

Bachelor Thesis

The Expression of Sentiment: An analysis of the use of intensifiers in song lyrics in a bilingual context

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Abstract

In this research paper, the relation between emotional expressiveness and language will be examined. Song lyrics will be analysed in two languages, specifically Dutch and English, to see whether or not there is any difference in how strongly sentiments are expressed for songs written in either the first or the second language. This will be done by analysing intensifiers that are used in the song lyrics, and whether these are more frequently used positively or negatively. After analysing the songs, it can be concluded that intensifiers are used more frequently in a second language, and that positive intensifiers appear more frequently than negative ones. Further research can look to solidify these findings by analysing a much larger sample of songs, as well as analyse different languages to see whether or not these findings hold true for singer-songwriters with different first languages than Dutch.

Key words

Intensifier, emotion, song lyrics, language

Introduction

When communicating information, individuals make a conscious decision of conveying this information in a particular language. This choice may be made depending on multiple variables, like language skills of the recipient, ability to express oneself, the target audience that can be reached with each language, etc. Artists do a similar thing when writing a new song; if you look at the Dutch charts, e.g. the Q-music top 40, a variety of songs can be found in both the Dutch and the English language. Upon a closer look, one can see that there are also many songs in English that are written and sung by Dutch artists. Famous Dutch artists like Anouk, Alain Clark or Duncan Laurence sing their songs primarily in English, even though Dutch is their first language.

Traditionally, the Dutch music charts have been dominated by mainly music in English, Dutch or dialects of the Dutch language (van der Hoeven, Janssen & Driessen, 2016). Van der Hoeven et al. examined how the Dutch and English languages were used in songs as a means of expression, and found that even though English language music has historically dominated the Dutch charts and is still extremely popular, the attitude towards Dutch music was changing and that it was becoming more widely accepted and renowned; singers like Maan, Snelle, Suzan & Freek or Froukje are among the most popular Dutch artists at this moment, and they all sing in their native language. Even still, many up-and-coming artists these days still choose to sing in English; take artists like Sera or Davina Michelle.

Why do these artists choose to do this? One could argue that it is solely to be able to reach a more international audience, but a more interesting angle could be to look at whether or not an artist is able to express themselves better in their first language in comparison to their second language. In order to analyse this, it is necessary to look at how emotions are expressed across various languages. A previous study done by Hanser, Mark & Vingerhoets (2022) examined popular songs that were played often at Dutch funerals. A combination of English and Dutch-lyric songs were analysed, and they found that English language songs more often referred to sadness, and also more frequently used second-person pronouns as compared to their Dutch counterparts. This shows interesting opportunities for research that focuses on how emotional expressiveness differs between languages.

One of the most straightforward ways to view emotional expressiveness is to look at valence. A statement can either have a positive, negative, or neutral valence. A study done by Rozin, Berman & Royzman (2010) showed that words with valence come across as ‘marked’, which means that they appear more noticeable to readers. They also explain that in many languages, positive words are seen as ‘the standard’ and appear less marked than negative words.

Several researchers have investigated why this effect exists. Marian & Kaushanskaya (2008) investigated the emotional expressiveness of bilinguals. Participants were asked to share their experiences about immigration, and they found that the participants used more emotion words when speaking in their second language as opposed to their first language. Javier, Barroso & Muñoz (1993) state that this effect is seen because positive words are seen as less marked as opposed to negative words, as referenced earlier. They argue that the first language has more emotion connected to it and it makes individuals feel these emotions stronger than in a second language. Hayakawa et al (2017) argue that this is because of upbringing; being raised in your first language, you connect emotions more strongly to everything you see. In a second language, this happens to a much lesser degree, resulting in a lower emotional intensity.

Because of this, Javier et al. argue that bilinguals prefer their first language to express positive emotions, and their second language for expressing negative emotions, since this allows them to distance themselves from those emotions. Therefore, it would be interesting to see if this means that phrases in a second language contain more negative words than positive words, since they are evaluated to be less intense in a bilingual’s mind, and are thus more easily fitted into a sentence than in the first language.

In order to be able to analyse these differences in emotional expressiveness, it is first important to establish a clear and concise way to measure this. One way in which the expression of sentiment can be measured is to look at linguistic intensifiers. An intensifier is defined by Van Mulken & Schellens (2012) as a linguistic element that can either be omitted or replaced in a sentence with a sole purpose of adding a stronger meaning to a phrase, without changing the grammatic structure of that phrase. These intensifiers can be used to strengthen the valence of a word or a phrase; this can be positive (e.g. *‘really good’*), negative (e.g. *‘so stupid’*), or neutral (e.g. *very early*). Besides adding words, an intensifier can also be a stronger version of another word, making a phrase have a stronger emotional charge (e.g. *‘great’* instead of *‘good’*). Van Mulken & Schellens (2012) investigated the use

of intensifiers and how an audience's perception of a phrase changes through the inclusion of an intensifier. They found that the use of a linguistic intensifier made phrases more subjective and more potent in recipients' eyes. This means that the use of intensifiers can be a reliable way to measure emotional expressiveness.

While this study highlights the effects of intensifiers in English, a study by Richter and van Hout (2020) investigates how intensifiers are used in the Dutch language. They analysed the most frequently used intensifiers in the Dutch language, and hypothesized that the intensifiers that were used most often would carry less expressive value, which was later confirmed by their results. It would thus be interesting to see if these conclusions hold true in a bilingual context.

Van Mulken & Schellens (2012) analysed editorials and reviews in their study, while Richter and Van Hout (2020) analysed Twitter posts. Combining their research with the element of song lyrics, Watanabe (2022) conducted a study investigating the use of intensifiers in British music. The study not only evaluated the use of 'American' words in British music, but also did a comparative study between different genres. The results show that intensifiers, specifically 'American' ones such as *so* and *real*, were more popular in certain genres than others; more specifically, hip-hop used much more of these intensifiers than pop-music, for instance.

While previous research on the topic of intensifiers exists, little work has been done investigating the link of using intensifiers with the expression of sentiment. The aim for this study is to formulate an approach that analyses the use of intensifiers to see how they are used for emotional expressiveness. Looking at their emotional valence could provide insight into how positive and negative sentiments are expressed, and to what extent there are differences between them. Focusing on the language component, one can see that research investigating the use of intensifiers between different languages is lacking (Su, 2016), so it might be interesting to see to what extent English language music written by Dutch artists, whose native language is not English, also contains these intensifiers. Comparing this with songs written in their native language (Dutch), it could further give insight into whether native language has an influence on the use of intensifiers in expression of sentiment.

Therefore, this study will focus on the use of intensifiers with either a positive or a negative emotional valence. Intensifiers can also have a neutral emotional valence, e.g. in '*very early*', but these will not be included in the study. The exact guidelines for what is counted as an

intensifier in this study are further specified in the method section. The use of these intensifiers will be analysed in order to be able to determine whether or not they are more frequently used in either the songwriters' first or second language. As such, the following research question was developed for this study:

To what extent are there differences in the expression of emotions in song lyrics in Dutch or English by Dutch songwriters?

This main research question will be answered through two sub-questions:

To what extent does the use of intensifiers differ in song lyrics written in the first or the second language?

Are there differences in the emotional valence that these intensifiers (or the words they modify) carry between the two languages?

Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs (2001) concluded in their study called '*Bad is stronger than good*' that negativity is more potent in our brains and is evaluated more strongly as opposed to positivity, which was also concluded by Rozin, Berman & Royzman (2010). According to these conclusions, it could make sense that intensifiers with negative valence are less frequently used compared to their positive counterparts, because negativity is inherently seen as more strong in people's minds.

This leads to the hypothesis that intensifiers with positive emotional valence appear more often in song lyrics than intensifiers with negative emotional valence. Taking into consideration the argument made previously that negative emotions are more easily expressed in a second language (Marian & Kaushanskaya; Javier, Barroso & Muñoz), the hypothesis is that this effect is more pronounced in Dutch lyrics as opposed to English lyrics; English lyrics will contain more negative intensifiers than Dutch lyrics. As for the difference in use of intensifiers, it is difficult to hypothesize, since there is not much research to take into consideration beforehand. What can be argued is that since emotional intensity is lower in a second language, more intensifiers will be used in English lyrics, since writers can more easily distance themselves from emotions in their second language.

Resolving these questions may give more insight into differences between writing songs in a first versus a second language. It could also open up more opportunities for further research to investigate why songwriters choose to write their song in a specific language, and whether or not emotional expression has anything to do with this decision.

Methodology

Materials

The design used in this study was a corpus analysis of a selection of songs written by Dutch artists, in either the Dutch language (first language) or the English language (second language). For this analysis, a custom setlist of song was created. With the emphasis of this research being on songwriters, the Wikipedia list of Dutch singer-songwriters that write in Dutch, as well as the list of Dutch singer-songwriters who write in English, were analysed and the artists that were relevant to this research were selected. All singer-songwriters who were active in the correct time-frame and who fell into the genre of pop music were selected. At first, the intention was to select artists that were active in the period 2010-2020, but later it was concluded that this time frame was too narrow, with many artists falling only partially in this window, so the frame was broadened to also encompass artists that started their career in the late 90s at the latest, so that at least large parts of their musical careers fall into the preselected time frame.

From these artists, a random sample of 20 was selected for each language. This was done with an online random number generator; the artists were numbered according to their position in the list, and the number generator randomly selected 20 artists to create the sample. Afterwards, 20 songs for each artist were selected to be analysed. This initial setlist of songs still included some irrelevant artists and songs, so these were ultimately eliminated from the study. After making sure the setlist only included relevant songs from relevant artists, this time the songs were numbered in a similar method that was used to select the sample of artists, and a random number generator picked 25 songs out of the setlist for each language to be analysed by hand. This Excel document with the 50 songs that were analysed is included in the appendix at the end of the paper.

Procedure

This research examines the use of intensifiers in song lyrics, and also takes into account their emotional valence (positive or negative). It is important to first establish how exactly intensifiers were measured in this study. Van Mulken & Schellens (2012) distinguished two main types of intensifiers: omissible intensifiers and replaceable intensifiers. An omissible intensifier refers to adding a certain word before an adverb or an adjective to give it stronger meaning. These intensifiers belong to the more linguistic and traditional category of the word (e.g. *very, so, really, etc.*). A replaceable intensifier refers to the replacement of an adverb or an adjective with another adverb or adjective that intensifies the expression. Replaceable intensifiers are not as clearly defined as a linguistic category compared to the more traditional omissible intensifiers; there is more room for variety here. An example can be the phrase *'this song is amazing'*. The word *'amazing'* in this sentence does not fall into the omissible category of intensifiers, since it cannot be omitted without changing the meaning, but it still intensifies the expression, since *'amazing'* is a stronger word than simply *'good'*. In this sentence, it replaces the word *'good'* in order to intensify the expression. Below, examples are listed of both categories of intensifiers in both the English and the Dutch language to provide a clear overview. The intensifiers are either coded positively or negatively.

Intensifier	Valence		English example	Dutch example
Omissible	Positive	->	<i>very good</i>	<i>erg goed</i>
	Negative	->	<i>really annoying</i>	<i>heel triest</i>
Replaceable	Positive	->	good <i>great</i>	mooi <i>het mooiste wat er is</i>
	Negative	->	a fail <i>a disaster</i>	slecht <i>verschrikkelijk</i>

As seen in the examples, replaceable intensifiers can also include more than one word, and can even be a whole phrase. Anything that intensifies an expression, but cannot simply be omitted, falls into the replaceable category. For omissible intensifiers, besides words like *very, so, and really*, repeated words were also counted (e.g. *a weak, weak man*; in this expression, the word *'weak'* is repeated twice to intensify the phrase; it can easily be omitted without inherently changing the meaning).

Aside from positive and negative valence, it was mentioned before that there was a third type; the neutral valence (e.g. *really* early). In this study, the neutral emotional valence will not be included; the focus of the research is on the use of positive or negative intensifiers and how their use and frequency differs depending on which language the song lyrics are written in. Considering the fact that phrases with neutral emotional valence are not used to express emotions, including this level of valence would complicate the study and likely distract from the main research question, which is to see whether or not intensifiers are used to convey more positive or negative emotions between different languages. However, in certain cases, inherently neutral words like (e.g. *very far*) were included in the research. This depends on their context; if the singer conveys emotion in the phrase in which the neutral intensifier is used (e.g. ‘you feel *so far* away from me), the choice was made to include the intensifier in the analysis, since the writer uses it to express a sentiment, in this case, a negative one.

Considering the fact that this can become quite complicated and quite subjective at times, a second coder was used (Eeke Lijftogt) to ensure the inter annotator agreement. The second coder analysed a sample of 5 songs from each language’s setlist, and this was compared with the analysis of the first coder. Afterwards, the first and second coder compared their analyses, and if there were differences anywhere, a discussion followed to determine what the final coding should be. All the data was analysed by hand, without the use of a linguistic tool.

Statistical treatment

After analysing the data, it was put into an Excel file, which was later converted to an SPSS file. For the statistical analysis, a frequency analysis was performed for both type of intensifier (omissible vs replaceable) and valence (positive vs negative) to visualize the use of intensifiers in the song lyrics. For both of these variables, Chi-square tests were performed to see if there was a relation between language and type of intensifier or valence. Finally, an independent samples t-test was conducted to see if the number of intensifiers used in the lyrics differed significantly between both languages.

Results

In the 50 songs that were analysed (25 Dutch and 25 English), a total of 200 intensifiers were used; 76 of those were used by the singer-songwriters who write in Dutch, and 124 by the singer-songwriters who write in English.

A frequency analysis showed that intensifiers with an omissible character were most frequently used (66%) compared to replaceable intensifiers (34%). For songs by Dutch singer-songwriters written in Dutch, omissible intensifiers were used 75% of the time as compared to 25% of the time for replaceable intensifiers, and for songs written in English, omissible intensifiers were also used more frequently (61%) as compared to replaceable intensifiers (39%). The percentages can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Frequency analysis for the type of intensifier used per language. In both languages, omissible intensifiers are used more commonly than replaceable intensifiers.

Language			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Dutch	Valid	Omissible	57	75	75	75
		Replaceable	19	25	25	100
		Total	76	100	100	
English	Valid	Omissible	75	61	61	61
		Replaceable	49	39	39	100
		Total	124	100	100	

An independent samples t-test for the number of intensifiers used showed that there was a significant difference ($t(198)=4.808, p<.001$) in the amount of intensifiers used in English songs ($M=9.50, SD=6.384$) compared to Dutch songs ($M=5.63, SD=3.698$). Relatively speaking, songs written by Dutch artists in English contain more intensifiers than songs written in Dutch (see tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: Independent samples t-test for number of intensifiers per language, mean scores and standard deviation.

	Language	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Number of intensifiers	Dutch	76	5,63	3,698	,424
	English	124	9,50	6,384	,573

Table 3: Independent samples t-test for the number of intensifiers per language.

		Levene's Test for		t-test for Equality of Means						
		Equality of								
		Variances								
								95% Confidence		
								Interval of the		
								Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-	Mean	Std. Error	Lower	Upper
						tailed)	Differen	Differen		
Number of intensifiers	Equal variances assumed	44,174	,000	-4,808	198	,000	-3,868	1,125	-5,455	-2,282
	Equal variances not assumed			-5,424	197,4	,000	-3,868	1,125	-5,275	-2,462

A Chi-square analysis showed a significant relation between the use of intensifiers and language ($\chi^2(1) = 4.23, p = .035$). Omissible intensifiers appear relatively more frequently in songs written English (75) than in songs written in Dutch (57). The same holds true for replaceable intensifiers for both songs in English (49) and Dutch (19) (See tables 4 and 5).

Table 4: Chi-square analysis for the relation between type of intensifier and language. Songs in English contain relatively more intensifiers of both types than songs in Dutch.

		Language			
		Dutch	English	Total	
Type of intensifier	Omissible	Count	57 _a	75 _b	132
		Expected Count	50,2	81,8	132,0
		% of Total	28,5%	37,5%	66,0%
		Standardized Residual	1,0	-,8	
	Replaceable	Count	19 _a	49 _b	68
		Expected Count	25,8	42,2	68,0
		% of Total	9,5%	24,5%	34,0%
		Standardized Residual	-1,3	1,1	
Total	Count	76	124	200	
	Expected Count	76,0	124,0	200,0	
	% of Total	38,0%	62,0%	100,0%	

Table 5: significance of the Chi-square analysis for the relation between language and type of intensifier.

	Value	df	Asymptotic		
			Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4,425 ^a	1	,035		
Continuity Correction ^b	3,801	1	,051		
Likelihood Ratio	4,531	1	,033		
Fisher's Exact Test				,045	,025
Linear-by-Linear Association	4,403	1	,036		
N of Valid Cases	200				

A frequency analysis for the valence of intensifiers showed that positive intensifiers appeared more frequently (54%) than negative intensifiers (46%). These percentages are the same for both Dutch and English songs, as can be found in table 6 below.

Table 6: Frequency analysis for valence of intensifiers. The percentages for both languages show that positive intensifiers are more commonly used than negative intensifiers.

Language			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Dutch	Valid	Positive	41	54	53	54
		Negative	35	46	46	100
		Total	76	100	100	
English	Valid	Positive	67	54	54	54
		Negative	57	46	46	100
		Total	124	100	100	

A Chi-square analysis showed that there was no significant relation between valence of intensifiers and language ($\chi^2(1) < .001$, $p = .991$). Both languages used more positive intensifiers compared to negative ones. More detailed information can be found in tables 7 and 8.

Table 7: Chi-square analysis for relation between language and valence. The observed and expected counts are the same, resulting in a chi-square value of 0.

			Language		Total
			Dutch	English	
Valence of intensifiers	Positive	Count	41 _a	67 _a	108
		Expected Count	41,0	67,0	108,0
		% of Total	20,5%	33,5%	54,0%
		Standardized Residual	,0	,0	
	Negative	Count	35 _a	57 _a	92
		Expected Count	35,0	57,0	92,0
		% of Total	17,5%	28,5%	46,0%
		Standardized Residual	,0	,0	
Total	Count	76	124	200	
	Expected Count	76,0	124,0	200,0	
	% of Total	38,0%	62,0%	100,0%	

Table 8: Chi-square and p-values for relation between valence and language. As seen below, there is no significant relation between the two.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (1- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	,000 ^a	1	,991		
Continuity Correction ^b	,000	1	1,000		
Likelihood Ratio	,000	1	,991		
Fisher's Exact Test				1,000	,553
Linear-by-Linear Association	,000	1	,991		
N of Valid Cases	200				

Conclusions

After analysing the results, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in the use of intensifiers by Dutch songwriters in songs written in Dutch or in English; relatively speaking, songs written in English contain more intensifiers than songs written in Dutch. This is true for omissible intensifiers, as well as for replaceable intensifiers.

As for the emotional valence of these intensifiers, no differences were found between the two different languages; both tend to use slightly more positive intensifiers than negative ones. As for the types of intensifiers, both languages used more omissible intensifiers compared to replaceable ones.

This leads to an answer to the research question: expression of sentiment through use of intensifiers is done more commonly in Dutch singer-songwriters' second language (English) as compared to their first (Dutch). Intensifiers with negative valence are less frequently used than those with positive valence, though not to a statistically significant extent.

Discussion

In the results, it can be seen that intensifiers are used more frequently in lyrics in the second language as compared to the first language. This result can be explained by the lower emotional intensity that the second language has compared to the first; phrases, and intensifiers, are inherently perceived as less emotionally marked when writing in the second language. In the native language, adding an intensifier may seem to make the phrase too emotionally charged, when in a second language, it may be done more easily without feeling like the phrase is too strong. This would explain the discrepancy between the two languages when it comes to the amount of intensifiers used.

When looking at the types of intensifiers that were used, it can be observed that both Dutch and English lyrics use more omissible intensifiers than replaceable ones. This may be a familiarity issue; common omissible intensifiers like *so*, *really*, *very*, etc. are well-known and exist in all languages, and are easily slotted into a sentence. Replaceable intensifiers can be a bit more complicated to use at times, which could explain why they appear less frequently in the lyrics.

Moving on, it was found that both languages use more positive intensifiers compared to negative ones. If we look back at Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs (2001), who argued that positive words appear less marked than negative ones, it makes sense that songwriters are more eager to use positive words than negative words, since they carry less emotional meaning. Since negative words inherently carry a lot of sentiment by themselves, more so than positive ones, they do not require an intensifier as frequently to express strong meaning. Positive intensifiers, on the other hand, can be more easily used, since positivity does not stick as strongly in our minds compared to negativity.

Following up on this, when formulating the research question, it was hypothesized that song lyrics in the second language would likely contain more negative words, since negative words are more marked than positive ones, and since the emotional intensity is higher in the first language, it would be easier to express negative emotions in the second language, as it allows someone to distance themselves from those emotions. This hypothesis was refuted; there was no link found between language and the valence of intensifiers.

A possible explanation for this could be the Dutch songwriters' high proficiency with the English language. For years, the Netherlands has been the country with the highest English language proficiency of any non-native English-speaking country in the world (Anthony, 2023). Dutch people are exposed to English from a very young age, which could mean that the language barrier between the first and second language is not as high, hence the lack of difference in use of negative intensifiers between both languages. Also, the ever-famous 'Dutch directness' could play a role here; one could argue that Dutch people are so used to being direct, that they feel more comfortable than other nationalities expressing negativity, both in their first or their second language, though this would of course need to be researched. Finally, Marian & Kaushanskaya (2008) state in their paper that this difference in emotional expressiveness in bilinguals varies for different languages, which could mean that while this effect was found to be true in their study (and others), it does not have to be the same case for Dutch.

After analysing the results, it is important to establish some limitations to the study. Since the analysis had to be done completely by hand, because of the lack of tools and setlist for this type of study, it was not possible to analyse a very large sample of songs. Further research could look to verify whether the results found here hold true for a much larger sample size. In this paper, guidelines for what counts as an intensifier have been established (beside the linguistic category), which can be used in further research as well. Furthermore, future studies could repeat the same process with songwriters of different languages, to see whether having a different first language influences the expression of sentiment in a second language. Alternatively, one can look to find more concise explanations for the results found here; while different languages were analysed, the aspect of culture was largely left out of the study. If this element is used in further investigations, it could provide an interesting addition to the research in the field.

To draw a conclusion to this research paper, it can be said that emotional expression is a very complex issue. This study has built upon the linguistic connection to emotional expression, using song lyrics as a basis for its investigation. Nevertheless, the expression of emotion in song lyrics remains a very interesting topic to be researched. Music makes everyone in the world feel things, which makes the emotional aspect of it incredible relevant.

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Appendix

Statement of own work – BA thesis

By signing this declaration, the undersigned

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Bachelor's student at the Radboud University Faculty of Arts,

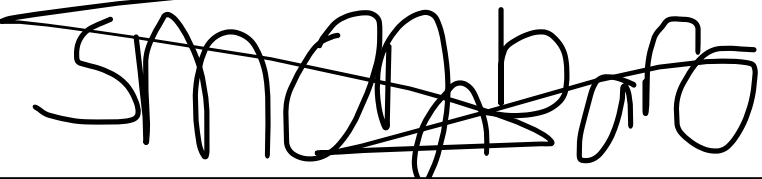
declares that the submitted BA thesis is entirely original and was written exclusively by himself/herself, and without the use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT. The undersigned has indicated explicitly and in detail where all the information and ideas derived from other sources can be found by referencing all sources used, both in the text and in the bibliography.

By signing this declaration, the undersigned also declares that the research data presented in this thesis were collected by the undersigned himself/herself using the methods described in this thesis.

Place and date:

Helden, Netherlands, June 8th 2023

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sander Mombarg', written over a horizontal line. The signature is contained within a rectangular box.