GOD IS A DJ A CORPUS-BASED APPROACH TO CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH SONG LYRICS

Mihaela DUMA, Assistant Lecturer, Petroleum-Gas University of Ploieşti

Abstract: Music is widely assumed as being God's universal language. Similarly to language, music is then not only defined by sounds, but also by its linguistic content, namely by lyrics. Thus, besides its aesthetic attributes, music also displays culturally significant meanings to the messages it foregrounds. Since religion acts as a moral and ethical benchmark in almost all areas of life, and people constantly relate their political, social and cultural behaviour to religious beliefs, it should be challenging to find out how these beliefs are disclosed in song lyrics. The aim of this study is hence to explore several popular English song lyrics and find out how they relate to religious beliefs by focusing on the structure and content of such discourse. Special attention shall be given to recurrent religious lexical items and their collocative patterns in order to illustrate more subtle aspects of meaning, such as semantic preference and semantic prosody.

Keywords: religious lexical items, contextual meaning, collocative patterns, semantic prosody, song lyrics

We are by nature spiritual human beings. Moreover, spirituality, as part of our nonmaterial legacy, could be considered the invisible backbone of life itself. However, in a society that is evermore dominated and defined by consumerism, where bread and circus apparently set the scene for the so much craved social validations, there seems to be little time and interest for peeling off the superficial layers of such values and getting to the core of the genuine and fundamental spiritual values which practically validate us as human beings. The question is whether this modern commercial-corporate mentality has really washed off all traces of spirituality within humans. Or, could we even discuss the non-existence of spirituality without validating first its very existence? After all, we cannot debate over either material, palpable things or abstract, intangible concepts that do not exist. What we can do nonetheless is measure and evaluate their impact on daily narratives. Narrative here is understood as a social form of linguistic manifestation of people's attitudes, beliefs, values and ideas. In this reading, song lyrics can also be regarded as narratives as long as one of their main raisons d'être is to depict and bring into the foreground people's ideological points of view on most various and complex socio-cultural matters.

Considering spirituality a subtle, but constant benchmark in shaping the socio-cultural character of people, the aim of this paper is to explore the narrative of song lyrics focusing primarily on the religious lexical items featured within. Having this purpose in mind, a random selection of 50 popular English songs has been downloaded from the Web (http://www.azlyrics.com/). All songs belong to well-known musicians, or music bands of both English as well as American origin, such as Sting, The Doors, Madonna, Faithless, Pink, Nirvana, Christina Aguilera, Depeche Mode, Eric Clapton, Pink Floyd, Bob Dylan, U2, Robbie Williams, Jay-Z and Queen just to name a few. The only criterion that all songs were supposed to meet has been to contain the lexical item *God*. After converting each song to an individual

BDD-V543 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:19 UTC)

plain text file and after deleting all phrases and choruses that were repeated three times or more within the same song, a computerized text analysis provided by AntConc software has been applied in order to give us a full and proper quantitative account on the frequency of occurrence and the collocational patterns featured by these particular lexical items. Besides the valuable linguistic input that such analyses usually reveal, it shall be challenging to see whether the observed lexical concordances have an echo in larger corpora, such as the British national Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). This technique of matching texts against large and representative language corpora is most valued among corpus linguists as it "supplies the 'bottom up' *textual evidence* for what has until now been regarded as 'top down' *prior knowledge* in the act of reading". (Louw 1993:161)

Textual evidence has been playing a fundamental role in recent linguistic research promoted within the field of corpus linguistics. The most remarkable contribution put forward by this school of thought could be encapsulated in Sinclair's dictum "trust the text". (Sinclair 2004) Trusting the text has given rise to a radical shift of perspective in linguistic meaning interpretation challenging and ultimately compromising the traditional and even cognitive approaches to meaning which advocate the independent word meaning. Research on empirical data obtained from naturally occurring language instances gathered in corpora has highlighted that words do not possess meaning in themselves, but rather in combination with other words around them. Meaning becomes hence a joint contribution of words in combinations, reinforcing the postulate according to which meanings have words and not the other way around. Moreover, as empirical research has revealed, most words seem to attract almost exclusively only a certain category of words, preferring thus the vicinity of either positive or negative words and building up eventually some so-called 'good' and 'bad' prosodies. (Louw 1993: 171) When outlining semantic prosody, Louw envisages it as a "consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates." (idem: 157) Therefore, semantic prosodies can only become visible through direct observation on samples of genuine language instantiations and they cannot thereby be observed, or accessed through human intuition or introspection. All the more reason to trust the text.

Even though corpus linguists foster the idea that meaning is to be found in the text (Sinclair 2004), in each unique linguistic instantiation (Firth 1957), we believe that meaning should also be explored beyond the text's linguistic surface (Halliday 1978, 1985; Kramsch 2009). Observing merely song lyrics, as in our case, going beyond the textual surface could bring in valuable information about the socio-cultural and even political circumstances within which this particular linguistic event is nested, contributing thus to a more accurate and complex meaning interpretation. Hence, text considered in the larger socio-cultural setting in which it is embedded could add further valuable layers to its aura of meaning. Such an exhaustive socio-cultural approach to meaning would be of particular value for any language-centered study, it is nevertheless exceeding our aims in this present paper.

Before starting our proper song lyrics analysis and, while considering all the previously mentioned aspects, we would like to highlight that the meaning we are seeking for in this research is to be found beyond the physical boundaries of the proposed lexical items, more precisely within their "extended units of meaning." (Sinclair 2004) According to the Sinclairian lexical framework and as suggested previously in this paper, words are by nature contextual entities, they are not independent or isolated, on the contrary, they are interconnected.

BDD-V543 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:19 UTC)

Therefore, besides the evident contribution of the *core lexical item* itself to meaning construction and interpretation, subtler meaning potential should be observed through the lenses provided by the other units of meaning: *collocation* – co-occurrence of two or more words, *colligation* – co-occurrence of grammatical choices, *semantic prosody* – positive or negative "aura of meaning" and *semantic preference* or *association* – semantically related words which tend to attract each other. (idem) Considering all these aspects, no theoretical hypotheses shall be outlined and proposed in advance as the text itself shall guide us towards a linguistically reliable outcome.

The first stage in our analysis is to build a collocational network for the lexical item we are interested in observing. We shall however discuss only those collocations which occur more than two times. Any other instantiations, because of their low frequency, could suggest singularity of style rather than representativeness, or reliability of linguistic evidence and shall therefore be omitted.

Hence, within the selected song lyrics the lexical item *God* amounts to a number of 85 concordance hits. The following table shows an overview of the most frequent extended collocational patterns built around the core or central node of *God*:

Fre-quen-cy	N2, N3, … - position to the left	N1 – position to the left	Central node	N1 – position to the right	N2, N3, … – position to the right
10			**God**	***is***	a DJ love great good warning the nations warning them
9		***if***	**God**	is could had was 's	a DJ talk a name one of us on our side
5	oh can I be as	***my***	**God**	 you	 must be sleeping
5		***oh***	**God**	where	'd you go?
3			**God**	***gave***	me the sunshine you style Noah the rainbow
3		***dear***	**God**	I you how	was terribly lost 're the only North Star have you been then?
3	do you believe nothing is perfect	***in*** ***in***	**God** **God**	 's	 perfect plan
3		***with***	**God**	on	our side its side my side

Table 1. Extended collocational patterns in the song lyrics corpus

BDD-V543 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:19 UTC)

Listing these collocations is nevertheless not sufficient unless we put them into a larger textual environment and observe how they are employed. In the following section of this paper we shall give special attention to each of the above mentioned collocations. An overall acknowledgement however emerges from a quick scanning of the table. By observing these most frequent concordances listed in the table, it becomes obvious that there is a clear patterning tendency to the left of the node rather than to the right. We shall further see whether this fact plays a role or not in the meaning construction and interpretation of the extended collocational string.

God is

The most frequent collocation is realized to the right of the central node *God*, where the first position (N1 to the right) is occupied by the word *is*. In terms of semantic preference, the noun + verb collocation *God is* is followed by a description, surfacing in our example twice as a noun (*a DJ*/ *love*) and twice as an adjective (*great*/ *good*). Only once the verbal component of the collocation is part of a complex tense form, namely of a present tense continuous form. While in most of the instances God is passively described, mostly in a positive manner, the last concordance reveals a dynamic God, who is actively involved in some sort of present action.

Nevertheless, one of the mentioned instantiations deserves some further considerations. Unlike the other descriptions, the one which occurs most frequently, *God is a DJ*, seems intuitively to deviate from an expected pattern. Should we observe Louw's definition of irony, then, this concordance is an evident case of intended irony: "[i]rony relies for its effect on a collocative clash which is perceived, albeit subliminally, by the reader." (1993: 157) Louw goes on and argues that in order for a potential collocative clash to be well grounded and credible "there must be a sufficiently consistent background of expected collocation against which the instantiation of irony becomes possible." (idem) Such consistent background can only be found in large corpora, such as the BNC, which is a 100 million of word collection of written and spoken language samples, or the COCA, which comprises 450 million words. After consulting both corpora, we could infer that while the BNC does not list this concordance at all, the COCA lists it twice, both entries referring however to the same matter, more precisely to the name of a single belonging to a famous contemporary American artist called Pink. It could also be interesting to mention that the concordance *God is a …* has 31 entries in the BNC and 246 entries in the COCA corpus. As displayed in the reference corpora, most entries are of the *God is a + noun* (*spirit*, *mystery*, *person*, *woman*, *gift*, *source*) or *God is a + adjective + noun* (*loving father*, *mighty weapon*, *spiritual being*) type. Most instantiations reveal a positive attitude, albeit there enough are cases where negative feelings are fostered.

If God

Moving forward to the next collocation ranked in terms of frequency, *if God*, we can notice that most of the times when this collocation is followed by the verb *to be*, the latter is employed in the present tense form, conveying thus the idea advanced by the conditional sentence type 1 which predicates that the expressed condition is possible and also very likely to be fulfilled. In such a reading, God seems very likely to be a DJ and also to be on our side.

BDD-V543 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:19 UTC)

Once again, the former instantiation *if God is a DJ* can be interpreted as ironic, while the latter *if God's on our side* seems more commonplace.

The other patterns which complete the *if God* collocation consist of several verbs (*can, to have*, and *to be*) used in the subjunctive mood as required by rules of the conditional sentence type 2 which predicates that the expressed condition is possible, but very unlikely to happen. Considering these colligational aspects, the semantic prosody featured by all of these instances is a negative one, the intended meaning expressing therefore regret, doubt and disbelief: *if God could talk*, but he cannot, *if God had a name*, but he does not and *if God was one of us*, but he is not.

In the reference corpora, the collocation *if God* reveals 797 occurrences in the COCA and 116 in the BNC corpus. In terms of frequency, when comparing patterns like *if God is* with *if God was* it becomes evident that the former type is preferred to the latter one. While the former records 16 entries in the BNC and 119 entries in the COCA, the latter only shows up 5 times in the BNC and 46 times in the COCA. Beyond statistics, this means that language users tend to entrust God's potential of being what or how they expect him to be.

My God

Collocations of this type are very often encountered in real life language instantiations. Most of the times however, they are used in contexts with no religious meaning or reference whatsoever. The patterns displayed by our analysis reinforce this statement. Only one out of 5 concordances makes clear reference to God as a spiritual entity: *can I be as my God?*. The use of the modal verb *can* conveys the idea of insecurity and doubt, exposing thus a reticent and therefore negative attitude.

The other use of the collocation *my God* reveals an apparently unexpected interpretation as it can express both positive and negative attitudes in the form of surprise, disgust, outrage or protest. Skimming through the 1,136 examples provided by the BNC corpus and other 7,715 examples provided by the COCA corpus, we can reason out that such instantiations prove nothing else but the great receptiveness and fluid character of lexical items in general and religious lexical items in particular.

Just to briefly exemplify the fluidity of language the *oh my God* collocation has recently become *omigod* which surprisingly enough has 79 entries in the COCA corpus, but none in the BNC. Could this mean that Americans are more open to linguistic and consequently to socio-cultural change than the English? Such examples nevertheless stand for the speaker's openness to coin new words, disregarding thus the sometimes-rigid cultural tradition revealed through language.

Another aspect worth mentioning when referring to this particular collocation is that in most western European languages the word *God* collocates with the first person singular possessive adjective: *my God* (English), *mein Gott* (German), *mio Dio* (Italian), *mi Dios* (Spanish), *mon Dieu* (French), *Istenem* (Hungarian) and, moreover, such expressions can be used and are frequently used just as in English, with no religious reference. In Romanian however, there is no such equivalent expression like *Dumnezeul meu*. This issue could reveal cultural and social aspects worth to be approached in a future detailed linguistic investigation.

BDD-V543 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:19 UTC)

Oh God

In the examples featured by our analysis, this type of collocation is followed by a question or request. *Oh God where'd you go?* for example is a question that reveals some sense of abandonment inducing hence a negative attitude. The interjection *oh* softens somewhat the direct approach towards God which otherwise would have been more abrupt and would have possibly sounded more aggressive.

Surprisingly or not, this collocation has 1,241 entries in the BNC and only 1,136 in the COCA corpus. While obviously Americans prefer the *oh my God* variant in order to articulate their surprise or horror, the English are more comfortable with using the *oh God* collocation.

God gave

The collocation *God gave* is in our analysis followed by either a pronoun (*me*, *you*) or a proper name (*Noah*). The idea of God giving someone (an animate human being- *me, you, Noah*) something (abstract, nonmaterial such as *the sunshine, style* and *the rainbow*) is not a very unfamiliar one. Out of the 24 entries displayed by the BNC and 378 by the COCA more than 90% are observing this pattern. What is interesting however is that most of the abstract things God gives away are disclosing a positive, optimistic and pleasing attitude.

Dear God

Similarly to the *(oh) my God* and *oh God* collocations, this collocation is used in our small corpus as an opening stance for a request or a rhetorical question. Such statements can reveal both positive attitudes, like surprise or astonishment, and negative ones, like consternation and stupefaction.

Nonetheless, patterns like *dear + proper name* are considered to be quite familiar in everyday language use and, as corpus research has revealed, they are mostly employed in written discourse. Browsing through the 8,411 concordances displayed in the COCA and the 8,493 ones displayed in the BNC we can reason out that the great majority of *dear + proper name* patterns are foregrounded within written discourse. *Dear God*, on the other side, seems to be exclusively used in oral discourse in both consulted corpora. While the BNC displays 151 entries for this collocation, the COCA displays 430. In most of the uses, the general sense is that of an unpleasant and undesired surprise, fostering thus a negative attitude.

In God

This collocation patterns both to the left as well as to the right in our small corpus, showing no particular features different from the ones uncovered in larger representative corpora. Hence, when patterned to its left, this collocation is usually preceded by a verb such as *believe, (dis)trust, delight* and more rarely by a noun such as *faith, brother*. The 555 BNC concordance hits and the 3,046 COCA ones show a clear manifestation tendency of *verb + in God* like patterns. Most verbs within such linguistic structures display a positive attitude.

When patterned to its right however, there is a pervasive trend specific for possessive sequences such as *in God's + noun*. Most nouns employed *plan, will, (good) grace, providence* are revealing positive attitudes towards God. There are, however, nouns like *name* which when employed after this collocation confer the sense of a negative surprise.

BDD-V543 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:19 UTC)

With God

The last collocation discussed in this paper seems to be a very pervasive one in language. The reference corpora display 2,357 entries in the COCA corpus and, respectively, 409 in the BNC corpus. In our corpus however, *with God* is patterned to its right being followed by the preposition *on* which, at its turn, is part of a quite restricted collocational pattern, namely *on + someone's side*. Surprisingly enough, the reference corpora display only 20 entries in the COCA and 2 entries in the BNC that feature patterns like *with God on*. Moreover, while in the BNC neither of the two examples furnished (*with God on his island*, *with God on the beach*) match the pattern encountered in our corpus, at least 50% of the COCA featured examples are similar to the one in our corpus.

To conclude, our analysis has revealed that the narrative specific to song lyrics is not essentially different from the everyday linguistic discourse. With only one exception, *God is a DJ*, all the other collocational patterns displayed in our corpus have a faithful match in the larger and more representative corpora. Hence, the lexical item *God* seems to preserve its linguistic behaviour even in types of narratives which because of their artistic character are somehow intuitively expected to be more colourful and rare. *God* is probably a too powerful and overwhelming symbol in people's perception and is therefore less prone to more frequent variations albeit, as corpus data has revealed, it is extremely often used in expressions which do not qualify for the religious register.

A noteworthy hypothesis emerges however from our analysis and this can be epitomized in the judgment according to which the more extensions we add to a collocation, the more refined and nuanced the overall meaning seems to become. In this reading, the boundaries of meaning are fluid and therefore constantly shifting, revealing thus a vivid and innovative language.

Bibliography

Firth, J.R. 1957. *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*. London: Oxford University Press

Halliday, M.A.K. 1978. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold

Halliday, M.A.K.; Hassan, R. 1985. *Language, Context and Text: a Social Semiotic Perspective.* Victoria, Australia: Deakin University Press

Kramsch, Claire. 2009. *Language and Culture.* Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press

Louw, Bill. 1993. "Irony in the Text or Insincerity in the Writer? The Diagnostic Potential of Semantic Prosodies". *Text and Technology. In Honour of John Sinclair*. Ed by Mona Baker. 157-176. Philadelphia/ Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company

Sinclair, John McH. (edited with Ronald Carter). 2004. *Trust the Text. Language, Corpus and Discourse*. London: Routledge

http://www.azlyrics.com/ (last accessed on November 22, 2013)

http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/ (last accessed on November 22, 2013)

http://corpus2.byu.edu/coca/ (last accessed on November 22, 2013)

BDD-V543 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:10:19 UTC)