Justin Timberlake’s odd verb conjugation in his lyric “my heart bledded girl,” being frequently ridiculed by online grammar sticklers and in my personal discussions with music enthusiasts. There has been little or no literature published on this exact subject; however, these subjects have been touched upon in some recent grammar publications, and then only mentioned as brief references -- and I feel that this is a topic that merits some deeper consideration.

In this dissertation, I hope to examine two aspects of grammar in pop music. First, I will discuss the perpetual and ever-so heated debate between the prescribers and the describers (which are two different views on grammar), and I will be reconciling these two view points in order to discuss the notion that grammar in popular music is getting worse with each passing year, a feeling that I have divined from various online texts and discussions with friends in the music business. It is my opinion that grammar is just as good as it was in popular music 20 years ago, and I hope to establish a usage trend in popular music through the last two decades or so by reviewing the lyrics of the top 5 billboard songs every year from 1988 to 2008 in an attempt to answer the question whether or not the grammar of lyricists is becoming worse; my thesis being that grammar is in fact *not* getting worse in popular music, but simply that there is a certain status quo which at times might sway from its epicenter but will more or less remain the same through the years. Second, I hope to connect some of those grammar gaffes with popular examples of grammar mistakes in the past, in an attempt to reach some sort of definitive conclusion regarding grammar in pop music today. I will be relying mostly on Bryan Garner’s recently published book *Garner’s Modern American Usage* for thoughts and opinions on various aspects of American English grammar.

Chapter 2: The Prescriptivist and Descriptivist Debate

When it comes to grammar there are two schools of thought concerning usage -- the prescriptivist and the descriptivist. In brief, firm prescriptivists argue that there are some ways which are more correct than others when it comes to grammar.

Prescriptivist will often refer to old patterns of usage and “issue judgments about linguistic choices¹,” and they will sometimes ignore changing trends. Staunch descriptivists will argue that there is no correct way of using a language and avoid making value judgments about grammar and usage. They instead “seek to discover the facts of how native speakers actually use their language.²” To further clarify the two concepts, here are some thoughts regarding the two movements by Bryan Garner, one of the preeminent authorities on grammar and usage today:

“Essentially, descriptivists and prescriptivists are approaching different problems. Descriptivists want to record language as it’s actually used, and they perform a useful function – though their audience is generally limited to those willing to pore through vast tomes of dry-as-dust research. Prescriptivists – not all of them, perhaps, but enlightened ones – want to figure out the most effective uses of language, both grammatically and rhetorically. Their editorial advice should accord with the predominant practices of the best writers and editors.³”

These so-called “language wars” have been going on for decades, with some rather nasty and caustic remarks being exchanged between the two camps. The prescribers, in one account in Garner’s book, compare language to a helpless orphan who must be reared carefully by those who are familiar with the rules of upbringing, i.e. the prescribers themselves. Meanwhile, the describers hastily label any prescriptivist as priggish and sanctimonious. It is my opinion that both camps make a fair point, and that we should be aware of the gist of each camp’s argument. The prescriptive camp advocates clear speech that emphasizes the importance of good word choice. They make a distinction between words such as *regardless* and *irregardless*, and *couldn’t care less* and *could care less*, and as Garner aptly pointed out -- the prescribers differ from the describers in their, “relative immediacy of

¹ Garner, pp xxxt

² Garner, pp xxxi

³ Garner, pp xxxiii

linguistic perspective,⁴ meaning that the prescribers are interested in how language functions *here* and *now*. They delve into why certain grammatical constructions are more appropriate than others by probing through historical accounts and past literature. The describers meanwhile, view language in a more distant manner. They recognize that the changes that occur in languages are inevitable and that there is really no point in trying to impose a standard version of a given language. Bryan Garner offers a genuinely ingenious metaphor for this rift in the language camps when he compares the situation to the San Andreas Fault. Stating that the describers have little interest in whatever minor tremor might be affecting the area *right now*, for they find such miniscule earthquakes to be a part of a much larger picture, and it is this larger picture that they are interested in. Meanwhile, the prescribers view these minor tremors as important to the people who are living there right now, and they feel that they should be monitored closely for they have an important effect on today's population. There was one point in particular concerning the "language wars" that struck home, and that was a quote by Dwight L. Bolinger, a respected describer. Bolinger stated that, "If rules are to be broken, it is better done from knowledge than from ignorance, even when ignorance ultimately decides the issue," and this is precisely the point that this dissertation will deal with. It will seek to establish a trend in popular lyrics and document occurrences within this particular field. It will then discuss certain grammatical choices which might be deemed reprehensible, and suggest that if these "errors" are to be made, that they be made with a clear understanding on why these choices are deemed inadvisable. Pop lyricists (at least the majority of those whose songs were reviewed) are very rarely trained linguists or college-educated grammarians who break "rules" deliberately based on a thorough understanding of the English language, but (in my opinion) regular people who make linguistic choices that reflect the norms of the majority.

I will be relying on Bryan Garner's *Garner's Modern American Usage* as the main guideline for grammar as well as other secondary sources to affirm my findings. I decided to rely on Garner's usage guide for two reasons, the first being because it is one of the most recently published guides to grammar and usage, and also because it is highly respected. Second, because Garner approaches this field of study the same way that I intend to approach it in this dissertation: by reconciling two different points

⁴ Garner, pp xxxvi

of views in order to gain a balanced insight into a linguistic phenomenon. Garner points out that each viewpoint has its pros and cons. Prescribers tend to have three faults: they tend to “(1) over-rely on personal taste; (2) confuse informality with ungrammaticality; and (3) appeal to ‘certain invalid arguments.’” As for the describers Garner explains that their fault lies in that they “(1) insist that their methods are the only valid ones; (2) disclaim any interest in promoting the careful use of language, often denouncing anyone who seeks to do so; and (3) believe that native speakers of English can’t make a mistake and that usage guides are therefore superfluous.”

In this dissertation I will blend the two schools of thought expediently. Meaning that I will take a prescriptivist stance when reviewing the lyrics, searching for “poor” grammatical choices (because otherwise, if I were to review lyrics in a descriptivist state of mind, I would strictly speaking gather no errors at all), but in my overview of the facts I will reconcile the two point of views in an attempt to make a value-free judgment of the state of grammar and usage in popular music today.

Before continuing I would like to outline my basic principles in order to be as objective as possible, I will:

1. Avoid relying on my personal taste and refer instead to Garner’s usage guide in order to be as objective as possible in my search for so called grammar gaffes.
2. Recognize that pop music is a medium in which informality rules sovereign, meaning that although I will record certain sets of grammatical usage which a prescriptivist might deem to be poor, I will not pass judgment on these choices but rather refer to the schools of thought in an attempt to further elucidate the state of usage in popular music.

Chapter 3: The Prescriptivist “Poor Grammar”

As you might have inferred from the previous chapter, making value judgments about certain linguistic choices is both highly controversial (mainly to the describers) and also ill-advised unless thoroughly substantiating one’s claims with sufficient evidence. In the following chapters I will be referring to certain linguistic occurrences as “errors”, “mistakes”, “blunders” or “gaffes” in quotations, if they either go against Bryan Garner’s advice in his usage guide or against any other such common grammatical knowledge. These quotation marks serve the purpose of reminding the reader that I am not making value-judgments about the various grammatical constructions but rather noting that from a particular vantage point, these constructions might be deemed inadvisable. Every such “error” will be followed by a detailed discussion into why this particular linguistic occurrence merits this label, i.e. if I were analyzing the following sentence, “John walked over to the ATM machine,” and I labeled the noun and its modifier, “ATM machine” as an “error”, what would follow would be a detailed discussion into why saying “ATM machine” is redundant with references to Garner’s book or other such usage guides. However, the reader must fully understand that these “errors” are being marked based on a prescriptive point of view in which we assume that some grammatical choices are better than others, especially if we consider the history of the language and do not purely go on the descriptivist maxim that if a certain variation of a language is being spoken by native speakers than that variation is acceptable.

Language is an ever changing phenomenon open to changes -- and in the field of music it thrives on bending the rules. As I mentioned in the introduction, popular music has never been considered a field of language in which grammar is of the essence. Adherence to prescriptive grammar in music is not essential, that is to say a song does not make or break depending on its grammar. Lyrics in music often times reflect the trends of spoken language of a particular group of people and so does its style and diction. It is difficult to parse a lyric for certain grammatical elements because lyrics do not follow the norms of standard American language. Lyrics are not complete sentences and thus when parsing lyrics it is often necessary to take this into account, for example:

An extract from Fergie’s *Big Girls Don’t Cry* goes as follows:

**“I need some shelter of my own protection baby,
to be with myself front and center,
clarity, peace, serenity.**

And in order to parse this lyric as a complete sentence, it would be read as:

I need some shelter of my own protection, baby. I need to be with myself front and center; I need clarity, peace, and serenity,

and seen as perfectly grammatical. This is how I will be parsing lyrics in this essay. I will view lyrics as incomplete sentences replete with interjections that do not follow the standard rules of written American English.

Since recording and reviewing every element of grammar in all of these songs would be impossible to do given the restrictions placed on length in this particular essay, I have narrowed it down to certain markers of “poor” usage from a prescriptive point of view in an attempt to discuss some regularly occurring grammatical occurrences. Before I started reviewing the 100 lyrics from 1988-2008 I browsed the internet in search for chat rooms and other internet discussion sites in order to get a feel for some of the most common and most talked about grammar “gaffes” (for there have been few books published on this subject.) I did however find one book on grammar, Martha Brockenbrough’s *Things That Make Us Sic*, where there were some examples of grammar in popular music. After having gathered a fairly large amount of research evidence and carefully reviewing whether or not the grammatical occurrences that English enthusiasts had pointed out were valid, I set out to establish a list of popular “errors” so that I could have these points in front of me when I set out to review the songs. Here is a list of some of the most talked about types of grammar areas in music through the years, and in no particular order:

#1 The Use of *Ain’t*

Elvis Presley – You Ain’t Nothing but a Hound Dog

In this rock ‘N’ roll classic Elvis Presley utilizes the non-word *ain’t* quite emphatically in his refrain. *Ain’t* as Garner puts it is seen as a “shibboleth of poor usage,⁵” and labels it in accord with Webster’s Third Dictionary saying that it is dialect and represents illiterate speech. That is to say *ain’t* is often used in everyday

⁵ Garner, pp 31

speech by cultivated speakers, but most of the time for two reasons, “(1) to be tongue-in-cheek; and (2) to flaunt their reverse snobbery.⁶” There were many examples of the use of *ain’t* and I expected that it would probably be quite prevalent in the songs that I was about to review. Other examples of the use of *ain’t* were found in The Ting Ting’s *Shut Up and Let Me Go*, where Katie White sings, “I ain’t taking this”. Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers were also caught using it in *I Won’t Back Down*, when Tom sings “there ain’t no easy way out,” along with many other artists regardless of genre or date of release. Thus in short, the use of *ain’t* is not strictly speaking considered to be grammatically incorrect, but rather informal and part of certain dialects. I will discuss the use of *ain’t* in more detail later on in this essay.

#2 The Incorrect Use of Pronouns

Jessica Simpson – Between You and I

Pronouns seemed to have been troubling pop stars in quite a few of the examples that I came across, and perhaps one of the most talked about instance was Jessica Simpson’s song title, *Between You and I*. The rule is that when a pronoun is the object of a verb it must be in the objective case. This means that the correct form of the title according to language professionals would be, “Between You and Me.” However, most grammarians are sympathetic to these types of “mistakes” for they are considered to be hypercorrections. To further clarify I quote the online grammar maven, *Grammar Girl*, who states that, “the theory is that people have been so traumatized by being corrected when they say things such as ‘Ashley and me went to the mall,’ instead of ‘Ashley and I went to the mall,’ that they incorrectly correct ‘between you and me,’ to ‘between you and I.’⁷” To summarize, even though this is considered a hypercorrection, it is considered wrong by prescribers. I found a couple of examples of this type of “mistake”, in System of a Down’s song *U-Fig*, where Serj Tankian sings, “you and me should go outside.” Likewise in Queen’s song, *Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy*, Freddie Mercury sings “I’d like for you and I to go romancing.” Martha Brockenbrough dedicates a whole chapter to pop stars in her

⁶ Garner, pp 31

⁷ Grammar Girl

book *Things that make Us Sic* and mocks Jim Morrison for writing the lyric, “I’m gonna love you ‘til the stars fall from the sky/ for you and I.”⁸

#3 Double Negatives

Pink Floyd – Another Brick in the Wall

Double negatives are a common feature of many pop songs and I will not delve into their purpose now, but rather give a couple examples for prescribers would hastily label double negatives as poor usage and suggest that any careful writer avoid them. The most famous example of a double negative is probably Pink Floyd’s *Another Brick in the Wall*, where the chorus goes as following: “We don’t need no education.” The problem with this double negative is that if we read this literally it means *we do not need NO education*, in the sense that Pink Floyd is implying that they really *do* need an education, which is clearly not what the song is about. This grammar phenomenon, if you will, is quite common in all genres. The Rolling Stones used a double negative in their hit song *I Can’t Get No*, in which Mick Jagger sings, “I can’t get no – satisfaction,” which might lead the listener to believe that Mick is constantly satisfied (which probably has some truth to it). Peter Frampton also used a double negative in his song *Can’t Take that Away* where he sings, “and nobody can’t take that away.” TLC also used a double negative in their hit song *No Scrubs*, which goes, “I don’t want no scrub...” Thus, double negatives are informal grammatical constructions that I predicted to be quite common in popular music.

#4 Incorrect Verb Conjugation

Eric Clapton – Lay Down Sally

One of the most talked about grammar “mistakes” in popular music was Eric Clapton’s song *Lay Down Sally*. *Lay* is the present tense form of the transitive verb *lay*, which means that it needs a direct object. Thus, what Clapton is really saying in this song is that someone should physically *lay* down Sally, but what he obviously meant to say is that Sally should *lie* down; hence, the correct form of the title according to prescribers is *Lie Down Sally*. Savage Garden made this same “mistake” in their song *Truly, Madly, Deeply* where Darren Hayes sings, “I want to lay like this

⁸ Brockenbrough, pp 10

forever,” when it should have been *lie*. Tense conjugation was also an area of concern for some artists, like in the case of Nickelback’s song *Photograph*. In the song Chad Kroeger sings “we used to listen to the radio, and sing along to every song we know,” the whole sentence is in the past tense and then suddenly he switched to present with the last word (clearly to make the lines rhyme, but nonetheless -- incorrect.) Another quite talked about grammar “gaffe” was Elvis Presley’s misuse of *shook* as the past participial form of the verb *shake* in his song *I’m All Shook Up*. Martha Brockenbrough derides Justin Timberlake’s incorrect conjugation of the verb *bleed*, where Timberlake sings, “My heart bleeded girl,” in her book *Things that Make Us Sic*.

#5 Was for Were

Clay Aiken – Invisible

Verbs have moods to indicate the speaker’s attitude, we have the indicative mood when a speaker is making a statement, the subjunctive mood to indicate doubt, and the imperative mood to express a command. There were a couple of cases in which artists misunderstood the use of these moods. For example, in his song *Invisible*, Clay Aiken sings, “If I was invisible.” Clay is using the first person singular indicative form of the verb *be* when he should have used the first person singular subjunctive *were* to indicate that the mood is hypothetical and not factual. Gwen Stefani made the same “mistake” in her song *Rich Girl*, where she sings, “If I was a rich girl,” when according to the rule she should have used *were*.

#6 Subject Verb Agreement

Nickelback – Believe it or not

Subject-verb agreement is an area of grammar that most of us understand and master at a fairly young age, but pop stars seem to continually misunderstand this concept. As a quick reminder, take the first part of the first sentence of this paragraph, “Subject-verb agreement is an area of grammar...” In this sentence *subject-verb agreement* is the subject of the sentence and *is* is the main verb, and it would be incorrect to say, “Subject-verb agreement *are* an area of grammar...,” for the fact that the singular subject *subject-verb agreement* must take a singular form of the verb *be* which is *is* – this is pretty straightforward and easy to understand; however, In

Nickelback's song *Believe it or not* Chad Kroeger sings, "Everyone have things that they hide," a phrase that jars any grammatically-sensitive ears. What Kroeger should have said is "Everyone has things that they hide." The group Tears for Fears in their song *Lord of Karma* made a similar "mistake" when Roland Orzabal sings, "My superego, where I go, he go," when it should have been goes, but they seem to have sacrificed subject-verb agreement in order for the words to rhyme. Britney Spear's in the song *Circus* sings, "there's only two types of people," when the contracted form *there's* stands for *there is* which is the singular form of the verb *be*, and therefore renders this sentence ungrammatical.

#7 Who vs. That

Britney Spears – Overprotected

Who is a relative pronoun used to refer to humans, and *that* is a relative pronoun used to refer to anything non-human, and you would expect any careful writer to make this distinction. This was a popular area of mention in internet discussion boards and it came up every once in a while. In Britney Spear's song *Overprotected*, Britney sings, "say hello to the person that I am," when she should have used *who* instead, since she is referring to herself. The Police made this same "mistake" in their song *Every Little Thing She Does is Magic*, where Sting sings, "It's always me that ends up getting wet," when he should have used *who* instead of *that*.

The Big 7

These seven areas of grammar came up the most when reviewing examples in my research, and as I stated before, since parsing the lyrics for every aspect of grammar would be impossible given the restrictions placed on length in this particular essay, I felt that it would be useful to focus on these seven areas while also taking note of other grammatical occurrences and trends. Thus I kept my eyes open for "mistakes" that fit into "the big 7" category but also tried to catch other similar "blunders".

Chapter 4: The Big 7 and the Songs Reviewed

In this section I will be briefly discussing the "errors" that were noted down while reviewing the top 5 songs of every year from 1988 to 2008. I will briefly mention each grammatical occurrence that could be construed as "erroneous" from a prescriptive point of view and discuss the reasons why they might be perceived in this

manner. Many of the examples will include phrases or sentences that are perfectly grammatical when speaking informally, but I will nonetheless label these occurrences as “errors” in an attempt to gather a holistic picture of grammar in popular music. There will also be times when I speak of certain artists making “mistakes” when they talk in a slangy manner, and even though this sounds a bit judgmental and harsh, I will refer to these grammatical occurrences in this manner for reasons of expediency. All of these so-called “mistakes” will be discussed in detail in chapter five, where I will be delving into the reasons behind why these “mistakes” are made, and whether or not they are done on purpose or not.

1988 – Top 5

Out of the five songs reviewed for the billboard list in 1988, there were no songs with any salient grammatical “errors”.

1989 – Top 5

While reviewing the top 5 songs for 1989, I found “fault” with two of the songs. First, in Bobby Brown’s *My Prerogative*, Bobby sings, “Ego trips is not my thing,” when according to Garner’s usage guide he should have used *are* as the proper linking verb for a plural noun. Bobby Brown also sings, “all these strange relationships really gets me down,” when it should have been get for the fact that *relationships* is a plural form of the noun. Second, in Paula Abdul’s hit *Straight Up* she sings, “I’m moving way too slow,” when the correct form of this adverb would need to take the suffix *-ly* in order to be proper. *Slow* is the adjectival form of the word, and *slowly* is the adverbial form of the word.

1990 – Top 5

For the top five songs of 1990, there was only one song that contained an “error”. In Bel Biv Devoe’s song *Poison*, one of the lead vocalists sings, “poison, deadly, moving it slow,” and this is the same type of aforementioned “error” that Paula Abdul made in the above section. What he should have said was, “poison, deadly, moving it slowly,” to be more correct; although, that whole sentence functions very awkwardly in my opinion.

1991 – Top 5

Out of the five songs reviewed in 1991, I found “errors” in two of the songs. In the song *I Wanna Sex You Up* by Color Me Badd the lead vocalist sings, “I wanna make sweet loving all night long.” In this sentence, *loving* is a gerund or an adjective which can not be the direct object of a verb. Direct objects must be nouns, pronouns, or noun phrases. Second, in the song *Gonna Make You Sweat* by the C&C Music Factory, the singer states, “your body is free and a whole.” There is no reason why the indefinite article *a* should precede the noun *whole* in this particular sentence. Indefinite articles come before nouns, and are linguistic markers that do not fix the identity of the noun modified. But in the sentence, “your body is free and a whole,” what we have is a linking verb which cannot logically be connected to the word *whole* preceded by the indefinite article for the fact that the word *whole* does not take an indefinite article in its noun form, only in its adjectival form.

1992 – Top 5

Concerning the top five songs for 1992, I found “fault” with three out of the five songs reviewed. In Sir-Mix-A lot’s track *Baby Got Back*, he uses the word *ain’t* quite frequently, and I will be discussing this usage in some detail in the following chapter. Also, the title and the refrain, *baby got back*, could easily be labeled non-standard from a prescriber’s point of view. *Back* in this sentence signifies a female’s rear end, and in order to say this traditionally we would have to say something along the lines of, “(my) baby has got a rear end,” which would certainly detract from the hipness of the song and quite frankly sounds a little pompous. Second, Kris Kross utilized *ain’t* in their song *Jump, Jump*, and again I will be discussing this in detail in the later chapter. Lastly, TLC in their song *Baby, Baby, Baby* both relied on double negatives and the non-word *ain’t*, and these are areas which will be dealt with in the coming chapter.

1993 – Top 5

For this particular year I found “fault” with two of the songs out of five. In Whitney Houston’s song *I Will Always Love You*, Whitney sings, “life treats you kind.” This occurrence is similar to the “error” made by Bell Biv DeVoe and Paula Abdul in the previous sections. In order for the word *kind* to function properly as an adverb to prescribers it must take the suffix *-ly*. Second, in the song *Whoomp There It Is* by the group Tag Team, there were plenty of odd sentence structures which are

common to the rap genre, and I will not be going into any kind of detail for I feel that these sentence structures are simply too many to discuss.

1994 – Top 5

For the top five songs of 1994 there were few “errors”, and the only thing worth mentioning is the use of double negatives and the usage of *ain’t* by Boyz II Men in their song *I’ll Make Love to You*, when the boys sing, “I ain’t got nowhere to go.” This will be discussed in detail later.

1995 – Top 5

Out of the top five songs reviewed for 1995, there were three songs which contained areas of grammar which could be construed as “errors” by prescribers. First, in Coolio’s hit single *Gangsta’s Paradise*, Coolio utilizes both the non-word *ain’t* along with double negatives. Along with these two “errors” Coolio also used the relative pronoun *that* when referring to a human being, and this will also be covered in the following chapter. Second, in TLC’s song *Waterfalls*, Lisa “Left-Eye” Lopez raps, “I seen a rainbow yesterday,” when traditionally the correct form of the verb should be *saw*. TLC also use the non-word *hisself* for *himself* in their lyrics, a word that can be labeled as slang or a vogue word. TLC also use the word *ain’t*. Lastly, in a different song by TLC, the song *Creep*, T-Boz sings, “I’ll keep giving loving,” and according to prescriptive usage the gerund or the adjective *loving* cannot be the direct object of a verb, thus T-Boz should have sang, “I’ll keep giving love.”

1996 – Top 5

Concerning the top five songs on the billboard chart in 1996, there were two songs which contained grammatical “errors”. First, in Mariah Carey’s song *One Sweet Day*, she sings, “I lay me down to sleep,” when she should have used the reflexive pronoun *myself* to refer back to herself in this sentence. She probably opted for the pronoun *me* in this instance for the fact that it is a syllable shorter. Second, in the song *Nobody Knows* by the Tony Rich Project, Tony sings, “I pretended I’m glad you went away.” This sentence starts out in the past tense but then reverts to the present with the singer’s use of *I am*. For this sentence to be grammatically correct by prescriptive standards it would have to read, “I pretended I was glad that you went away.”

1997 – Top 5

For the top five songs of 1997, there were two songs that contained “errors” and both of them by Puff Daddy, a.k.a. P.Diddy. First, in his tribute to the late Biggie Smalls in the song *I’ll Be Missing You*, Puff raps, “even though you’re gone, we still a team,” and truncates the contraction *we’re* into *we*, and this leaves an incomplete sentence lacking a main verb. Second, in Puff Daddy’s song *Can’t Nobody Hold Me Down*, he utilizes double negatives and the non-word *ain’t*. Puff Daddy also makes a “mistake” when he raps, “girls wanna lust me,” and traditionally, the word *lust* cannot be used as a transitive verb. Puff Daddy in this song also raps, “simply a lot of men be wanting to hear me,” a sentence that lacks structure in the traditional prescriptive sense. Prescribers would probably advise Puffy to change the sentence into, “a lot of men want to hear me.”

1998 – Top 5

Out of the five songs reviewed for the year 1998, four of them were at “fault” from the traditional prescriptive point of view. First, in the song *Too Close* by Next, one of the vocalists sings, “it’s almost like we’re sexing,” in which he creates a gerund from the word *sex* and places it in his lyric. This would be seen by any staunch prescriber as an “error” in the traditional sense. Second, in the song *The Boy Is Mine* by Brandy and Monica, Brandy sings, “his love is all in me,” and this sentence strikes me as odd and unconventional for the fact that the word *all* in my mind functions as an intensifier in this grammatical construction and gives the whole sentence a slangy feel to it. Brandy and Monica also use the word *ain’t* in their song. Third, in Shania Twain’s song *Still the One*, there were some instances where the word *ain’t* is used. Lastly, in the song *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, Darren Hayes sings, “I want to lay like this forever,” where he conjugates the verb *lie* incorrectly and this will be dealt with in some detail in the following chapter.

1999 – Top 5

Concerning the top five songs of the billboard chart in 1999, there was only one song which contained any prescriptive “errors”, and that was the song *No Scrubs* by TLC. In the song, the songstresses croon, “a scrub is a guy that thinks he’s fly,” when according to the rules of prescriptive grammar the correct relative pronoun should be *who*, and again – this will be discussed in more detail later. In this song

TLC also utilizes double negatives, when T-Boz and Chili sing, “I don’t want no scrub.”

2000 – Top 5

Out of the five songs reviewed for the year 2000, three songs out of five contained “errors”. First, in Santana’s song *Smooth*, Santana uses the word *ain’t* on a couple of occasions. In yet another Santana song, *Maria Maria*, the accompanying singer states that, “she remind me of the West Side Story,” where the word *remind* needs to be *reminds* with an *s* because of the singular pronoun *she* that precedes it. The singer that accompanies Santana also sings, “as the rich is getting richer,” when according to usage guides the linking verb needs to be *are* because of the plural noun *rich*. Third, in Joe’s song *I Want to Know*, Joe states that he wants to, “be the one who always make you smile,” when he should have added an *s* to the ending of the word for the fact that he, singular, is the subject of the sentence.

2001 – Top 5

For the top five songs of 2001, there were two songs which were at “fault” from the prescribers’ vantage point. First, in Alicia Keys song *Falling*, Alicia sings, “I am taking more than would a fool,” and I think that this sentence is worth noting for the fact that it is awkward, but not strictly speaking “erroneous”. This just showcases how lyricists will often times play with the order of sentences in order to accommodate rhymes, and this occurred in many of the lyrics that were reviewed. Any prescriber would probably recommend changing the sentence to, “I am taking (or putting up with) more than a fool would,” because it is clearer. Second, in the song *I’m Real* by Jennifer Lopez, she sings, “what you trying to do to me?” This sentence lacks a main verb, and from a prescribers vantage point it should read, “what are you trying to do to me?”

2002 – Top 5

Concerning the top five songs on the billboard chart in 2002, there were four songs which contained grammatical “errors”. In Ashanti’s song *Foolish*, she sings, “I don’t know why you treating me so bad,” a sentence that lacks a main verb – Ashanti quite obviously omits the verb *are*; also, as discussed earlier in this section, the word *bad* needs to contain the adverbial suffix *-ly* in order to be grammatically correct. Ashanti also makes a similar “mistake” a little later in the song when she sings, “all

the things we accept, be the things we regret,” in which the correct form of the bare infinitive *be* should be *are*, for the fact that the main subject is plural. Second, in Nelly’s song *Hot in Herre*, Nelly raps that he is, “looking for the right time to flash them g’s,” and in this example Nelly would have been well advised to use the adjective *those* instead of *them*, which according to freedictionary.com is non-standard. Nelly also states, “you better give that man what he asking for!” This is a sentence which lacks a linking verb between *he* and *asking*. In this same song Nelly also raps, “I’m just playing like Jason – unless you gone do it,” and in this instance Nelly is lacking a main verb, along with these “errors” there is also a prevalence of the word *ain’t* in his lyric. Nelly had another song on the top of the charts this year, his song *Dilemma* with Kelly Rowland. In this song Nelly utilizes double negatives, e.g. “there is no way Nelly gone fight over no dame.” Nelly also follows his routine of leaving out linking verbs in his sentences, when he raps that he going to, “pick up everything mami hitting.” This sentence clearly lacks a linking verb between *mami* and *hitting*. Lastly, in the song *Wherever You Will Go* by The Calling, the singer quite emphatically sings, “If I could, then I would, I’ll go wherever you will go,” and in this sentence he reverts from the hypothetical “if I could,” to the present tense indicative “I will go,” which leaves the sentence sounding a bit odd.

2003 – Top 5

Out of the five songs reviewed for 2003, four songs had areas of concern from a prescriptive point of view. First, in 50 Cent’s song *In Da Club*, 50 Cent raps, “we gone party like it’s your birthday,” a sentence which clearly omits the third person plural verb *are*. 50 Cent makes a similar “mistake” later on in his song when he raps, “Mami, I got that Ex if you into taking drugs,” a sentence which again lacks the verb *are*. It should also be noted that this song is rife with the word *ain’t*. Second, in R. Kelly’s song *Ignition*, R. Kelly states, “we got food everywhere,” where he omits the auxiliary verb *have*, which would make this sentence “erroneous” from a prescriptive point of view. R. Kelly also sings, “we just thuggin’ it out,” where he, like 50 Cent in the previous example, leaves out the third person plural verb *are*. *Ignition* by R. Kelly contained quite a few of such constructions and I will discuss these cases in the following chapter. Third, in Sean Paul’s song *Get Busy*, we have various “mistakes” that result from the fact that Sean Paul speaks a different variety of American English than most of these artists, and these “errors” are not really applicable because of this,

and will be mentioned later on. Fourth, in Beyoncé Knowles's song *Crazy in Love*, Beyoncé sings, "my pride is the one to blame," and thereby humanizes the word *pride*, which is definitely non-standard. Beyoncé also sings, "Who he think he is," in her lyric, leaving out the third person singular present tense of the word *do*, making this construction ungrammatical. Along with these two examples, there were also cases in which Beyoncé used double negatives and the word *ain't*.

2004 – Top 5

For the songs on the top five list on the billboard chart in 2004, there were four with areas of concern. First, Usher's song *Yeah!*, contained a number of odd sentence structures. In the first verse, Usher states that a certain female was, "all up on me," as well as "checking up on me," sentences which can be construed as slang and definitely non-standard from a prescriptive point of view. Along with using the non-word *ain't* quite frequently, Usher also sings, "you the one to please," and just like 50 Cent and Nelly, Usher omits the verb *are* in this sentence. Ludacris, Usher's cohort in this song, also uses the incorrect form of the verb *leave* when he raps, "we leaves them dead." Usher had a second single on the billboard top 5 in 2004, and that song was *Burn*. In this song Usher states, "that don't mean that I want to," a sentence that utilizes the plural *don't* instead of the singular *doesn't*. There is also a very interesting "slangy" sentence in this song, where Usher states that he and his lady friend have, "been done fell apart," something that is very non-standard. Usher also utilizes the non-word *ain't* and has trouble with subject-verb agreement in this same song. Third, in Alicia Key's song *If I Ain't Got You*, there were many examples of the use of *ain't* as well as the use of double negatives. Fourth, in the song *The Way You Move* by Outkast, Big Boi, like a couple of rappers in the aforementioned examples, leaves out the verb *are* in two of his sentences: when he raps, "we never relaxing," and "we tapping right into your memory banks."

2005 – Top 5

All five of the songs reviewed for 2005 had some aspects of grammar which could be interpreted as "erroneous". First, in Mariah Carey's song *We Belong Together*, Mariah uses both double negatives as well as the word *ain't*. Mariah also uses an incorrect pronoun in the sentence, "because I didn't know me," she should have sang, "I didn't know myself." Second, in Gwen Stefani's song *Hollaback Girl*,

Gwen uses double negatives and the word *ain't*, as well as omitting the main verb in the sentence, “this my shit.” Third, in the song *Let Me Love You* by Mario, Mario sings, “If I was your man,” an incorrect choice of words to a prescriptivist, and I will discuss this in more detail later. Fourth, in Kelly Clarkson’s song *Since U Been Gone*, apart from the non-conventional spelling of the title as well as the omission of the auxiliary verb *have*, Kelly also sings, “how I picture me with you,” in which she makes the apparently common (this has appeared in several other examples) “mistake” of opting for the pronoun *me* instead of the reflexive pronoun *myself*. Lastly, in Ciara’s hit single *I, 2, Step*, Ciara uses the non-word *ain't* as well as using the plural *don't* instead of the singular *doesn't* when she sings, “it don't matter to me.”

2006 – Top 5

Out of the five songs reviewed in 2006, four of the songs had areas of concern from a prescriptive point of view. First, in Eminem’s song *Smack That*, which he performs alongside of Akon, there were a number of sentences which omitted certain grammatical aspects need in order for a sentence to be construed as complete. A couple of examples of this are, “I ma call her,” and “they gone flip,” sentences which lack one grammatical element or another. Eminem also raps, “didn’t think I saw her,” where he reverts between the past and present tense incorrectly, as well as stating that, “the wardrobe intact now,” where there is an omission of the linking verb *is*. Second, Sean Paul makes an appearance with his song *Temperature*, and like his previous track *Get Busy*, this song will not be discussed in any detail here because of Sean Paul’s linguistic background. Third, in Nelly Furtado’s song *Promiscuous Girl*, there were three sentences which omitted the third person plural verb *are* making these sentences incomplete, e.g. when Nelly or Timbaland sing, “How you doing young lady,” “That feeling that you giving,” and, “what you waiting for.” Nelly and Timbaland also utilize double negatives in this song, and Timbaland also omits the auxiliary verb *will* in the sentence, “I be the first to admit it.” Fourth, by consulting the appendix for Beyoncé Knowles’s song *Irreplaceable*, you will see various “mistakes” that have been covered in this section before; sentences that use *was* instead of *were* and *them* instead of *those*. It is also worth mentioning that the sentence, “go ahead and get gone,” is unconventional as well as the sentence, “how about I’ll be your nothing,” which sounds highly irregular.

2007 – Top 5

Concerning the top five songs of 2007, there were four songs that contained “errors” from a prescriptive point of view. First, in the song *No One* by Alicia Keys, Alicia sings, “you and me together,” when she should have sang, “you and I together,” because in that sentence Alicia and the person in question are both subjects of the sentence. In this song Alicia also sings, “they could say what they like,” when it would have been grammatical to say “they can,” given the fact that the sentence is in the present tense. Second, in Fergie’s song *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, Fergie sings, “and I’m gonna miss you like a child misses their blanket,” where she opts for the wrong possessive pronoun. Fergie also sings, “I must take the baby steps,” with the definite article *the* preceding *baby steps* which makes it sound as if there was a certain and very particular type of baby steps that she is taking, which is “erroneous”. Third, in one of the most talked about grammatical constructions in popular music in the 21st century, Timbaland’s song title *The Way I Are*, is “incorrect” from a prescriptive point of view, and along with this unconventional refrain Timbaland also utilizes double negatives and the non-word *aint*. Lastly, in Soulja Boy’s song *Crank That*, we witness a lyric replete with slang and filled with odd grammatical constructions that were dealt with in previous parts of this chapter.

2008 – Top 5

For the top five songs of 2008, three songs had areas of concern regarding grammar. First, in Flo-Rida’s song *Low*, we see some “mistakes” already discussed above, for example the use of *them* instead of *those*, and in the sentence, “did I think I seen shorty get low,” where Flo-Rida reverts between tenses. Also, in this song Flo-Rida uses *ain’t* and double negatives. Second, in the song *Lollipop* by Lil Wayne we have double negatives as well as the use of *ain’t*. Lil Wayne also uses the plural *don’t* for the singular *doesn’t* when he raps, “and he don’t do that,” as well as having trouble with subject-verb agreement in his lyric, “shorty wanna thug,” in which according to prescribers he should have said, “shorty wants a thug.” Lastly, in T.I.’s song *Whatever You Like*, we witness his use of *ain’t* as well as double negatives.

Chapter 5: The Results

Contrary to what I had expected to find, grammar from a prescriptive point of view, does seem to be getting worse in popular music -- but in a different sense than one would have expected. Meaning that the kind of usage which prescriptivist would not approve of is becoming more prevalent within a certain genre and this genre is becoming more popular. That is to say that the grammar of a given song is not dependent on the year that it was released (meaning that the grammatical elements of a song is not different now than it was 20 years ago or vice versa) but rather that it is entirely dependent on the genre of music and the background of the artist. This means that a rock song today will not likely contain more grammatical “blunders” than a rock song 20 years ago, but a hip-hop song will almost without exception contain certain grammatical elements that a staunch prescribers would deem bad. The increase in what I defined earlier as “bad” grammar through the years is not due to a decline in grammatical skill by artists, but influenced by the influx of urban culture (and urban slang) via hip-hop and r&b music. That is to say that one could predict the grammatical qualities of a given track if one were to be given the genre and some background information on the artist and his/her image.

Out of the 100 lyrics reviewed there were 13 cases of double negatives and in all cases the double negatives were to be found in rap or r&b songs, artists like Nelly Furtado, Lil Wayne, Gwen Stefani, and Flo Rida just to name a few. Almost one fifth of the songs reviewed contained the word *ain't*, and although it was prevalent in rap and r&b it also made its appearance in rock, country, and pop lyrics. There were two cases in which an artist used *that* as a possessive pronoun instead of *who* -- Coolio and TLC. There were 17 cases of artists flouting the traditional rules of subject-verb agreement, and again this was done mostly by rap artists and r&b singers with an urban image -- artists like 50 Cent, Usher, Outkast, Mariah Carey, etc. There were three cases of artists using what prescriptivist would deem the wrong form of a word for an adverb, mostly using the adjectival form, and these artists were Paula Abdul, Bell Biv DeVoe, and Whitney Houston. There were two cases of artists conjugating verbs differently than what prescriptivist would approve of, and the “guilty” parties were Color me Badd and Savage Garden.

Two Types of Grammatical Occurrences

While reviewing the 100 lyrics it became clear that there were two types of “errors” being made: on the one hand, we have “errors” that result from sheer lack of judgment, where we have artists who simply made a “mistake”, and given the chance to go back and change these “errors” they most likely would do so -- that is to say that there is no stylistic benefit resulting from this “error”. If Sting would have sang, “it’s always me who ends up getting wet,” the song would not have suffered any stylistic loss; it does not detract from the alliteration nor does it cancel a rhyme. The second type of grammatical “error” was made as a result of two factors. In the first case, “errors” were made deliberately for some sort of stylistic benefit, most often to make one word rhyme with another. Second, are grammatical constructions which coincide with a trend in spoken language particular to a certain group of people.

The First Kind of Grammatical Occurrence

The first kinds of grammatical “errors” made in pop lyrics were those that most likely were done by lack of judgment alone. The reason for why I speculate that these grammatical “errors” were done by sheer lack of judgment is because there is no practical reason for why these rules were broken, which leads me to suppose that they were done by “mistake”, and out of the big seven mentioned earlier, four of these were likely being made by mistake.

1. *That* used as a pronoun for humans instead of *who* e.g. “Say hello to the girl *that* I am.”
2. Incorrect verb conjugation, e.g. “*Lay* down Sally.”
3. The incorrect use of pronouns, e.g. “Between you and *I*.”
4. *Was* for *were* when implying wishful thinking e.g. “If I *was* a rich girl.”

That for *Who*

As I explained earlier, *Who* is the relative pronoun used to refer to human beings and *that* and *which* are the relative pronouns used to refer to anything other than humans according to modern usage guides. Using *that* when *who* is called for is perhaps not a gross grammar “mistake” but you would nonetheless expect careful writers and lyricists to make the distinction.

For example, in TLC’s *No Scrubs*, T-Boz and Chili both make the “mistake” of referring to a scrub as, “a guy that thinks he’s fly,” when T-Boz and Chili really should have used *who* as the appropriate relative pronoun. This is an example of the

first kind of grammatical “error” in which there would have been no stylistic benefit to changing *that* to *who*. Some might argue that because TLC is an urban group that has usually reflected the *vogue* words of African-American or teenage slang, using the *who* might be seen as deviating from their cultural image, and this is certainly a relative point, but I would argue that on this particular grammatical point, using the *who* could not be seen as a deviating shibboleth for it is subtle.

Coolio made the same “mistake” in *Gangsta’s Paradise* when he rapped, “I’m the kind of g that little homies wanna be like.” Coolio would have been well advised to use *who* for *that* in that particular line, and again one could argue that given his urban background grammar is not a big concern for Coolio.

Even though the only two cases of this grammatical “error” in this study were made by individuals who speak a particular branch of American English characterized by slang and often referred to as Ebonics or Urban American, there are other documented cases of this “mistake” being made by artists who tend not to take such liberties with the English language; one of these being Sting. In the Police’s song *Every Little Thing She Does is Magic* Sting sings, “It’s always me that ends up getting wet.” Britney Spears, perhaps a less respectable artist from a grammatical standpoint, also made this “mistake” when she sang, “Say hello to the girl that I am.”

Thus, to sum up, from a purely descriptive point of view one could state that the use of *that* for *who* as a relative pronoun for human beings occurs quite often in pop lyrics given the fact that this type of grammatical construction is not so common; meaning that sentences with two clauses in which the relative clause references an antecedent is not a common feature of pop lyrics, but when it does occur, pop artists are likely to use the relative pronoun *that*.

Incorrect Verb Conjugation

Out of the 100 songs that I reviewed only three contained examples of incorrect verb conjugation, out of which two were most likely done by “error”, and in both of the cases the verb in question was *lay*. The first “error” was made by Color Me Badd, when the singer declared, “lay back.” *Lay* is a transitive verb which requires a direct object and thus the proper way of asking someone to recline in a horizontal position would be to say “lie back.” The second instance of this “mistake” was by Savage Garden when Darren Hayes stated that he wanted to “lay like this forever.” Again, the correct form of the verb would be lie.

I classified this “mistake” as the first kind because it has no real stylistic benefit, both forms of the verb are the same amount of syllables and start with the same consonant (the only difference is in the generation of the two diphthongs, *lay* being slightly more closed than *lie*). There are quite a few irregular verbs in the English language but most of them are quite easy to remember, e.g. *drive*, *choose*, *catch*, etc. The only irregular verbs that seem to be given pop musicians a hard time is *lay* and *lie*, which artists tend to mix up. Again, this is a “mistake” arising from not knowing any better -- there is no added stylistic benefit from using these verbs interchangeably, unless of course to accommodate a rhyme.

The Incorrect Use of Pronouns

Pronouns are a confusing area for many speakers of the English language and pop stars are no exception. In short, pronouns are parts of speech which substitute for nouns or noun phrases, usually such that were previously specified. There are two specific prescriptive rules that need to be mentioned before we look at the examples from the lyrics. First, when pronouns follow prepositions, they *must* be in the objective case. That is *me*, *you*, *him*, *she*, etc; thus, you would say, “this is between you and me,” and not, “this is between you and I.” Second, when pronouns are doing the action, they must be in the subjective case, thus we would say, “you and I should go to the park,” and not, “you and me should go to the park.”

Now, let’s take a look at some of the examples from the lyrics. From the 100 lyrics that I parsed there were 5 documented accounts of incorrect usage of pronouns in the sense described above; the question of case.

The first instance of bad usage is not really applicable as a *first kind of grammar error* as explained earlier, and it concerns Sean Paul’s song *Get Busy*. Sean Paul is a Jamaican artist who speaks a dialect of Jamaican Patois in which phrases that occur in this song like, “me want to see,” and, “me lyrics provide,” are an every day linguistic occurrence that would not be frowned upon when spoken. And since Sean Paul is projecting an image of a Jamaican artist this type of dialect might be understood as crucial to his image.

Second, we have Mariah Carey’s song *We Belong Together* where Mariah sings, “Because I didn’t know me.” In this sentence Mariah should have used the reflexive pronoun *myself* which is used when the subject and the object of the sentence are the same, thus, “Because I didn’t know myself,” would have been the

correct way of saying this; however, one might argue that the difference in syllables would have offset the flow of the lyrics.

Third, we have Kelly Clarkson making the same “error” as Mariah Carey in her song *Since U Been Gone*, where she sings, “How I picture me with you.” Again, the reflexive pronoun of choice should have been *myself*, and not the objective form *me*. The sentence should have sounded like this: “How I picture myself with you,” but again, there is a difference in syllables which may have affected these word choices.

Fourth, we have Alicia Keys’ song *No One*, where Alicia sings, “you and me together,” this sentence should nonetheless read: “you and I together,” because she is referring to herself as the subject of the sentence.

Finally, we come to the much talked about song *The Way I Are* by Timbaland. Among the shaky grammar constructions in this particular song I found was the phrase, “just you and me together.” Like the previous example, where we saw Alicia Keys’ having trouble with cases, Timbaland should have said, “just you and I,” for he and Keri Hilson, are the subjects of that particular sentence; however, in the last two examples of artists having trouble discerning between case in pronouns, one should be sure that these are cases in which only the stuffiest prescriptivists would find any fault with. These grammatical constructions are most of the times considered perfectly grammatical in informal situations, and thus one must keep in mind that I am simply mentioning these grammatical constructions on the basis of gathering evidence, and not to sound sanctimonious or pass judgment.

Was for Were

When implying wishful thinking, verbs take the subjunctive mood form (explained in some detail earlier). That is *were* and not *was*. Out of the 100 lyrics reviewed there were only two instances in which artists had to decide between the indicative and the subjunctive mood. The first instance was Bell Biv DeVoe’s song *Poison*, in which they make the right distinction, as they chose to say, “If I were you I’d take precaution.” The second instance, was when Mario in his song *Let Me Love You* sang, “If I was your man,” when according to the rules of grammar he should have sang, “If I were your man.”

Out of the “Big 7” these four areas are the ones which I chose to label as the first type grammatical occurrence, in the sense that most of these “mistakes” are a result of artists not making a distinction between two options and making a choice

without stylistic benefit. Let us now take a look at the other 3 aspects of the “Big 7” as well as another area worth mentioning.

The Second Kind of Grammatical Occurrence

The second type of grammatical “errors” made in pop lyrics were those that were either made on purpose, or done unconsciously by using shibboleths which mark an adherence to a certain way of speaking, i.e. slang. Out of the Big 7 areas discussed, three of these belong to this second type of grammatical occurrence, they are:

1. The Use of Ain’t, e.g., “If I ain’t got you.”
2. Double Negatives, e.g., “I don’t want no scrub.”
3. Subject-Verb Agreement, e.g., “Shorty wanna thug.”

Besides these areas, artists also seemed to be making interesting sentence constructions which have developed as slang through the past years, and I will discuss one of these sentence constructions briefly.

The Use of *Ain’t*

As I mentioned earlier *ain’t* is as Bryan Garner puts it, “a shibboleth of poor usage,” but nonetheless quite common in informal speech and in lyrics. Out of the 100 lyrics reviewed nearly 25% of them contained the word *ain’t*, and it was not confined to any particular genre; however, it was most common in rap and r&b music. Since this isn’t seen as a prescriptive “error” per se, because of the fact that it is perfectly acceptable in informal contexts, this type of usage quite obviously belongs in this second category of grammatical occurrences. *Ain’t* serves as a useful replacement for *is not* because it is a syllable shorter, making it a fine substitute for rappers trying to squeeze as much meaning as they can into the sometime quickly passing bars⁹.

Double Negatives

Double negatives were quite common in the lyrics that I reviewed, with over 10% of the songs containing this grammatical construction. Prescribers would frown upon using double negatives, but they are in a sense similar to the usage of *ain’t* for the fact that they are quite common in everyday speech. We must however make one important note of this usage, and that is that it is my belief that double negatives are

⁹ A bar is a traditional unit of measurement in music, usually the length of two snares or one line.

actually a useful construction in informal situations. Double negatives add a degree of emphasis, which could of course be added via other grammatical constructions, but in pop lyrics they sometimes serve a useful purpose. Take for example Gwen Stefani's song *Hollaback Girl*, in which she sings, "Cuz I ain't no hollaback girl, I ain't no hollaback girl." Gwen could of used the indefinite article *a*, but this would have been a whole lot weaker than using the negative *no*; not only does it give a certain volubility to the sentence but it also adds emphasis. It is my opinion that saying, "I ain't no liar," instead of, "I ain't a liar," gives it a vehemence which is perfectly fine in informal contexts, perhaps even a sense of emotion. Given this notion that double negatives might serve a purpose, and the fact that they are accepted modes of informal speech and quite common in urban slang, they fit aptly into the category of the second type of grammatical "errors", which are done on purpose by the artists but probably restricted to informal situations.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is, in short, making sure that the verb of the sentence matches the corresponding case of the subject; e.g., in Lil Wayne's hit song *Lollipop*, Wayne slurs, "Shorty wanna thug," when according to prescribers *shorty* is a singular noun which must take a singular form of the verb *want*, which is *wants*. Over 15% of the lyrics reviewed contained examples of subject-verb *disagreement* and they were all confined to genres of rap and r&b. The reason for why I marked this linguistic construction down as the second type, or one that is done on purpose or for some sort of effect, is because this is perhaps one of the most salient features of what I have been referring to as "urban slang." Any short contact with this dialect, will within moments have you noticing that it is an important feature of this type of speech. One really can't imagine that, for the sake of argument, these artists would opt for subject-verb disagreement in formal situations -- for such constructions have their time and their place. However, this type of speech does indeed serve a purpose within song lyrics. The first purpose that it serves is the identification of the artist with a certain group of people, and what used to mean the inner-city or the ghetto has by now expanded to include any rap/hip-hop aficionado. The second purpose it serves is, by the fact that subject-verb *disagreement* often prefers the shorter case of the verb, that this type of construction allows rappers and singers alike to squeeze in extra words into each line, just like contractions. For example, in Timbaland and Nelly Furtado's

song *Promiscuous Girl*, Timbaland sings, “I be the first to admit it,” in which he saved himself a syllable compared to singing, “I shall be the first to admit it.”

One More Example – The Use of *Them* for *Those*

The use of *them* for *those* when a pronoun was needed, e.g. “Shorty had them apple-bottom jeans, boots with the fur.” The reason for why I chose to categorize this “error” as a second kind of grammatical “error” is on the basis that this kind of grammatical construction feels like slang. This is quite the radical deviation from traditional ways of standard American English which I presume resulted from a playful creativeness rather than a technical “error”. There were at least 4 other instances of this kind, and this is a common trend in rap music.

Chapter 6: Acknowledgments and the Conclusion

Acknowledgments

There are two things that are necessary to consider before discussing the conclusion of this dissertation.

First, this essay was never intended to be an all encompassing look into the phenomenon of grammar in popular music, but rather a brief sneak-peek into this particular field. I have outlined and reviewed some of the main issues that I felt needed to be discussed and pondered them from an academic vantage point.

Second, in retrospect, the number of songs reviewed could have been greater. That is to say that even though parsing the top five songs of each year for twenty years gives some insight into the prevalent grammar of each year’s lyrics and the development therein -- the number of songs would have to be increased in order to give a truly complete picture of grammar in pop music. It might have also helped with the accuracy of this research paper to isolate the genres and investigate their individual grammatical properties.

Conclusion

To sum up, what I believe to have been established in this report are a number of generalizations that one could apply to the area of American popular music. My original hypothesis, which stated that -- grammar in popular music has not been getting worse from the prescriptive point of view in the past 20 years, (a timeline spanning from 1988-2008) but that there is a certain status quo which may sway from its epicenter but remains the same -- was proven wrong, but for a different reason than

one would have expected. We saw the growing popularity of a particular type of music, that of rap and r&b¹⁰, which brought into the charts a different type of American English with different grammatical characteristics. Thus, this influx of Urban-American English which is replete with slang and various other grammatical constructions that prescribers might frown upon has become more popular through the years and has been dominating the top of the charts for the past eight or nine years. One has simply to skim through the appendix to verify this notion; every rap song that was reviewed had one or more characteristic that prescribers would frown upon, and as you progress through the years the amount of “error” marks increases quite a bit. Along with my hypothesis being proven wrong, there were various other generalizations that emerged as a result of this exposition.

First, popular music is not an area where good grammar is essential; which means that since most lyricist view this particular conduit of expression as more or less informal, aspects of grammar will likely not be given much consideration, or that is to say, rarely be of the utmost importance to *most* artists; however, we must take note of the fact that this is the status-quo now -- and I fully realize, as any other researcher must do, that this notion may not be applicable in the future. What we have also established about this first issue, is that the amount of consideration or importance an artist places on grammar is to a degree dependent on the sub-genre of his particular popular music (and the individual artists themselves, there are always exceptions); one might perhaps create a theoretical scale between popular sub-genres, hip-hop being at one extreme, with little consideration for prescriptive good grammar and a heavy dependence on slang; and rock or pop in the *classic sense* being at the other extreme, with at least some grammatical consideration (we must, however, be wary of this generalization for the fact that there are exceptions.)

Second, I believe that through my research, or before the actual parsing of the lyrics occurred, I have established a list of seven grammatical issues that are the most talked about and the most prevalent when discussing popular lyrics, and I would like to think that they are pertinent to any lyricist wishing to stay grammatically correct;

¹⁰ In this case, rap and r&b denotes artists which have an urban background. If you consult the appendix you will see a slight increase in Rap songs placing on the top of the chart, and it is not only this slight increase that I am referring to – but also the increase in popular songs that are heavily influenced by this genre’s way of speaking.

meaning that, since there have been few books or works of literature published in this field, that these points (admittedly I am being bold here) may in fact assist any person endeavoring to undertake such a work, or any lyricist seeking to stay grammatically correct.

Third, I have examined some of the most talked about grammar “gaffes” in popular music through the years and discussed them in some detail. I also believe that I have established a certain maxim when it comes to grammar in popular music. In popular music there are two types of “mistakes” being made: those that are being done by accident and for no stylistic benefit, and those that are being made on purpose either to accommodate rhymes or to show association to a certain group of people.

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www.billboard.com

www.tfd.com

Appendix

Below, I have posted the names of the songs categorized by year and overall rank. I have either marked None below each song to indicate no salient grammatical “blunders”, or I have listed quotes from the given song or comments about the song that I found to be reprehensible.

The Songs1988

Top 5 Year End List on Billboard

#1 George Michael – Faith

None

#2 INXS – Need You Tonight

None

#3 George Harrison – Got My Mind Set on You

None

#4 Rick Astley – Never Gonna Give You Up

None

#5 Guns N Roses – Sweet Child O Mine

None

1989

#1 Chicago – Look Away

None

#2 Bobby Brown – My Prerogative

Ego trips is not my thing – All these strange relationships really gets me down

#3 Poison – Every Rose has its Thorn

None

#4 Paula Abdul – Straight Up

I’m moving way too slow

#5 Janet Jackson – Miss You Much

None

1990

#1 Wilson Philips – Hold On

None

#2 Roxette – It Must Have Been Love

None

#3 Sinead O'Connor – Nothing Compares to You

None

#4 Bell Biv DeVoe – Poison

Poison, deadly, moving it slow

#5 Madonna – Vogue

None

1991

#1 Bryan Adams – Everything I do

None

#2 Color Me Badd – I Wanna Sex You Up

I wanna make sweet loving all night long – Lay back

#3 C&C Music Factory – Gonna Make You Sweat

Your body is free and a whole

#4 Paula Abdul – Rush Rush

None

#5 Timmy T – One More Try

None

1992

#1 Boyz 2 Men – End of the Road

None

#2 Sir Mix-a-Lot – Baby Got Back

A few – Baby got back – The use of ain't

#3 Kris Kross – Jump

The use of ain't

#4 Vanessa Williams – Save the Best for Last

None

#5 TLC – Baby, Baby, Baby

The use of ain't – Double Negatives

1993

#1 Whitney Houston – I Will Always Love You

Life treats you kind

#2 Tag Team – Whoomp There it is

Plenty of odd sentence structures

#3 UB40 – Can't Help Falling in Love with You

None

#4 Janet Jackson – That's the Way Love Goes

None

#5 Silk – Freak Me

None

1994

#1 Ace of Base – The Sign

None

#2 All 4 One – I Swear

None

#3 Boyz 2 Men – I'll Make Love to You

Double Negatives – I ain't got nowhere to go

#4 Celine Dion – The Power of Love

None

#5 Mariah Carey – Hero

None

1995

#1 Coolio – Gangsta's Paradise

Double Negatives – The use of ain't – That for who as a pronoun – Slang

#2 TLC – Waterfalls

The use of ain't – His-self for himself – I seen a rainbow yesterday

#3 TLC – Creep

I'll keep giving loving – Slang

#4 Seal – Kiss from a Rose

None

#5 Boyz 2 Men – On Bended Knee

None

1996

#1 Los Del Rio – Macarena

Not really applicable – Spanish

#2 Mariah Carey – One Sweet Day

I lay me down to sleep

#3 Celine Dion – Because You Loved Me

None

#4 The Tony Rich Project – Nobody Knows

I pretended I'm glad you went away

#4 Mariah Carey – Always be my Baby

None

1997

#1 Elton John – Candle in the Wind

None

#2 Jewel – You were meant for Me

None

#3 Puff Daddy – I'll be Missing You

We still a team

#4 Toni Braxton – Unbreak my Heart

None

#5 Puff Daddy – Can't Hold Me Down

Use of ain't – Girls wanna lust me – Simply a lot of men be wanting to hear me

1998#1 Next – Too Close

It's almost like we're sexing – Slang

#2 Brandy – The Boy is Mine

His love is all in me – The use of ain't

#3 Shania Twain – You're Still the One

The use of ain't

#4 Savage Garden – Truly Madly Deeply

I want to lay like this forever

#5 LeAnn Rimes – How Do I Live

None

1999

#1 Cher – Believe

None

#2 TLC – No Scrubs

A scrub is a guy that thinks he's fly – Double negatives – I don't want no scrub –
Slang

#3 Monica – Angel of Mine

None

#4 Whitney Houston – Heartbreak Hotel

None

#5 Britney Spears – Baby One More Time

None

2000

#1 Faith Hill – Breathe

None

#2 Santana – Smooth

The use of ain't

#3 Santana – Maria Maria

She remind me of the West Side Story – As the rich is getting richer

#4 Joe – I Wanna Know

Be the one who always make you smile

#5 Vertical Horizon – Everything You Want

None

2001

#1 Life House – Hanging by a Moment

None

#2 Alicia Keys – Fallin'

I'm taking more than would a fool

#3 Janet Jackson – All For You

None

#4 Train – Drops of Jupiter

None

#5 Jennifer Lopez – I'm Real

What you trying to do to me

2002

#1 Nickelback – How You Remind Me

None

#2 Ashanti – Foolish

I don't know why you treating me so bad – All the things we accept, be the things we regret

#3 Nelly – Hot in Herre

Looking for the right time to flash them g's – Give that man what he asking for – The use of ain't – Unless you gone do it

#4 Nelly – Dilemma

Pick up everything mami hitting – Double Negatives – There is no way, Nelly gone fight over no dame

#5 The Calling – Wherever You Will Go

If I could, then I would, I'll go wherever you will go

2003

#1 50 Cent – In Da Club

We gone party like it's your birthday – If you into taking drugs – The use of ain't

#2 R. Kelly – Ignition

We got food everywhere – We just thuggin it out – Subject verb agreement

#3 Sean Paul – Get Busy

Me want to see – And me lyrics provide – Subject Verb Agreement

#4 Beyoncé Knowles – Crazy In Love

My pride is the one to blame – Who he think he is – The use of ain't – Double Negatives

#5 3 Doors Down – When I'm Gone

None

2004

#1 Usher – Yeah

All up on me – The use of ain't – You the one to please – We leaves them dead –
Checking up on me

#2 Usher – Burn

That don't mean I want to – We done been fell apart – The use of ain't – There's so
many things – I'mma be burning

#3 Alicia Keys – If I Ain't Go You

The use of ain't – Double Negatives – I don't want nothing at all

#4 Maroon 5 – This Love

None

#5 Outkast – The Way You Move

We never relaxing – We tapping right into your memory banks

2005

#1 Mariah Carey – We Belong Together

I didn't know nothing – Double Negatives – Because I didn't know me – The use of
ain't

#2 Gwen Stefani – Hollaback Girl

The use of ain't – Double negatives – This my shit

#3 Mario – Let Me Love You

If I was your man

#4 Kelly Clarkson – Since U Been Gone

Since you been gone – How I picture me with you

#5 Ciara – 1, 2 Step

It don't matter to me – The use of ain't

2006

#1 The Fray – How To Save A Life

None

#2 Eminem – Smack That

Wanna jump up in my Lamborghini – All on the floor – The wardrobe intact now –
I'ma call her – They gone flip – Slang – Didn't think I saw her – etc.

#3 Sean Paul – Temperature

The way they time cold – I wanna keeping you warm – etc. – Jamaican

#4 Nelly Furtado – Promiscuous

How you doing young lady – That feeling that you giving – Double Negatives – I don't see no ring on your hand – I be the first to admit it – What you waiting for – etc.

#5 Beyonce Irreplaceable

Go ahead and get gone – Because you was untrue – Baby you dropped them keys – How about I'll be your nothing

2007

#1 One Republic – Apologize

None

#2 Alicia Keys – No One

You and me together – They could say what they like

#3 Fergie – Big Girl's Don't Cry

Like a child misses their blanket – I must take the baby steps

#4 Timbaland – The Way I Are

The way I are – The use of ain't – Just you and me – Double negatives

#5 Soulja Boy – Crank That

Jocking on them haters – The use of slang – Soulja boy off in this oh – etc.

2008

#1 Flo Rida – Low

Shorty had them apple bottom jeans – Them baggy sweat pants – The use of ain't – Double Negatives – Did I think I seen shorty get low – etc.

#2 Leona Lewis – Bleeding Love

None

#3 Sarah Breiles – Love Song

None

#4 Lil Wayne – Lollipop

Shorty wanna thug – The use of ain't – double negatives – And he don't do that – etc.

#5 T.I. – Whatever You Like

The use of ain't – Double negatives

