Critical Discourse Analysis about Bob Dylan's Lyrics

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Abstract

Bob Dylan is a famous folk musician and social activist in the 1960s. At the same time, as an excellent songwriter, Dylan's lyrics creation is deep and meaningful. His songs have received much attention from all over the world. As music can also be viewed as a discourse, this study adopts critical discourse analysis to investigate how music discourse influences people's thinking. Considering that corpus linguistics approaches can improve the objectivity of critical discourse analysis research, thus resulting in a more robust and valid set of findings, this paper employs a mixed research method. For this purpose, a corpus of 369 Bob Dylan's lyrics published from 1961 to 2012 was searched. This article analyzes the lyrics of these songs with corpus linguistics and discusses the social meaning behind them with social events, social practices, and social structures as the three layers outline which are from Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. Results show that "traveling", which can be seen as a rebellion against the world, is an important theme of Bob Dylan's writing. He always uses low-modality verbs to shorten the distance between him and his listeners. Society influences his work, and in contrast, many people was influenced by his songs.

Keywords

Bob Dylan, Critical discourse analysis, Corpus linguistics, Lyrics.

1. Introduction

Bob Dylan was born Robert Allen Zimmerman in May, 1941, in Duluth, Minnesota. He has long been considered as a mythical figure, a poet, a songwriter, a singer, an actor, and an author. Dylan has been presented as "one of the greatest musical and cultural figures, influences and voices of the time" (Marqusee, 2005). Dylan is a pioneer of folk-rock, he inherited a lot of traditional folk characteristics in his creation, presenting the sincerity and naturalness of life, voicing for the voiceless. Many of his songs are closely connected to society and his own experience. Friedman takes the life and music of Bob Dylan as touchstones for all individuals who seek self-fulfillment (2012). Bob Dylan and his music-art have elicited much interest from a wide array of writers, critics, and journalists, especially after he was nominated for the Nobel Prize, and most of these papers are inclined to consider the social and cultural influence of Dylan. But there is a paucity of study to view Dylan's lyrics as discourse, thus analyzing them in a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) way. As an attempt to fix this gap, this study adopts CDA to explore Dylan's music and his thinking.

Gee defines "a Discourse is a characteristic way of saying, doing, and being (2000:30)". And lyrics can be analyzed as a kind of discourse, as Schlegel views music as "philosophy in sounds" (quoted in Dahlhaus, 1985: 34). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), also called critical linguistics or critical language study, is a type of analytical research that primarily studies how social power abuse, ideological dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by oral and written discourse in the social context (van Dijk, 2001: 352). It is not only concerned with the meaning of a discourse, but also how the discourse produces the meaning through

language operation; hence further it aims to disclose how language and ideology mutually influence each other and how they are connected to power and social structure (Ding & Liao, 2001). The "core" of CDA remains the systematic and explicit analysis of the various structures and strategies of different levels of text and talk (Van Dijk, 2008). However, many CDA practitioners have tended to use qualitative techniques, and this approach has been criticized for being subjective and, not representative (Stubbs, 1997; Widdowson 1995). While corpus linguistics (CL) methods are quantitative and make use of statistical tests, which are performed by computer software. Therefore, an integrative combination of methodologies associated with corpus linguistics (CL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) was formed. In order to understand Bob's music, the following questions are addressed:

1 What kinds of cultural symbols show in Bob's songs?

2 What kinds of strategies Bob employed in his writings?

3 What is the socio-cultural context behind these cultural symbols?

2. Literature Review

For more than fifty years, Bob Dylan has attracted many people's attention. Obviously, he is an outstanding singer, but his literary achievement was not fully acknowledged by the majority. In 2016, he was awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature for "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition". Li thinks Bob's arrangement of black humor and symbolic images reflect the oral culture in American, which combines popular forms and serious themes together (2017). There are some investigations about Dylan's songs at home and abroad. Martinez focuses on Dylan's masculinity and performativity in some pieces of his songs (2020). Revisiting Dylan's lyrics within the tradition of American poetry, Chung argues that Dylan is a poet who weaved the 1960s American cultural and political issues with poetic languages born in the American grain (2017). Dylan's lyrics display remarkable literariness to the public and have established his songs as a valuable linguistic and cultural phenomenon (Lin, 2018). However, many of these papers focus on part of his lyrics. It is important to have a comprehensive investigation of his songs.

3. Theoretical Framework

Fairclough has made a great contribution to the field of critical discourse analysis. He combines discourse analysis with social theories, laying stress on changes in society and culture. He regards language as social practice and argues that "critical discourse analysis should analyze social interactions in a way which focuses upon their linguistic elements, and which sets out to show up their generally hidden determinants in the system of social relationships, as well as hidden effects they may have upon that system" (Fairclough, 1989: 5). He proposed a Three-Dimension Model, which views that discourse should be seen as simultaneously a language text, discourse practices and social-cultural practice (Fairclough, 1989:97). There are three steps of critical discourse analysis: the description of the language text, interpretation of discourse practice and explanation of the social practice.

3.1. Description of the language text

Linguistic description is the first stage of discourse analysis in Fairclough's Three-Dimension Model. This stage is the analysis of linguistic features, including vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure (Fairclough, 1992: 75). Vocabulary involves the choice of individual words in certain contexts. Grammar deals with how words combined in clauses and sentences can be studied from transitivity, modality, and thematic structures. Cohesion is concerned about how sentences are combined together，while text structure refers to the organizational features of texts.

3.2.   Interpretation of discourse practice

Social practice can be regarded as the process of constructing different social elements in our daily life, including actions and interactions, social relationships, individuals, the material world, and discourse. Interpretation serves as the mediator between description of text and explanation of social practice. Analysis of discourse practice is concerned with how a text is produced, in the socio-cognitive aspects.

3.3.   Explanation of social practice

Explanation of social practice is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social contexts—with the social determination of the process of production and interpretation, and their social effects (1989: 26). The construction of discourse is inevitably influenced by the social contexts, values, and culture, etc. Therefore, in this stage, discourse should be seen as a social practice that has been influenced by the ideology, culture, history, and politics of a certain society. The explanation should be the analysis of the social practice with the aim of revealing the power and ideology and social-cultural factors hidden in the contexts.

4.   Method

First, with the assistance of AntConc 3.5.9., a corpus was established to have a descriptive analysis of Dylan's songs. The first step was to understand the meaning of his lyrics. The main data resources are 369 texts from a classical collection of lyrics from Bob Dylan's 31 albums over fifty years (Dylan, 2014). In order to have more realistic data, the titles of these songs were excluded from the corpus. Some abbreviations of the original edition were extended for coding and analyzing. For example, "ol'"was replaced by "old", "an'" was replaced by "and" in the coding process. For the disparities between the written version and the singing version, this article takes the written version as standard. After that, Fairclough's Three-Dimension Model was used to show how the discourse produces meanings through language operation, then to discover how social events influence his creation. The top 50 lexical keywords are searched to grasp the theme of his writing. Modal auxiliary verbs are also calculated to show his attitudes.

5.   Results

5.1.   Description of Dylan's Lyrics

It is well acknowledged that lexical words contain more specific meanings than functional words. So, an analysis of the top 50 lexical keywords is needed, which are listed in the order of their keyness on Table 1. In this process, nouns and their plural forms are seen as one word and so are the words and their capital forms. In total, there are 34798 lemma tokens and 5116 lemma types.

The top 40 lexical keyword has some characteristics. First, only one adjective is included in this list, "hard", which occurs 109 times in Dylan's lyrics. The most frequently used words are nouns and verbs. There are 22 nouns and 19 verbs in the top 40 list (Some words can be nouns or verbs). Next, a large proportion of the verbs are Dynamic Verb and relate to "travelling", such as "walk", and "leave". Third, we can divide the nouns into three categories detailed in Table 2. (1) religious nouns, "Lord" and "God", which appear 118 and 106 times respectively. Because they are synonyms, so it's the most regularly used word; (2) Words that express personal feelings, such as "mind", "heart", and so on ;(3) Words about nature, such as "road", "light", "wind".

Table 1. Top 40 lexical keyword list of Bob Dylan's songs

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Rank	Keyword	Frequency
1	time	378	21	road	125
2	love	348	22	light	123
3	baby	258	23	friend	122
4	night	238	24	cry	121
5	day	234	25	door	121
6	walk	215	26	woman	121
7	heart	196	27	lord	118
8	hear	190	28	fall	112
9	leave	177	29	lie	111
10	eye	166	30	life	110
11	stand	160	31	play	110
12	hand	156	32	hard	109
13	break	148	33	roll	109
14	mind	142	34	god	106
15	call	138	35	die	105
16	feel	137	36	dream	105
17	blow	133	37	wind	105
18	head	131	38	stay	98
19	people	126	39	sun	98
20	town	126	40	sing	97

Table 2. Three categories of the nouns

Religious words	Words about nature	Words that express personal feelings
Lord, God	night, day, people, town, road, light, door, wind, sun	love, baby, life, eye, heart, hand, head, mind, friend, woman, dream

5.2. Interpretation of Dylan's Attitudes

In contrast to a conversation, which is sequential, music is usually simultaneous, and this is at the heart of music's great power to unite people and create group feelings (van Leeuwen, 2012). Fairclough (1989:126) has pointed out that modality relates to the speaker's or writer's objectivity, which is a major component of interpersonal meta-function. Therefore, modality often probes into the interpretative level to investigate whether and to what degree the reporters deliver their attitudes or behaviors to interfere with readers' ideologies or attitudes. Modality consists of modal verbs, modal adjectives, modal adverbs, notional verbs, etc. The present research takes the modal auxiliary verbs as analytical tools to investigate how Bob Dylan delivers his attitudes and feelings.

Modal auxiliary verbs can signal a higher or lower degree of pressure on the others to carry out a command or a higher or lower degree of certainty about the validity of the proposition (Halliday, 1985: 149). There are three categories of modal auxiliary verbs. High-value modal verbs are often represented by "must, have to, and need". "Will, should, and would", which refer to be supposed to, are median-value modal verbs. "Might, may, and could" are low-value verbs. The proportions of modal verbs in all values are calculated, which is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. The proportions of modal verbs in Bob Dylan's songs

Value	words	frequency	proportion
1 low	may/might	196	51.75%
	can/could	958	
2 median	will/would	839	41.84%
	should/shall	90	
	ought to	4	
3 high	need	1	6.5%
	have to	10	
	must	132	
total		2230	100%

As we can see from Table 3, low and median value verbs account for the largest part of the total modal verbs, which are 51.75% and 41.84% respectively. The use of low and median value modal words can shorten the distance with listeners and lower polarity. High-value verbs are less frequently used and only take 6.5% of the total modal verbs. At the same time, the minimal use of high-value verbs can make the sentence more convincing and persuasive. Dylan's songs thus can stimulate people's emotional identity.

5.3. Explanation of cultural background

Culture not only influences how people perceive the world and themselves, but how people use language. Thus, when studying how social practices influence the creation of the lyrics, cultural factors should be taken into consideration. In the 1960s, the United States experienced great changes. The mainstream values of America are rejudged. The frequent outbreak wars made disillusionment spread throughout the United States; the civil rights movement of the 1960s raised very often; and technology is powering forward. Bob Dylan, like other young people at that time, is gradually rethinking how the world we living in works. After WWⅡ, Americans were suddenly brought to face a completely new world in which old rules and guidelines turned out to be helpless. After the Cold War, the anti-war movement grew and militancy and escalates during the Vietnam years. Young people took the counter-culture movement to realize their own value. People agree that"Bobby is very much a product of the beat generation (Sheldon, 2011: 174)."

Not only the time influenced Bob Dylan, Dylan himself also had a significant personal

impact on millions of his fans and followers around the world. Dylan's fans have related to how Dylan and his music have in some direct and specifically personal way in their own life-journey experience (William, 2015). In *The Death of Emmett Till*, he voices colored people to fight for their rights and freedom; *Masters of War and John Brown* shows his anti-war belief. Bob Dylan and his songs connected to the black civil rights movement, the free speech movement on campus, and the anti-war movement. Rock and revolution seem to be going hand in hand (Zhang & Xiong, 2008).

6. Discussion

6.1. Traveling, Religion and Personal Feelings

From the high proportion of "god" and "lord" in Dylan's lyrics, we know that Dylan was deeply influenced by Western religion. And many metaphors in his songs come from *Bible* (Ricks, 2003). Bob Dylan uses many words related to "traveling", such as "walk", "leave", etc. Traveling

has become an important theme in his songs. "Wind" and "blow", which represent the difficulties and struggles of his journey, appeared very often. In *Farewell*, he wrote, "Oh the weather is against me and the wind blows hard." Dylan said when he left, he was "like Columbus going off into the desolate Atlantic (2004:99)." Dylan's wanderings without home is to question political instability and uncertain future (Liu, 2017). Nouns about nature also are highly used, showing listeners and his fans the beautiful scenery during his journey. Singing for nature can be seen as a kind of rebellion to industrial society. Dylan also used songs to focus on the feelings of unique individuals. He challenged accepted beliefs, and he used symbolism and themes drawn from nature.

6.2. Low modality values and social status

Dylan uses fewer low and median modal verbs than high modal verbs, which makes his voice more convincing. By using these strategies, his beliefs and way of thinking resonate with the youngsters. Ideally speaking, modality values have nothing to do with the social role because the speaker can have an objective judgment on something. However, in a real-life situation, the modality value chosen by the speaker is often constrained by the social roles of the speaker and listener(s). Speakers with a high social status are inclined to adopt a high modality value. If the speaker and the listener are in the same position and don't know each other, they will adopt a low modality value to help establish a friendly atmosphere. For Bob Dylan and his listeners, he adopts a low modality value strategy to distance himself and his fans.

6.3. Dylan and his influence

Historical, social, and political factors can shape the construction of Dylan's works, in which Dylan's rebellion, fragmentation, and mystery were key features that destabilized the hegemonic models of performativity that prevailed during the Cold War. In contrast. Dylan influenced many of his fans through his music. Roland Barthes wrote that even "the 'grain' of the voice" signifies, or 'indexes' the body from which it emerges during a performance, and is potentially capable of affecting others" (1977). Calling on returning to nature, showing great hatred of wars, and by adopting a low modality value strategy, Dylan unites the people of that time. Folk-rock music provides a background, often referred to as a 'soundtrack' of emotion, pleasure, meaning for the lives, experiences, and memories of millions of fans and listeners the world over. Just like Dylan, many of his fans are on the road to finding a new way of life.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Findings

In this study, a mixed research method was employed to investigate how Bob Dylan and his music influence his listeners. Critical discourse analysis is used to discuss how music influences people's thinking and doing. Bob Dylan's 369 lyrics are collected and constructed as a corpus. The texts show that Bob Dylan concentrates on personal feelings, religion, and traveling, which signals that he wants to get away from the recurrent unsatisfied world. As for social practice, he uses low-value modality verbs to create a friendly atmosphere between him and his listeners. It should be noted that historical, social, and cultural factors will influence his works. Wars, injustices, consumerism, and industry, force many young people like Dylan to find a place to express themselves. The sense of identity makes people unite and shaped the future of the United States.

7.2. Limitations

Due to the limit of time and the knowledge of the author, there are some limitations of this study. First, this study, although covers a large number of Dylan's works, didn't cover all of his works. Second, it is concerned with analytic tools. This paper only investigates the role of modality

verbs. Analytic tools like nominalization, transformation, and transitivity have not been adopted in the present research. A further study could apply these linguistic tools in the study to enrich the findings.

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