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# **‘Y’all don’t want to hear me, you just want to dance’: A cognitive approach to listener attention in OutKast’s ‘Hey Ya!’**

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## **Abstract**

In his recent article on ‘musical stylistics’, Morini (2013) demonstrates (with reference to a song by Kate Bush) that lyrical and musical content can work in harmony to produce consonant meanings and stylistic effects. Our article develops Morini’s musical-stylistic approach by employing cognitive theories to track how music and lyrics can work together in a different way. ‘Hey Ya!’ by OutKast (2003) employs a knowing dissonance between the song’s lyrical content and its rhythm and key, the reconciliation of which leads to a drastic and surprising re-reading of the song’s meaning, often documented in online articles and listener discussions (e.g. Koger, 2015). Combining a cognitive-poetic approach with theories of ‘habituation’ and ‘fluency’ in music psychology (Huron, 2013), our analysis centres around the shifting position of the song’s lyrics within the Figure and Ground (Langacker, 2008; van Leeuwen, 1999) of the composition, in order to account for listener (in)attentiveness. This leads to a consideration of the attentiveness of readers to lyrical content in music more generally, and its implications for stylistic analysis of the genre.

## **Keywords**

Musical stylistics, cognitive poetics, attention, pop music, multimodal stylistics, OutKast

## 1. Introduction

This paper proposes a cognitive approach within the emerging field of musical-stylistic analysis. Our analysis takes Morini's recent article on multimodal 'musical stylistics' as a point of departure, as it was the first paper to propose a model of stylistic analysis that considers the role of both lyrics and music in meaning-making and affective responses to songs. Morini (2013) analyses the song 'Running Up That Hill' by Kate Bush and demonstrates that lyrical and musical content can work in harmony to produce consonant meanings and stylistic effects. His approach begins with a functional-linguistic analysis of the song's lyrics, where he discusses the role of foregrounding, transitivity, deixis and metaphor in the lyrical depiction of a relationship struggle. Then he draws on musicology to offer a linguistic-musical analysis of the melodic line when the lyrics are sung, noting the way that melody influences prosody and works to foreground particular semantic fields in different sections of the song. Finally he considers the wider musical arrangement and instrumental architecture of the track, noting the presence of different elements in a listener's attention and the metaphorical sense of movement that these elements create: a sense of upward striving but no corresponding forward motion (2013: 293). Overall he argues that analysis of the musical mood of the piece 'confirms the initial impression formed by reading the textual skeleton of the lyrics' (2013: 294). In 'Running Up That Hill', 'sounds and words appear to form a surprisingly coherent whole, with the music reinforcing linguistic meaning or contributing to create it [...], and the lyrics lending more explicit contours to the musical mood' (Morini, 2013: 294-295).

Morini's article evidences the power of multimodal stylistics when applied to music, as it offers a convincing account of the emotional mood and meanings of the song. Although he acknowledges the difficulties inherent in making connections between different semiotic systems (such as music and language), he also argues that, if modern pop-rock songs are to be

understood as aesthetic creations, then analysts need to find a way to study words and sounds at their intersection and as interactive parts of a whole (2013: 284, 295). This involves breaking songs down into layers (such as the bare lyrics, the lyrics as melody, and musical structure at large) to enable analytical attention to be directed at the component parts, and then considering their interaction as a holistic listening experience (2013: 285). This approach to musical stylistics stands in contrast to previous stylistic work, which has considered song lyrics on paper, separate from their delivery and musical accompaniment, such as Steen's (2002) analysis of Bob Dylan's 'Hurricane', or Gavins' (2007: 61-64) discussion of 'Cherry Blossoms' by The Tindersticks.

In this article we follow Morini's lead in examining the interaction between lyrics and music in song, beginning, as he does, with a linguistic analysis of the lyrics on paper (in Section 2), before considering the interaction between music and lyrics in the song as a whole (in Section 4). Our choice of song is motivated by one of Morini's concluding remarks, when he notes that not all songs offer the kind of semantically coherent whole that he observed in 'Running Up That Hill' (2013: 295). Indeed, he notes that 'many pop songs have been written in which words and music stand in open or covert contradiction' (Morini, 2013: 295; for recognition of this in popular culture, see Brown 2012; Koger 2015). 'Hey Ya!' by OutKast (2003) is an example of a song whose music and lyrics do not interact to produce a straightforward reinforcement of meaning, but instead work together and against each other to produce multiple, interacting meanings that are evident in listener discussions online (see Section 3). The contrast between the upbeat pop style of the song's musicality and its initially existential lyrics, coupled with the song's dynamic structure and vocal prosody, interacts with listener attention so that the song can create both 'surface' and 'deeper' meanings.

In order to understand how this multimodal interaction works, our musical-linguistic analysis in Section 4 employs a cognitive framework, drawing on research in cognitive

linguistics and music psychology to examine the ways in which language and music can draw attention towards – and away from – particular features of a song. By applying a musical-stylistic method to track how music and lyrics work together in a different way, we hope to contribute to the development of the approach set out by Morini. We also consider the stylistic implications of the capacity of listeners to enjoy and interpret a song without necessarily attending to the meaning of its lyrics.

## **2. Linguistic analysis of the lyrics of ‘Hey Ya!’**

First, we consider the lyrics of ‘Hey Ya!’ on paper. ‘Hey Ya!’ comprises two verses, three choruses and a bridge section. The lyrics of ‘Hey Ya!’ (see Appendix 1 for our transcription) are dominated by propositions and imagery relating to romantic and sexual relationships between men and women. The lyrics feature a male persona addressing a listener; however, deictic cues in the text (Stockwell, 2002: 43-46) and related shifts in register create the impression that this address occurs in different contexts, which shift as the lyrics progress from the more private to the public.

In verses 1 and 2, a first-person male persona speaks about his romantic relationship with a woman (‘My baby’, ‘she’, ‘we’). There is little to construct a sense of the speaker’s spatial location in physical terms; instead, spatial deixis indicates a more abstract, metaphorical plane: the confines of a relationship, with reference to messing ‘around’ (line 2) walking ‘out the door’ (3), and being ‘in denial’ or ‘happy here’ (13). The verses are located temporally in the present tense, apart from a brief shift into the present perfect in line 11 (‘we’ve been together’). This creates a sense of immediacy, suggesting that the speaker is contemplating his feelings about a long-term relationship in the present moment, a sense that is reinforced by the temporal locative ‘right now’ (4).

In verse 1, due to the absence of second-person pronouns or forms of direct address, the speaker's lines read like personal, inner reflections. Verse 2 encodes a more explicit relationship between the speaker and an addressee through the use of second-person pronouns ('You think you've got it [...]', line 10) and interrogatives ('what makes love the exception?', line 12; and 'why [...] are we so in denial?', line 13). The referent of the second-person pronoun in verse 2 is ambiguous, however. It could refer in a generalised sense to an indefinite group of people, or it could be seen to function in a doubly deictic manner (Herman, 2002), indicating both the speaker's own attitudes towards his relationship and drawing the listener into the discourse too. Likewise, the 'we' of line 13 could include the speaker, his addressee, his romantic partner, or society more generally, the ambiguity of which allows the listener to relate to the speaker's observations.

Both verses involve the speaker contemplating his and his partner's desires, thoughts and feelings with regard to their relationship. In general, the verses acknowledge the difficulties and emotional pain involved in the maintenance, or potential dissolution, of the speaker's long-term relationship, and pose the philosophical question of whether romantic love can last. There is a predominant sense of unease, created in part by the frequent use of negation, opposition and interrogatives (see Givón, 1993; Hidalgo-Downing, 2000; Jeffries, 2010; Nahajec, 2012). Negation appears at the syntactic (e.g. 'don't mess around', 'don't fight the feeling', 'can't stand to see', 'nothing', 'not happy') and semantic levels (e.g. 'denial'), and is present in some form in every line. Negation often features in the presentation of opposite or conflicting concepts: for example, 'don't mess around'/'really want to [mess around]' (2-3); 'got it'/'don't get it' (10); 'together'/'separate' (11). This creates a sense of conflict at the heart of the speaker's view of his relationship. The speaker also suggests difficulties in his relationship by contrasting the tenaciousness of his parents' relationship with his own: the former are 'sticking through together' whilst he and his partner

‘don’t know how [to stick together]’ (5). Several interrogatives (most frequent in the final lines of verse 2) express the speaker’s lack of certainty about the nature of his relationship. The interrogative in line 12 creates further opposition between two popular-cultural ideas: the adage that ‘nothing lasts forever’ and the romantic notion that love *can* last forever.

Additionally, the rhyme scheme of verse 2 transitions from the regular AABB of the first verse to an assonant half-rhyme (‘all’ and ‘involved’ (10, 11)), before the rhyme scheme is abandoned altogether (‘exception’ and ‘here’ (12, 13)). Viewed in the context of opposition, verse 2 opposes verse 1 structurally, since it undermines the steady repetition of metre and rhyme while the lyrics themselves question the stability of the speaker’s romantic relationship. Verse 2 also includes several marked phrasal repetitions (‘then what makes’ (12) and ‘why oh why’ (13)), which creates a sense of intensity in the speaker’s questioning.

The chorus, by contrast, is semantically vague, consisting of the repetition of the phrase ‘hey ya’. ‘Hey’ is classed in the OED as an interjection; however, the OED also notes that it is ‘sometimes used in the burden of a song with no definite meaning’ (OED online, 2018). ‘Ya’ bears some resemblance to the second-person pronoun, and the phrase could therefore be read as a call to an addressee (‘Hey you!’). However, we feel that there is not a clear sense of address in this section when compared with the relational deixis of the verses. Despite being semantically vague, this phrase is foregrounded in the textual composition through the sheer weight of the repetition. The chorus section is repeated in the lyrics three times (6-9, 14-21, 32-35), sometimes with variation through the addition of abstract noises (transcribed as ‘Uh oh’), which are also semantically vague.

Chorus 2 deviates from the first and third, as it also contains some more definite linguistic content (14-21). This section was particularly difficult to transcribe because it involves the layering of multiple vocal parts (we have indicated overlapping sections using the symbol // in Appendix 1). At the beginning of chorus 2, the speaker makes a metatextual

comment about his listeners' attitudes, using direct second-person address: 'Y'all don't wanna hear me, you just wanna dance'. The use of the pronoun 'Y'all' is characteristic of the Southern US dialect of OutKast, and strongly suggests that the speaker is addressing a plural 'you' (though there is debate over whether 'y'all' is always plural; see Butters 2001). The speaker postulates what this audience's attitude to his words will be, and suggests that they want to dance rather than listen to him. Negation and syntactic parallelism construct the activities of hearing and dancing in opposition to each other, and, as we shall show below, this opposition becomes increasingly pertinent in the performance of the song.

Second-person address is maintained throughout chorus 2, but the referent of 'you' appears to shift to a hypothetical potential suitor, rather than the audience of line 14 (although there is ambiguity here). Once again, negation is used to create an opposition between two concepts: this time, the speaker claims that he wants a casual sexual relationship (having sex in his 'caddy') rather than a serious relationship (in which one meets the partner's parents). A regular rhyme scheme is briefly reinstated ('daddy'/'caddy' (16), 'mama'/'cumma' (18)), but the rhymes are less sophisticated than those in the verses above – for instance, the word 'cum' is extended to 'cumma' in order to make the line scan, and more childish terms of address are used ('daddy', 'mama'). Thus, there is a marked shift in register here, which verges on silliness or triviality in comparison to the philosophical angst of the verses.

In the bridge, the speaker's address to a plural audience of 'fellas' (22) and 'ladies' (24) listening to the song is resumed, and the lyrics take on a more formal and familiar MC-ing call-and-response style popular in genres such as funk and hip-hop (cf. Price-Styles, 2015). The speaker addresses the audience as though he can see and hear them on a dance floor ('I can't hear ya' (22), 'I want to see y'all on your baddest behaviour' (25), 'get on the floor' (28)). The responses of the audience are also represented (we have transcribed these with square brackets). It is difficult to read the lyrics without imagining the music in this

section because of the textual deixis (Stockwell, 2002: 46) that is encoded in the language: the speaker uses the demonstrative ‘this’ to refer to the song (‘break this down’ and ‘break this thing down’ (24)) and indicates the temporal position in the track (‘in just a few seconds’ (24)), both of which draw attention to the song as an artefact, viewed externally. The bridge also features imperatives directed at the audience, perhaps most notably the repeated ‘Shake it like a polaroid picture’ (26-31): the focus is very much on the speaker’s immediate interaction with the plural addressees rather than on the themes raised in the verses.

It is possible to see some semantic connections between chorus 2, the bridge section, and the verses: for instance, casual relationships are contrasted with serious ones (16, 18), the gendering of the audience matches the theme of heterosexual relationships, and the reference to coldness (22-23) could be interpreted as emotional coldness. However, the main purpose of chorus 2 and the bridge seems to be to heighten audience involvement and encourage them to dance. This focus appears to be linked to the speaker’s remark in line 14 about the fact that his listeners simply want to dance.

On paper, then, ‘Hey Ya!’ reads as a song of two halves. Overall, the song appears to be preoccupied with some of the different forms and challenges of heterosexual relationships. However, the soul-searching of the initial verses is abandoned in the second chorus and the bridge, as the speaker shifts from relatively private to explicitly public address. This shift in deixis and register appears to be motivated by the speaker’s perception of the desires of his listeners. The main source of regularity in the structure of the song is the repeated but semantically vague chorus refrain of ‘hey ya’.

### **3. Listener responses to ‘Hey Ya!’**

In his analysis of ‘Running Up That Hill’, Morini (2013: 289) points out that the analysis of song lyrics on paper presupposes a highly attentive listener who is both able and motivated to

pay attention to the linguistic nuances of the lines. Although it is possible to listen to the lyrics in this very attentive way, he notes that:

few people actually experience pop-rock music like that, and many are apt to gather vaguer impressions from a more casual kind of listening. Furthermore, even for those who *do* follow the lyrics as they listen, other non-textual factors may come into play which interact with the words and [...] foreground[d] certain sections of the lyrics at the expense of others.

Discussion of 'Hey Ya!' on internet forums and in online magazine articles suggests that the song is perceived as having hidden meanings that are not immediately available to a casual listener. In particular, listener discussions of the song observe a surprising contrast between the emotional mood of the music and the lyrics. For instance, *Time* magazine (Anonymous, 2011) observes: 'Have the lyrics to "Hey Ya!" ever heard the music? Has the music read the lyrics?' The song regularly features in articles with titles such as: '6 popular upbeat songs you didn't realise are depressing' (Brown, 2012; Pollard, 2015); '11 happy sounding songs that are actually sad' (Hutchison, 2015) or 'Do you know what you are singing? Ten songs with surprising meanings' (Koger, 2015). The writers of these articles capitalise on the idea that 'Hey Ya!' is a song that people sing along and dance to without paying full attention to the lyrics:

It's very easy to miss the message of this song. [...] But when you actually listen, and hear that Andre is pretty much painting a picture of an unhappy couple on the brink of breaking up, it makes you want to stop dancing. (Koger, 2015)

On fan forums such as Song Meanings and Reddit, listeners discuss a range of responses to the track, which vary depending on the attention that is paid to the lyrics. Several posters offer lengthy and detailed interpretations of the ‘deeper lyrical meaning’ of the song, suggesting, for instance, that it ‘paint[s] a sad picture of the descent of relationships in 2000’s’ (Poster 1) or reflects the speaker’s ‘lost hope for love’ (Poster 2). Conversely, many listeners respond to the song without close scrutiny of the lyrics, either knowingly or unknowingly. Poster 3 writes: ‘this makes me so happy =D I don’t care what it’s about’. And Poster 4 observes: ‘Lyrics aside, “Hey Ya!” is a fun song. Very catchy!’ Responding to Poster 1’s reading, Poster 5 remarks: ‘Dang man ... that’s deep. All I ever got from this song was “Hey Ya” over and over again’. Similarly, Poster 6 writes:

I totally fell for it. The text was so fast, I never bothered to really listen to it, or read it.

I just ‘shake it like a Polaroid’. Now I feel stupid. But thanks again for the great analysis!

Some posters make connections between the types of listening evident on the discussion boards and the words of the song itself. Commenting on Poster 3’s lack of concern with the lyrics, Poster 7 writes:

I don’t mean this in a confrontational way, but I think it is ironic that [Poster 3] said they don’t care what the song is about. ‘Y’all don’t want to hear me, you just want to dance’. And I have to agree.

Poster 7’s citation of line 14 of the lyrics points out that the song itself references the different types of engagement that listeners may have, and knowingly predicts people’s

reactions. On the same forum, Poster 8 also alludes to the idea that the song embraces both attention and inattention to the lyrics: ‘Some people get it, and some others prove the point of this song’. As such, there is a sense among some listeners that the song thematises different levels of listening engagement, and perhaps deliberately obfuscates its subject matter in order to reinforce the failures of communication noted throughout the song’s lyrics. In the comment above, Poster 6 portrays the song as a trick: ‘I totally fell for it’. And this is also evident in Genius Lyrics’ (2010) description of the track as ‘a reflection on modern love *disguised* as a dance track’ (our emphasis).

These responses are interesting from a musical-stylistic perspective for a number of reasons. First, they suggest that there is a contradiction between the musical and lyrical components of the song that contributes to the song’s meaning and effects. This supports Morini’s (2013) claim that analysing lyrics on paper often provides an incomplete picture of a song. The verses, in particular, are identified as contradicting the musical mood. Second, the responses suggest that it is possible to experience the song differently, depending on the listener’s attention to its musical features and lyrical subject matter. Just as O’Halloran (2003: 170-171) has identified the need to distinguish between analyst and non-analyst readings in Critical Discourse Analysis, so these comments demonstrate a variety of responses among listeners that are shaped by the effort expended in attending to the song’s lyrics and their meaning. There is an implication that it is easy to listen casually to the song and miss the full lyrical content but also, more intriguingly, that the song itself seems complicit in tricking or manipulating the listener’s attention so that the more serious meanings of the verses can be missed in casual listening. Taking our cue from these observations, Section 4 examines how theories of attention in language and music can account for the way in which the song is able to produce such an effect.

#### 4. The interaction between music and lyrics in ‘Hey Ya!’

This section presents a reading of ‘Hey Ya!’ which connects musical and lyrical modes, and considers how they frame and direct listener attention. We argue that the musical mood and the song’s overall structure, as well as the prosody of the vocals when performed in interaction with the rhythm and harmony of the track, work to draw attention away from the private communication and existential semantic content of the verses’ language. Attention is directed, instead, at the vaguer semantic content of the choruses and the more public, interactive bridge section. These attentional dynamics actively reflect the song’s underlying message about audience desires and expectations, and allow the track to function as a text with a ‘surface’, structural meaning (as an upbeat, pop dance track) that operates in contrast to its darker, less readily perceptible lyrical content.

Musically, ‘Hey Ya!’ consists of a regular syncopated drumbeat, a bass melody (perhaps played on a synthesiser), and strummed guitar chords present throughout the track, except for a brief moment of silence at the end of verse 2 (discussed in Section 4.2 below). The vocals (performed by Andre 3000 and multiple backing vocalists) carry the main melody, which varies in each section and shifts between a number of performance styles: from singing, to rap, to speaking (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2 below). There is an additional synthesiser melody in the choruses, as well as a number of electronic effects over the bridge and chorus 3.

The rhythm and harmony (chords) repeat a six-bar structure throughout, illustrated in Table 1.

	Bar 1	Bar 2	Bar 3	Bar 4	Bar 5	Bar 6
<i>Rhythm</i>	4/4 time	4/4 time	4/4 time	2/4 time	4/4 time	4/4 time
<i>Harmony</i>	G	C		D	E (Em in chorus)	
<i>Illustrative</i>	My baby	mess around because she		know for	sure-----	

<i>vocals, Verse 1</i>	don't	loves me so and this I		
<i>Illustrative vocals, Chorus 1</i>	Hey-----	ya-----	Hey-----	ya-----
<i>Illustrative vocals, Verse 2</i>	You think you've got it	oh you think you've got it but got it just don't get it til there's	nothing at	all-----

Table 1: The six-bar refrain that is repeated throughout 'Hey Ya!'

Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 2008: 58) divides attentional prominence between the foregrounded Figure and the backgrounded Ground. Previous musical analysis (van Leeuwen, 1999: 23) has employed similar terminology, using Figure to refer to prominent elements in the musical structure, and Ground to refer to what is audible but not prominent, while also distinguishing between the Ground and the underlying Field, which is backgrounded even further within the structure and can be heard only with close attention (see also Morini, 2013: 291). In general, the mix of 'Hey Ya!' positions the vocals and the drumbeat as the most prominent Figures, whilst the bass, guitar and chorus synth melody are the heard but less prominent Ground, and the electronic effects are only audible with close attention, so are part of the Field. However, as we will show (Section 4.3), prominence and listener attention are dynamic (van Leeuwen, 1999: 18): they are subject to change as the song progresses and as the listener becomes familiar with patterns in the music's structure.

#### ***4.1 Musical mood and song structure***

From a musical perspective, 'Hey Ya!' maintains a consistent upbeat feel throughout. The song is in G major, and performed in the original recording at the moderately fast tempo of 159 bpm, with a high vocal pitch typically indicative of joy (van Leeuwen, 1999: 92). The

back-beat syncopation and the alternation from 4/4 time to 2/4 in the fourth bar of every refrain firmly root the song's rhythmic ground in contemporary dance-oriented pop conventions, and this is reinforced by the relative prominence of the drumbeat in the mix. 'Musical expectancy' and 'evaluative conditioning' (Juslin and Västfjäll, 2008) suggest that listeners employ their prior experience of musical practices in interpreting a new song, and so the foregrounding of these features from the very beginning primes the listener to anticipate an upbeat song. Likewise, the opening lyrics of 'Hey Ya!' support these expectations, with the count-in of the first bar (1) and reference to the singer's 'baby' (2) placing the song within a romantic semantic field typically associated with pop lyricism.

There is an overlap between stylistic interest in attention and existing literature in music psychology. For instance, van Leeuwen's (1999) Figure, Ground, and Field terminology bears comparison to Stockwell's (2002: 13-25) adaptation of Figure and Ground from gestalt psychology, and foregrounding has long been employed by stylisticians to examine the role of language in directing readers' attention (Shen, 2007; Short, 1973; van Peer, 1986). Huron (2013) examines foregrounding as a musical phenomenon, and develops the Habituation-Fluency Theory to account for the paradox of habituation and attention in repetitive music: 'repetition induces habituation in which familiar stimuli lead to a reduction in responsiveness. On the other hand, processing fluency induces positive feelings towards familiar stimuli' (8). Songs typically balance processing fluency with variation in order to sustain listener attention. Repetition provides easily accessible structure, while variation produces interesting but less readily processed novel experiences.

Expectancy and habituation both rely on the listener's recognition and subsequent anticipation of structural repetition, as repeating patterns contribute to listeners' expectations and perception of musical features. As Lidov (2005: 27) puts it, 'innovations which lack the support of an established musical language can appeal to repetition to clarify their vocabulary

and procedures’. Likewise in cognitive poetics, schemata and ‘scripts’ (Schank and Abelson, 1977) have been adopted (Stockwell, 2002: 75-90) to explain how readers employ existing knowledge to process new imagery in reference to past experiences quickly. In other words, conformity to expected patterning increases the fluency of engagement, allowing listeners to process aspects of the song that fit these patterns with relative ease. However, Table 2 below shows that reliable patterns of musical and lyrical structure are almost entirely absent from ‘Hey Ya!’, outside of its initial and final chorus.

Verse 1	Chorus 1	Verse 2	Chorus 2	Bridge		Chorus 2
A	B1	C	B2	D	E	B1
‘My baby don’t...’	‘Hey ya’	‘Oh, you think...’	‘Hey ya’	‘Alright now...’	‘Shake it...’	‘Hey ya’

Table 2: Structural repetition in ‘Hey Ya!’

After the first chorus (B1), the second verse (C) subverts any musical expectancy that the listener may have established to predict a parallel of the structure of the initial verse.

Although the key remains the same, the vocal melody and scansion are entirely distinct.

Verse 1 is sung by Andre 3000 and features between 16 and 17 syllables per six-bar refrain, and an AABB rhyme scheme. Verse 2 features between 24 and 26 syllables per six-bar refrain, gradually subverts the rhyme scheme of verse 1 (see Section 2), and the vocal delivery shifts to a style closer to rapping than singing, although it remains melodic in its pitch variation. In terms of both its musical and lyrical structure, verse 2 subverts the expectations and conventions established earlier in the song, thereby preventing habituation

and requiring greater attention from the listener in his or her parsing of the semantic content of its lyrics.

While the chorus also repeats after the second verse (B2), it features additional lyrics which, unlike the 'hey ya' of the chorus itself, contain definite semantic content. As a result, chorus 2 contains a dynamic shift in prominence: the anticipated chorus and additional lyrics are mixed to a relatively equal volume and primarily alternate rather than overlap, which means that neither immediately appears to take the Figure or Ground position. Instead, this chorus presents an array of potential Figures, with the listener able to focus either on the developing pattern of the 'hey ya' chorus, or on the novel lyrics which interrupt their fluency. With this introduction of ambiguity into the song's Figure, this second chorus becomes highly distinct from its first and final iterations. Although it provides anticipated repetition, chorus 2 also features contrapuntal novelty which resists listener habituation, and could reduce the processing fluency typically associated with chorus structure. Coupled with the pragmatic transition from individual to plural audience address mentioned in Section 2, this moment in the song also precedes a marked shift in vocal style. From the first chorus (B1) to the end of the bridge (E), the listener is presented with substantial variation in lyrical structure, vocal style, and musical layering, in a constant foregrounding of its novel musical elements. With this avoidance of structural repetition, habituation is minimised within a single listening, which means that a listener may need to become familiar with the song over several performances before being able to background its structure and attend more fully to its lyrical content.

If we read this continual defiance of pattern in terms of motion (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003 [1980]; Morini, 2013: 293), there is little in the way of a sense of progression either in the song's structure or the meaning of its lyrics, and the movement from point to point is disorienting and non-linear. In this sense, the listener is required to attend continuously to the

present structure, which constantly moves away from its starting point, in both musical and semantic terms. In the dynamics of casual listening, this shifting structure could function to background the initial verses, as listeners are presented with novel sections which feature increasingly direct audience address as the song progresses.

#### ***4.2 Repetition, prosody and vocal delivery***

As well as the continuous introduction of novel features, there are several points throughout the song where repetition is rapid and unmistakable. Aside from the instances of ‘hey ya’ in the chorus, the vocals repeat several times the same few words in quick succession: ‘what makes’ (12), ‘why oh’ (13), ‘alright’ (23), and ‘shake it’ (26-31). This repetition foregrounds lyrics that have minimal semantic content and isolates them from their syntactic context, thereby emphasising the sound and rhythm of the individual words (Margulis, 2014: 162).

The repetition also impacts on the melodic composition and the prosody of the lyrics, which in verse 2 means that listeners’ attention to the lyrics is affected not only by repetition, but also deviation in the musical structure. For instance, the final bar of the six-bar refrain in verse 1 consistently contains a minim, a single-beat pause, and ‘uh’ utterance, as shown in Figure 1. As a result of the repetition of ‘what makes’ in line 12, the lyrics extend to the end of the refrain, with the final three words of the question (‘what makes *love the exception?*’) sung across the final bar. This end to verse 2 eschews the syncopated rhythm used throughout the rest of the refrain (seen in bars 47 and 48 in Figure 1), and instead emphasises the first and third beat of the bar. This contrast with the expectations established in verse 1 and maintained for the first eleven bars of verse 2 introduces rhythmic challenges to processing fluency at one of the key moments in the lyrical expression of the verses’ existential theme.

**[INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR TO HERE]**

Additionally, the short 2/4 bars in each six-bar refrain modulate expected patterns of speech, drawing listener attention away from the semantic content within these bars. This is most explicit in the final line of the second verse, where the singer asserts that he and his partner '*know we're not* happy here' (our emphasis). At the end of verse 2, all the instruments fall silent temporarily in the final two bars of the six-bar refrain, and the vocals progress downward tonally, finishing on the lowest note of the entire vocal performance, followed by a minim rest. In comparison to the otherwise fast-paced polyphony, this moment marks the closest stylistic parallel between the musical performance and lyrical content. However, the italicised lyrics appear in the fourth bar of the refrain (in 2/4 time) and are spoken just before the music stops. As a result, the deviation from the regular backing and speed means that the lyrics 'happy here' are more strongly foregrounded than the semantically significant negation 'not'. Elsewhere in these verses, the 2/4 bars contain lyrics which either actively negate, or semantically correlate to negative emotional evaluation, such as 'don't know', 'nothing at', and 'feelings in-[volved]', likewise positioning semantically significant lyrics at the moment of the song's rhythmic alternation.

In this way, the final line of verse 2 reinforces interpretations by listeners at all levels of attention, as the interplay between the lyrical wording and musical foregrounding of the lyrics allows listeners primarily interested in the song as a dance track to have their expectations reinforced by the foregrounding of 'happy'. Similarly, the silence at the end of verse 2 is broken by Andree 3000 a beat before the full musical accompaniment restarts for the chorus. While the lyric of line 14 ('Y'all don't want to hear me, you just wanna dance') draws direct attention to the disparity between the listener's interest in the music and the more serious lyrics of the first two verses, only the initial word ('Y'all) precedes the initiation of the chorus. In casual listening, the rest of the line is obscured as the more habituated

content of the chorus takes attentional prominence, and the significance of the spoken statement is downplayed and ‘buried’ (Emmott and Alexander, 2014: 332; see also Sanford and Emmott, 2012). As a result, in listening, the initial ‘Y’all’ bears comparison to the empty utterance ‘uh’ (1) on the fourth beat of the song’s first bar, which establishes a syncopated rhythm but carries little semantic value of its own. The vocal delivery of the lyrics in the context of the song can work to distract listener attention from explicitly negative or self-aware lyrical comments, meaning that they are easily overlooked in casual listening.

#### ***4.3 Summary and implications for musical stylistics***

Given the interplay between music and language throughout ‘Hey Ya!’, the song itself establishes the idea that listeners may be engaging to different degrees. Not only is it possible to enjoy ‘Hey Ya!’ as a song regardless of the level of attention that the listener pays to the lyrics; the song’s teasing of the opposition between music and language also rewards closer consideration. As the song’s structure resists habitual familiarity in a single listening, with minimal structural repetition beyond the simplest iteration of the chorus, listener awareness of the song’s lyrical content primarily develops in additional close listening, according to online self-reporting. Indeed, forum users report only noticing the meaning of the verses after having heard slower, acoustic covers:

When I heard Obadiah Parker’s cover I realised how beautiful these lyrics are, haven’t even noticed that the song had a deeper meaning before (Poster 9)

I always loved this song then I heard Mat weddle’s cover and then i realised how cynical and bittersweet the lyrics were. I love this song so much (Poster 10)

In both of the cover versions in question, the song is performed by a single acoustic guitarist and singer at a tempo of around 75 bpm. The polyphonic mixture of background sounds and additional vocals are not reproduced, and the choruses all follow the pattern of choruses 1 and 3, so that the variation of chorus 2 is not present. That listeners respond to the lyrical content of these slower, musically simplified versions supports a reading of the original version as stylistically foregrounding non-lyrical features.

Even in the original recording that this article is concerned with, however, the lead vocals are the only source of the melody for much of the song, and, in order to follow this, the listener must be paying some attention to the vocals *without* paying attention to the lyrics. In other words, while the melodic vocal performance across the track is certainly part of the Figure, the lyrics themselves are often part of the Ground. For, while listeners are typically aware of the presence of the lyrics in the song, they evidently do not always stand out enough to be parsed semantically. Singers in general must produce *some* sound in order to perform, but this sound is not required to carry linguistic meaning. It is, of course, very common to enjoy and react emotionally to a performance in a language that the listener does not speak. Indeed, composers and performers such as Enya, Sigur Rós, and Karl Jenkins have all produced songs in artificial proto-languages which avoid linguistic interpretation altogether, and function exclusively as a vehicle for musical performance. Accordingly, the process of assessing musical-stylistic effects most closely reflects the actuality of experiencing a song when it is able to account for the possibility of listeners' alternative, non-linguistic points of focus within the song. As mentioned in Section 3, our reading has explored the stylistic intersection of music and language while accepting – and even continually referring to – the validity of a surface reading of the song for its primary, dance-oriented appeal.

As we have shown throughout this Section, listeners' perception of Figure/Ground is a dynamic, online process that has the capacity to change throughout the song, as well as in

repeated listening, where processing fluency becomes easier for aspects of the song not repeated within a single listening. While a model which avoids over-interpretation (O'Halloran, 2003) and remains as close as possible to minimally attentive, non-analytical listeners' experience of the song (Widdowson, 1997) is undoubtedly useful for grounding stylistic practices, this should not suggest that an analysis of the stylistic qualities of these lyrics is misplaced. We have also shown how 'Hey Ya!' actively rewards maximal attention through self-referential commentary, and the parallelism between its 'buried' message and overt structure. A reading of the interplay between music and lyrics which draws on cognitive models of listener and reader attention can sustain an account of both in-depth and surface-level listenings, and we suggest that musical stylistics should aim to account for both maximal and minimal listener attention in order to explain the stylistic significance of a song's lyrical choices.

## **5. Conclusion**

At the beginning of this paper, we observed that musical stylistics thus far (Morini, 2013) has analysed songs in which the musical and lyrical content work in direct parallel to produce concomitant affective meaning. Our analysis of 'Hey Ya!' has challenged this understanding of the musical-linguistic relationship. While a reading of the song's lyrics on paper can be used to produce interesting stylistic discussion points (Section 2), it is evident that, when a lyrics-only analysis is compared to everyday listeners' experiences of the song (Section 3), the musical elements of the track influence the extent to which the song's lyrics are noticed.

Our revised approach (Section 4) produced a cognitively-oriented reading that can account for both surface listening experiences and the multimodal interaction of lyrical meaning and contrastive musical expectancy referenced within the song itself. The application of a cognitive framework to musical-stylistic analysis allows us to draw on both

recent cognitive poetics and music psychology. In particular, the works of both fields on attention and repetition have similar theoretical origins, and can readily be compared for common ground in the study of language and music. In adapting these models to discuss ‘Hey Ya!’, our musical-stylistic reading has argued that an understanding of listeners’ attention is essential to making sense of the relationship between the layers of possible meaning within the song, and that cognitive poetics and music psychology can be used to model the dynamic interaction between musical structure and lyrical content. Moreover, surface-level reactions which do not attend to the lyrics – deliberately or otherwise – suggest that lyrics more generally need to be considered by stylisticians as related to, but distinct from, the vocal performance in the Figure/Ground.

Finally, the ideas put forward here are not exclusive to music. Many of the comments made above regarding foregrounding and listener attention can be readily extended to other formats in which language is positioned alongside other communicative modes. For ‘Hey Ya!’ itself, although there has not been space to analyse it within the parameters of this paper, the accompanying music video provides additional comparable layers of audio layering and visual framing. In the video, a fictionalised concert in which audience members shout over the performance further foregrounds the musicality and dance elements of the song over its lyrics. The model of attention explored above is readily applicable to these multimodal elements, extending the applicability of the analysis developed here beyond music *per se*. As the literature surrounding ‘musical’ stylistics expands, no doubt further parallels will be drawn between the relationship that language has with music, and with other forms of media.

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