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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Gender and Language: a Sociolinguistic  
Approach to Rock Music from the 1970s and  
1980s

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**Gender and Language: a Sociolinguistic  
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## **Abstract**

Linguistic traits traditionally accepted for masculinity in Western societies, such as vulgar language, are expected to be found in the Hard rock and Heavy Metal songs of the 1970s and 1980s, since this subculture has always been predominantly formed by men. After the creation and analysis of one corpus composed by songs written by female artists, and another one made up of songs created by male artists, the results of this study have proved a high usage of slang, expletives and taboo words in songs written by both genders. It has also been found emotional disclosure, though much less frequently, in the studied lyrics from male bands. Considering gender as performative, both male and female musicians seem to be trying to redefine their gender identity.

Key words: Hard Rock, 1970s and 1980s, sociolinguistics, gender performance, vulgar language, emotional disclosure.

## **Resumen**

En términos generales, en las canciones de Hard Rock y Heavy Metal de las décadas de 1970 y 1980, se presupone un predominio de rasgos lingüísticos asociados al género masculino como es el lenguaje vulgar, debido a la preponderancia de hombres en estos subgéneros musicales. Tras la creación y análisis de un corpus compuesto por temas de artistas femeninos y otro de artistas masculinos, los resultados de este estudio han demostrado un elevado uso de jerga vulgar, expresiones malsonantes y palabras tabú en las canciones escritas por artistas de ambos géneros. De manera relevante, los datos también muestran lenguaje asociado a la expresión emocional, aunque mucho menos frecuente, en las letras de bandas masculinas. Considerando el género como un constructo social, afirmamos que tanto los músicos femeninos como masculinos analizados, parecen tratar de redefinir su identidad de género.

Palabras clave: Hard Rock, décadas de los 70 y 80, sociolingüística, género performativo, lenguaje vulgar, expresión emocional.

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## 1. Introduction

Sociolinguistics is the study of different aspects of language in relation to social variables, including class, age, gender, etc., to obtain information as to whether there is variation of language use among the people of a certain context. It also investigates if sociocultural conventions on language are performed by speakers. In short, “[s]ociolinguistics is basically the study of the effect that society has on language use” (“Sociolinguistics”). In the Western societies, sociolinguistic studies were first conducted in the 1960s by William Labov.

The proliferation of other authors led to a sociolinguistic interest in gender. It was Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) that firstly studied gender and encouraged linguists to examine women's talk. This focus on gender seems mainly due to the political activism of the Women's Movement during the 1960s (Coates 5). Interestingly, sociolinguistic studies then concentrated exclusively on women's speech, seen as deviant with respect to men's talk. It is not until 1997 that men's language use is also problematized by sociolinguistics. From 1975 to our days, four different sociolinguistic approaches to language and gender have been applied. Currently, the dynamic approach establishes gender identity as a social construct that speakers 'do' rather than 'are' (Coates 6).

Since the 1970s, the number of variables analyzed continued growing, including popular music. As early as 1984, Peter Trudgill studied the pronunciations of British pop singers and their “tendency to adapt their accent to ... an American pronunciation” (Schulze 1). Similarly, sociolinguistic research on Hip Hop mainly contemplates the adoption of regional dialect features, for instance from African American English (Schulze 18) in a globalized music genre. This process is often called “gocalization” by researchers (Schulze 1) and has also been applied to one study on Indie Rock “in order to explain how local and global forces influence discursive identity production” (Schulze i).

Regarding rock music, research has been carried out to a lesser extent, but contrary to Hip Hop and Pop studies, these discuss the variable gender related to language. Schippers in *Rockin' out of the Box* argues that performing and negotiating gender is used as a “strategy of resistance to socially prescribed gender roles” (Schippers back cover) in the Alternative Hard Rock genre, which lacks “the sexism of mainstream rock” (Schippers ix), referring to Hard Rock and Heavy Metal. However, there has been little research on those latter genres.

This study seeks to remedy this situation, for it would be an attempt to approach Hard Rock and Heavy Metal sociolinguistically, attending to the gender variable. These subgenres of rock originated in the United States and the United Kingdom during the 1960s and became very popular in the 1970s. During the 1980s Heavy Metal and Hard Rock bands tended to create Glam Metal music, but they began to lose fame in the 1990s due to the success of Alternative Rock. The great majority of musicians dedicated to Hard Rock and Heavy Metal are men. In words of Schippers “Hard Rock has always been a largely male dominant cultural form” (Schippers ix). Consequently, linguistic traits traditionally considered masculine in Western societies, such as vulgar language, could be expected in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal songs including those written by women. Moreover, though standard language is generally considered prestigious, vulgar language conveys a covert authority in some contexts, being one the Hard rock scene, for “[s]ubcultures have long used slang” (Rossman Allen). Sutton adds that slang’s “covert prestige ... appeals more to males” (Sutton 282) which is reasonable regarding the fact that masculinity is stereotypically associated to powerful language.

Departing from these premises, this study aims to investigate how women and men behave linguistically in the Hard Rock scene beyond societal expectations on gender, in order to contribute to our understanding of the performance of gender in a specific context and of the formation of gender identity more generally. Firstly, this study will investigate whether women’s speech in a male predominant subculture conforms to the expectations of femininity

in Western cultures or tries to resist them by adopting vulgar language. Secondly, it will be analyzed if men strictly adapt to the linguistic conventions of emotional restraint and impersonal topics or transgress them.

## 2. Methodology

Firstly, in order to achieve our research goals, thirty bands were selected; fifteen of them were formed exclusively by men. All the bands originated in English speaking countries. Moreover, all of them perform the music genres of either Hard Rock, Heavy Metal or Glam Metal.

Table 1

Sex of Members, Musical Subgenre and Geographical Origin of the Bands

Sex of Members	Name of band	Subgenre	Place of origin
Men	AC / DC	Hard Rock	Australia
Men	Alice Cooper	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	United States
Men	Bon Jovi	Hard Rock, Glam Metal	United States
Men	Black Sabbath	Heavy Metal	Great Britain
Men	Cinderella	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	United States
Men	Deep Purple	Hard Rock,	Great Britain

		Heavy Metal	
Men	Def Leppard	Hard Rock, Heavy metal, Glam Metal	Great Britain
Men	Guns 'n' Roses	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal	United States
Men	Kiss	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	United States
Men	L.A. Guns	Hard Rock, Glam Metal	United States
Men	Mötley Crüe	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	United States
Men	Poison	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	United States
Men	Rainbow	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal	Great Britain
Men	Skid Row	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal,	United States

		Glam Metal	
Men	W.A.S.P	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	United States
Women	Girlschool	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal	Great Britain
Women	Leather Angel	Heavy metal	United States
Women	Meanstreak	Trash Metal (subgenre of Heavy Metal)	United States
Women	Pagan Babies	Hard Rock	United States
Women	Phantom Blue	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal	United States
Women	Rock Goddess	Heavy Metal	Great Britain
Women	(The) Runaways	Hard Rock, heavy Metal	United States
Women	Vixen	Hard Rock, Glam Metal	United States
Mixed	Bitch	Heavy Metal	United States
Mixed	Femme Fatale	Hard Rock,	United States

		Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	
Mixed	Heart	Hard Rock	Canada
Mixed	Joan Jett & the Blackhearts	Hard Rock	United States
Mixed	Lee Aaron	Hard Rock, Heavy metal	Canada
Mixed	Lita Ford	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	United States
Mixed	Madam X	Hard Rock, Heavy Metal, Glam Metal	United States

Secondly, two corpora were made up of the lyrics of songs published by these bands during the 1970s and 1980s. Concretely, these lyrics were taken from the official websites of the bands when possible. The first corpus included one hundred and ten songs written by at least one of the members of the bands constituted by men. The second corpus was also comprised of one hundred and ten songs written entirely or partly by the women involved in the mixed and all-female bands. It should be noted that the songs were selected randomly in order to ensure objectivity of sampling. Additionally, the lyrics were modified by deleting the chorus when repeated, to avoid a distortion of the results.

Finally, the two corpora were processed by means of the program AntConc. All the words found that could possibly be considered vulgar, including slang, expletives and taboo words, were verified by means of dictionaries<sup>1</sup> and the results were quantified.

### 3. Results

As was initially discussed, one of the expected linguistic traits in the lyrics of Hard Rock and Heavy Metal songs is vulgar language, due to the fact that this subculture is predominantly formed by men and to the social attribution of coarseness to masculinity. It is also attributable to slang's subversive function and covert authority in subcultures. Women, however, are socially expected to be conservative in linguistic terms, which means, according to early researchers on language and gender like Lakoff, that "women don't use offcolor or indelicate expressions" (qtd. in Coates 15).

Focusing on the use of vulgar language in the songs selected for each gender group, the results can be summarized as follows:

Table 2

Number of Vulgar Terms in Each Gender Group

Number of slang terms in male bands:	Number of slang terms in female and mixed bands:
437	391

Relevant for this study, from the slang terms attributed to women in the previous table, a distinction was made between those found in mixed bands and all-female bands:

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<sup>1</sup> A Collins dictionary, and two online glossaries *The Online Slang Dictionary* and *Urban Dictionary*

Table 3

## Number of Vulgar Terms in Bands Involving Women

Number of slang terms in mixed bands:	Number of slang terms in all-female bands:
237	154

The results of my study prove that effectively in the Hard Rock sphere, there is a tendency to highly use vulgar terms, regardless of the sex of the band members. However, concerning gender expectations the results are controversial. Definitely, the songs written by women present vulgar language contrary to social conventions. And moreover, the number of terms found differs only in forty-six with respect to those used by men, which is evidence of a more than frequent usage. Nevertheless, more vulgar words are employed by all-male bands and also, as the second table shows, more words are found in mixed bands, in regard to all-female bands.

The second part of this study analyzes the topic selection in male bands, with the object of concluding whether the stereotype that men avoid self-disclosure and restraint emotionally applies to male Hard Rock artists. The following table includes representative verses of the songs in which the writer has aimed to transmit the condition of his feelings.

Table 4

## Verses that Display Emotions from Songs Written by Men

BAND	SONG	VERSES	TOPIC
Alice cooper	Love's a Loaded Gun	You looked into the eyes of men above you / I was the one who really tried to love you.	Failed relationship
Def Leppard	Love Bites	Love bites, love bleeds/ It's bringin' me to my knees . . . It can't be love if you throw it about	Failed relationship
Mötley Crüe	Without You	Without you, woman,/ The world comes down on me/ ... I'd slowly wilt and die/ But with you by my side/ You're the reason I'm alive	Love
Skid Row	I Remember You	'Cause you'll always be my dream come true/ Oh my darling, I love you	Love
Guns and Roses	Sweet Child o' Mine	Now and then when I see her face/ She takes me away to that special place/ And if I'd stare too long/ I'd probably break down and cry.	Love
Poison	Every Rose has its Thorn	Though it's been a while now/ I can still feel so much pain . . ./I hear you found somebody new/ and that I never meant that much to you/ To hear that tears me up inside.	Failed relationship
Kiss	I Still Love You	You tell me that you're leaving/ And I'm trying to understand/ I had myself believing/ I could take it like a man/ But if you gotta go,	Failed relationship

		then you gotta know/ That it's killing me . . .  It hurts so much inside, your telling me goodbye . . . I still love you, I love you.	
Cinderella	Don't Know  What you Got ('Till it's Gone)	Heartaches come and go and all that's left are the words/ I can't let go . . . I can't clear my heart of your love it falls like rain . . . Can't you see my heart's been draggin' lately.	Failed  relationship
Rainbow	I surrender	I surrender: I surrender to your heart babe . . .  / This is a feeling I never knew/... Can't you feel the love that I send you/ . . . Since you left me I'm near to heartbreak... I'm still in  love with you.	Failed  relationship
Bon Jovi	Born to Be  my Baby	And I'll know that you'll be live /In my heart  till the day that I die	Love

The results demonstrate that male Hard Rock artists express their feelings, though only in ten songs out of the hundred and ten analyzed. Deepening in details will be displayed in the next section.

#### 4. Discussion

Once the theoretical framework has been introduced, the methodology explained and the results interpreted, this section would discuss more subjectively, some of the inferences that can be extracted from the outcomes.

#### 4.1 Women and linguistic vulgarity

Having explained the results, I move to discuss four social implications that arise from the finding of slang, expletives and taboo words in the songs written by women. Firstly, women's use of vulgar language in our corpus may be interpreted as a means to take part in the Hard Rock in-group identity. Secondly, I will claim that, regarding the fact that speech traits socially considered as appropriate for femininity are traits that convey powerlessness, women use vulgar language to resist domination and acquire status and power, contrary to the general belief that women only seek cooperation in communication. Thirdly, I will argue that women involved in the Hard Rock scene use slang, furthermore to transgress the socially established linguistic gender stereotypes, as an attempt to redefine femininity. Finally, the higher use of coarse terms by women in mixed bands will be interpreted as a result of the lack of condemnation regarding the application of these features in mixed contexts.

To begin with, women's linguistic vulgarity in songs can be seen as a means to participate in the group identity for Hard Rock and Heavy Metal, initially established by men, and which traditionally corresponds to white heterosexual English-speaking males. As a matter of fact, one of the male bands included in the corpus carries as a name *W.A.S.P.*, which stands for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Excepting gender, the musicians analyzed share all these characteristics. However, women's linguistic coarseness should not be understood as an effort to seem masculine for they restrain their use of slang as compared to men, probably because of the pressure caused by the linguistic convention that femininity is conservative. More likely, they seem to be striving to take part in this genre's social identity through a specific language usage. In Fact, as Hard Rock and Heavy Metal were originated and mainly developed in English speaking countries and as we are dealing with oral popular culture, it is fair to assume that the most important factor to join this group identity is the use of English and more concretely the use of vulgar language in English. Slang, oaths, and expletives have

long been connected to subcultures as Hard Rock, to masculinity but also to power “because they contravene social taboos and are often used to shock people” (De Klerk 147); that is, due to their subversive function or their “violation of a code” (147). Vulgarity is therefore one of the most authoritative and salient linguistic traits in this music genre. For this reason, the adoption of a vulgar speech seems the most direct means to form part of the Hard Rock group identity. According to De Klerk, expletives “reinforc[e] group membership” (147). In line with this, Sutton reports that “[a]dolescent slang establishes an identity separate from adults and children” (Sutton 290). Similarly, slang provides Hard Rock musicians, both men and women, with a feeling of membership in an alternative social identity, distinct from the rest of society.

Secondly, being vulgar language authoritative in the Hard Rock subculture, and being powerless linguistic traits the ones socially admissible for femininity, women’s employment of vulgar terms in their songs may be understood as an attempt to resist male domination and procuring status for themselves, thus transgressing the stereotype that women always seek cooperation in communication. Any linguistic choice needs to be linked “to wider social processes, relationships and power” (De Klerk 146). Accordingly, the traits socially established for women convey a sense of social position. O’Bar and Atkings detected in their study that the features that Lakoff had labelled as ‘Women’s language’, “correlate[ed] not with gender, but with ... the speaker’s social status” and concluded that these traits had “been confused with women’s language because, in societies like ours, women are usually less powerful than men.” (Coates 109). In other words, women have traditionally been categorized as powerless in Western societies. Anyhow, women may adapt to their subordinate position, but, as “reaction to such domination is various” (Gal 175), they can also possibly resist it. Women may be linguistically competitive, though “gender-stereotyping ... causes us to miss ... the status-seeking element in women friends’ talk” (Cameron 59). If we contextualize this,

feminism seems the fundamental encouragement for these women to oppose domination and change their status. Additionally, researchers have observed that “with shifts in power, norms ... of expletive usage are being challenged” (De Klerk 148) and that “usage of expletives ... no longer carry gendered meanings” (157). Hence, it appears that the feminist wave of the 1960s fostered female Hard Rock artists to acquire status, which they tried to achieve by employing vulgar language in their songs during 1970s and 1980s, increasingly erasing its association to masculinity.

Furthermore, by contravening the gender stereotypes that women always seek cooperation and do not use slang, they are also obtaining status, for “transgressing the social rules is an act of power” (Floréal 33). Nevertheless, female artists’ usage of vulgarity is lower than that of men’s, as this study proves. This clashes with Trudgill’s general affirmation that women “find it necessary to use symbolic means to enhance their position” (qtd. in Eckert 67) having few other options, which means that women would employ the authoritative variety of language more than men. This contradiction seems result of a conflict between the pressure of conventions on women to not use slang and their effort to obtain status by using the powerful variety of language in Hard Rock: the vulgar.

In continuation, female Hard Rock artists seem to be contravening linguistic norms with the purpose of redefining femininity. As I have previously explained, female hard rock musicians in using vulgar language are breaking two gender stereotypes; namely that women never talk competitively nor coarsely. Two features on the contrary expected from men. This should not be read as an effort to emulate men but to subvert the gender identity accepted for women in Western societies. In other words, they seem to not be satisfied with the linguistic norms considered appropriate for femininity since, “stereotypically ... ‘male’ forms, when used by women, can index ... nonconformity” (Gal 178-179). Moreover, if we understand gender identity as a social construct, speakers are capable of remodeling both masculinity and

femininity in the different contexts in which they participate. In words of Gal, “because the linkages between linguistic forms . . . and gender categories are ideologically constructed” speakers can “reconstruct femininity and masculinity” (180). Therefore, these women not only try to engage in the Hard Rock group identity together with male musicians, but their language choice also serves them to create a new identity for the nonconformist women; a different sense of femaleness which does not condemn vulgarity and which does not relegate women to a subordinate position. But this redefined image of femininity is not restricted to women of the Hard Rock scene. Our results seem to correlate with relatively current studies that prove a “growing resistance by females to conformity to stereotyped norms” (148). One of them is Sutton’s research on the use of slang in an American college. She observed that ten out of thirty female students used slang with their friends (e.g. bitch), as terms of affection when talking to women (Sutton 288) and concluded that these women wanted to be “different from the stereotypical image of women” (289) and “redefine femininity through their use of language” (290). It seems to be a general trend, originated by feminism, among women of different contexts to contravene linguistic norms, consequently creating a new feminine identity.

Finally, the results of my study showed a higher use of vulgar and taboo language by women in mixed bands (237 words), than in all-female bands (154 words). Initially, this could be understood as an attempt by women in mixed bands to imitate men. In fact, as Coates found in her study of taboo words, “in mixed contexts, . . . male and female speakers seem to accommodate to the perceived norms of the other gender” (Coates 98). Although acknowledging this, women should not to be seen as adapting themselves to male’s socially accepted conventions when using vulgar language. An alternative interpretation could be that these women, who try to redefine femininity, feel more liberated to do so in mixed contexts, as the expected behavior in those situations is to accommodate to the other gender’s linguistic

norms. That is, they are released from the stereotype of not using taboo language and from the “guilt and self-condemnation” that De Klerk’s study on the use of expletives found in women’s attitudes (De Klerk 155). Thus, they permit themselves a higher use of powerful linguistic features as is vulgarity in Hard Rock. As an instance, the mixed band “*Bitch*”, in which all the songs are written by its leader singer Betsy, employs as much vulgar language as any of the male bands.

#### **4.2 Men and self-disclosure**

According to societal linguistic stereotypes on gender, women talk usually about people and feelings while men talk about impersonal topics to avoid self-disclosure. In words of Coates, “men align themselves with hegemonic masculinity ... through the use of swear words and ... emotional restraint” (Coates 141). She adds that even when men debate personal matters, “and thus potentially challenge masculine norms”, they would use linguistic strategies, such as taboo words, to ‘neutralize this’ (Coates 142). However, in the corpus of this study, ten songs were found where male Hard Rock artists expressed their feelings, without using taboo language, consequently transgressing this masculine linguistic convention. According to relevant studies, this could be readily understood as an attempt to appear effeminate. As stated by Coates “[s]ome men ... construct themselves ... as having experienced fear or pain. But there is a constant awareness that this exposes them ... to accusations ... of being gay” (Coates 142). Floréal agrees that “in artistic spheres, where a man could express himself as an emotional being, his creativity would easily be associated with effeminacy” (Floréal 17).

Nevertheless, Hard Rock male artists explicitly verbalize their heterosexuality in these songs (Table 4), which is supported by including women in the videos as addressees of love lyrics. Therefore, I argue that, contrary to intend the expression of a homosexual identity,

their linguistic transgression is aimed at creating a new heterosexual masculinity in which it is permitted for men to self-disclose, to express feelings and in which it is not strictly compulsory to use vulgar or taboo terms. As Floréal pointed out, “it is not forbidden for a heterosexual man to be emotional at times” (Floréal 17).

Still, their contravention of gender stereotypes is subtle linguistically talking, considering that ballads are significantly less frequent than songs dealing with impersonal or taboo topics thus maintaining a conventional image of masculinity. On the other hand, their opposition to gender norms is fundamentally expressed in a visual manner, in “their visible rejection of heteronormative attire and appearance” (Floréal 9). Most Hard Rock male artists dress according to what is considered feminine in our societies. Probably, men’s challenge of accepted masculine norms may seem to lack a cause; especially because the linguistic features traditionally attributed to masculinity conveyed power and hegemony as opposed to feminine conventions. However it could be interpreted that male Hard Rock artists’ intention to remodel masculinity is encouraged by the struggle initiated by feminism to change power relations and reconstruct femininity. Having Hard Rock female artists adopted vulgar language to renovate the feminine identity, this feature lost its gendered association and men appropriated new masculine features. Nonetheless, recent studies argue that due to Feminism “men’s identities have become more problematic ... and ... masculinity is therefore ‘in crisis’” (De Klerk 156). It may be excessive to talk about ‘crisis’ in the Hard Rock context considering that only ten out of the hundred and ten songs studied displayed feelings.

## **5. Conclusion**

To conclude, this study has been concerned with two linguistic gender stereotypes; that women do not use vulgar language nor seek social status. Similarly, it has dealt with the social belief that men avoid expressing feelings through the selection of impersonal topics.

The aim was to clarify whether those socially accepted norms of Western societies apply to the English-speaking Hard Rock and Heavy Metal musicians from the 1970s and 1980s.

This investigation has shown that female artists used a great proportion of vulgar language in their songs, slightly less than male artists. Interestingly, the study has proved a tendency in women forming part of mixed bands to use this linguistic feature more frequently than women in all female bands. Regarding men, ten songs had been found in which they display their feelings without vulgar language as complement.

The implications that arise from these findings are that Hard Rock and Heavy metal artists seem to be trying to redefine masculinity and femininity by means of language, encouraged by the feminist wave of the 1960s. Feminism initially led women to transgress linguistic gender stereotypes and adopt the masculine linguistic feature of vulgarity in order to acquire status and power. Consequently men also appear to modify their conventional linguistic practices of emotional restraint, though much more slightly, to maintain a differentiated heterosexual masculinity which avoids associations with effeminacy. Finally, the results proving that women in mixed bands use more vulgar terms than those in all-female bands suggest that the former feel released from the pressure to accommodate to the linguistic norm that women do not employ coarse language, for speakers are expected to adapt to the other gender's norms in mixed contexts.

It would be interesting to further study musical subcultures, as it may provide better understanding of the real linguistic behavior of speakers and of the process of formation of gender identity. Moreover, additional research could be interesting in the musical scene of Hard Rock and Heavy metal, which have received far less attention than Pop or Hip Hop, to conclude whether the results of this study represent a pattern or constitute an exception.

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