

LINGUISTIC IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND STYLE OF SPEECH IN CHARLI XCX'S 360: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Charli XCX constructs a distinct social identity through deliberate linguistic choices in her 2024 single "360". (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) framework of identity construction through language, as well as theories of style shifting and linguistic selfbranding, this qualitative-descriptive research analyses the song's lyrics alongside visual elements present in the official music video. Close reading and discourse analysis were deployed to excavate layers of meaning embedded in the text. The findings reveal that Charli XCX strategically deploys register variation, intertextual references, and direct address to position herself simultaneously as cultural provocateur and insider voice within hyperpop aesthetics. The study argues that her linguistic manoeuvres function not merely as stylistic ornamentation, but as deliberate sociolinguistic acts that negotiate power, authenticity, and belonging in contemporary pop culture discourse.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Identity Construction, Style Shifting, Linguistic Self-Branding, Charli XCX.

INTRODUCTION

Language, in its most restless and unpredictable dimension, is never neutral. It breathes ideology, crackles with social meaning, and nowhere is this more electrically visible than in contemporary pop music, where a single pronoun choice or a strategically broken grammatical rule can crystallise an entire cultural identity in three minutes or less. Pop songs are not merely entertainment artefacts; they are condensed sociolinguistic performances, sites where artists negotiate who they are, who they speak for, and crucially, who they are speaking at.

Among the artists who have taken this negotiation most deliberately and most audaciously into their craft, Charlotte Emma Anning, better known as Charli XCX, occupies a particularly fascinating position. Her 2024 single "360," released as part of the widely discussed BRAT album cycle, is a text that rewards serious linguistic scrutiny. On the surface, it is a bravado-soaked anthem of self-positioning within celebrity and fashion culture. But beneath that glossy exterior runs a sophisticated web of register play, identity markers, and stylistic choices that actively construct a social persona, one that is simultaneously exclusive and inviting, elitist and ironic, hyper-aware and gleefully unserious.

Sociolinguistics has long recognized that language and identity cannot be separated so easily. Word choices, sentence structures, even the intonation reflected in the lyrics are all social artifacts. However, in the context of modern pop music, especially within the hyperpop ecosystem that serves as Charli XCX's natural habitat, this dimension becomes much more intense because the audience actively participates in shaping that meaning through social media, fan communities, and viral discourse.

The central research question guiding this investigation is: How does Charli XCX construct her social identity through linguistic choices in the song "360"? This question necessarily branches into smaller inquiries, specifically what lexical and grammatical

features mark her speech style in this text, how register shifting operates across different sections of the lyric, and in what ways the language of "360" functions as a form of self-branding that consolidates her position in a particular cultural niche.

The significance of this study extends beyond mere fan-academic interest in a single pop song. As English Language Education increasingly grapples with questions of language in digital and popular media contexts, analysing how artists like Charli XCX use language as a tool of social positioning offers students and researchers a viscerally immediate case study in applied sociolinguistics. The song is a classroom in itself, if one knows how to read it.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, appropriate for research whose primary aim is to illuminate, in fine-grained detail, the sociolinguistic mechanisms at work in a specific text. Qualitative approaches, as (Creswell, 2014) emphasises, are particularly suited to investigations that seek to understand phenomena in their natural complexity rather than to measure them against predetermined quantitative benchmarks.

The choice to work descriptively rather than prescriptively reflects a commitment to following the data wherever it leads, without imposing a rigid theoretical template onto the text before the analysis begins. The theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2 function as productive lenses that make certain features of the text visible and analytically tractable. To ensure trustworthiness of the analysis, the researchers engaged in prolonged engagement with the data through multiple rounds of reading, peer debriefing between the two authors, and member-checking of interpretive claims against the full lyrical text.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Markers in the Lyrics

The most immediately striking feature of "360" as a sociolinguistic text is its density of identity markers, linguistic features that explicitly or implicitly signal the speaker's social position and affiliations. The song positions Charli XCX from its very opening not as a supplicant seeking recognition, but as someone already at the center of cultural production. This is crystallised in the opening declaration of Verse 1:

I went my own way and I made it / I'm your favourite reference, baby (Charli XCX, 2024)

The past tense construction "I went" and "I made it" is sociolinguistically significant: the achievement is framed as already complete, irreversible, beyond debate. There is no hedging, no modal softening, no invitation to dispute. Identity here, in Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) terms, is not being negotiated but proclaimed. The second line further complicates this with the possessive construction "your favourite reference," where the artist positions herself as the cultural source material from which others derive inspiration, inverting the usual power dynamic between celebrity and fan.

The choice of lexicon throughout the song is culturally directed with great specificity. The reference to "Gabbriette" in "Call me Gabbriette, you're so inspired" functions as what might be called a linguistic shibboleth: a marker fully legible only to listeners already embedded within a particular cultural circle of fashion and alternative celebrity. This mechanism of inclusion and exclusion operates simultaneously, in a single breath, producing meaning on different registers for different listeners.

There is also conspicuous use of hyperbole and absolutist constructions throughout the

lyrics. The claim "I'm everywhere, I'm so Julia" performs total cultural omnipresence, while "Legacy is undebated" forecloses the very possibility of challenge. In the sociolinguistic literature, such performative declarations of selfhood have been analysed as what (Goffman, 1959) termed face-work: the linguistic management of social identity in interaction. The absolutism itself is the performance.

The pronoun architecture of "360" is equally revealing. The song deploys a complex interplay of first-person singular, second-person direct address, and third-person references that position different social actors in specific relational configurations. Perhaps the most rhetorically dense instance appears in the chorus:

When you're in the mirror, do you like what you see? / When you're in the mirror, you're just looking at me (Charli XCX, 2023)

Here the "you" and "me" perform a startling collapse of identities: the listener who looks at themselves in the mirror is told they are looking at Charli XCX. This is not merely bravado; it is a sophisticated sociolinguistic manoeuvre that positions the artist as the constitutive reference point for the listener's own self-perception. The second person that began as intimate direct address pivots into something more confrontational and philosophically provocative.

Style Shifting in "360"

Perhaps the most analytically rich dimension of "360" from a sociolinguistic standpoint is the consistent and purposeful style shifting that operates throughout the track. Charli XCX moves between at least three distinct registers within the space of a single song, and those movements are themselves meaningful acts of social positioning.

The first register is a high-fashion declarative register, characterised by assertive diction, concise and cutting sentences, and a tone that makes no apologies. Lines such as "I set the tone, it's my design" and "No style? I can't relate" exemplify this: short, categorical, delivered without qualification. This register indexes the world of runways and magazine editorials, and crucially it performs the arrogance of genuine insider status.

The second register is vernacular digital, a style drawing heavily on internet slang and the casualised grammar that characterises social media discourse. The phrase "You gon' jump if A. G. made it" demonstrates this clearly: the grammatically contracted "gon'" and the casual conditional structure collapse the distance between artist and fan, signalling participation in the same informal communicative space. This register does something quite different from the first: it reaches toward the listener, collapsing hierarchical distance.

The third and most analytically interesting register might be called an ironic meta-register, visible in lines such as "666 with a princess streak." The juxtaposition of satanic numerology with the diminutive "princess streak" is self-aware to the point of self-parody: it comments on the genre of the daring pop persona even as it enacts one. This triple register play is, (Coupland, 2007) framework of style as social action, a sophisticated form of stylisation: the deliberate deployment of a recognisable style with sufficient ironic distance to signal that the speaker is fully aware of what they are doing.

Language as Social Persona Construction

Drawing these strands together, it becomes possible to articulate how precisely the linguistic choices in "360" construct Charli XCX's social persona. The persona that emerges is not monolithic but deliberately multifaceted: she is simultaneously insider and commentator, participant and ironist, the center of a cultural moment and its most acute critic.

(Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) principle of adequation and distinction is operating at full

capacity here. Charli XCX's language positions her as adequately similar to her core audience: speaking their slang, referencing their cultural touchpoints, inhabiting their ironic register. Simultaneously she marks herself as distinct through her access to elite fashion and celebrity culture, her self-possession, and her refusal to soften or qualify her declarations. The lyric "If you love it, if you hate it / I don't fucking care what you think" is the starkest expression of this distinction: it performs radical indifference to outside validation while simultaneously addressing the outside with great care.

What makes the construction of this persona linguistically effective is that it never feels like a transparent marketing exercise, even though in a certain sense it actually is. This is exactly where (Thornborrow & Montgomery, 2010) dimension of linguistic self-branding becomes relevant: the strongest brands are those that feel like an authentic expression of a self, even when, especially when, they are the product of highly conscious linguistic work.

The music video reinforces and complicates these linguistic constructions in productive ways. The visual iconography of the video, its aesthetic of hyperreal glamour tinged with deliberate irony, mirrors precisely the register play occurring at the level of language. The visual and the linguistic are co-constitutive of the social persona being assembled; neither can be fully understood without the other.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of Charli XCX's "360" has demonstrated that contemporary pop song lyrics constitute a rich and underexplored terrain for sociolinguistic investigation. Through the deployment of (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) identity construction framework, theories of style shifting, and concepts of linguistic self-branding, it has been possible to illuminate the sophisticated mechanisms by which language in this text constructs a complex and multiply-positioned social persona.

The main findings of this study can be summarised in three key statements. First, the lyrics of "360" are laden with linguistic identity markers that function as indicators of social position and cultural affiliation, simultaneously operating as mechanisms of audience inclusion and exclusion. Second, the text features deliberate and meaningful style shifting between at least three different registers, and the transitions between these registers themselves constitute sociolinguistically significant acts. Third, the overall linguistic project of this song functions as an effective form of self-branding because it manages to feel authentic even while executing highly calculated representational strategies.

The implications for English Language Education are worth noting explicitly. Analysing texts like "360" in educational settings offers students direct, viscerally engaging encounters with applied sociolinguistic concepts. The abstract principles of identity construction, register variation, and discourse positioning become concretely visible in a text that students are likely to already know and have strong feelings about. There is real pedagogical power in that familiarity.

This research also opens several avenues for further investigation. A comparative analysis between "360" and other songs from the BRAT album 2014, or between Charli XCX and other hyperpop artists, could yield broader insights into the sociolinguistic features that define this genre. Similarly, a reception analysis examining how listeners from various social and cultural backgrounds interpret the linguistic identity markers in this song would provide a highly valuable complementary dimension.

Language is never innocent. In "360," every word choice, every register shift, every

pronoun placement is doing sociolinguistic work of considerable sophistication. Charli XCX has, whether by instinct or design or some electric combination of both, produced a text that rewards the kind of sustained linguistic attention this study has attempted to give it.

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