

Gilberto Giannacchi

**THE WRITER'S STANCE IN ONLINE MUSIC REVIEWS:
A CORPUS LINGUISTICS STUDY**

ABSTRACT. This article deals with a corpus linguistics study on contemporary online music reviews. The aim of this study is to identify linguistic clues of stance and evaluation by the reviewers, and to investigate whether the authors show contemptuous behavior and elitist views, as claimed by the genre's detractors. To answer those research questions, a music reviews corpus has been analyzed with the freeware toolkit for corpus linguistics investigations AntConc. The corpus is made up of contemporary musical album reviews published online. The results of this study show that there are few explicit linguistic features that clearly point to the authors' stance towards the reviewed album. However, the consistent lack of hedges and modals mirrors the reviewers' high level of confidence – which can be perceived as an elitist and contemptuous demeanor.

KEYWORDS: Music reviews. Corpus linguistics. Critical discourse analysis. Evaluation.

1. Introduction

1.1. *An overview on the definition of music reviews and music webzines*

Contemporary music reviews can be defined as a singular genre. Even though they continue to sway readers – and many critics achieved cult status – it might be a time-consuming process to find academic definitions of the genre. However, criticism of music has widely been commented as an intellectual

activity¹. This practice implies an evaluation of the significance of a piece of music, an artist, or a genre (Latham, 2002). To properly evaluate a musical artifact, the authors should mediate the artist's and the potential listener's points of view. Furthermore, they should consider the spiritual implications of the composition – i.e., what the listener feels or is supposed to feel – and think carefully about the cultural context and the system of values in a specific music genre. Behind musical criticism lies a multifaceted ideological system that concerns both musical competence and subjectivity. Given these premises, one can define a music review as the actual outcome of the evaluation process involved in musical criticism.

Notwithstanding this, no precise stylistic guidelines must be respected to write music reviews. They can vary in terms of length, focus and ideological background. For example, Robert Christgau's iconic 'capsule reviews' tend to be brief and concise², while many online reviews (e.g., Pitchfork's, Stereogum's) provide the reader with long and detailed track-to-track analyses. Each music journal has its own culture-bound values that deeply influence the outcome of every single review.

¹ See Adorno (1976), Latham (2002).

² See Christgau's website (Christgau, n.d.) for an overview.

Nowadays, webzines – i.e., online journals that do not have a paper edition – have gained great visibility, mainly because they are easily accessible and free of charge. Moreover, printed press itself gives coverage to online music magazines – e.g., Bray (2009) – thus nurturing their expansion. In addition, some websites have an active role in sponsoring and promoting artists and festivals. In the last 15 years, Pitchfork has yearly hosted its own festival and Resident Advisor has become a recording label for electronic music artists. For these reasons, some journalists that previously wrote for paper music magazines currently write for music webzines – e.g., David Stubbs, a former writer for Melody Maker, publishes reviews on the British independent online magazine The Quietus.

1.2. Negative criticism on music reviewers

Music critics are undoubtedly prone to criticism. This can be related to the reviewers' stylistic imprint, or it can transcend the text itself and address the author's attitude or editorial stance. An 'ill-famed' example concerns Pitchfork, an online magazine read by circa 1.5 million people every month (Alexa, n.d.). In an article titled *The Pitchfork Effect*, published on Wired Magazine, the author criticized the magazine's "impenetrable writing, factual gaffes made by

first-time critics” (Itzkoff, 2006), while other satirical websites, such as The Onion, made fun of the webzine’s alleged elitist stance and snobbish demeanor – e.g., the satirical article *Pitchfork Gives Music 6.8* (The Onion, 2007).

This case exemplifies the main beliefs held by the genre’s detractors. Music reviewers are often thought to be elitist and, as far as webzines are concerned, unprofessional. This type of discontent might be found on online forums. For example, in a Quora thread titled *Why do a lot of people have low opinions of music critics?* a user believes that:

It is ok to read about new albums as a guide or a “shopping list” but we all know music critics are not about that. It is about their “superior taste” and the need to tell others what is “good”. (Quora, n.d.)

Moreover, readers might be skeptical about the social status achieved by the reviewer and might be sensitive to opposite points of view:

I can think of two reasons [why music critics are hated]. One, a critic dissed their favorite star once, and/or two, critics can achieve star maker status when in fact their taste is really no better than anyone else’s. (Quora, n.d.)

In other cases, authors of music reviews are perceived to have a ‘feeling-driven’ approach, which supposedly is related to negative prejudices of reviewers towards the reviewed artists, hence leading to pompous and annoying stylistic choices:

Another thing I pick up on more and more when it comes to music reviews is that the person writing the review seems like they had a negative attitude about the music before they even heard it. (McClure, 2011)

The previously provided quotations show that the main issues in music reviews' criticism are not related to the press system or the market, but to reviewers as single individuals. It seems that modern critics tend to neglect the rich intellectual system involved in criticism of music and, on the contrary, adopt a controversial – and apparently contradictory – approach. Readers think that authors write reviews according to their own feelings and they aim at leaving little to no room to discussion and debates, thus failing to mediate the artist's and the listener's visions on a piece of music. Their style is perceived to be baroque, based on a sensationalist figurative language and obscure cultural references. Furthermore, they attempt at convincing the reader of their sophisticated taste and their remarkable cultural level. These features can either persuade potential readers to buy highly acclaimed records, or – as seen – to stark criticism.

Albeit thought-provoking, these comments are solely based on the users' and average readers' surmises. To determine where – and if – these authors' pretentiousness and manipulative approach can be found, a thorough linguistic investigation is necessary. Corpus linguistics – i.e., the study of language based

on examples of real-life language use (McEnery & Wilson, 1996) – has successfully been employed for both text linguistics and genre analysis (Flowerdew, 1998), since it can be considered as a synergetic discipline. Therefore, it provides effective strategies to make hypotheses on actual reviews. Even though research on CL has widened exponentially in the last 30 years, there are few corpus-based studies on the genre of reviews – film, book and music reviews. By using corpora, electronically stored collections of texts with precise representative functions (Leech, 1991), the researcher might obtain clear, unbiased views (Baker, 2006) on a given text genre – music reviews making no exception. Furthermore, corpus linguistics helps to identify grammatical and lexical patterns that strongly influence readers, albeit they might elude a superficial reading (Hunston, 2002). Taking this into account, a corpus linguistics study on music reviews can not only reveal their salient lexical, grammatical and pragmatic features – and allow to compare them to the criticism illustrated in 1.2. – but also shed some light on potential implicit strategies that might impact the ever-growing music webzines’ audience. To phrase it differently, the concordances containing given lexical and grammatical items – e.g., adjectives, nouns and modal verbs – will be compared to unveil semantic and pragmatic patterns that reflect the reviewer’s stance. The results

will prove useful to verify if the criticism towards music reviews is ‘backed’ by the linguistic data found in the corpus. This part of the investigation is based on an interdisciplinary approach which combines corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis (cf. Baker et al. 2008, Van Dijk, 1993). CDA principles on the social purpose of language (cf. Blommart, 2005) are essential to interpret linguistic results qualitatively.

2. *Aims and methods*

2.1. *Research questions*

The first research question addressed for the purposes of this study is: how do reviewers evaluate a band or an album?

The notion of evaluation (cf. Hunston & Thompson, 2000) has been widely used in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify the linguistic patterns and choices that might hint at the author’s personal stance or feelings towards a given topic or event. Evaluation is intrinsically connected to the notions of connotation and affection, which respectively identify the experience that is evoked by a given expression and the personal feelings of the speaker (Leech, 1974 and Cruse, 1986). Clues of evaluative language may be found in lexical choices, modality and hedges. Evaluation is a core principle of music reviews

because it implies a judgement on a piece of music – e.g., a song, an album or a live concert. To provide a clear and objective assessment, the author might refer to impersonal sets of values, such as the cultural environment in which the product was recorded, intertextuality and the musicians' technical proficiency. However, as seen in the previous section, music reviewers are rarely impartial. This corpus linguistics analysis aims at unveiling textual and linguistic features that can unmask the reviewer's attitude and opinion.

The second research question is: do the results of the investigation give reliability to the popular perception on music reviews?

It is often argued that reviews are snobbish and overwrought, and authors are reckoned to impose their personal taste to every person who is reading the review (Ottenhof, 2020). This demeanor could be traced to dubious lexical choices, low use of modal features and intertextual obscurity. This study might help to reveal the features that have led the audience to conceive these thoughts.

2.2. *Corpus construction and analysis*

The *2018 Music Reviews Corpus* is entirely made up of contemporary online music reviews. Each review was copied onto a blank .txt file and then saved. This corpus is designed to photograph the current state of music reviews,

as far as their lexical and pragmatic content is concerned. Such reviews were published on 11 different English mother-tongue webzines³ – the corpus features 10 reviews from each site. The total amount of word tokens is 64,755. The online magazines included in the corpus are based in different English mother-tongue countries and have various editorial responses as for their album assessment and article length. Each of the 110 reviews deals with a specific album by a given artist – thus resulting in 110 albums by 110 different artists. Furthermore, different genres were considered while building the corpus, and positive and negative reviews were included, so to avoid unbalanced results in the evaluative and sectorial language. This heterogeneity in a small corpus can furnish a reliable perspective on present-day album reviews' characteristics.

The corpus was analyzed with AntConc, a freeware toolkit developed by the British linguist Laurence Anthony. AntConc was crucial to easily pinpoint the salient concordances and collocations (Sinclair, 1991) and to make general surmises based on preliminary statistical data.

³ The websites from which the reviews were collected are *Consequence of Sound*, *Drowned in Sound*, *Pitchfork*, *Pop Matters*, *Renowned for Sound*, *Resident Advisor*, *Slant Magazine*, *Spectrum Culture*, *The Line of Best Fit*, *The Quietus* and *Tiny Mix Tapes*. These magazines are based in the UK, US and Australia and employ reviewers who have English as their mother-tongue.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Preliminary quantitative data

Firstly, a comment on the corpus's type-token ratio must be made – i.e., the total number of word types divided by the total number of word tokens, then multiplied by 100. This allows the researcher to verify the lexical density of a given corpus (Thomas, 2005). As for this corpus it goes:

$$10,303/64,755 \times 100 = 15.91\%$$

This result is interesting, because it partly contrasts with the criticism that is often made towards music reviews. 15.91% might be considered an unexpected result that hints at a low lexical density, thus contrasting with the readers' idea of wordiness. However, the type-token ratio alone does not provide reviewers with a bulletproof apology.

Further speculations can be made by looking at the 10 most frequent lemmas, since it might help to pinpoint and interpret the main semantic field of a given text genre. Even though AntConc does not provide tagging, an asterisk after a given word can be put in the search bar and the program will automatically find results that have the selected word as a root – unfortunately, it will not individuate irregular verb forms, given the radical difference of the root.

LEMMAS	RAW FREQUENCY
Album	401
Song	341
Music	293
Sound	274
Record	207
Band	206
Track	203
Time	149
Guitar	130
Rock	124

Table 1: The 10 most frequent lemmas in the music reviews corpus

The results in Table 1 do not seem to reflect the popular perception towards this text genre. The 10 most frequent lemmas show a strong semantic cohesiveness, and each term is relevant to the music semantic field. The most widely used lemma ‘album’ would be highly expectable because the corpus is solely constituted by album reviews. The only term that might not be relevant to the music semantic field is ‘time’. Nevertheless, it is the most frequent lemma in the British National Corpus and its usage can be both literal and metaphorical. The other terms that are worth considering are ‘guitar’, ‘rock’ and ‘band’. As mentioned before, the corpus is made up of album reviews from different musical genres – e.g., Eminem, Aphex Twin and Cristoph De Babalon, respectively hip hop and electronic/techno artists. In those genres, guitars play a significantly small role, and ‘rock’ would be an inappropriate definition for such

types of music. Furthermore, many records included in the review have been recorded by solo artists – e.g., Paul McCartney, Carrie Underwood. The high frequency of these three terms might signal the relevance of rock cultural values to this day, although it might be argued that hip-hop and electronic music are the main genres associated with the forefront. These speculations, however, are concerned with music itself and the culture-bound values associated with this form of art. As for the research questions, no signs of evaluation, judgement and lexical pomposity seem to be contained in the 10 most frequent lemmas. On the contrary, they show a strong genre cohesiveness and a manifest neutrality of the reviewer. Still, expressing evaluation often is a subtle and implicit task that goes beyond the usage of straightforward and clear evaluative devices.

3.2. *Qualitative Data*

3.2.1 *Adjectives*

Adjectives represent immediately recognizable evaluative elements. Namely, they can be considered as words that typically occur in an evaluative environment (Hunston & Thompson, 2002). Naturally, this is a key aspect in music review, since adjectives can be assets to express parameters of evaluation.

ADJECTIVES	RAW FREQUENCY
Good	58
Best	56
Full	53
Little	48
Some	41

Table 2: 5 most frequent adjectives in the corpus

As table 2 shows, only the adjectives ‘good’ and ‘best’ might be perceived as overtly evaluative. However, depending on the culture-bound values of a given cultural setting – in this case the standard parameters that are associated with a worthy musical product – adjectives can acquire a precise connotation that goes beyond their plain semantic meaning.

‘Good’ and ‘best’ proved to be the most direct adjectives to express stance. This can be seen in AntConc concordance string. As far as ‘best’ is concerned, the most frequent clusters are evaluative noun phrases such as ‘best songs’, ‘best album’ and ‘best moments’. Furthermore, the webzine *Consequence of Sound* uses the phrase *The Good* to introduce paragraphs that illustrate the most remarkable features of a record. Therefore, these results give very little room for interpretation (see Figure 1).

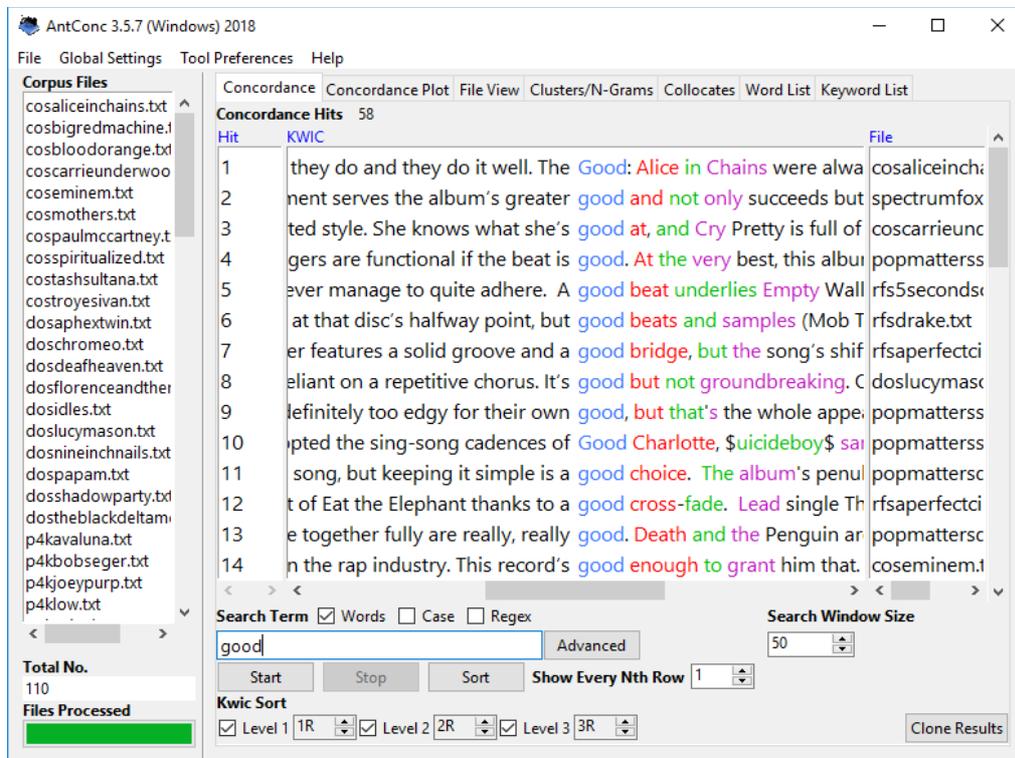


Figure 1. Examples of concordance strings for “good” in the corpus.

The adjective ‘same’ can be used to stimulate precise associations and thoughts in the audience:

- A) It’s good, but she’s not the same as she once was (Horowitz, 2018)
- B) But there wasn’t the same energy that sprung out from the record as it did on their second album Dye It Blonde (Kusher, 2018)
- C) Each track, built on the same kind of muted drums and gently sighing chords distinguishes itself (Lee, 2018)

As seen in concordances A and B, ‘same’ is employed intertextually. The latter works of Kathy Mattea (reviewed by Horowitz) and Cullen Omori (reviewed by Kusher) are negatively being compared to their previous ones. The authors believe that the reviewed albums lack some of the qualities that gave

prestige to the previous works. As for concordance C, ‘same’ highlights the repetitiveness of Will Long’s formula. When readers approach this sort of sentences, they might immediately be influenced and might be prone to expect a disappointing listening of the reviewed album. These concordances partly hint at the authors’ persuasiveness. An essential aim of the writer is to firmly state their viewpoint on the record and to make a strong impression on the person who is reading the article – who may be searching for some quality opinion articles prior to approaching the album.

The frequency of the 5 most used adjectives in the corpus is not as high as one would expect to find in a test genre that lays its foundations on expressing judgement. To exemplify the issue, the frequency of the 10th most used lemma – ‘rock’, with 124 hits – doubles the frequency of ‘good’ and ‘best’. Thus, it can be hypothesized that the authors choose to evaluate albums with more implicit linguistic devices.

3.2.2. *Modal verbs*

For this study, modal verbs are divided into non-epistemic and epistemic (Depraetere & Langford, 2018). Non-epistemic modality refers to the possibility – or the necessity – for a situation to occur, and the necessity or possibility for someone to do something⁴ (ibid.). Epistemic modality is directly related to the speaker’s knowledge about a fact or a situation. When speakers use epistemic modality, they are speculating about the truthfulness of a past, present or future situation. Music reviewers can benefit from the employment of modality since it does not straightforwardly represent reality (Zandvoort, 2012), thus allowing reviewers to make hedged speculations on the intrinsic value of a given release.

MODAL VERB	RAW (NORMALIZED) FREQUENCY
Can	102 (0.15%)
Could	64 (0.10%)
Might	58 (0.09%)
Would	50 (0.08%)
Will	48 (0.07%)

Table 3: 5 most frequent modal verbs in the corpus

Music reviewers can – and should – use modality frequently. It applies to several contexts – e.g., hypotheses on why the album is good or bad,

⁴ Some non-epistemic modals express permission – i.e., (not) be allowed to do something –, (in)ability – i.e., the physical, perceptual and intellectual capability to do (or not to do) something – and mere (im)possibility – i.e., non-epistemic possibility unrelated to permission and ability.

speculations on how a band might evolve after having published their last record. On the contrary, a scarce employment of modals can lead to different considerations – i.e., it might create an image of a detached and pretentious author (cf. 1.2.).

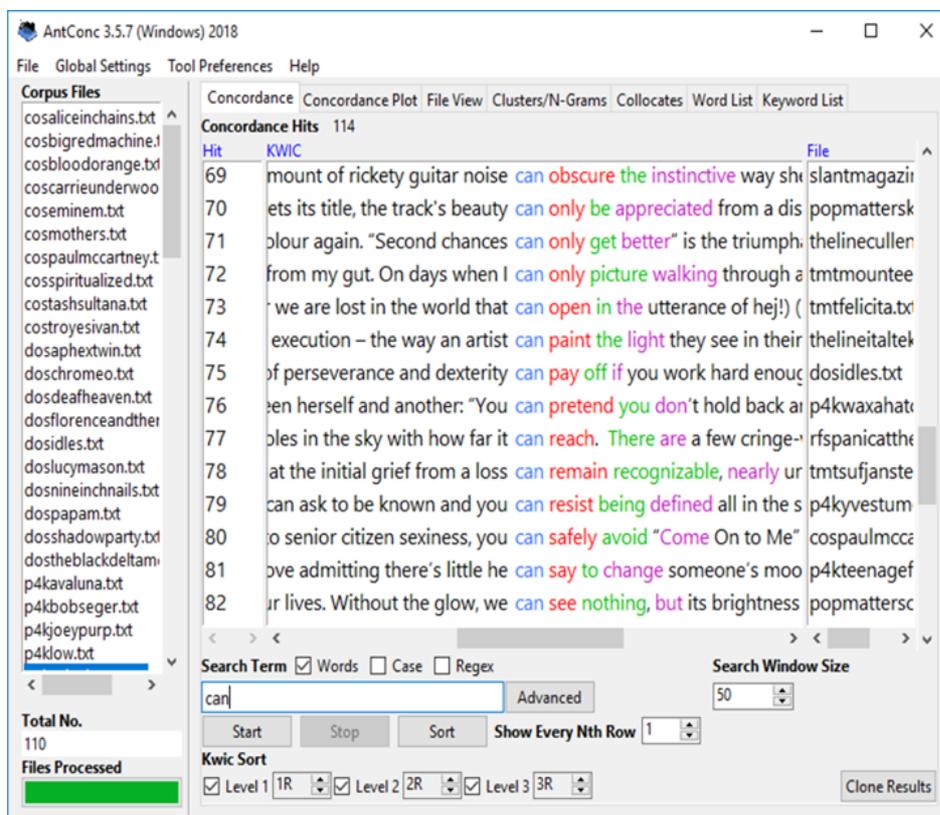


Figure 2: Examples of concordance hits for “can”.

‘Can’ is the most employed modal verb in the music reviews corpus⁵, albeit a low normalized frequency (0.15%). In addition, ‘can’ only appears in 65 texts

⁵ Some songs included the word *can* in the titles. Such occurrences have been left out on the frequency list.

out of 110 and its frequency in single reviews remains scarce – 6 times at the most in a Tiny Mix Tapes review (Coral, 2018).

The relatively high frequency of this modal verb might be related to its wide range of meaning. Its affirmative form not only has a dynamic nature – i.e., it relates to abilities which come from the concerned individuals (Palmer, 2001) – but can also be used deontically, as to express permission from external sources (ibid.). The negative form of ‘can’ may also be used to highlight a strong epistemic necessity. Most of the concordances show a preponderant dynamic usage of the modal verb:

- D) The way an artist can paint the light they see in their [...] (Richardson, 2018)
- E) Admitting there is little he can say to [...] (Sodomsy, 2018)
- F) Without the glove, we can see nothing [...] (Horowitz, 2018)

The only concordance string that might be relatable to the writer’s opinion is “if you’re not into senior citizen sexiness, you can safely avoid ‘Come on to me’ [...]” (Clark, 2018) – concordance 80 in Figure 2. This is, however, still expressed as a logical, “matter of fact” reasoning – the author’s utterance is highly similar to a conditional cause-effect clause.

The second most frequent modal verb on the list, ‘could’, has a slightly more epistemic connotation. It might be employed as a weak epistemic modal and to convey non-epistemic possibility in the past. ‘Could’ has a significantly

lower frequency in the corpus than ‘can’. This could be due to its stronger evaluative and epistemic nature. If this were the case, it would strengthen the views of music reviewers’ audience – i.e., the authors express their opinion without feeling the need to create a distance. It might happen in certain instances, however this tendency is rarer than expected:

- G) You could easily call most dance music (Churchill, 2018)
- H) Not that Idles could ever be accused of faking it (Gourlay, 2018)
- I) And it is a decision that could either stall their success (Benfield, 2018)

The tendency of giving a hedged connotation to ‘could’ might be perceived as slightly stronger. The three cases above clearly convey the author’s point of view on the album – or the general context surrounding the artist. The first two concordances express hedged stance – although in the first concordance ‘easily’ reinforces the strength of the author’s statement. The third concordance string constitutes a prediction based on the knowledge that the author possesses over the album and the band that are being dealt with. ‘Could’ is rarely used as a hedge in the corpus. Such verb is more frequent as a mere possibility modal:

- J) Knowing you could drown in the process [...] (Hazelwood, 2018)
- K) Promote any rock act they could find [...] (Conaton, 2018)
- L) It could get away with his messy [...] (Totsky, 2018)

‘Might’ is the third most frequent modal verb in the corpus. It belongs to both epistemic – more precisely, it indicates a weak epistemic possibility – and

non-epistemic environments. Nevertheless, differently from ‘can’ and ‘could’, it may have a formal connotation when non-epistemic, and it can more consistently be employed to make hedged considerations and hypotheses.

In the music reviews corpus, ‘might’ often expresses the author’s stance towards the album or its songs. This happens even when the modal verb has a non-epistemic possibility denotation – e.g., “sonically this might brutalise the ears” (Cottingham, 2018). By quickly looking at the key words in context, the semantic role of ‘might’ would become clear:

- M) This might be the one that takes a few listens to [...] (Linnell, 2018)
- N) Leatherface might be the record’s most interesting [...] (Conaton, 2018)
- O) The Molochs might easily be dismissed as another drop in the [...] (Smith, 2018)
- P) These tracks might end up as fan favorites [...] (Bromfield, 2018)
- Q) The result is as you might expect, a bunch of fairly typical pop songs [...] (Wright, 2018)

Concordances M, N, O and P are clear hedged expressions. The authors developed their own opinion on the album and they are conveying their stance by adopting ‘might’, which can be associated with cautiousness in expressing something. Concordance Q is presented with thought-provoking characteristics. It ends with a post-modified noun phrase (“a bunch of fairly typical pop songs”). Interestingly, though, the author directly addresses the readership with a 2nd person pronoun (“you might expect”) as to veil their own opinion with the

viewpoint of the person who is reading the review. It can be assumed that in this case the reviewer wanted to create complicity with the readership and aimed at collocating the writer and the reader on the same ideological level.

With 50 hits, ‘would’ is the fourth most frequently employed modal verb in the corpus. This centre⁶ modal is associated with hypothetical statements that are relevant to an epistemic modal field. Due to its polyfunctional grammatical and semantic nature, it is a valuable device for the reviewer – as will be seen later, it is one of the most frequently used modals in newspaper articles. Nevertheless, the frequency percentage in the music reviews corpus is very low – ‘would’ appears in only 36 reviews out of 110.

Some verb phrases in the corpus’s cluster list represent common expressions that can be associated with opinions. One of these is ‘would seem’:

- R) Whereas formally Vocoder contains more wayward text, humor, and altogether abandon than Lucier would ever have it, similar to Lucier, Vocoder would seem to be a piece that needs no further explanation. (Scavo, 2018)
- S) For an artist who borrowed from “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” [...] and who chided the use of racist sports mascots on 2014’s Nikki Nack, the sociopolitical climate of 2018 would seem like ample fodder for Merrill Garbus’s righteous anger. (Goller, 2018)

⁶ I.e., it features singular grammatical features. Centre modals do not require auxiliaries in both interrogatives and negatives and do not have a third person singular suffix. *Must, can, could, might, may, would, will and should* are all centre modals (Depraetere & Langford, 2012).

T) Likewise, the tight, funky “Trying” almost sounds like Thompson’s vying for a freak mainstream hit – the addictive hooks of the chorus certainly help – but the underlying darkness would seem (thankfully) out of place alongside today’s carefully marketed pop stars. (Ingalls, 2018)

‘Would seem’ might be considered as a form of distancing by the author. As shown in the use of the modal verb ‘might’, ‘would seem’, in the last concordance above, is followed by a quite abrupt remark about modern popular music (“careful marketed pop stars”). This appears to lower the illocutionary force contained in the investigated expression. In addition, this collocation proves to be rare in the corpus.

The least frequent modal verb listed in the chart is ‘will’ – which might be considered as the present form of would. It denotes volition – i.e., the degree of the speaker’s willingness – and predictions, furthermore it functions as an auxiliary verb for the future. Since it has both modal and auxiliary functions, one could expect high normalized frequency concerning will. However, such frequency is surprisingly low in the corpus – it appears on 34 out of 110 reviews in the corpus. These results confirm again the scarce tendency of employing modality by music reviewers. ‘Will’ is similarly employed like ‘would’ in the corpus. The most common verb phrase is ‘will be’, which often denotes

predictions concerning the future or the expectable reaction of the listener when approaching the album:

U) It will be fascinating to see where they go from here. (Spenceley, 2018)

V) The Walker Brothers' magisterial Make it Easy on Yourself will be familiar to many listeners. (Deusner, 2018)

Will tends to collocate with adverbs as well, but this is rare in the corpus – the most frequent adverbial collocation, 'will likely', only appears twice.

3.2.3. Observations on the frequency of modal verbs

The results in 3.3. brought to light the very scarce frequency of modal verbs in the music reviews corpus. In light of this issue, it can be useful to compare the use of modal verbs in the corpus with the frequency of modal verbs in different genres. For example, music reviews share some similarities with newspaper articles. Both genres aim at informing – i.e., the album review gives information on a musical release, the newspaper article on miscellaneous events. Moreover, even though evaluation may not be an essential feature of a newspaper article, both genres can easily adopt modal verbs as a recurring stylistic and pragmatic feature. Modals allow music reviewers to hedge their own opinion and allow journalists to make predictions and speculations on current affairs.

The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al. 1999, p. 489), a descriptive and corpus-based grammar, features a quantitative analysis of modality across different genres – e.g., conversation, fiction, newspaper, academic. Listed below are the approximate results for normalized frequency of modal verbs in newspaper articles. The incidence is calculated per 1.000.000 word tokens:

MODAL	RAW FREQ.	NORMALIZED FREQ.
Will	4200/1.000.000	0.42%
Would	2400/1.000.000	0.24%
Could	1400/1.000.000	0.14%
Can	1200/1.000.000	0.12%
Should	1000/1.000.000	0.10%

Table 3: raw and normalized frequency of modal verbs in newspapers (Biber et al., 1999, p. 489)

Table 3 shows how prediction/volition modals are exponentially more frequent in newspaper articles than in music reviews. ‘Will’ and ‘would’ have a considerably low normalized frequency in the music reviews corpus – respectively 0.08% and 0.07%. On the contrary, the most frequent modal verbs in the music reviews corpus ‘can’, could and ‘might’ mainly express a non-epistemic meaning, which is less frequently relevant to stance and evaluation— e.g., the affirmative form of can merely has a non-epistemic function.

What appears to be clear is that modal verbs are more frequently used in newspaper articles. It can be argued that journalists behave more cautiously when describing – alleged – facts. That tendency is mirrored by the relatively high usage of prediction/volition modal verbs, which are often employed to make speculations. Furthermore, ‘could’ is more frequent than ‘can’ and, as previously commented in the article, its affirmative form might denote epistemic possibility. To reinforce these claims, ‘should’ is more frequent than ‘must’ in newspapers.

As for music reviews, ‘can’ curiously is the most employed modal verb – even though its normalized frequency is relatively low (0.15%). This can demonstrate how evaluative modality – more frequently linked with an epistemic usage – is an uncommon pragmatic device in music reviews. Similar claims may be made for ‘might’, a possibility modal that can have a rather formal connotation. Its relatively high usage in music reviews, a genre that is not mandatorily supposed to be formal, might be perceived as an unorthodox stylistic device that is less consistently frequent in newspaper articles. These observations might lead to hypothesizing that journalists rely more on the epistemic power of modal verbs than music reviewers. In view of the circumstances, ‘will’ and ‘would’ not only generated very few hits in the music

reviews corpus, but they are also primarily employed as tense auxiliaries, thus in a non-evaluative field. It might be surmised that music reviewers avoid massively using modality. This phenomenon mirrors the readership's viewpoint on music reviewers. The tendency of giving modal verbs a marginal role in reviews can be a sign of over-confidence and snobbery. If music reviewers did not feel the need to cautiously express their judgements, such attitude would easily lead to criticism.

3.3. *Discussion*

As pointed out in 3.1., evaluation might be expressed with connotative lexis and modality, which are not as widespread as one would expect to find in music reviews – a genre that intrinsically require evaluation. As commented while analyzing the most frequent lemmas, music reviews have a high degree of lexical cohesiveness – i.e., they mainly belong to the music semantic field –, and can lead to speculations about the contemporary music system. The most frequent adjectives in the corpus are ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Undoubtedly, the Manichean opposition between good and bad instantly comes to mind when thinking about evaluating something. Consequently, reviewers may use openly evaluative lexical items that can be associated with worthy, or negligible

musical products. However, as the results show, many adjectives which express neutral qualities can be associated with bad musical products. For example, ‘same’, a semantically impartial adjective, can have a derogatory meaning in the music environment. This considered, adjectives appear with a relatively low frequency in the music reviews corpus. Therefore, it can be deduced that expressing stance with connotative adjectives is not a highly recurrent linguistic pattern in music reviews.

As for modality in the corpus, it mainly expresses non-epistemic meaning – thus being hardly relevant to evaluative environments. The tendency of employing modals for expressing stance is negligible, even when compared with other text genres (cf. 3.5.). As mentioned before, modality creates a hedge between the actual events and the author’s speculations. Given the results of the investigation, authors might scarcely employ modality because they may extremely be sure about their opinions, thus tending to impose their judgement to the audience. This might be related to the perceived manipulative demeanor of music reviewers, which is often argued about in forum discussions.

The answer to the first research question (cf. 3.1.) does not lie in the presence of traces of evaluation and stance, but in their absence – even though reviewing something implies giving judgements on a cultural artifact. The

reviewers are aware that, when writing a music review, they are expressing their own verdict. Apparently, they aim at conveying it as decisively as possible, thus justifying the low frequency of modality and hedging expressions. This might index the reviewers' manipulative attitude.

Considering these premises, do the music reviews' actual stylistic features mirror the criticism forwarded by the readers? As for the lexical content, the type-token ratio shows a low density. Furthermore, reviewers seldom employ uncommon expressions. On the contrary, the reviews' semantic field appears to be solid and cohesive, mainly made up of generic words relevant to music. Thus, average readers would easily grasp their meaning and correctly interpret them. Unorthodox lexical choices might be connected to the author's wishful thinking. The negative perception on music reviewers appears to stem from stylistic and pragmatic subtlety. The high confidence of reviewers stems from the lack of modality and overt expressions of stance and evaluation. Arguably, they presume that the audience consider album reviews as merely objective. Alternatively, music reviewers may believe that their own taste reflects objectivity. This can be evinced from specific linguistic features, such as modal verbs and the way they are employed.

Certainly, music reviewers might be accused of over-confidence. However, this attitude is more likely to be found in veiled stylistic choices, rather than in explicit lexical features.

4. *Conclusion*

The internet is replete with complaints about music reviews. The main features that easily lead to negative criticism are linked to the authors' attitude in conveying their own stance. What emerges from the collected data, is that music reviewers express their opinion in a quite peculiar manner – i.e., the lack of epistemic modality and openly evaluative adjectives. Even though large part of the criticism levelled at reviewers is based on their alleged use of baroque lexical features, the corpus shows patterns that suggest otherwise.

When analyzing a corpus, it would be spontaneous to examine its evident features. However, in many cases it might be equally important to concentrate on what is absent. As in the case of this study, the avoidance of certain grammatical and lexical choices – together with the absence of syntactic and semantic patterns that one expects to find in music reviews – can reveal valuable hints on the author's behavior and stance. Given these considerations, the speculations made in Section 3 are largely based on what has not been found –

or what I had previously expected to find more consistently. This has helped to avoid biased results. Arguably, writers are aware that the readership's attitude is not merely passive and that words trigger precise responses, thus authors carefully choose what to put into writing and what to exclude.

The low presence of evaluative semantic features may reveal a lot about the supposedly high confidence of reviewers. They might either think that their taste is superior to other non-qualified music enthusiasts, or that the statements they are expressing are purely objective and not questionable. It might be interesting to verify whether this kind of demeanor appears in other types of review – e.g., art, film, or book reviews. In addition, it would also be relevant to lead a comparative and diachronic investigation on a corpus made up of reviews written in different decades to see whether reviews have changed their core textual features in time, or if the reviewers had a different method of conveying their opinion in the past. An additional semantic and lexical investigation would be riveting in such corpus. Are reviewers aware of the criticism and did they decide to opt for simpler lexical choices to regain the audience's trust, or are there substantial differences in writing if Rolling Stone and Melody Maker early reviews were to be compared with Pitchfork's and The Quietus's?

Music reviews are one of the endless possibilities that can be explored when trying to employ music and linguistics in synergy, because they are intrinsically connected to a multifaceted cultural environment and can shed some light on the complexities behind the reception of music. Furthermore, they constitute an atypical genre for linguistic studies, and thus allow researchers to explore and investigate unprecedented strategies in expressing evaluation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Webzines

Consequence of Sound. (2022). <https://consequence.net>

Drowned in Sound. (2022). <https://drownedinsound.com>

Pitchfork. (2022). <https://pitchfork.com>

Pop Matters. (2022). <https://www.popmatters.com>

Renowned for Sound. (2022). <https://renownedforsound.com>

Resident Advisor. (2022). <https://ra.co>

Slant Magazine. (2022). <https://www.slantmagazine.com>

Spectrum Culture. (2022). <https://spectrumculture.com>

The Line of Best Fit. (2022). <https://www.thelineofbestfit.com>

The Quietus. (2022). <https://thequietus.com>

Tiny Mix Tapes. (2022). <https://www.tinymixtapes.com>

Primary sources

Churchill, M. (2018, February). *Debit – Animus*. Resident Advisor.
<https://ra.co/reviews/22271>

Clark, T. (2018, September 5). *Album Review: Paul McCartney Remains Full of Vigor on Egypt Station*. Consequence of Sound.
<https://consequence.net/2018/09/album-review-paul-mccartney-remains-full-of-vigor-on-egypt-station/>

Conaton, C. (2018, September 10). *Math-, Prog-, and Pop-, Death And The Penguin Are Full Of Hyphenated Rock*. Pop Matters.
<https://www.popmatters.com/death-and-the-penguin-anomie-2601619703.html>

Cottingham, C. (2018, June 22). *Nine Inch Nails: Bad Witch*. Drowned in Sound. <https://drownedinsound.com/releases/20371/reviews/4151879>

Coral, E. (2018). *felicita – hej!* Tiny Mix Tapes.
<https://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/felicita-hej>

Deusner, S.M. (2018, August 7). *Paradise: The Sound of Ivor Raymonde*. Pitchfork. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/various-artists-paradise-the-sound-of-ivor-raymonde/>

Goller, J. (2018, January 19). *Review: Tune-Yards, I Can Feel You Creep Into My Private Life*.

Slant Magazine. <https://www.slantmagazine.com/music/tune-yards-i-can-feel-you-creep-into-my-private-life/>

Gourlay, D. (2018, August 24). *Idles – Joy as an Act of Resistance*. Drowned in Sound. <https://drownedinsound.com/releases/20416/reviews/4151983>

Hazelwood, H. (2018, August 15). *Foxing: Nearer My God*. Spectrum Culture.
<https://spectrumculture.com/2018/08/15/foxing-nearer-my-god-review/>

Horowitz, S. (2018, September 11). *Kathy Mattea Flies Like A 'Pretty Bird'*. PopMatters. <https://www.popmatters.com/kathy-mattea-pretty-bird-review-2603780757.html>

Horowitz, S. (2018, September 10). *Chris Liebing Ignites A 'Burn Slow' In The Darkness*. PopMatters. <https://www.popmatters.com/chris-liebing-slow-burn-review-2602707333.html>

Ingalls, C. (2018, September 13). *Richard Thompson Gets Back To Basics With '13 Rivers'*. PopMatters. <https://www.popmatters.com/richard-thompson-13-rivers-2604373474.html>

Kuscher, O. (2018, August 16). *Cullen Omori's The Diet finds him on invigorating form*. The Line Of Best Fit. <https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/reviews/albums/cullen-omori-the-diet-album-review>

Lee, S. (2018, March 14). *Will Long – Long Trax 2*. Resident Advisor. <https://ra.co/reviews/22224>

Scavo, N.J. (2018). *die Reihe, Vocoder*. Tiny Mix Tapes. <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/die-reihe-vocoder>

Smith, B. (2018, September 16). *The Molochs – Flowers in The Spring*. The Quietus. <https://thequietus.com/articles/25308-the-molochs-flowers-in-the-spring-album-review>

Sodomsy, S. (2018, August 11). *Teenage Fanclub: Bandwagonesque*. Pitchfork. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/teenage-fanclub-bandwagonesque-thirteen-grand-prix-songs-from-northern-britain-howdy/>

Spenceley, H. (2018, August 1). *The Black Delta Movement: Preservation. Drowned in Sound*. <https://drownedinsound.com/releases/20400/reviews/4151946>

Totsky, M. (2018, September 13). *Suicideboy\$ suffer through their debut. So will you*. PopMatters. <https://www.popmatters.com/suicideboy-want-to-die-review-2604351757.html>

Wright, D. G. (2018, August 13). *Deaf Havana: Rituals*. Spectrum Culture. <https://spectrumculture.com/2018/08/13/deaf-havana-rituals-review/>

Secondary sources

Adorno, T. W. (1976). *Introduction to the sociology of music*. New York: Seabury Press.

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., Finegan, E. (1999) *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A critical introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Depraetere, I., & Langford, C. (2012). *Advanced English Grammar (A Linguistic Approach)*. London: Continuum.

Cruse, D. A. (1986). *Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flowerdew, L. (1998). *Corpus linguistic techniques applied to textlinguistics*. *System*, 26(4), 541-552.

Hunston, S. (2002). *Corpora in Applied Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hunston, S., Thompson, G. (2000). *Evaluation in text: Authorial stance and the construction of discourse: Authorial stance and the construction of discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leech, G. (1974). *Semantics*. London: Penguin.

Leech, G. (1991). The state of the art in corpus linguistics. In Aijmer, & Altenberg, *English Corpus Linguistics: Studies in Honour of Jan Svartvik* (pp. 105-122). London: Longman.

Latham, A. (2002). *The Oxford companion to music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McEnery, & Wilson. (1996). *Corpus Linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Sinclair, J. (Ed.) (1991). *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, D. (2005). *Type-token Ratios in One Teacher's Classroom Talk: An Investigation of Lexical Complexity*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). *Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis*. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249-283.

Zaandvort, R. W. (1974). *A Handbook of English Grammar*. Groningen: J. B. Wolters.

Websites

Alexa (n.d.) *Pitchfork website traffic*. Alexa:
http://www.alexac.com/data/details/traffic_details?q=&url=http://www.pitchforkmedia.com

Bray, E. (2009, October 16). *The 25 best music websites*. The Independent.

Christgau, R. (n.d.). *Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics*.
<https://www.robertchristgau.com>

McClure, K. (2011, March 23). *Why Music Critics Suck*. Collapse Board.
<http://www.collapseboard.com/why-music-critics-suck/>
<https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/the-25-best-music-websites-1803346.html>

Izkoff, D. (2006, September 1). *The Pitchfork Effect*. Wired Magazine.
<https://www.wired.com/2006/09/pitchfork/>

«AGON» (ISSN 2384-9045), n. 33, aprile-giugno 2022

Ottenhof, L. (2020). *Music criticism in the time of stans and haters*. Columbia Journalism Review. <https://www.cjr.org/criticism/stan-hater-music-criticism.php>

The Onion, n.a. (2007, September 10). *Pitchfork Gives Music 6.8*. <https://www.theonion.com/pitchfork-gives-music-6-8-1819569318>

Quora, n.a. (2016). *Why do some people dislike music critics?* Quora. <https://www.quora.com/Why-do-some-people-dislike-music-critics>

Quora, n.a. (2017). *Why do a lot of people have low opinions of music critics?* Quora. <https://www.quora.com/Why-do-some-people-dislike-music-critics>