

A Style of Song Lyrics: The Case of *Really*¹

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1. Introduction

Over the last century, we witnessed an explosion of linguistic research addressing similarities and differences between spoken and written genres (cf. O'Donnell 1974; Chafe 1982; Tannen 1982; Chafe & Danielwicz 1987; Biber 1991; Biber et al. 1999). For the most part, these studies documented important characteristics of speech and writing by comparing a small number of different genres (cf. Chafe 1982; Chafe & Danielwicz 1987). More recently, researchers (e.g. Biber 1991; Passonneau 2014) have begun to make a large-scale comparison of spoken and written registers, including those that are typical (e.g. daily conversation, academic articles) and those that are less typical (e.g. telephone conversation, twitter).

However, these discussions have paid little attention to one popular English register, namely song lyrics. Note, for example, that song texts are not included in any of the present-day standard reference corpora (e.g. British National Corpus, Corpus of Contemporary American English) (Kreyer & Mukherjee 2007: 31). This may be somewhat surprising since we are constantly surrounded by (popular) music in daily life. The reason for this absence in linguistic analyses may be that people generally look down on things intended for entertainment and do not regard songs as an appropriate object of academic study (Tagg 1982).

Nevertheless, song lyrics are worthy of linguistic study because sung language is a mode of speaking and writing even if it is accompanied with music. Thus, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing discussion about linguistic differences between speech and writing by paying a particular attention to song lyrics. To this end, the paper will focus on an interpersonal aspect of language use although our way of using a language is influenced by other linguistic factors, such as field and mode (cf. Halliday 1978). I will restrict myself to this linguistic factor because song lyrics seem

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particularly unique in this respect. Previous studies have claimed that the frequent occurrence of the first and second person pronouns and the low value of type-token ratio are characteristic features of the language of song lyrics (cf. Murphey 1992; Kreyer & Mukherjee 2007; Werner 2012). It is due to such features that song lyrics are often characterized as informal or interpersonal (Murphey 1992). However, it is also pointed out that other informal and interactive features such as fillers (e.g. *you know*) are almost absent in this register (cf. Kreyer & Mukherjee 2007). It seems to me that these contradictory results show that song lyrics use a different communicative system from daily conversation; then, I will explore the system in this genre in details, by using an item, namely *really*, whose distribution enables us to identify the communicative roles that the singer and the listener play.

The plan of the present paper is as follows. The following section (2) will describe the rationale behind using the expression *really* to study an interpersonal aspect of song lyrics and other English genres. Then, the corpus design of two American English corpora (American Popular Music Corpus of English and Manually Annotated Sub-Corpus) will be described. The method that is used to identify the uses of *really* will also be explained in this section. In section 4, the results obtained by analyzing those corpora will be shown. Finally, I will offer some concluding remarks.

2. Why *really*?

2.1. Formality

Really is generally considered as a speech-specific item. This popular association with speech is confirmed by recent corpus-based studies (cf. Leech et al. 2001; Aijmer 2007; Liu & Espino 2012). For instance, Liu & Espino (2012: 210) provide the frequency information of *really* over the five registers (Spoken, Fiction, Magazine, Newspaper, and Academic) in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and show that *really* in Spoken is by far the most frequent of these genres (see Table 1).

Table 1. Cross-register distributions of *really* in COCA (Liu & Espino 2012: 210)

	Spoken	Fiction	Magazine	Newspaper	Academic	Total
<i>really</i>	135,802	45,147	36,904	34,531	10,703	263,087

The information in Table 1 raises one fundamental question: why is *really* so frequent in speech? One hasty answer is that, in spoken discourse, there are more semantic or pragmatic contexts where people can increase the illocutionary force of their statement. If so, other emphatic expressions must occur as frequently as *really* in the spoken register. However, the genre comparison of *really* and its synonyms in the British Component of International Corpus of English (ICE-GB) shows that some synonyms such as *actually*, *indeed*, and *in fact* appear less frequently in speech (cf. Aijmer 2007: 119). Rather, some (e.g. *actually*) are used more frequently than *really* in written settings, especially in formal settings (cf. Aijmer 2007: 119). Therefore, the frequent occurrence of *really* in speech, as is observed in many corpus linguistic studies, may be attributed to the informal nature of spoken English. Thus, in this paper, I will use the overall frequency of *really* as a measure of formality (see section 4.1).

2.2. (Inter)subjectivity

The cross-register difference in the use of *really* lies not only in the overall frequency, but also in the functional distribution (cf. Stenström 1986; Diani 2008). As Defour (2012) and other researchers observe, in today's English, *really* is polysemous, with at least three different meanings. See examples (1)-(3) below (the italics are my own).

(1) Evaluator (= *actually*, *certainly*, *indeed*, *truly*)

Honestly, I think it's kinda funny that you waste, your breath talking about me
 Got me feeling kinda special, *really* (Kesha/Backstabber)
 (= Got me feeling kinda special, indeed)

(2) Intensifier (= *very*, *very much*)

I'm actin' *really* odd (Gwen Stefani/Don't Get It Twisted)
 (= I'm actin' very odd)

(3) Discourse marker

A: How much is it just to buy the mike?
 B: Couple hundred.
 A: *Really*.
 B: Yeah. (MASC/face to face)

Historically, the evaluator reading as in (1) is the original and oldest, dating back to at least the Middle English period (Powell 1992: 90). The main function of the evaluator *really* is to reinforce an effect on the truth value of the statement (Quirk et al. 1985: 853). Originally, *really* occurs in contexts that are ‘explicitly based in empirical reality’ (Defour 2012: 87), but, in contemporary English, this adverbial exclusively works as a marker of subjective reality (Defour 2012: 87). In (1), we assume that the speaker, or, more specifically, the singer (Kesha), conveys the subjective rather than objective veracity of her statement (*Got me feeling kinda special*) because the surrounding contexts (*Honestly, I think it’s kinda funny that you waste, your breath talking about me*) do not allow us to identify any objective evidence of her claim.

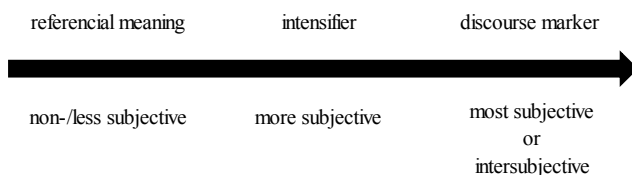
The second reading as in (2) was introduced much later than the first sense. In the late seventeenth century, *really* started to develop an intensifying function in the process of subjectification (Defour 2012: 88). By this semantic change (cf. Traugott 2003), the evaluator reading that was originally based on ‘objective reality’ (Defour 2012: 87) started to take on a subjective scope, which led to the intensifier reading in certain syntactical positions (i.e. next to scalar adjectives, adverbs, or verbs) because of the semantic proximity between the (subjective) evaluator and the intensifier (Defour 2012: 88): ‘what is real and true with respect to a scalar property implies boosting of this property’ (Paradis 2003: 203). In the example (2), *really* is interpreted as a degree modifier since the adjacent adverb *odd* is a gradable (i.e. scalar) item.

The eighteenth century saw the development of *really* as a discourse marker as in (3) (Defour 2012: 88). It is widely claimed that this new usage was caused by an extension of subjectification, by which linguistic items are developed into an intersubjective or listener-oriented sense (cf. Traugott 2003; Athanasiadou 2007). In (3), *Really* in the third line is intersubjective in that speaker A highly expects listener B to draw inferences about their intention (the surprise that speaker A expresses) and expectation (what speaker A expects listener B to do) from the ongoing conversation. Note also that this expression is subjective as well, as it signals the speaker’s personal stance (in the case of (3), surprise).

By the eighteenth century, these three uses of *really* came to co-exist (Defour 2012: 88). However, synchronic studies (e.g. Stenström 1986;

Diani 2008) claim that there is a different preference regarding the use of *really* in speech and in written discourse. In spoken English, the intensifier (in the vicinity of adjectives) is more common than in written English (cf. Diani 2008: 314). *Really* as a discourse marker is characteristic of speech (cf. Stenström 1986). The evaluator *really*, on the other hand, is used in both speech and writing, but it is expected that it is preferred in writing in a propositional sense (cf. Swales & Burke 2003; Diani 2008).

The disparity between speech and writing probably reflects different (inter)subjective levels in the two registers. As I have just mentioned, *really* in contemporary English is mostly subjective, but, according to Athanasiadou (2007) and Traugott (2010), there is gradability in subjectivity. See below the model of the development of adverbials, which is provided by Athanasiadou (2007: 563) (simplified for this study).



In this model, the referential reading of an item is treated as the least subjective, the developed intensifier reading as more subjective, and the pragmatic meaning as the most subjective, or, in Traugott's (2010) terms, intersubjective. The reason why the pragmatic sense is more subjective than the intensifier sense is that 'the construal of the speaker is maximally subjective allowing the hearer to draw inferences' (Athanasiadou 2007: 562). In the case of *really*, the intensifier is interpreted as more subjective than the evaluator, and *really* as a discourse marker is the most subjective or intersubjective.

The fact that the evaluator is preferred in writing may indicate that, in (typical) writing, the speaker's existence tends to be hidden to maintain objectivity. Thus, it is unlikely that (inter)subjective items are used there. On the other hand, in (typical) speech, personal claims and involvement with the listener are much more evident, which leads to the frequent use of the intensifier and the discourse marker.

Thus, *really* is an ideal stylistic tool for this study, since it allows us to identify the roles the speaker and the listener play in a register. Although this is a preliminary attempt, it reveals an interesting aspect of song lyrics, as shown in section 4 below.

3. Methodology

3.1. Materials

In this study, the first version of American Popular Music Corpus of English (PMCE-US), which was compiled for my master thesis project (cf. Watanabe 2017), serves as a database of song lyrics. This is a half-a-million-word corpus, consisting of 1,400 song lyrics by American artists. To the best of my knowledge, this is the largest English corpus of present-day song lyrics. All song lyrics texts are collected from *Metrolyrics*², a music website that guarantees copyright issues. Compare the size with that of other corpora of English song lyrics (see Table 2).

For comparison, Manually Annotated Sub-Corpus (MASC) (Ide et al. 2008) is used as spoken and written research materials³. This American English corpus consists of no less than 19 genres, with 20,000-30,000 words for each. The total count of the corpus is half a million words. The database includes newer genres (e.g. blog, twitter) as well as older (traditional) ones (e.g. face to face, essay).

² See: <<http://www.metrolyrics.com/>> (Accessed 28 February 2018).

³ The original data are drawn from a larger American English corpus, namely Open American National Corpus (OANC). Unlike OANC, MASC is balanced in terms of genre distribution. See: <<http://www.anc.org/>> (Accessed 28 February 2018).

Table 2. Comparison of English song lyrics corpus

	Year of Charts	Word Counts	Number of Songs
PMCE-US	2002-2015	557,373	1,400
Murphey (1989, 1992)	1987	13,000	50
Kreyer & Mukherjee (2007)	2003	176,000	442
Falk (2010)	1950s-1999	53,000	300
Werner (2012)	1946-2005	341,000	1,128
Sophiadi (2014)	1960s-2000s	N	225
Eiter (2017)	2012-2016	119,982	303

N: information is not given

3.2. Methods

All instances of *really* are extracted by means of the AntConc tool (3.4.4). Then, each function is identified manually. As Biber et al. (1999: 857) state, *really* is one of the most difficult items to analyze in linguistics, especially when it occurs in a certain syntactic position (e.g. preverbal). In most cases, however, it is possible to identify its function by looking at the syntactic position (cf. Stenström 1986; Biber et al. 1999; Lorenz 1999). For example, in the following syntax, *really* typically works an evaluator.

- **sentence initial**

(4) *Really*, you're a life-saver (Eminem/Tonya)

- **sentence middle**

really BE _

(5) There *really* is no mystery (Faith Hill/Baby You Belong)

really do (emphatic do) _

(6) You know I *really* do love you (Mary J. Blige/Baggage)

***really* ADV (evaluator) VP**

- (7) And I *really* truly believe in my heart of hearts the focus gets misdirected
(MASC/court transcripts)

***really* NP (except that NP includes scalar adjectives)**

- (8) Loving you is *really* all that's on my mind (Beyoncé/Dance for You)

***really* DET NP**

- (9) we're all in this long line and we're giggling and laughing and cutting up and
having *really* a great time (MASC/face to face)

really* _ *not

- (10) I *really* don't play that shit (50 cents/This Is 50)

With strong negative items (e.g. *never*, *not* _ *anything*)

- (11) They don't feed into anything *really* anymore (MASC/face to face)

Interrogative

- (12) Was it *really* worth it? (Britney Spears/Shattered Glass)

BE *really* PP

- (13) That's *really* about all we can do (MASC/debate transcripts)

● **sentence final**

- (14) Got me feeling kinda special, *really* (Kesha/Backstabber)

On the other hand, *really* as an intensifier is usually positioned next to a gradable adjective as in (15), or adverb as in (16) (cf. Stenström 1986).

- (15) I get *really* sick and tired of boys up in my face (P!nk/Missundaztood)

- (16) I'm actin' *really* odd (Gwen Stefani/Don't Get It Twisted)

Finally, *really* as a discourse marker is the easiest to identify since the form does not precede any words.

- (17) *Really*? Anything else? (Eminem/Dr. West)

However, the most difficult are the preverbal positions. In this paper, when *really* occurs medially with verbs like *love*, *want*, and *need* as in (18), or non-scalar verbs as in (19), I take all these examples as an evaluator. The other preverbal situations are interpreted as an intensifier as in (20).

(18) And boy, you know I *really* love you (Ashanti/Foolish)

(19) When I'm sitting with Anna, I'm *really* sitting with Anna

(Nicki Minaj/Come on a Cone)

(20) Changing Your Underwear - It *Really* Works! (MASC/jokes)

Some negative contexts are also problematic, although it is often possible to identify the meanings by taking into consideration the surrounding semantic or pragmatic contexts. See below.

(21) Nothing really matters. I don't *really* care (Alicia Keys/Teenage Love Affair)

(22) You say you don't *really* dance. Don't worry about it (Chris Brown/Yo)

In (21), the speaker emphasizes that there is no problem concerning an issue by using both the strong negative *nothing* and the evaluator *really* in the first sentence. In this kind of context, it is unusual to interpret *really* in the second sentence as *not _ very*, or a downtoner (Quirk et al. 1985: 597), as the effect of the reinforcement gets weakened. On the other hand, in (22), where *you* (probably female) expresses hesitancy to dance with the speaker so as to avoid having an intimate relationship with the speaker, this individual is unlikely to use *really* as an evaluator to strengthen the truth value of her statement because it may directly hurt the speaker's (Chris's) feelings.

Really as a downtoner (*not _ really*) as in (22) and *really* as in (23) (which is termed 'planning' in Stenström 1986) are excluded from this study (but included in the frequency test in Figures 1 and 2 in section 4.1).

(23) because that *really*...that's an important question (MASC/face to face)

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Overall frequency

The preliminary overview of the study was carried out by calculating the relative frequencies of *really* through a comparison of PMCE-US and the spoken and written components of MASC. As can be seen from Figure 1 below, there are considerable differences between the three corpora. There are more than twice as many tokens per 10,000 words in the MASC spoken (12.1) as there are in the written (5.0), which roughly confirms Leech et al.'s (2001) and Liu & Espino's (2012) BNC and COCA findings, respectively. PMCE-US (7.8) lies between MASC-sp and MASC-wr, but PMCE-US is more written-like than spoken-like, as *really* is more frequently used than in the written part of MASC, but strikingly less so than in the spoken part.

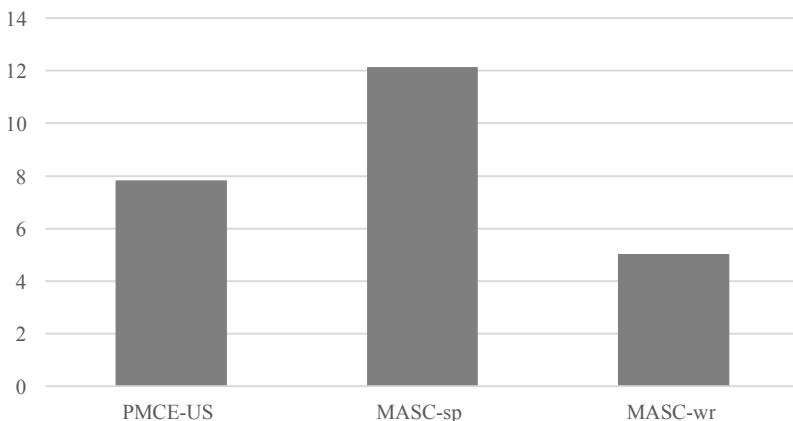


Figure 1. Normalized frequency of *really* in PMCE-US and MASC: per 10,000 words

However, the further investigation in Figure 2 reveals that song lyrics are more spoken-like. The frequency of *really* is almost the same as that of two spoken registers, whose talks are recorded in formal settings with participants discussing formal subjects: court (7.3) and debate (7.7). This indicates that song lyrics actually constitute a formal spoken-like register, which is a somewhat unexpected result (cf. Murphey 1992).

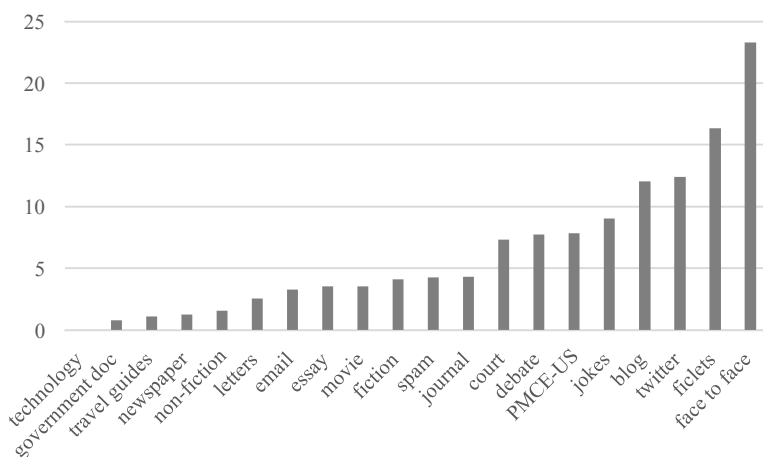


Figure 2. Normalized frequency of *really* in PMCE-US and 19 genres in MASC: per 10,000 words

4.2. Functional distribution

The instances of *really* identified as an evaluator, an intensifier, or a discourse marker are analyzed across the three corpora (see Figure 3).

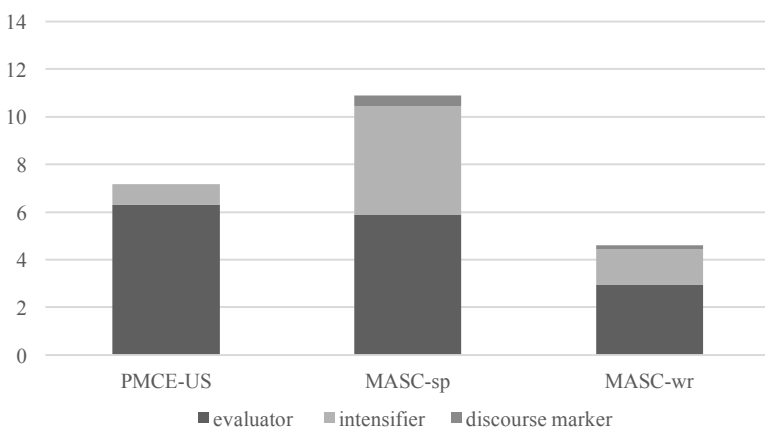


Figure 3. Discourse functions of *really* in PMCE-US and MASC

The most significant finding is that the intensifier use varies considerably with genre. It is particularly preferred in the spoken register, which features approximately 40% of the total *really*. On the other hand, *really* is less likely to work as an intensifier in writing (30%); instead, the evaluator is more dominant (49% vs. 58%). The pragmatic use of *really* is also more frequent in speech, but the difference between the two media is not very significant (4% vs. 3%). After all, MASC contains only eleven tokens of the discourse marker, which makes it hard to make a meaningful conclusion.

PMCE-US shows a very different picture from both MASC-sp and MASC-wr in this respect, with 81% of the total use occupied by the evaluator. This is caused by not only the high occurrence of the evaluator but also by the low frequency of the intensifier; only 46 (10%) out of 436 examples of *really* intensify degree. Besides, the other subjective use of *really* (i.e. the discourse marker) is rarely used, with only one example being used in PMCE-US, which is cited in example (17) above.

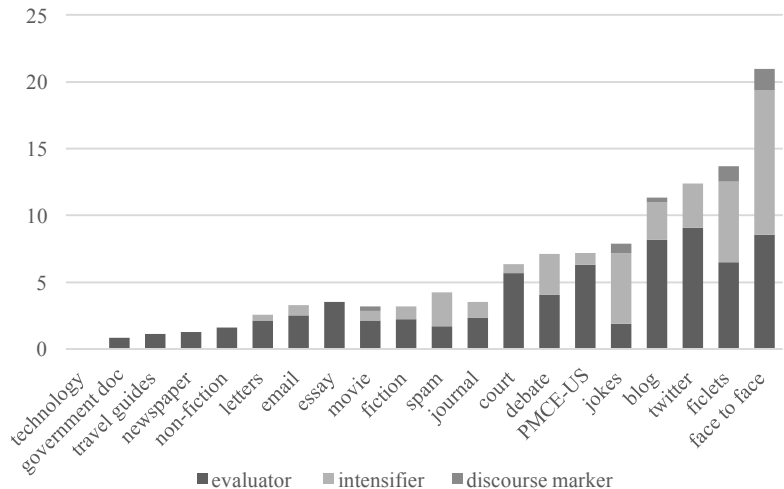


Figure 4. Discourse functions of *really* in PMCE-US and 19 genres in MASC

A closer investigation is shown in Figure 4. This large-scale comparison also illustrates that (inter)subjective level in song lyrics is considerably low. In particular, striking contrasts emerge between song lyrics and face to face conversation. While it is generally claimed that conversation (face to face) and song lyrics share similarities (cf. Murphey 1992), they differ considerably in the intensifier use: 47% and 10%, respectively. The low intensifier rate in song texts is still remarkable, even if compared with the other genres except formal written genres (e.g. government documents, non-personal letters) and court transcripts, which are mostly informative in nature. This similarity of song lyrics with those genres leads us to hypothesize that song lyrics also form an informative genre.

Before making a conclusion, we should also consider the possibility that the use of *really* may be conditioned not only by formality and (inter)subjectivity, but other factors such as musical rhythms. In singing, people usually speak differently from conversation because music requires them to produce words carefully along the beats. Since one song has a fixed number of beats, the number of words is also fixed in each song. Besides, one beat is so fast that only a few syllables can be produced along each beat. As a result, a repertoire of words is largely limited to items with a few syllables, and the extremely low value of average word length in PMCE-US (3.76) indicates that this genre indeed prefers words as short as three to four letters, that is, one or two syllables in length (cf. Watanabe 2017). Therefore, the use of the three-syllable word *really* may be limited by this factor. However, the two-syllable *really*, which is represented as /rí:li/, also appears in many popular songs. It is, therefore, still possible that the findings shown in Figures 1-4 reflect an interpersonal aspect of song lyrics⁴.

⁴ One reviewer points out the possibility that the two-word *real* works as a substitute for the three-word *really*. In fact, PMCE-US possesses some examples of the intensifier *real* as in *real bad*. However, in American English, their social functions are very different because *real* is more stigmatized than *really* (Yaguchi et al. 2010: 593). Therefore, it is questionable whether the former serves a surrogate for the latter.

5. Conclusion

In the present study, several points have been discussed regarding formality and (inter)subjectivity in a number of English genres by examining PMCE-US and MASC. First, this study has shown that the use of *really* in song lyrics is as frequent as in court and debate transcripts. This indicates that this register has a formal nature. Second, the investigation of (inter)subjectivity has revealed that song lyrics are less subjective as well as less intersubjective since *really* as an intensifier or a discourse marker is infrequently used. Contrary to the general assumption that song lyrics are informal and conversation-like (Murphey 1992), this study has illustrated that song lyrics apply a different communicative system from that of conversation.

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