What are the ramifications of taking vocal ‘accent’ as the focus of musicological or ethnomusicological analysis?

Vocal accent in musical performance may carry more information than what is apparent at a first look. This idea becomes more significant in a popular music realm, where globalization is pronounced, thus making the dichotomy of individuality and belonging desires (Hagen 2014, p. 224) obscured compared to a realm where locality dominates the form of expression. This essay comments on the possible problems that may arise from taking the vocal accent as the focus of ethnomusicological analysis, as well as provides theories and examples of identity construction in different popular musics. While analysing the song ‘This Barren Skin’ by the Norwegian funeral doom metal band Funeral (Funeral 2006) from a vocal accent perspective, it also provides an argument about how this vocal accent may be used to construct a band’s identity, and –more importantly- differentiate this national identity from others that are present in a similar or the same music scene. In arguing this point, identity construction theories that are already present in different popular music genres are employed with examples of the relationship between language use, vocal accents, and national identities in these genres. An online ethnographic study concerning the analysed song follows these examples in order to supply the argument that language use and vocal accent is a significant differentiator in this and ‘neighbouring’ music scenes using online communication boards, online music videos, and online album reviews.
Before going into detailed approaches regarding vocal accents, language use, and identities in popular music, it is beneficial to comment on conceivable problems that might emerge from taking the vocal accent as the focus of ethnomusicological research while contending it as a way of identity construction in popular music. First of all, the fact that music has a more structured and strict rhythmic underlay than speech (Clarke 1989, p. 12) can make vocal accents harder to conceive, or at least this might make the vocal accent misleading in terms of the identity of the singer. This, however, is more of a concern for the European art music genres rather than popular musics around the world, because ‘unlike classical music, in popular music individuality is encouraged’ (Eidsheim 2011, p. 644), hence the strictness of a ‘written’ rhythmic structure may be altered more freely in popular music for the sake of expressing individuality. This problem is further strengthened considering that musical sequences can only be comprehended ‘in relation to all other sound events’ (Drake & Palmer 1993, p. 343). Drake & Palmer also argue that in the musical perception process, our main tool is segmentation (Drake & Palmer 1993, p. 344), thereby if the rhythmic structure in question does not allow for this segmentation to happen in order to differentiate a vocal accent, an analytical focus on the accent would not yield correct or even satisfactory results.

Another complication that may emerge from taking vocal accent as a focal point in ethnomusicological research is the complexity of identities of individuals as well as groups, in both historical and biographical terms. According to Said, no one today is purely one thing (Ballantine 2004, p. 105), hence considering only the vocal accent as the main reflection of one type of identity would in fact prove to be faulty at best. A final problem I mention in this essay surfaces from the non-aural perceptual qualities of a musician. According to linguistic research, ‘non-sonic information plays
a crucial role in how we perceive voices and determine racial identities in general’ (Eidsheim 2011, p. 644). In addition to this, in an African-American cultural context, Stoever-Ackerman argues that ‘sounding “black” is certainly linked to looking black’ (Stoever-Ackerman 2010, p. 65); and as the result of the racialisation process in the United States, the ‘black’ sound or what the ‘black sound’ is, is connected to the appearance so much so that this process functions ‘almost on a subconscious level’ (Stras 2007, p. 209). These two points suggest that vocal accent may or may not be heard accurately depending on the appearance of a musician. Eidsheim also mentions a study where students attended the same lecture twice with the same audio but a different visual; and this resulted in students hearing the lecture where an Asian lecturer is depicted to be speaking, with an Asian accent, even though the audio remained the same between the iterations of this lecture (Eidsheim 2011, p. 645).

Considering these potential ramifications, I discuss some examples next regarding identity construction and language in popular music, as well as authenticity especially related to language use. According to Eidsheim, vernacular languages and pronunciation styles are tools to position the singer within a social context such as race, social group, or geographic location (Eidsheim 2011, p. 643). This idea can be expanded to a nation considering the agency of the nation, and thus popular music becomes a promotional tool for a national image, and a cultural export that showcases a nation’s identity (Krause 2008, pp. 224-227).

Language use in popular music may change depending on different circumstances. For example, a language may be selected for a popular song in order to preserve a national heritage (Shandu 2007). Another example can be observed in Wales, where popular music is a celebration tool for the recovery of the use of Welsh language (Llewellyn 2000, p. 323). A final example is from Germany, where popular
musicians see the ability to use English as an ‘artistic prowess and intent, demonstrating global competitiveness and legitimacy’ even to the extreme point of using English sounding nonsensical vocalisations (Larkey 2000, pp. 4-5). However, in places where English is the first language, one observes that instead of the language choice, how that language is pronounced, i.e. the vocal accent, becomes important. Because popular music expresses cultural identity of the self, community, and the nation (Shuker 2008, p. 280). As an example, one may look at the country music of the United States of America. The idea of ‘whiteness’ is so explicit in this music that ‘we simply cannot fail to recognise’ it (Mann 2008, p. 77). Country music expresses the Southern identity, thus a Southern affiliation becomes important, as well as a Southern accent, which can allow a song to be played on a country radio (Mann 2008, p. 79). This situation results in non-Southerners adopting a Southern accent in order to get exposure, which brings the authenticity of this type of music in question (Mann 2008, pp. 80-81).

Language use, both in terms of language selection and the vocal accent, in popular music is closely related to authenticity. A song in a popular music genre may be considered authentic if it (Mattar 2009, p. 181):

(a) does not copy a style

(b) has pride in its own locality

(c) has relations with a locality

Krause defines the bands that try to find their own voice in the increasingly global network of popular culture ‘aesthetic demarcation’ (Krause 2008, p. 228). Mattar argues that ‘musicians are often evaluated by consumers on how authentic (genuine, real) they are’, and when evaluated as inauthentic they are considered to be of lower quality (Mattar 2009, pp. 181-182):
‘Singlish is laughable. It’s not real English… especially the accent, it’s just weird’
(Mattar 2009, p. 190)

In metal music, a similar process to what Mattar and Krause discusses, in other words an ‘aesthetic demarcation’ may be found. Because metal music is an increasingly global phenomenon (Wallach et al. 2011), ‘contextualisation’ using the language and especially the vocal accent, acknowledging English as the dominant language, may be considered ‘an attempt to provide an anchor point in terms of globalisation and post-modern circulation’ (Dibben 2009, p. 146). The contextualisation in question is achieved through the use of local vocal accents that are agreed upon between the global audience and the musicians (Benson 2013, p. 24).

As Berger states, ‘music is used to actively think about, debate, or resist the ideologies at play in the social world’ (Ladegaard & Sachdev 2006, p. 266). Through this idea of music, one may achieve a broader inspection of national musics, and thus more authentic national roots (Llewellyn 2000, p. 326; Spracklen 2012, p. 416). In the case of the connection of Norwegian metal and the Norwegian national identity, which this essay discusses, a ‘self-image of the people of music’ is projected through metal music (Krause 2008, p. 223). According to Krause, stylistic imitation comes to an end, when bands start relying on their natural vocal accents, and stop trying to hide these accents in the use of English language, and this accent use also ‘signals increased regional self-awareness’ (Larkey 2000, p. 3; Krause 2008, p. 223).

The regional self-awareness in Norway comes from three main interpretations of culture. Language emerges as the first one, because, as mentioned above, English is the dominant language choice in metal music; considering that Received Pronunciation or Standard American pronunciation are the preferred, desired, and aspired ways to speak English in Scandinavia (Ladegaard & Sachdev 2006, p. 93),
and the role of music as a resistance mechanism against ideologies present in the social world, one may easily argue that the choice of Norwegian accents in the production of metal music generates a way of regional self-awareness. The Norwegian self-awareness is initiated from heritage, because of the idea of self-respect present in Nordic mythology (Lundberg 2008). The third interpretation comes from nature. Nature may be considered an important tool for identity construction (Dibben 2009, p. 131). This argument is further strengthened for Norway looking at these statement from Norwegian black metal musicians (Lundberg 2008):

Vreid band member: ‘Nature in Norway helps to get negative, if I was at a beach in Florida, I wouldn’t have written this kind of music.’

Mordichrist band members: ‘It’s raining all the time, we can’t be happy all the time as a result.’

This self-awareness of the musicians helps listeners to (Krause 2008, pp. 234-235):

(a) experience and express solidarity with musicians
(b) demonstrate criticism of the worldwide prominence of American popular musics
(c) relate the music to stereotypical associations

The way audience connects with the music becomes important as the following analysis of ‘This Barren Skin’ of the Norwegian Funeral is done using commentary present on the Internet by the audience members, rather than the musicians.

One observes an interesting pattern in television broadcasts, interviews, reviews, and commentary about Norwegian and Swedish metal bands. I give some examples of these in order to establish the pattern, and showcase how foreign (to Norway and Sweden) audiences perceive Norwegian musicians. My first example is
the animated television series from United States of America, titled ‘Metalocalypse’ (Small & Blacha 2006). In this television show, one sees characters based on stereotypical characteristics of extreme metal musicians in a dark humour setting. The characters Toki Wartooth and Skwisgaar Skwigelf are from Norway and Sweden respectively. Their thick Norwegian and Swedish accents and their trouble of commanding proper English grammar are the most striking qualities of these characters. The fact that, in the first episode, the Norwegian Prime Minister sends the band cases of wine as a gift also shows the perception of Norway and its integrated national identity with extreme metal music.

One sees a pronounced attention on the accents of Norwegian and Swedish metal musicians, in both their music and their speaking voices. The following examples show this concentration:

Brun is a fast talker and absorbing everything he said was not easy, especially with his thick Norwegian accent and the fact he was on a speakerphone (Wasteland 2004).

‘It's like there's a law that it's illegal to become famous, and then you become a sellout,’ he [Abbath from Immortal] says in a thick Norwegian accent (Gendron 2007).

‘We really wanted to make this album a bit more epic than we did before,’ Galder says through a Norwegian accent (Bracelin 2010).

[Answering a question about his name] V'gandr: [()typical Norwegian accent, medium-deep voice, diaphragmatic[]] Ole (Majesty 2004).

[About Liv Jagrell from Sister Sin] Her thick Swedish accent should detract from the music, but instead it adds punch and charisma to each track (Rose 2012).

[...] I could say [sic] Power Metal with a Norwegian accent all day! (alpentalic 2008)
Martyrdod appear exactly how you’d imagine—long hair, head banging and Swedish accents. [...] Listening to the vocalist’s Swedish accent was cool though and he seemed enthused to be playing here for the first time (Dietch 2012).

Trivium with a Swedish accent [Review title] (hells_unicorn 2013)

Should it not be Satan, not Santa? [In a Norwegian accent] (SockPuppetParody 2014)

[In the comments section of the video] Jorg4629: [H]ail from norway [sic] BTW we have worse [sic] english [sic] that that,, [sic]

SockPuppetParody: Haha! We did our best (worst) (SockPuppetParody 2014)

A similar situation is observed in the comments section of one of the two videos of ‘This Barren Skin’ of Funeral existing on YouTube as of this writing (FuneralBand 2007):

nickthemick2005: An excellent song indefinitley. [sic] The vocalist is awesome, especially with his heavy accent. Great song/video.

As seen many members of the audience and critics focus on the accent, as a result of the existence of this characteristic accent in music, it is also observable that comments from these two videos as well as some reviews of the album From These Wounds, which contains ‘This Barren Skin’, focus on the national Norwegian identity more often than one expects from a song in doom metal genre, as doom metal characteristically does not deal with issues related to nationality, heritage etc. These examples illustrate the national pride and attributed (from foreign sources) national identity to this song and album in question:

scottie5391: [...] The video is awesome. Guys carrying a casket through a dark Scandanavian [sic] forest and two people dancing in some kind of shrouds... how can you go wrong? (FuneralBand 2007)
SillyViking: I'm Proud of being a Norwegian Jeg er stolt over å være en nordmann
(FuneralBand 2007)

Dustin B: [N]orway has best black metal [and] now the best doom metal HAIL
NORWAY! [W]e just need a melodic death metal band then we got all of
[S]andinavia lol! (Mr. 2008)

Funeral is the sort of band that makes you wonder if anyone in Norway ever smiles
(Mavity n.d.).

Hooray for Norway, all for throwing a doom metal-leaning at me and making me like it! (Rapin n.d.)

In conclusion, this essay discussed possible problems that may arise from
doing a vocal accent analysis, and different theories and examples relating to identity
construction through language and popular music. The vocal accent can be a powerful
tool to construct a national identity in popular music as this essay observed from
different examples. When taking the vocal accent as a focal point of enquiry into
ethnomusicological research, one needs take heed of the potential ramifications that
may come up.
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