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Research Article

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Sacred Languages of Pop: Rooted Practices in Globalized and Digital French Popular Music

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Abstract: Nowadays, popular music artists from a wide range of cultures perform in English alongside other local languages. This phenomenon questions the coexistence of different languages within local music practices. In this article, I argue that we cannot fully understand this issue without addressing the sacred dimension of language in popular music, which entails two aspects: 1) the transitory experience of an ideal that challenges intelligibility, and 2) the entanglement with social norms and institutions. Further to which, I compare Latin hegemony during the Middle Ages and the contemporary French popular music, where English and French coexist in a context marked by globalisation and ubiquitous digital technologies. The case of the Middle Ages shows that religious control over Latin led to a massive unintelligible experience of ritual singing, which reflected a strong class divide and created a demand for music rituals in vernacular languages. In the case of contemporary French popular music, asemantical practices of language are employed by artists in order to explore alternative, sacred dimensions of language that challenge nationhood.

Keywords: ritual, intelligibility, language, popular music, France, Middle Ages

Introduction

The second edition of Live Nation's Download Festival, one of the largest mainstream rock and metal festival in France, was held during the summer of 2017. The line-up was a blend of vintage and new acts, mostly international bands (Linkin Park, Green Day, etc.), including French bands such as Gojira, but very few bands from local French scenes. As a consequence, the majority of the music was sung in English, which does not differ tremendously from many other major French festivals such as Rock en Seine or Eurockéennes. Only a few festivals have a francophone-oriented line-up, such as Francopholies or Printemps de Bourges. This situation does not seem to have too much of an effect of shock or worry in the public discourse, except maybe with a few conservative commentators.

During the highly emotional and collective moments that are music festivals (St. John), the coexistence of English and French is generally perceived as natural or taken for granted, which reflects a certain degree of globalisation. Of course, it has not always been the case, as illustrated by the numerous discussions over cultural imperialism and the active defence and promotion of the French language (in media and arts especially). This leads to a major question: how do different languages actually coexist in the same cultural spaces, considering the specificity of music as a social practice?

When I attended the Download Festival, it was almost impossible to know where the bands were from without prior knowledge of them, as most of them performed in English. This linguistic homogeneity

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contributes to the ideal of a global community among metal scenes (Weinstein, “The Globalization of Metal”) but also raises broader questions regarding language diversity (Toivanen and Saarikivi; Errington; Mufwene). However, one band, in particular, caught my attention: Rise of the Northstar. I had not heard of the band before seeing them on stage. Their performance seemed to fulfil a role similar to that of any American hardcore-based music, with its screaming and mosh pits. The audience responded with energy and enthusiasm.

At the same time, the band distinguished itself from others by making references to Japanese manga and wearing *gakuran*, the traditional Japanese male uniform that is also worn by Japanese thugs. This mix of references was intriguing enough for me to search for more information about the band on my smartphone. In the same moment that I was reading their Wikipedia page, one of their songs ended and the singer started to talk to the audience in French. According to Wikipedia, the band was from the Paris suburbs and had formed in 2008. There, Rise of the Northstar could be associated to the dominant part of the French metal scene that has predominantly sung in English since the end of the 1980s (Spanu, “Global Noise, Local Language”).

By the time the concert was reaching its end, the music and atmosphere became more intense. The singer stirred up the crowd in French between songs and also during songs, performing an unusual mix of French and English on stage. For instance, during the last song, while the musicians were obviously creating a crescendo before the final explosion, the singer started to tease the audience, saying fiercely in French: “We’re gonna show ‘em, we’re gonna show the Anglo-Saxons that we have guts!” [On va leur montrer, on va leur montrer aux Anglo-saxons ce qu’on a dans le ventre!]. Despite the irony of the reference to this kind of otherness (i.e. “Anglo-Saxons”) while performing in English, the situation was intriguing, reminiscent of the medieval religious and musical rituals where different languages had specific roles and functions, with the aim of adjusting for the participation of the audience.

In this article, I want to argue that we cannot fully understand these roles and functions without addressing the sacred dimension of language in popular music, which entails two aspects: 1) the transitory experience of an ideal, and 2) the entanglement with social norms and institutions. This comparison suggests that there is a relationship between language in music and the sacred. The sacred challenges the role of intelligibility within processes of identification through music (Frith, “Why Do Songs Have Words?”; Frith, “Music and Identity”) and helps understand the—sometimes contentious—coexistence of different languages in the same cultural and social space. After addressing these elements more thoroughly, I will compare the coexistence of different languages in religious music from the Middle Ages with popular music from the current digital era, with a specific focus on France.

Language, Music and the Sacred

Music and language play a decisive role in the way individuals relate to each other. They are major symbolic components of social life. Put differently: “Social identities are indexed and expressed in the intertwining of musical and verbal practices” (Feld *et al.* 340). As a collective practice, music articulates a set of shared values and affects that are recognised as authentic in a specific situation and for a specific group. This authenticity is performed through rituals and discourses, such as concerts and press articles in contemporary pop music (Frith, *Performing Rites*).

In his seminal work *Music and Trance*, French anthropologist Gilbert Rouget sheds light on the link between the practice of singing and the rituals that organise social life. Among those rituals, he focuses on possession and trance, which are transitory states performed by one or several persons, accompanied by music and generally marked by intense or unusual behaviours. Rouget goes beyond the traditional focus on the physiological aspect of trance and conceptualises it as a performance rooted in a belief system shared by an audience. A “successful” trance, according to Rouget, happens when the audience recognises a divine presence through the performer. Depending on cultural codes, this presence can be enacted through human voice and take many shapes, from mythical characters in opera in European tradition to orishas in Afro-Caribbean music.

The first part of my definition of the sacred rests on this rather common and universal phenomenon of trance: the ordinary—yet time-limited—experience of the extraordinary through music, made possible by the process of “figuration” (Descola). The sacred dimension of music resides in its potential to put an individual or group face to face with what has shaped their sensibility in the past and what goes beyond them at the same time. It echoes with something that has happened in the past and something that has not yet happened. This sacred dimension explains why music is so important within processes of identification and community building, but also in escapist behaviours and more generally in the search for utopian ways of life. The sacred is here defined as a fundamentally shared experience (“trance”), though it also relates, as we shall see, to social organisation. But what is the place for language in these music rituals?

In his work on the origin of language, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues that music has no mechanical effect on humans and must relate to the cultural environment of the listener in order to activate a response—to “heal” (Rousseau). This “cultural environment” takes the shape of a complex set of semiotic modalities and semantics. It is enacted through the process of ritualised identification, on the basis of what we could call symbolic “authenticity,” which is never fixed and always performed, renewed and relocated. This process applies to language (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller), especially in music, though it would be “ineffective if used in isolation from one another or from the performance as a whole” (Briggs, “The Meaning of Nonsense”).

From this point of view, the use of language in singing is intimately related to the performance of authenticity in a certain time and place - even though what a social group considers as authentic is an ideal hard to reach. In other words, the practice of language in music is the product of a negotiation between performers and audiences (and all the potential intermediaries), based on a common cultural environment, in order to transcend the habitual. A singing language is sacred when it is used in a music ritual that embodies what a group of people considers as an authentic performance. As we shall see, the mutual accord on what is authentic can be challenged for different reasons, but the relation between language and the sacred dimension of music making follows certain patterns.

First, in popular music, the recorded voice is used to materialise a certain persona, a soul that can resonate with the mass audience’s cultural frame (Hennion). The purpose of that voice, according to our definition of the sacred, is to break with common sense and daily life, through the simple act of singing a certain way and through other artefacts (nicknames, storytelling, body performance, music videos, etc.). The role of language is fundamentally ambivalent because it has to simultaneously “speak” to the listener (i.e. be familiar, be part of the cultural environment) and “lose” him/her (i.e. transcend the habitual, reach something divine). It echoes with a widely spread phenomenon in ritual speech: unintelligibility. The characteristic of unintelligibility in ritual speech is to provide meaning and a possible sense of divinity in spite of its “nonsensical” appearance. The role of unintelligibility is fluctuant and volatile and can be grasped only in accordance with “other modalities of semiosis in ritual performance” (Wirtz 401).

This phenomenon is what allows so many contemporary singers to use foreign languages or stylized versions of their usual language, despite a certain fixity in how individuals conceive language as an embodiment of a group identity. The modalities of using language in music in order to seek out this fundamental ambivalence depend on the social context and aesthetic norms. For some, it is easier or more obvious to use a foreign language such as English (e.g. in French rock, see Guibert, “Chantez-Vous en Français ou en Anglais?”) or Italian (e.g. in opera, see Cook; Loubinoux), while others twist their daily language to make it sound special. For instance, early Beatles used southern US-accented English (Backes Nunes and Nunes Azzi; Trudgill), rappers around the world mixed national and foreign languages to address a diasporic audience and challenge nationhood (Alim and Pennycook; Prévos). In other words, languages in popular music are always local or relocalised (Pennycook).

Second, there’s a social implication of language use in music despite the great aesthetic and verbal abstraction contained in the first part of our definition of the sacred. It involves categories of pure and impure (Caillois), institutions, taboos, interdictions, norms, and therefore power (Durkheim). Music rituals themselves follow specific rules and traditions to a certain degree, which implies a sense of social order, even when they seem chaotic and violent (Bastide). What Roger Bastide designates as “musical order” relies on two structures of power: religious institutions and social norms. If one of these structures grows

weaker (e.g. situations of secularisation, exile, marginalisation, etc.), the nature of the sacred experience changes and becomes “wild” [sauvage], that is to say, unstable and unpredictable.

In order to understand the coexisting and changing practices of language in music in relation to their sacred dimension, we thus have to consider their level of institutionalisation. For instance, in the case of underground music or counter-cultural movements, the level of institutionalisation is low, which enables new ways of using language. But this situation is always temporary, as underground and counter-cultures can only grow by integrating or creating social institutions. It has the effect of normalising music and language practices which would otherwise disappear.

To illustrate this complex yet fundamental phenomenon, we'll now examine a historical and emblematic case where our notion of the sacred (as trance and social organisation) helps to understand the contentious and changing role of singing languages.

The Case of Latin Singing in the Middle Ages

Changes in language practices are never socially neutral. They participate in the evolution of societies, as illustrated by the following case of Latin in the Middle Ages. Here it is important to keep the distinction between the sacred dimension of music and language as defined above in anthropological terms, and the religious context of the Middle Ages, where the sacred refers also to religious institutions. As will be demonstrated, there is an interaction between these two aspects, and it is precisely this interaction that will be explored in order to compare it with contemporary pop music in France (Heinich).

Latin refers to a complex set of more or less official languages that were used during a very long period (Adams). My point here is not to go through its history, but to see how one of its dominant sung forms, the one that was used for religious services, started to be intensively contested by Protestant Reformers in sixteenth-century Europe. During this period, among Catholics, the social difference between clergymen and most of the population was as clear as the linguistic one. Most people used Romance vernacular languages derived from Latin and had poor proficiency in the Latin form that was used during church services; to the point that collective singing became sometimes impossible and made the sermons unintelligible (Launay). It created a tension between the cult of God's words embodied in Classical Latin, this mysterious language that was as difficult to understand as God for most believers, and the evangelical need to include the believers (Regis-Cazal).

However, long before Latin was contested by Protestant Reformers, this linguistic tension in the musical and religious ritual had been addressed in various ways by the Catholics themselves. Even though Pope Saint Gregory I had supposedly fixed the order of prayers and chants of liturgy around the seventh century, traces of the presence of other sung languages during services exist in the tenth century (Duneton). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this presence took the shape of bilingual Latin-Romance tropes known as “glossed epistles” [épîtres farcies] but also bilingual liturgical dramas (Le Vot) that were supposed to keep the religious ritual accessible and attractive. Priests started to use more and more unofficial translations of the liturgy, especially for important parts of the Bible (Schmidt).

Besides, the role of Romance languages was not only to increase comprehension. They were used especially for choruses that were repeated many times, increasing the emotional participation of the believers, while Latin was used for more solemn and intellectual parts. All this emanated from a wish on the part of the Church to appropriate and control the potentially dangerous popular extra-liturgical expressions by incorporating them into the religious text itself. On the one hand, the Church was committed to the new Latin. But on the other hand, the Church wished to exploit the popular tendency to use non-Latin songs for worshipping (Cazal). The Church released short bilingual poems supposed to be sung by believers outside liturgy in order to reinforce their faith and progressively allowed popular melodies to be sung in the liturgy, as long as the lyrics fit the liturgical standards (Duneton). Additionally, songs in Latin were sung in many non-religious occasions, especially by the travelling elite, and their lyrics could be sometimes suggestive and licentious. In other words, it was a period of great mixing (not to say confusion) regarding the distribution of singing languages.

In certain regions where Latin was strictly kept as the only language for liturgy, the Catholic Church noticed an increase of idolatry (Launay). The low understanding of Latin transformed Latin in an object of mystical attraction, almost detached from traditional Catholic values. The linguistic gap between the elite and the rest was so strong that in some places, even the priests used Classical Latin without understanding it. This phenomenon became a concern during the Council of Trent (held between 1545 and 1563) when the idea of translating the Bible in other languages was debated. This was also the time when the Catholic Church built its Counter-Reformation strategy, issuing a condemnation of what was considered heresy, such as liturgy in other languages than Latin. In other words, as a sacred language, Latin embodied the social order that the Catholic Church was trying to maintain.

Among German Protestants, singing liturgy in vernacular language was common. While the Catholic Church had always seen it as a pragmatic exception to the Latin rule, it was one of the bases of Protestant faith. The reasons for this can be found in Martin Luther's doctrine, where masses were only a commemoration of Jesus Christ's sacrifice, not a reproduction of it. As a commemoration, each individual was supposed to be free to choose its own relation to God (Schmidt). The same conception of freedom led Luther to encourage the use of vernacular languages in religious service. Taking communion and singing was at the core of the service, according to Luther, because they were a way to explore aesthetical and poetical dimensions of faith, so they needed to be accessible to the believers. But the accessibility was not restricted to a matter of comprehension. Luther was keen to criticise religious songs when they were translated into vernacular without subtlety. He even asked poets to work on proper versions of religious songs in order to reach a certain level of harmony between text, music and accessibility.

The case of Latin helps clarify the anthropological articulation of singing with the sacred. This articulation depends on two factors: semantics and social order. A minimum level of familiarity with the language is necessary to produce identification and allow listeners to experience the ritual. But in this case, despite the officially sacred status of Latin and its hegemony in terms of identification, the lack of comprehension reached an extreme point, excluded some of the audience and created a strong demand for more accessible music rituals. At the same time, it created a strong attraction (i.e. idolatry) and participation but also lose the intended meaning of the ritual (here controlled by religious authorities). Although schematic, this model can be replicated in more secular and modern musical contexts, where the sacred dimension of music still determines the place and coexistence of singing languages.

Languages and the Sacred in a Digital and Globalized Context: The Case of French Popular Music

Even though music from all over the world is being produced and promoted in multiple languages, most of the global circulation is in English. For instance, studies on European radio broadcasting show that "the number of European artists capable of transforming a local success into a cross-border success is quite limited. The only music that crosses borders without limitations is US-based repertoire. English-language repertoire heavily dominates the airwaves and digital downloads, with shares of local language music varying by country, but never over 25%" (European Music Office & Eurosonic Noorderslag). In other words, digital tools seem to enhance English hegemony, with a few exceptions, such as Psy's "Gangnam Style" and recent Latino acts in Spanish.

In addition, new technologies deeply transformed our relation to language in music, especially in mainstream pop music. Lyrics and their translation are easily accessible, as well as deep analysis of their content and meaning by fans or professional journalists. Most new pop songs are first released through lyric videos, giving the lyrics a unique place in music consumption, as part of broader marketing strategies. Music videos in other languages than English can include subtitles in English when they target international audiences (e.g. Stromae from Belgium, Keith Ape from Korea, etc.). In the past, international singers could perform their songs in different languages, depending on the audience targeted. Egyptian singer Dalida performed in up to ten different languages! The translation of songs still exists today, especially

in Asia (Benson), as well as a myriad of strategies to find a good balance between local authenticity and international market, for instance through the use of bilingual songs.

More generally, the new economy of music has radically changed business models, with a significant impact on language practices. For many artists, the decrease of income from record sales has been partly replaced by synchronisation licences for the use of their music in audio-visual material (commercials, TV shows, etc.). Deals with famous brands can boost the career of small artists by giving them new financial resources and great exposure. Because this type of music use is comparable to a soundtrack, and also because most brands seek international stature, the music they choose tends to be in English. In France, this leads many labels to push local radio channels to promote French bands singing in English (even though radio channels have a French broadcasting obligation). The hope is that these bands gain enough exposure to be noticed by French brands (Véronique and Martiréné).

If the sacred dimension of music is so deeply rooted in rituals, where can it be found in the digital age where music is also distributed online and listened to at home (Nowak and Bennett)? Fabian Holt brilliantly described the impact of digital technologies on live music, arguing that the live music economy has never been stronger than now (Holt, “The Economy of Live Music in the Digital Age”). Rituals such as popular music concerts and festivals are boosted by new technologies, and people still seek collective and intense experiences rather than staying at home listening to infinite amounts of music from streaming platforms. Although the liminal state that one can reach during such rituals might be framed by digital media (Holt, “Music Festival Video: A ‘Media Events’ Perspective on Music in Mediated Life”) or other types of social structures and norms (such as security, economy, hipness, etc.), it still plays an important role in regard to identification in contemporary society. It carries a sense of time and place. The sacred dimension of music in the digital era is embodied by the centrality of live performance and has a direct impact on language practices. Indeed, despite their media ubiquity, international superstars singing in English cannot be physically present to perform in all the places where they are broadcasted and idolised. This public gap allows local artists to mimic international stars’ music in their own language and produce altered versions of global pop, raising questions on how authenticity is linguistically performed.

In contemporary France, the level of institutionalisation of the national language is quite high, since French is officially considered as a fundamental element of the nation and identity of its citizens (Giordan). As such, it benefits from specific legislation and institutions that generally work together with the concept of “cultural exception” as a protectionist cultural policy framework. The protection of French language and culture has been a major concern for a long time, as attested by the numerous associations for the defence of French in the 1930s (Offord) or the Blum-Byrnes agreements from 1946 (Wall, “Les accords Blum-Byrnes”). This ideological frame has survived until today as illustrated by the amendment made in 2015 to force French radios to propose a more diverse range of music in French, following the obligation of broadcasting 40% of songs in French from 1996 (Joux).

Nevertheless, other languages, such as English, Arabic, Spanish or Chinese, are everywhere, from stores to media, local cultural events to political meetings. This is due to the highly globalised aspect of French society and the central role of media—especially the internet—in daily cultural practices, but also its colonial past and persistent regional cultures (with different degrees of linguistic difference). The coexistence of all these languages is complex, especially in popular music, but we’ll try to address it with the help of our previous model. To limit the scope of our investigation, I will take the example of only two languages: French and English.

If language plays a role in the way music produces identification through sacred performances, how do artists deal with the traditional relationship between language and nationhood in a globalised and digital world? In the case of France, music in English has been associated with foreign mainstream culture and imperialism, but also with counter-culture, therefore influencing the local production of music. One of the most emblematic examples of this influence is the “yéyé” period (in reference to the tendency of young French singers from the 1960s to incorporate the word “yeah” in their singing parts). Yéyé artists expressed a reaction to older generations and classical culture but also created a new mainstream culture based on fantasised views on British and American culture (Anderson; Tamagne, “‘C’mon everybody’: Rock’n’roll et identités juvéniles en France”). Despite the strong foreign influence and all the critique on the part of

the cultural and social elite (Tamagne, “Juvenile delinquency, social unrest and national anxiety French debates and controversies over rock’n’roll in the 1960s and 1970s”), yéyé artists did not break the national rule regarding the use of French. The sacred dimension of this new music was adapted into French and therefore faced the critique of its lack of authenticity (Briggs, *Sounds French*).

Regarding the French language, its most emblematic or authentic embodiment in music remained for a long time “French Chanson” (Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*), a traditional poetic and text-based form with heterogeneous instrumental accompaniment (Rudent, “Chanson française: A Genre without Musical Identity”). Simultaneously, the terms “French pop”, “variété française” and “French rock” refer to an ambivalent appropriation and adaptation of international genres into French, mainly by white artists and often considered as dimly authentic (Guibert, *La Production de la culture*). On the other hand, French rap and “urban music” designate music in French that is produced mainly by non-white artists, whose authenticity relies on the inventiveness of their lyrics and language mix. However, in recent years, more and more artists have started their career by singing in English, therefore avoiding the problem of authenticity in certain genres—especially pop/rock/metal. Some of them even obtained recognition by national media institutions such as “Victoires de la Musique” (French equivalent of the Grammys). Some examples include Shaka Ponk, Jain, Hyphen Hyphen or The Dø.

Early traces of the use of English can be found in two very different sites of French music production (Spanu, “Sing it Yourself!”). The first one is dancing/electronic music: French disco that targeted international audiences in the 1970s (e.g. Patrick Hernandez’ “Born to Be Alive”), followed in the 1990s by the “French touch” (e.g. Daft Punk, Air). The second is underground punk, post-punk and metal from the 1980s and 1990s when DIY artists and labels followed transnational counter-cultural aesthetics. In short, the sacred dimension of the music ritual in English corresponded to body politics and utopian universalism.

Recent studies conducted interviews with several French pop/rock singers performing in local venues, in English or French, and gave an empirical view on their specific relation to language (Spanu and Seca). The discussion that follows relies on the same data. It is not meant to determine which language practice is dominant over the other but rather give a clear idea of the different models of language use and how they can be related to the sacred.

The first tendency, which is also considered as the most typical or even stereotypical, especially in text-based music, is to write lyrics before the music. Artists who proceed this way are more likely to sing in French, which places them in a well-established tradition of French poets and *chansonniers*, e.g. Jacques Brel, Georges Brassens, Léo Ferré (Cordier; Hawkins). This literary tradition embodies “Frenchness” to the point that the relation with the French language can be considered, to some extent, as sacred. In contemporary French pop, a good example of this tendency is Eddy de Pretto, who claims that his lyrics are the core of his art and meant to be intelligible, while the instrumentation is only a secondary tool (Davet).

French rappers are often compared to this text-based tradition (Pecqueux; Rubin), for more or less obvious linguistic reasons (Béthune). However, rappers can also write in a more spontaneous way, finding inspiration directly from the beat. The work they do to blend their lyrics with the music is far more complex than just adding words to the beat. They craft the way French words sound *with* the beat, and they do not always think too much about the meaning. For this reason, and also because they do not always feel comfortable with French as an identity category (Meghelli; Béru), their language practice remains quite distinct from chanson. While there is little use of slang and other forms of vernacular from the fringes in French chanson, French rap tends to be more ambivalent towards language and social norms (Ghio) and reemploys words and prosody from other languages such as Arabic or Wolof, and of course English.

Despite an early trend towards mainstream formats (Hammou), the sacred dimension of French rap (and most rap around the world) is rooted in street interactions between diasporic people using their cultural heritage to craft lyrics on the beat and challenge each other (Alim and Pennycook; Mitchell), making the use of French particularly innovative and nonstandard. These interactions are not necessarily real; they can be mythological. What interests me is how they contribute to the anthropological process of music sacralisation, embodying rap’s authenticity and shaping language practices in a certain social conjuncture.

In France, social norms regarding the role of language in music are marked by the fact that singing French means being judged in regards to lyrics and their literary value. Certain researchers emphasise

that France has a specificity in terms of lyrics evaluation, illustrated by the expression “text-based songs” [“chansons à texte”] as a superior category, and also by the tendency of cultural commentators to focus their critique on lyrics (Marc; Looseley, “Outside Looking in: European Popular Musics, Language and Intercultural Dialogue”). This specificity probably finds some of its origins in the traditional and sacred chanson ritual that took place in *café concerts*, with the audience sitting and drinking while singers were performing (De Langle). Additionally, the French literary field has long been at the heart of French cultural life, with regular official celebrations and controversies, which had an impact on the way language in music is perceived.

Finally, as already stated, the high and strict expectations of how French should be used are tied to the most structuring concept of French society, republicanism. This concept can be defined in many ways and has been used to justify all sorts of actions (from colonisation to political sovereignty), but what interests me is how it carries values of rationality supposed to enlighten people through the use of the French language. In this sense, French shares with Latin the idea of a universalist mission, but differs in regards to rationality and intelligibility. While singing Latin became an excluding force because of the extremely low level of understanding, French singing emphasises high comprehension and clear voice and lyrics. This tendency reached a point where the most refined and acclaimed music in French can be the one with the least usual singing components (rhythm, melody, etc.), as exemplified by Serge Gainsbourg’s famous spoken style (Julien).

Nevertheless, French singers can also nurture and maintain an alternative relationship to language and songwriting that falls within the scope of “aesthetics of incomprehensibility” (Szego) or “atrophy of meaning” (Tambiah), where denotatively-based meaning is undermined in an attempt supposed to reinforce the exceptionality of the music practice similar to certain speech rituals (Malinowski 221). In other words, their view on music experiences does not rely too much on understanding the lyrics. During composition, many French singers use “yaourt” (“yoghurt” in English), a common singing technique among French artists which consists in using sounds, onomatopoeias and syllables similar to a real language, in this case, English. Concretely, singers mimic English prosody and phonology and mix it with their own French singing habits (Cutler). This technique serves for voice experimentation, sometimes close to a mantra. It allows singers to escape from discursive and ordinary speech, in order to reach a certain degree of musical abstraction through the use of language (Padoux).

In other words, it is a practice of language as pure sound and music, and not as a semantical tool. Yet, this abstraction is never supposed to be meaningless. On the contrary, its *raison d’être* is deeply circumstantial and related to a specific group, even though it does not have a specific denotative meaning. During rehearsal, singers repeat words over and over in order to fuse the voice with the instrumentation, until it creates a singular emotion that can echo with a social group’s sensibility (Seca). In this sense, it is quite similar to the working process used within international mainstream pop, with top-liners looking for “hooks” (Seabrook). Rouget calls this phase “initiation,” which corresponds to what we usually know as songwriting and rehearsal. It is prior to all trance rituals and is supposed to be introspective and transitory. And indeed, in terms of language, “yaourt” is always a step towards a sort of normalisation of the lyrics, in English or French. It is when the singer thinks about how he/she wants to address the audience without losing the “spirit” of the initiation phase and according to the manufactured nature of popular music, which sometimes creates disagreement between artists and record labels over language use. A recent example of this is the French female rocker Mademoiselle K who had her record deal cancelled after she persisted to switch from French to English (Keller). This example speaks of the broader tension between the commercial and the sacred in popular music.

If the link between the spread of English and cultural and economic hegemony is well acknowledged, the sacred dimension of language in music helps us understand the mechanisms by which this spread operates in popular music. In the case of English in French pop, the fact that English has become the standard language for “yaourt” makes it a driving and structuring force within the “initiation” phase, even when the recipient language is French. It explains why some artists try to make the French language sound English when they sing, as stated in many interviews (Spanu, “Global Noise, Local Language”). It is a way to accommodate the specificities of French to contemporary pop sounds generally sung in English, while

addressing a specific French-speaking audience. This phenomenon can take different shapes depending on the music genre, but it applies from Christine and the Queens bilingual electro-pop to PNL cryptic cloud rap in vernacular French. It also has existed for a long time, at least since Serge Gainsbourg's early career, when he deliberately (and sometimes ironically) adapted the prosody of French to rock'n'roll music (Julien).

While English hegemony seems to be growing in French popular music, the sacredness of French persists through the chanson heritage and its many contemporary reformulations, from Stromae to Eddy De Pretto. The situation where two sacred languages coexist creates tension and creativity in local scenes (Spanu and Seca), sometimes in reaction to the normativity of the music industry. For instance, a new underground collective called La Souterraine has become increasingly praised by the media thanks to their deliberate and original focus on the French language in order to challenge English hegemony within underground scenes. Artists from this collective actually challenge a certain traditional sacredness of French through the use of French as an experimental language, with references from Quebec, Mali or Occitan culture, and free digital distribution on Bandcamp. At the same time, they do come within the scope of French chanson from time to time, by releasing provocative and innovative tributes to established "French Chanson" references such as Léo Ferré. This proves that the sacredness of any language is never total and can always be contested and challenged, even from within, articulating other dimensions of social life, especially social and cultural identities, and using new media technologies.

Conclusion

This article has shown how language practices in music are rooted in sacred rituals in which the search for a divine entity and experience blurs the common semantical view of language and moderates the coexistence of different languages. At the same time, music rituals tend to be domesticated and controlled by institutions and social norms that also have an impact on the distribution of languages. In the case of Latin, the religious control led to a massive unintelligible experience of sacred singing, which reflected a strong class divide and created a demand for rituals in vernacular languages. In other words, unintelligibility served the aim of significative exclusion. In the case of French, it is almost the opposite.

Despite the common social demand for intelligibility (e.g. clear and refined lyrics), asemantical practices of language such as "yaourt" are employed by artists in order to explore alternative sacred dimensions of language in music and include new audiences. These alternative versions can lead to final musical products either in English or French, or even a blend of both that somehow "violates a modernist ideology of language, and of communication more broadly, that emphasises clarity, efficiency, sincerity" (Wirtz 401). Indeed, using language within the practice of singing goes beyond the simple dimension of mutual comprehension that is the basis of the modern nation-state model (Sonntag and Cardinal; Balibar; Anderson). It explains why, in many contexts such as France, the use of English or English mimicry addresses new aesthetics, topics and audiences, beyond the national.

The emphasis on unintelligibility offers new perspectives to understand the English spread in pop music around the world, even in the most remote places where artists mix international standards with more specialised regional music when performing locally. If the use of English often irritates local political, religious or cultural authorities, it is because they perceive it as a threat to their modernist understanding of culture. They are unable to hear and understand the coexistence of vocal practices in different languages and the claim to belong to a local community or even to a broader nation that is not centred on only one intelligible language practice. Despite its rejection, this coexistence is made possible by the sacred dimension of language within musical practices presented in this article.

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