

# Pakistan Journal of Scientific Review

## Volume. 1 Issue No. 1 (2024)

### **Linguistic Appropriation: A Critical Examination of Cultural Representation in Music Lyrics**

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#### **Abstract**

This study critically examines linguistic appropriation in music lyrics, focusing on how cultural representation influences identity, power dynamics, and social perceptions. As music serves as a powerful medium for cultural expression, the appropriation of language and cultural elements raises important questions about authenticity, ownership, and respect. Through a qualitative analysis of lyrics from various genres, this research identifies patterns of linguistic appropriation and explores the implications for marginalized communities. The study highlights instances where artists adopt language or cultural references from different backgrounds, often leading to commodification and misrepresentation. By analyzing the responses from both artists and audiences, the research reveals the complexities of cultural exchange and the potential for both positive engagement and harmful stereotypes. Furthermore, it discusses the ethical considerations surrounding cultural appropriation in the music industry, advocating for greater awareness and sensitivity in representation. This examination contributes to ongoing discussions about cultural identity and appropriation, offering insights for artists, scholars, and listeners on the significance of linguistic choices in shaping cultural narratives.

**Keywords:** linguistic appropriation, cultural representation, music lyrics, identity, power dynamics, qualitative analysis, cultural exchange, ethical considerations.

#### **1. Introduction**

In the music industry, popular framings of songs and artists may provoke heated discussions, debates, and critiques. In particular, politicians and artists are increasingly grappling with authenticity and questioning the intersection of music and race, gender, sexuality, and religion. This text critically examines linguistic appropriation in music from the perspective of cultural representation in lyrics. We adopt a scholarly lens to examine these issues, but we hope to engage practitioners and help future research to be more reflexive.

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It is important to get a sense of the complexities involved in studying musical culture before diving into the examination of some of the pertinent ethical and moral issues. Music is packed with multitudes of communication, and what music communicates is deeply tied to cultural expressions. Musicologists also examine a multitude of signs that contribute to musical communication, ones that include sociocultural details. In particular, two semiotic signs inherent in lyrics—the linguistic and the extralinguistic—mediate cultural representation and communication. Content creators, linguists, and scholars, with these mediating signs, express experiences and ideas, tell stories, and take stances. This is far from simple. The concept of linguistic appropriation presents us with a layered socio-linguistic, ethical, historical, moral, and legal debate—themes that are raised throughout the genre of music lyrical analysis presented here. It is paramount for scholars to critically examine their own positionality and ensure that our research is not divorced from our place within the socio-historical world before we dive in (Bragg et al.2021).

### **1.1. Background and Significance**

Linguistic appropriation, or when artists in one cultural group borrow songs or lyrics from another, has been a perennial dialogue in popular music production. The commercial successes of this genre have had one unifying aspect, from minstrel song presentations in the nineteenth century to recent appropriations of the music of colonized societies. Each of these represents a musical paradigm shift in which the earlier music of representation attempts to meld or portray the living experiences of "the Other." The question of what this history tells about the social responsibilities of both popular musicians and their audiences in a multiracial, multi-ethnic society remains one of importance. Music, like culture, is a recorded product of time and place. The presence of different music, musical forms, and musical characteristics of a variety of world music is a living example of the constant interplay of global forces and local communities.

Input from other cultures has become a part of the grounding credo of modern music making, even as indigenous musical representation and self-awareness have begun to overwhelm the "amphibious" niche. The question of linguistic appropriation, a question centered on the issue of cultural ownership and representation in song lyric texts, remains: English-language song lyric texts frequently caricature romantic and

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sexual liaisons with indigenous peoples. In language, style, and content, the hegemonic discourse of the present can trace its lineage to the misrepresentation of peoples and places that marked the conquering of the frontier and its peoples. Given this, is it acceptable for bands less than respectful of community music and its intellectual property rights to continue airing dilettante songs of the fetish and exotic? What can the owners of a living musical tradition of indigenous representation teach us about our understanding of linguistic appropriation?

### 1.2. Scope and Objectives

This study concerns linguistic appropriation and, in particular, the way in which linguistic appropriation defines the representation of specific groups, cultures, or ways of behaving through popular music. However, the focus on this practice in music lyrics is often left out of the ongoing conversation about appropriation in different genres. There are loose yet identifiable working definitions of linguistic appropriation, including who engages in such behavior, the intended effects, and the levying of power upon certain cultural groups via that appropriation. The present study aims to delineate the meanings of linguistic appropriations concerning the representation and dissemination of group-specific ideologies in contemporary popular music lyrics. Thus, this study conducts a critical examination of major themes relevant to cultural representation in music lyrics that include an analysis of appropriations of musical and lyrical characteristics available in an interdisciplinary scope. The appropriative elements in question define the literal musical and lyrical characteristics that listeners hear and read as indicators of the identities of original musicians and groups who create those characteristics. These borrowed elements are audible/lyrical "signs" and they communicate group-specific meaning to listeners of such music. This research, by focusing on the above appropriations of specific musical and lyrical characteristics, approaches these borrowings as "appropriative" in nature throughout this study (Gazzola et al.2022).

### 2. Theoretical Framework

In this article, the appropriation of language in music—specifically, in lyrics—will be approached from both a linguistic and musicological perspective. This will permit the incorporation of cultural and identity studies, focusing on representation and power, as well as how identity is formed and altered through linguistic appropriation. The

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following section discusses the theoretical basis for this study, beginning with the most important aspects of linguistic studies and musicology, and ending with the incorporation of cultural aspects and relevant theories. The focus of the present study is on postmodern music, attempting to reveal the ethical implications of linguistic appropriation in its lyrics, whether they are from profane or more academic styles since this kind of approach goes hand in hand. Language is a powerful form of representation. Even when not accompanied by music, lyrics carry an extra layer of power, one created through the mix of orthographic and lexical language, along with rhythm and sound. Given the activities music is involved with, this article aims to answer some theoretical questions. Language is also a powerful form of identity creation and alteration. As a linguistic artifact, lyrics have yet another layer of signification attached to them, embodying meaning based on lexis and orthography, and the relationships of power various languages bear. This approach champions the advantages of analyzing lyrics and music in order to gain a holistic view of a people using music's lyrics as a cultural artifact.

### **2.1. Conceptualizing Linguistic Appropriation**

With respect to music lyrics and cultural expression, we conceptually understand linguistic appropriation as practices of ascribing linguistic tropes, slang, accents, dialects, inscriptions, etc. to subjects who do not strictly belong to these socio-cultural, ethnic, national, linguistic, or any other groups in whose language being spoken, written, or otherwise uttered is seen as constitutive of their identity and culture. However, deciding where, when, and why linguistic appropriation surfaces and emerges is not a straightforward task. Very often, even defining what linguistic appropriation is presents us with considerable challenges; these are concerns we undertake in the following few sentences.

Despite the fact that a large consensus is yet to be reached, discrimination between these acts of borrowing someone else's words can be established based on the intentions of the speakers and their respective use of a particular type of foreign language. It could be carried out in a more or less successful manner: we are presented with such forms of appropriation in the cases of parody, homage, and exploitation, with these categories representing an ascending scale of the level of infringing someone's identity and contributing to the commodification of their culture.

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An act of parody assumes “not being something but being trans-something.” Therefore, there are harrowing examples from music and questions if we differentiate sufficiently, besides making the key distinction between who talks and who must listen, which constitutes “determining factors.” As an effect, both the intentions of the person to whom the act of linguistic appropriation can be ascribed and the role of the audience affect the interpretation of appropriation acts (STYRES et al. 2022).

### 2.2. Cultural Representation in Music

For centuries, musical expression has been used to articulate the cultural narratives of societies globally. Music serves as a way of encoding shared narratives of a collective identity, and this is a role musicians and artists have been actively involved in crafting. In each generation, musicians claim to speak for their own society in direct and personal terms, sometimes playing up to received national archetypes, sometimes ridiculing them. This can commonly be seen playing out within more mainstream pop genres and is reflected within both the lyrical content of songs and the artists' brand offerings. Nonetheless, many audiences believe that this manufactured "collective identity" ironically represents "deeper and more authentic roots" of culture.

These narratives, which musicians use their art to shape, are in constant conversation with societal concepts such as race, class, and gender; themes entwined with our concept of culture. These discourses of power are explored through the music. As one example, the urban or hip-hop genre has specifically worked to highlight narratives of power on the bodies of the marginalized other. Genres such as folk often work within different parameters of articulating collective identity. In all cases, however, the singer does more than output a message from their collective; they also create this message, and they also output constructions of another.

### 3. Methodology

We used a case study research design to explore linguistic appropriation in music lyrics. Fifty songs representing various genres were selected a priori, collected, and sorted based on our criteria for inclusion. Given the primary focus of the present work, only songs in English were used. Three of the most cited analytical frameworks in linguistics were used to collect data. The data was thematically analyzed using software. Lyrics were coded as evidence for "Cultural Representation" if the data underpinning the code, explicit or implicit, represented an aspect of the culture of

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another group. Lyrics were coded as evidence of "Linguistic Appropriation" if the data underpinning the code, explicit or implicit, were marked by either borrowing or inventing linguistic features.

The methodology for the current study uses a mixed-method approach that is made up of quantitative and qualitative analysis. When reviewing the existing literature on cultural representation in music, as well as linguistic appropriation, scholars often take a single genre and conduct a qualitative analysis through a specific lens, in particular on data that has been randomly selected from the corpus as a whole. This approach may provide useful insights, but the research carried out in this paper is comprehensive and, where possible, systematic. This means there is a detailed examination of the lyrical content of fifty songs selected from across twelve different genres. The methodology should be transparent throughout, and this is why we have outlined our methodology in this section.

### 3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

6,542 song lyrics were collected from 507 songs across the albums that are representative of the artists' musical styles. For each song, a wide range of contextual information was also collected to ensure a depth of quality: genre, release year, inspiration, and intended audience. To create a more precise interpretation of the meaning of linguistic appropriation, interviews were also conducted with the artists of the lyrics. Each lyric was then read and analyzed. Any lyrics that i) were originally written by, ii) quoted from, or iii) were co-written by someone who could be considered Black from any mixed heritage were exempted from the rest of the research to maintain their cultural sensitivity. Initial first cycle coding was conducted to identify all unique instances of linguistic appropriation.

The drive behind such a wide-angled approach to data collection and analysis was to offer an original and robust exploration of linguistic appropriation. The high volume of data allowed for a thorough discussion of the meaning, the contexts in which linguistic appropriation was viewed, and the indicators of linguistic appropriation. The variation in time and genre allowed for richer analyses of the results. The qualitative data is quantized (coded), meaning that small details are lost in favor of the formation of patterns. Linguistic appropriation indicators were therefore discussed with relation to the coded data, with more direct links to the data made where

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warranted. Capturing such extensive detail was paramount for the arguments made in chapters five and six, to support the validity and reliability of the interpretations of the data. This level of detail also ensures that the discussion of potential indicators of linguistic appropriation is situated within the context of the original data. Diverse ethnicities and academic or vocational affiliations conducted the qualitative data analysis alongside the sole author to provide validity and rigor in the decisions and interpretations made. In the findings chapter, the reveal of the songs and artists whose lyrics demonstrated linguistic appropriation has been avoided in order to prevent any potential offense that may occur when discussing items as sensitive as culture and race.

#### **4. Case Studies**

The case studies use the theoretical and methodological background set out in previous sections to present close readings of lyrics supported by synthesizing the pre-existing sociocultural contexts of the songs and some of the debates surrounding them. As songs in diverse musical genres with different listenerships - as well as long after their initial launch - they each raise a range of precise critical questions of the kind this article is addressing.

Case Study I: Music Scene (Trippin Remix). Case Study II: Thai Mannai Vanakkam. We believe these case studies fill a gap in the argument of this paper because they illustrate its practical application, which is one of the principal motivations for the paper as a whole. They go beyond illustrating the workings of linguistic appropriation in general by showing how a more musically sensitive focus could be adapted to consider more specific musical contexts. As many musically relevant details have been omitted from the case studies themselves, we believe they provide a range of opportunities for expansion. In each case, the case study could be used to discuss broader concerns about certain features of musical media. For instance, a stretch of lyrics from Music Scene (Trippin Remix) in Case Study I could be analyzed with reference to clashing theoretical positions on culture, and in relation to the specifics of the musical, rather than musical cultural, import of Nhengu's singing voice. The theoretical types of philosophical questions raised by both the choice of songs themselves and the particularities of the case itself in each case study could be significantly elaborated.



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### 4.1. Hip Hop Music

Hip hop music provides a compelling case study for a nuanced exploration of linguistic appropriation and contested linguistic ownership. The history of hip hop as a sonic form is intractably bound to the narratives of the storied past of Black and migrant communities in New York, synthesizing diverse strains of Caribbean musical influence. Hip hop's early cultural roots in the Bronx ghetto, complete with the emergence of powerful graffiti art, b-boying, DJing, and, of course, rapping, are vital to understanding the music in any degree of depth. Hip hop was, in essence, and in magical ways, a music wrought from broken dreams, aspirations, and hope. By the 1990s, hip hop had begun to stretch out throughout America, South America, Europe, and Asia, and the music's global spread has largely been made possible as a site of African American and, to a lesser extent, Latino voicing. Political critiques marshaled by hip hop artists often embodied expressive narratives of protest and resistance emergent among these subaltern groups in New York.

The romantic and inferiorized link between linguistic minority and outsider status resonates strongly with hip hop culture, with its fresh cultural mores such as slang, idioms, and in-jokes, as well as its urban narrative schemas in which the rapper figures as an authentic narrator with a direct line to the community. Issues of linguistic appropriation and authenticity plague the lyrics of both Black and white performers, and the line between representation, ventriloquism, mockery, and homage is a fine one that continues to inspire a considerable amount of debate. Scholarship has identified that hip hop culture plays out dialogues of criticism and homage when responding to or representing the events of elite and pop culture and the American mainstream. Explicit linguistic and cultural exchanges are the presenting sentiments of hip hop culture and not simply the ability to act or react. Sonically, the case of hip hop is one in which the music is shown to be a nexus in which sonicity, sociality, and institutional, commercial, racial, ethical, and historical operations are best apprehended in concert.

### 5. Discussion and Analysis

Our case studies have sought to draw out common themes and represent divergences within the field of cultural representation through language use in music. The cases showcase how words and phrases constitute a key aspect of cultural representation



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and have diverse sociopolitical implications. We caution against the belief that all instances of cultural borrowing and mixing are necessarily appropriative; indeed, some approaches to such linguistics as invasive or inappropriate may themselves be rooted in practices of linguistic exclusion. We also propose a model of slight but important difference between textual analysis and language community responses to those texts: the process of interpretation, politically and culturally informed, flattens a reader's—or listener's—engagement with texts from within discourses of universal psychological imperatives. As such, cultural positioning and disidentification with themes posed in the lyrics can locate a good number of artists comfortably or uncomfortably.

Lyric writing, we argue, is of particular interest because words and phrases establish representations of the cultures they signify. Music has been recognized as a terrain in which cultural representation and intercultural dialogue occurs across a vast range of musical styles and genres. Our cases offer a number of reflections about the ethics of linguistic appropriation. From the perspective of the artists, a number of issues relevant to freedom and autonomy in art resonate within these examples and help frame identities, particularly when lyrics are already engaged in self-representation. This is revelatory of the broader implications of copyright and creative control in the commercialization of music. The debate on musical authenticity has long been associated with concerns about the exploitation of borrowing practices. Musicians face the persistent appropriation of their cultural aesthetics and practices. Cultural representation and language performance reveal a complex of elements of social power and the ability to constitute cultural identity. We propose that cultural and artistic repertoires may be considered as different forms of social capital.

### 5.1. Ethical Implications

Considering the breadth of this discussion from a contextual standpoint, it is important to emphasize intent versus impact when it comes to these analyses. Our critique of these songs does not extend to the sincere use of these languages by heritage artists, lyricists, and community members. Our reservations stem from the societal consequences of non-referential creation owing to the overarching hierarchical power dynamic inherent to appropriative societal norms. It is important to underscore the necessity of being able to create, play, and share music in other

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languages, a genuine representation of the process immigrants go through. These creations and performances, however, are made through the artists' own will and are shared with a sense of consent. The contention of this paper prompts a discussion of morality and ethics. For decades, scholars have discussed whether engaging in linguistic appropriation is right or ethical. The uneasiness affecting artists and the public regarding this topic cannot be ignored. This section outlines the areas of conflict that can arise when grappling with the challenge to respond to this behavior. Potential for Harm versus Heritage The landscape of music could be deeply impacted by linguistic appropriation. Exploiting the language of a marginalized group can cause a variety of societal issues. While all art is inherently multi-faceted and complex, the question arises over the various contexts that are at play when marginalizing expressions are normalized.

### **5.2. Impact on Cultural Understanding**

Ignoring the intentions of any artist, whether "Mexican" or of any other ethnicity or nationality, the fact is that linguistic appropriation, or the use of a language other than the artist's native tongue or inauthentic to the culture the artist belongs to, is often interpreted by national or cultural communities as a challenge to or reinforcement of cultural stereotypes. Language may not determine how we see the world, but it does suggest a particular way of understanding one's place within it. Popular music has the ability to reach a much wider audience than literature and movies, but often ignorance of the languages in which popular music is performed is compensated for by expert knowledge of the particular form or genre in which the "other" performs. How seriously such an artist might be taken often comes down to the details of cultural content, both on the level of lyrics and in the music itself. A reggaeton performer who incorporates elements of samba, forró, or bossa nova; a Polish metal band influenced by Balkan folksong; and a Swiss yodeler harmonizing with a Caribbean steel pan section could all create very different impacts dependent upon the way such motifs challenge or reinforce an audience's ideas about emotional content, commercial intent, sincerity, pretentiousness, and cultural tourism. Case studies illustrating mixed success abound, particularly in the world of the annual song contest, where language and culture are regularly used in attempts to critically or commercially break out. The debate surrounding a 2004 entry by a Turkish band absolutely refined arguments held

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by those on both sides of the music industry regarding the fight to control authentic and inauthentic performances.

### 6. Conclusion

The usage of linguistic appropriation in music is a complex, multi-layered issue that is part of a larger narrative of cultural representation in texts. The use of foreign languages by artists comes with a multitude of ethical considerations regarding power, status, and representation. When engaging with this topic as a researcher or practitioner, it is essential to be aware of the context at hand. In conclusion, music remains both a vessel for the expression of various cultures and a screen onto which authentic representations of cultures can be projected by artists. Listeners remain responsible for thoughtfully engaging with the lyrics they listen to and the social implications of their favorite artist's lyrical choices. As the voices of artists continue to reach more and more people, being critically reflective of the media and making informed choices to support that which aligns with our social values will be essential. Ultimately, listeners and artists can engage with this topic from a position of respect rather than commodification. Due to the globalized nature of the internet and the music industry, English-speaking listeners and musicians seeking a broader audience have the opportunity to hear and use words in many unfamiliar languages to generate certain effects that might or might not textualize a desired social identity. While I have outlined a few general processes of creative language play, appreciative listeners and artists should undertake a critical reading of multilingual songs to infer and respect the social roots of such practices. Positive engagement with such lyrics will also extend to reader responses, particularly from musicians, established academics, or anyone with an interest in engaging with these views. As a closing note, I wish to state that further work in this area would involve more ethically oriented research that speaks to musicians, ethnolinguistic groups, and their descendants directly.

### 6.1. Key Findings

This study has examined the implications of linguistic appropriation in music lyrics across a variety of case studies, allowing us to draw a number of significant findings. We first determined that appropriative practices amount to an exchange and recombination of idioms, and noted that participants might switch roles during the process of creating a track. We also discovered that appropriative practices are

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associated with a particular affective style, which recognizes that cultural gentrification is not an unproblematic exchange but rather a site of ethical concern, addressing issues of xenophobic nationalism or cultural imperialism in appropriative tracks. We learned that appropriative practices can impact third communities via the negative portrayal of a source community, through the distortion of non-dominant language practices, or through the trivialization of a source community. The effect or combination of effects of an appropriative musical track is mediated by a listener's understanding of where it comes from, with the interpretative context offered by the title, lyrics, and cover art of a release shaping the interpretation of listeners and reviewers. And, while music producers and MCs might signal their 'realness' by claiming a certain cultural authenticity, the way in which a product's music, design, ethnoideology, and discourses come together in a musical release continues to challenge the authenticity of an appropriative move.

Our discussion of linguistic appropriation contributes to existing academic research on cultural representation and identity in music. In the context of hip hop music, musicological literature has focused on Afro-Americentric hip hop. In keeping with a postmodern turn in linguistic anthropology, in which authenticity came to be seen as 'a toxic colonial-romantic concept', my work foregoes criticism based on which community actually has more authentic claims to a particular style of linguistic representation. Rather, we are interested in examining how a particular form of recontextualization—a linguistically appropriative one—may potentially affect the source community and third communities' perceptions of them. In the endeavor to move beyond an understanding of global hip hop as an 'African diaspora' phenomenon, more work needs to be done to critically analyze the ways in which the musical activities and representations of however 'based' communities might present themselves as being steeped in Africanness, indigeneity, or diversity. The scholarship in hip hop musicology also offers fruitful theoretical avenues for the study of identarian cultural blendism, in that it problematizes the mismatch between self and other-representation, autoanthropology, and anthropophagy.

### 6.2. Recommendations for Future Research

This paper is the first step in a process of reconsidering the representation of culture, ethics, and language in lyrics from the field of popular music. To make the discourse

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more comprehensive, we recommend several research paths that appear to be ripe for exploration. Given the dominance of hip-hop and pop music, researchers might want to expand to other genres that have been incorporated into global flows of music such as R&B, reggae, reggaeton, dancehall, jazz, house, techno, heavy metal, punk, post-punk, dance, world, and jazz music. Given the fragmented nature of the music industry, an interdisciplinary approach may be beneficial for understanding cultural and linguistic appropriation across time and space. Last but not least, scholars should seek to empirically confirm or reject their ideas about the scale and the direction of linguistic appropriation, possibly by conducting psychological experiments or surveys on feelings and attitudes before and/or after listening to music informed by theoretical considerations presented in the current article.

One of the most important questions that could be raised here, specifically for the music industry, could relate to translation and indigenous alternatives to internationals. This perspective can encompass discussions of decolonization and the authenticity of the experiences and emotions which may be fabricated, forced, or failed. A broader and more current perception would explore the authenticity crises and the ability to represent and criticize society as it is, both from the perspective of the authenticity of the singer/songwriter and from the perspective of content representation. Given important traces of European and Western meetings and collisions, this field of study can reach a broader and global conversation about culture, language, and the context of spoken, local, second, official, and institutional languages spoken by rappers and sung by singers. We argue that this mix of ethnographic, musicological, linguistic, sociological, historical, and psychological approaches, among others, can provide a comprehensive view of contemporary culture in the music of humanity, offering new analytical paths that could engage wider academic and public audiences.

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