

A Short Research on the use of Selectional Restriction Violations among Lyrics

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ABSTRACT

Songs, along with poetry, short stories, novels, and dramas, belong to the language of humanity (literary language). As an art form that began to be popular in the last century, it has come into the view of linguists more frequently today. Between its lines, vivid expressions such as “city can sleep”, “animals can talk to each other” and “memory can dance” often appear. This abnormal writing skill refers to a unique linguistic phenomenon ----- Selective Restriction Violation (SRV) explained by Noam Chomsky and is often associated with “metaphor” according to generative grammarians and cognitive linguists. In this research article, 10 representative sentences from popular musics’ list in recent years were selected in order to explore more about this phenomenon in music field. After a detailed analysis, it is found that it appears frequently and The author prefers to use the technique of “replacing concrete nouns with abstract nouns”(9 from all 10 sentences) although it is a special linguistic phenomenon. The underlying reason for writing in this way might be that metaphorical expressions can not only make the sentence more vivid, but also help readers more accurately understand the ideas which authors want to express.

INTRODUCTION

Hockett(1960) pointed out that one of the characteristics of learned a language is to master the grammar rules of that language, and can use these rules to create an infinite number of sentences. In addition, knowing these grammar rules can help learners distinguish sentence structure and spot the head and modifiers(Miller,2016). Interestingly, the head of a sentence is usually played by a verb, which also controls the subject and object of the sentence, called selectional restriction(SR). For example, if the subject of a sentence is “singing,” then in normal expression the subject of the sentence needs to be a person, not an animal, except for those Disney movies. SR can be defined from different branches of linguistics. As is known to all of us, in a variety of conversations and texts, SR can be used everywhere. This is the embodiment of the normative nature of language. However, as mentioned earlier, animals in Disney movies and other novels can talk, sing, and dance. It sounds funny, but do exist. This anomaly is called “selectional restriction violation (SRV)”. Similarly, VSR are also exist in literary language frequently and achieve some particular effect. As stated by Brinton (2000) that figurative uses of language (personification, metaphor, etc.) routinely violate or break SR, and figurative language is not a “normal”

language. Surely, literal words could be easily understood whether in contexts or in dictionary, whereas figurative/metaphorical speech has some extra meaning. SRV used has put forward metaphorical interpretation at the semantics levels in linguistics. As a result, SRV usually requires metaphorical interpretations. On the other hand, it appears frequently in literature works such as poem, song, and novel.

This research seeks to shed light on the application of SRV in lyrics and it based on three notions: 1. SR theory 2. SRV. 3. SRV in lyrics. Then the objectives of this research are to explore in what ways do lyrics violate the SR of the clause and the reasons. With the aim of research objective, the study sets out two research questions:

1. What type(s) of SRV be frequent used in the selected lyrics?
2. What could be underlying reasons for these of selectional restriction violation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

SR and Metaphor

It is generally believed that there is an inextricable relationship between the violation of choice restrictions and meta-

phor. Compared with most normally rule-abiding sentences, rule-violating sentences do not occupy a large proportion, but such “rule-restriction” can be used as a basis for metaphorical judgment in many cases (Loewenberg,1975). In this regard, Chomsky (1965) believes that the rule-breaking sentences are clearly represented by analogy, while Rankoff and Johnson (2008) figure out this is based on the cognitive level of usage.

To sum up, no matter what the function of the violation of alternative restrictions is, quite a number of linguists have reached a consensus that there is a strong direct connection between alternative restrictions and metaphor.

Selectional Restriction in Literature (Short Story, Poetry, and Lyrics)

First of all, SR in short stories. Novels are often filled with symbolic expressions, ‘The text is now transformed into an art symbol which is autonomous in form and expressive in function’(Gargesh, 1991: 192). Pourgharib and Rabi (2018) found that this symbolic expression could make short stories more complex, and he thought the conventionally ‘characterized’ lexicon functions to create the real-world actors/experiencers, mostly in two different strategies on the concrete combination: either [+ Human] attributes would be given to [-Animate] nouns, or [- Human] attributes would be given to [+ Animate] nouns. There is, thus, transference of qualities suggestive of inanimate objects to human beings and vice versa.

Secondly, SR in poetry. The use of SR in poetry is relatively rich because it is more symbolic than the short story. Petrick(1977) indicated that in poems, the author often used additional functions violating the restriction of choice, such as some clues suggesting extra meanings. Other linguists call it “locations of collocations”. They agree with Chomsky (1965) that “sentences that break rules can usually be explained by metaphor”, and thought that the use of grammatical methods to analyze poetry is not only feasible but also attractive (Hendricks, 1969). In addition, Nahajec(2009) used SRV to analyze the poem “The Tyre”, indicated that this writing method can help readers to present a certain concept after a series of violations of selectional restriction, and helped them have a better understanding on some connotative expression.

Lastly, SR in lyrics. Examples of this theory being applied to lyrics are still lacking. Soraya(2019) analyzed 9 songs were made by Maroon 5 in his doctoral thesis and then found that songwriters are skilled in using SR to express their inner feelings and stir up fans’ emotions.

In conclusion, selectional restriction is widely used in literary languages, and many studies have applied it although not much research has been done about SR among lyrics field. However, since lyrics and short stories belong to the same humanistic language (literary language).Then the theories that can be applied to poetry and short stories should also useful in this research.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The data we selected from 12 songs which from the most popular songs in the past few years, and then we selected 10

most suitable sentences for this research. This part showed in Table 1 for details.

Procedures

So far, we have the body of this analysis -----10 sentences from lyrics. Next, in order to clarify the mechanism of the SRV principle among sentences, the first step is to determine the verbs in each sentences and analyze the possibility of the noun before and after the verb. Specifically, if the verb in a sentence is “flow,” then its subject must be either liquid or time.

Second, to list the nouns that the verb actually follows in the sentence and compare them to the verbs listed in Step 1. Simply put, this step compares “actual nouns” to “nouns that should be used.” If there is a conflict, then we marked it as a SRV. The detailed data analysis was presented in the next section.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, 10 sentences were analyzed in details and explain the reasons why they violate the SR rule.

1. *I will then slowly close my eyes
And be cuddled by a shining memory’s breeze
The winds trace back.All the memories with you.
That’s the only wish I have.*
-----From Various Artists

The verb of this sentence is “cuddled.”As a matter of simple common sense, a person can only be cuddled by another Human (perhaps a robot), those words will belong to classes of Human or Animate.But then the colplace used in the sentence is “be cuddled by shining memory’s breeze.” Logically, a person can’t be hugged by memory.This is clearly a personification expression that gives “memory” some human charac-

Table 1. 10 sentences were selected for this research

Lyrics	Song’s name	Singer’s name
1. And be cuddled by shining memory’s breeze	One last you	Various Artists
2. I can’t erase the time of sleep	Two Steps From Hell	Tomas Bergersen
3. Regrets dancing around my head,	Breathe	Backstreet Boys
4. Secretes sleeping all over this bed, memories of what we did, got mixed with you.	Breathe	Backstreet Boys
5. I’m swept away by your love	Drowning	Backstreet Boys
6. The frozen time began to flow	One last you	Various Artists
7. Cover me with dreams	Drowning	Backstreet Boys
8. Set adrift on memory bliss of you	Set adrift on memory bliss	Backstreet Boys
9. The city sleeps and we are lost in the moment	Take my hand	Simple Plan
10. Cause our hearts are locked forever.	Take my hand	Simple Plan

teristics and can describe the feeling of comfortable vividly. In conclusion, it uses selectional restriction violation because it has a transition from “Human (Animate)” to “Abstract”.

2. *Burn the page for me*
I cannot erase the time of sleep
I cannot be loved so set me free
I cannot deliver your love
or caress your soul so.

----- From Tomas Bergersen

The verb of “I cannot erase the time of sleep” is “erase”. Many things belong to Concrete class can be erased, such as the marks written on a notebook, words on a blackboard, etc. In fact, the word “Concrete” was not chosen in the sentence, but “Time”. In conclusion, it uses selectional restriction violation because it has a transition from “Concrete” to “Abstract”.

3. ***Regrets dancing around my head***
Everything I never said, still numb from you

----- From Backstreet Boys

In this sentence, the verb “dancing” can only be matched with Human (even many ordinary people don’t know how to dance), but in fact it uses an “Abstract” that couldn’t possibly dance. This can be used to express the feeling of regret swirling around in the mind.

4. ***Secrets sleeping all over this bed***
Memories of what we did
Got mixed with you and it hurts.

----- From Backstreet Boys

Similarly, the verb of this sentence is “Sleep”. Only Human or Animate can sleep. In other words, “Secrets” cannot sleep. It seems to express that a secret has slept forever, so no one will ever know those secrets. In conclusion, it uses selectional restriction violation because it has a transition from “Human (Animate)” to “Abstract”.

5. *Everytime I try to rise above*
I’m swept away by love
Baby I can’t help it,
You keep me drowning in your love.

----- From Backstreet Boys

Next, “I’m swept away by love”. The verb “Swept” should accompany with a “Concrete noun”, but in fact the song-writer used “Love”--- an Abstract noun.

6. *The last day with you was truly magical*
The frozen time began to flow¹
At last the longest night has gone and brought in light
I felt myself melt in the morning light.

----- From Various Artists

As we all know, the noun that goes with the verb “Flow” must be liquid, such as water, a stream, a river, an ocean, etc. The author uses “Time” here, which endows time with a material attribute and is a metaphorical expression clearly.

7. *Go on and pull me under*
Cover me with dreams yeah
Love me mouth to mouth now
You know I can’t resist.

----- From Backstreet Boys

In this sentence, the verb “cover” can only be matched with Concrete nouns, but in fact the song-writer used an “Abstract” noun ----dream.

8. ***Set adrift on memory bliss of you***
The camera pans the cocktail glass
Behind a blind of plastic plants
I found the lady with the fat diamond ring.

----- From Backstreet Boys

Next, “Set adrift on memory bliss of you”. The verb phrase “Adrift on” should follow a “Concrete noun (especially liquid, such as a stream, a river, even an ocean)”, but the author used “Memory”--- an Abstract noun.

9. ***The city sleeps and we’re lost in the moment***
Another kiss as we’re lying on the pavement
If they could see us they would tell us that we’re crazy

----- From Simple Plan

Next, the city is not a living animal or a human being, so it can’t sleep. Here, the author uses a metaphorical expression, comparing the city to a person. When he is asleep, everything will be very quiet, so as to express the silence of the city.

10. *We can find some place to go*
Cause our hearts are locked forever.
And our love will never die.

----- From Simple Plan

Lastly, the verb “Lock” can only be used for locks (whether those requiring keys, electronic locks, or fingerprint locks). Obviously, “Hearts” is not one of them. We can predict the reason why the author wrote this is in order to describe the love between two people as stable as being locked and will not separated forever.

In conclusion, after careful analysis of 10 sentences, the following conclusion can be figure out: the “concrete to abstract” writing technique was used in 90% (9 from 10) of the sentences, either animate/human nouns or concrete nouns are cleverly substituted by the use of abstract nouns. By now, we can answer our first research question: What type(s) of SRV is frequent used in the selected Lyrics? The answer is “from concrete nouns to abstract nouns”. This data is summarized in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

Through the analysis of the data, we find that the author is good at emoting some nouns. Cities can be “sleep” and time can be “frozen” in their works. In fact, such forms of writing can be generally classified as “metaphorical expressions”, although they are often subdivided into similes, metaphors, metonymy, personification, and so on. Further investigation found that these phenomenon coincide with Chomsky’s (1965) view point which we mentioned earlier. He argues that the breaking of SR can be more or less associated with metaphor. Based on this, this section focuses on metaphor.

The concept of “metaphor” all kinds of main views on specific literary works and historical environment, since Aristotle, after the Roman, medieval and Renaissance, the 18th century, the romantic age, until modern linguist Noam Chomsky (1965) in generative grammar school and Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) book “Metaphor we lived by”, and believed that metaphor is a kind of mapping relationship between two concepts. For example, in the sentence “Argument is war” [This example is from Lakoff & Johnson’s book *Metaphor We Lived By*], one can use the cruelty of war to describe the state of two people when

they quarrel. On the one hand, it can make the sentence more vivid and facilitate people to produce more specific “picture” in their mind. On the other hand, it is a kind of “from the old to the new” process. Since the concept of “war” is clear after all, it can help people understand new concepts.

Table 2. The describing of the noun classes that should be used and actual be used in these sentences

	Verb	The noun (subject or object) that actual use in lyrics	The noun classes that should be used normally	The noun classes that actual be used
1. And be cuddled by shining memory’s breeze.	Cuddle	Memory’s breeze	Animate(Human)	Abstract
2. I cannot erase the time of sleep.	Erase	Time’s sleep	Concrete	Abstract
3. Regrets dancing around my head.	Dance	Regrets	Human	Abstract
4. Secrets sleeping all over this bed.	Sleep	Secretes	Animate	Abstract
5. I’m swept away by love.	Swept	Your love	Concrete(such as hurricane)	Abstract
6. The frozen time began to flow.	Flow	Time	Concrete(such as liquids)	Abstract
7. Cover me with dreams yeah.	Cover	Dreams	Concrete	Abstract
8. Set adrift on memory bliss of you.	Adrift	Memory	Animate(Human)	Abstract
9. The city sleeps and we’re lost in the moment.	Sleep	The city	Animate	Concrete
10. Cause our hearts are locked forever.	Lock	Our heart	Concrete	Abstract

To be specific, in the 10 sentences we selected, there is a large proportion of this situation, and we will cite a few typical examples here:

1. **Regrets dancing around my head**

Everything I never said, still numb from you

In this sentence, the author compares “regret” to a dancer who dancing in his head. To analysis it in conceptual metaphor theory as shown in Table 3:

2. *The last day with you was truly magical*

The frozen time began to flow

At last the longest night has gone and brought in light

I felt myself melt in the morning light.

To analyze it in conceptual metaphor theory as shown in Table 4:

Table 3. The analysis of “Regrets dancing around my head” in conceptual metaphor theory

Target domain	Source domain
Regret	→ Dancer
A status of lingering regret in the mind	→ Dancing
The most painful moment	→ Climax of the dance
Forget the regretful experience	→ Dance curtain call

Table 4. The analysis of “The frozen time began to flow” in conceptual metaphor theory

Target domain	Source domain
Time	→ River (or steam)
The speed of time	→ The speed of river
Time stopped	→ The river water froze
Time starts flowing	→ The river starts thawing

Table 5. The effect of writing sentences in this way

Lyrics	The effect of writing it this way
1. And be cuddled by shining memory’s breeze.	Express a feeling of comfort.
2. I cannot erase the time of sleep.	Express author’s mood and feeling at that time .
3. Regrets dancing around my head.	Express thr status that regret in author’s mind.
4. Secrets sleeping all over this bed.	It means the secret has never been told.
5. I’m swept away by love.	It used to show the intensity of love.
6. The frozen time began to flow.	It used to show the status of static to dynamic.
7. Cover me with dreams yeah.	It used to show the state of life.
8. Set adrift on memory bliss of you.	It used to show author;s feelings.
9. The city sleeps and we’re lost in the moment.	It used t indicate silence.
10. Cause our hearts are locked forever.	It shows the mood of falling in love.

Finally, I summarized the substantive usefulness of using metaphorical expressions in 10 sentences, as shown in Table 5.

According to this part, the second research question (What could be underlying reasons for these of selectional restriction violation?) could be answered. Through the analysis of these two examples, we find that the use of metaphorical expressions can indeed make the sentence more vivid, and it is more convenient for readers (fans) to understand the artistic conception that the author wants to express.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we analyzed 10 selected sentences from some popular music in detailed, using the theory of head and modifiers and selectional restriction. We found that authors prefer to use 'Abstract nouns' replace 'Concrete nouns' [In this case, the term "concrete noun" refer to to animate and concrete nouns in general.], which could be marked as "Metaphor". The underlying reason why they use SRV is that writing in this way can make the sentence read more beautiful, vivid, and convenient for readers to understand the kind of mood the author wants to express since both lyrics and poems belong to the literary language. So, by applying the theory of choice restriction to lyrics, we can reach a conclusion similar to Chomsky's (1965) ----- "sentences that break rules can usually be explained by metaphor".

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END NOTE

1. The verb "Flow" is not the main verb of this sentence, but this sentence also can be seen as a SRV .

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