

## **Ecolyrics in Pop Music: A Review of Two Nature Songs**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an ecolinguistic analysis of the lyrics of two nature songs – coined in this paper as ‘eco-lyrics’. The aim was to analyse the underlying stories that lie behind the lyrics, and how they model the natural world. The two songs chosen were *We Kill the World* by Boney M. (1981) and *Johnny Wanna Live* by Sandra (1990). In particular, the use of metaphors and appraisal patterns in Boney M.’s song and the use of salience patterns (through personification, naming and activation) in Sandra’s – in terms of Stibbe’s (2015) general classification of the ‘stories we live by’ – were looked at, in order to shed light on how the more-than-human world is represented in each of these songs.

**Keywords:** ecolinguistics, ecolyrics, nature songs, metaphor, salience

## 1. Introduction

The relatively new discipline of ecolinguistics, as the name implies, aims at studying the interrelationship between language and ecology. Michael Halliday (1990), in his seminal work which is often credited with launching ecolinguistics as a new recognisable form of the ecological humanities (Stibbe, 2015: 83), provided linguists with the incentive to consider the ecological context and consequences of language. In his speech at the AILA (International Association of Applied Linguistics) conference in 1990, Halliday stressed ‘the connection between language on the one hand, and growthism, classism and speciesism on the other, admonishing applied linguists not to ignore the role of their object of study in the growth of environmental problems’ (Fill, 1998: 43).

In a narrower sense, ecolinguistics, as Stibbe (2015: 1) puts it, is about ‘critiquing forms of language that contribute to ecological destruction, and aiding in the search for new forms of language that inspire people to protect the natural world’. Obviously, this critique and analysis goes far deeper than commenting on individual texts; rather, ‘ecolinguistics can explore the more general patterns of language that influence how people both think about, and treat, the world. It can investigate the stories we live by – mental models that influence behaviour and lie at the heart of the ecological challenges we are facing’ (ibid: 1-2).

Generally, discourses of many different types can be of interest to ecolinguistic analyses, and in the context of verbal arts, along with nature writing and poetry, musical lyrics are no exception in this regard. The present paper is an analysis of the lyrics of two nature songs – coined in this paper as ‘eco-lyrics’. The two songs chosen are *We Kill the World* by Boney M. (1981, 7" Single) and *Johnny Wanna Live* by Sandra (1990, track 3). The aim is to analyse the underlying stories that lie behind the lyrics, and how they model the natural world. Of particular interest to this study are the use of metaphors and appraisal patterns in Boney M.’s song and the use of salience patterns in Sandra’s – in terms of Stibbe’s (2015) general classification of the ‘stories we live by’.

## 2. Boney M.’s *We Kill the World*

### 2.1. A brief note about Boney M. and the song

Boney M. was a pop music project founded in the mid-1970s by the German songwriter and producer Frank Farian. Although the musical career of Boney M. was originally based in Germany, the group’s line-up consisted of Jamaican-born singer-performers. The group achieved huge success during the late 1970s and early 1980s with several of their hits topping the music charts in many countries in Europe and across the world.

*We Kill the World* was released as a single by Boney M. in 1981, and was also included on their fifth album *Boonoonoonoos* (Caribbean slang for ‘happiness’). The song is made of two different parts: an uptempo electro part *We Kill the World* sung by Marcia Barrett and Frank Farian (despite the video version which depicts Bobby Farrell as the male singer), and a second, ballad part *Don’t Kill the World* chanted by a group of children along with the lead singers.

As the titles suggest, the two parts are thematically related and, together, form a sequence criticising the mistreatment of the natural world by humans. The full lyrics of both parts of the song are given in the appendix section.

## 2.2. Review of the lyrics

The lyrics make use of a number of linguistic features to draw attention to the importance of the natural world. In particular, the use of metaphors and appraisal patterns are looked at in this section.

### 2.2.1. Metaphors

Metaphoric expressions are used extensively in Boney M.'s song. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, metaphor is considered one of the important features of language and, according to this view, much of our understanding of everyday experience is structured in terms of metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Taylor, 1995: 133).

In simple terms, a metaphor is 'a device that involves conceptualising one domain of experience in terms of another' (Lee, 2001: 6). Accordingly, every metaphor links two conceptual domains, the 'source' domain and the 'target' domain, making up what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call a 'conceptual metaphor' (e.g. LOVE IS A JOURNEY) that underlies many everyday expressions which are the actual realisations of that conceptual metaphor (e.g. 'Their relationship isn't going anywhere.').

One conceptual metaphor that the lyrics particularly make use of is the NATURE IS A LIVING THING metaphor, which is evident in the following lines from the second part of the song, *Don't Kill the World*:

- (1) Don't *kill the world* / Don't *let her down* ...  
Lend ear to *nature's cry* ...  
Don't *let her die* ...  
*Help her survive* ...

As seen in the above lines, natural world is personified and given the attributes of a living organism through the use of personal pronouns (*her*) and verbs carrying animate qualities (as the patient of *kill*, *let down*, and as the agent of *die*, *cry*, *survive*). The good point is that by personifying natural world, its intrinsic value as a living organism comes to the surface, encouraging respect and care for it, just as any living being deserves. However, it still implies a separation between humans and the rest of the world, including nature and other non-human beings. This separation is well observed, for example, in the first line in (1) 'don't kill the world; don't let her down', and also in the hook line 'we kill the world' in the first part of the song, which represents the natural world in a way as if we (humans) are not part of it ourselves. As Stibbe (2015: 71) points out, 'one key criterion for judging metaphors of nature is whether they place humans within or outside nature'. Bearing this in mind, this separation can be seen as a drawback of this modelling of natural world.

A more specific variety of NATURE IS A LIVING THING metaphor is the NATURE IS A MOTHER metaphor; that is, the gendering of nature as a female being, which is specifically realised in these lyrics by the use of feminine personal pronouns *she* and *her*, as can be seen in the following lines:

- (2) Don't let *her* down ...  
    *She's* all we have ...  
    Don't let *her* die / fight for *her* trees ...  
    Help *her* survive / and *she'll* reward you with life ...

This depiction of the natural world as a mother – in line with expressions such as ‘Mother Nature’ or ‘Mother Earth’ commonly used in many cultures – focuses on the life-giving and nurturing qualities of nature; as the last line in (2) puts it, ‘... and she'll reward you with life’. This in turn gives a sense of high reverence and sacredness for the natural world; but at the same time, one could still argue that it evokes ‘parallels between the oppression of women by men and the oppression of the earth by humans’ (Stibbe, 2015: 71). As Berman (1994: 258) states, ‘many common expressions such as ‘rape of the land’, ‘virgin forest’, ‘Mother Earth’ ... reinforce patriarchal dualisms and hierarchical traditions which continue to objectify women and Nature, and perpetuate the separations of humans from each other and the non-human world’.

### 2.2.2. Evaluations and appraisal patterns

Stibbe (2015: 84) defines evaluations as ‘stories in people’s minds about whether an area of life is good or bad’; and these evaluations are in turn realised in language through appraisal patterns which are ‘clusters of linguistic features which come together to represent an area of life as good or bad’ (ibid.).

One evaluation that the lyrics happen to be specifically criticising is the evaluation PROGRESS IS GOOD. This is evident in the verses of the first part *We Kill the World*, as seen in the following lines:

- (3) Concrete's rising up / where yesterday was park / you heard the robin's song  
    Heavy tractor runs / where air was clean and cool / make money burning fuel ...  
    Fishes doomed to die / as people live close by / and oak tree falls with moan  
    Parking lots will come / where flower fields were bright / as junkyard covers sight ...

As can be seen, these lines indirectly imply that progress is not necessarily always good, especially when it narrowly comes to industrial progress which can be ecologically destructive. Yet, it raises this criticism in a delicate way, as there is no direct encoding in the clauses expressing the opposite evaluation PROGRESS IS BAD. Instead, it does so by depicting a negative view of, for example, ‘concrete’ taking the place of ‘parks’, or ‘parking lots’ taking the place of ‘flower fields’, and the like.

This critical view of PROGRESS IS GOOD evaluation is also expressed recurrently in the pre-chorus lines, which represent a blurred view of a progress-driven future:

- (4) Where will this lead to? / And what is this good for? ...

The first part of the song *We Kill the World* culminates in the chorus lines:

- (5) We kill the world ... / We surely do! In pieces we do!  
We kill the world ... / Cause we don't know what we're doing

The chorus lines in (5) emphasise the fact that every one of us is contributing 'in pieces' to this gradual destruction of the natural world, unaware of the deep effects we are making on it because 'we don't know what we're doing'.

### 3. Sandra's *Johnny Wanna Live*

#### 3.1. A brief note about the song

*Johnny Wanna Live* is another example of a nature song recorded by the German singer Sandra. The song was written by Michael Cretu, Frank Peterson and Klaus Hirschburger, and it was included on Sandra's 1990 album *Paintings in Yellow*. Since its first release in 1990, the song has been covered a number of times by various artists, including a cover version by Sarah Brightman on her 1993 album *Dive*.

*Johnny Wanna Live* is in particular a song against cruelty to animals and, using a variety of linguistic features in the lyrics, it tries to bring the non-human animals back into the focus of our attention. The full lyrics of the song are reproduced in the appendix.

#### 3.2. Review of the lyrics

As mentioned, the lyrics are focused on the rights and welfare of animals, criticising their mistreatment by humans. In particular, the song tells the story of a made-up animal character called Johnny, who wants and has the right to live, just like any other living creature does. In the lyrics, the animal character and his painful life symbolically stand for all animals sharing the same situation, and as the lyrics go:

- (6) Johnny isn't just a name / He stands for every creature's pain ...

Of particular interest here is how the living nature of animals is made salient through the use of linguistic devices such as personification and naming, as well as maintaining the active voice throughout the text. These features are looked at in turn in this section.

##### 3.2.1. Salience

Stibbe (2015: 162) defines salience as 'a story in people's minds that an area of life is important or worthy of attention'. The lyrics of *Johnny Wanna Live* give high salience to animals as living individuals by using personification, naming, and assigning them active participant roles in clauses.

Personification is the technique of projecting characteristics that normally belong to humans onto inanimate objects and non-human animals. In the lyrics under discussion, this happens specifically by the use of personal pronouns *he*, *his*, or *himself* to refer to the animal, as seen in the following lines:

- (7) Who's to say *he* got no rights ...  
Got to give *his* skin away ...  
Through *his* eyes I look inside *his* heart / *He* can feel like me and you  
Can't defend *himself* cause *he* can't talk ...

This is quite unlike what happens in animal industry discourses, for example, which use the pronoun *it* to refer to animals (Stibbe, 2012: 5). Yet, the good point is that, this personification in the lyrics remains at a realistic level and does not go too far to turn into the kind of anthropomorphism that is typical of cartoon representation of talking animals; and as the last line in (7) accurately says it, Johnny 'can't defend himself cause he can't talk'.

Closely related to the concept of personification, is the technique of naming; that is, the animal represented in the lyrics is made prominent not only by being personified by the use of personal pronouns *he*, *his* or *himself*, but also by being specifically named. This naming which is present in the title phrase 'Johnny wanna live', and – being a hook phrase – is repeated more than ten times throughout the song, makes the animal as a living individual more and more salient to the audience.

Moreover, throughout the lyrics, the animal character, Johnny, is represented as the subject of active clauses (the use of active voice is maintained in all the clauses in the lyrics), and as the dynamic participant of material and mental processes. The following are example clauses that represent the animal character as the Actor of material processes (*live*, *pass away*, *give away*), and the Senser of mental processes (*want*, *feel*):

- (8) Johnny *wanna live* ...  
Just an ordinary day / an animal will *pass away* ...  
Got to *give* his skin *away* ...  
He can *feel* like me and you ...

The interesting point here is that this insistence on giving an active participant role to the animal character is to the extent that even in a clause such as 'got to give his skin away ...' Johnny remains the agent of the action, and not the patient (which would be even more unmarked and expected in this case, considering the meaning). This again gives more salience to the animal as a living individual, by assigning him an active role in a clause that would normally be structured differently.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper examined the lyrics of two nature songs – called 'eco-lyrics' in this paper – in order to shed light on the underlying stories behind them. In particular, the use of metaphors and appraisal patterns in Boney M.'s song *We Kill the World*, and the use of salience patterns via

personification, naming and activation in Sandra's song *Johnny Wanna Live* were looked at. Clearly, like any other type of discourse, the lyrics to pop music songs can contain specific stories and different ways of modelling the natural world. The analysed lyrics exploit a variety of linguistic features to communicate their message, and this study covered some of the techniques used in the verses.

It is also revealed that even nature songs which claim to have something to say in support of the more-than-human world, may in practice stop short of representing an accurate view of reality, and may, partly and unintentionally, contribute to some of the same assumptions behind the destructive discourses, as was the case with part of the underlying assumptions – that implying a binary division between humans and the rest of the world – in Boney M.'s song *We Kill the World*.

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## Appendix

### The full lyrics of the songs discussed in this paper:

▪ *We Kill the World*

I see mushrooms, atomic mushrooms  
I see rockets, missiles in the sky  
Poor world! Poor world!  
---  
Concrete's rising up  
Where yesterday was park  
You heard the robin's song  
Heavy tractor runs  
Where air was clean and cool  
Make money burning fuel  
Where will this lead to?  
And what is this good for?  
Poor world! Poor world!  
---  
Fishes doomed to die  
As people live close by  
And oak tree falls with moan  
Parking lots will come  
Where flower fields were bright  
As junkyard covers sight  
Where will this lead to?  
And what is this good for?  
Poor world is hurting bad  
Poor world is doomed to die  
---  
We kill the world, kill the world  
We surely do! In pieces we do!  
We kill the world, kill the world  
Cause we don't know what we're doing  
---  
Promenades must go  
So cars can drive in row  
New factory towers tall  
Farmhouse had to fall

No flowers in the air  
Pollution everywhere

▪ *Don't Kill the World*

Don't kill the world  
Don't let her down  
Do not destroy basic ground  
Don't kill the world  
Our means of life  
Lend ear to nature's cry  
Don't kill the world  
She's all we have  
And surely is worth to save  
Don't let her die  
Fight for her trees  
Pollution robs air to breathe  
Don't kill the world  
Help her survive  
And she'll reward you with life  
And don't just talk  
Go on and do  
The one who wins is you  
---  
Cherish the world  
A present from God  
On behalf of all creatures  
Made by the Lord  
Care for the earth  
Foundation of life  
Slow progress down  
Help her survive

(Boney M., 1981: Hansa Records,  
Germany)

▪ ***Johnny Wanna Live***

I got something on my mind  
It makes me sad and makes my cry - oh no  
Johnny wanna live  
Just an ordinary day  
An animal will pass away - oh no  
Johnny wanna live  
Who's to say he got no rights  
Even not a right to life  
Don't know why it leaves you cold  
Don't know how to make it show - oh no  
Johnny wanna live  
---  
Got to give his skin away  
For coats they wear on summer days - oh no  
Johnny wanna live  
Beauty aid and all the rest  
Come directly from a test - oh no  
Johnny wanna live  
Through his eyes I look inside his heart  
He can feel like me and you  
Can't defend himself cause he can't talk  
And this is why I talk to you  
Johnny isn't just a name  
He stands for every creature's pain - oh no  
Johnny wanna live  
---  
Go and try to look inside his heart  
You can find your own mistakes  
Try to hide them thinking he can't talk  
But he can read them in your face  
I got something on my mind  
It makes me sad and makes me cry - oh no  
Let him live  
Tell me why it leaves you cold  
I swear I'm gonna make it show - oh no  
Johnny wanna live

(Sandra, 1990: Virgin Schallplatten, Germany)