

6 How Can Sociocultural Linguistics Help Answer Open Questions in Metal Studies?

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6.1 Introduction: Sociocultural Linguistics

The purpose of this article is to explore a selection of open or underexplored conceptual questions in metal studies from the point of view of my discipline, sociocultural linguistics. Sociocultural linguistics is concerned with the intersection of language, culture, and society, overlapping thus, for example, with anthropology, sociology, literature, history, cultural studies, and the study of popular culture. The key difference between these related disciplines and sociocultural linguistics is that the latter focuses on language in various ways and on what we can learn from language about society and culture. Some burning questions in metal studies from the perspective of sociocultural linguistics are how we use social media to express our metal identities, how minorities and non-human species can be brought to the centre of metal music inquiry, and how a focus on language in all its forms (including the visual or semiotic aspect) can improve our understanding of the metal scene. A sociocultural linguistic approach can also help us see connections between different subcultures and metal, as one of the case studies in this article shows.

To use Barrett's words, sociocultural linguistics combines "interactional discourse with societal discourse through the concepts of performativity and indexicality."¹ Interactional discourse can take place offline (e.g. at metal concerts among fans or between the performer and the audience) and online (e.g. on social media), orally (e.g. in conversations between metalheads or interviews of band members, as well as in TikTok videos) or in writing (e.g. using hashtags, emojis, and comments or song lyrics that are often published in writing or written down). Societal discourse refers to, for example, the resistance to dominant regimes or racist views expressed in the lyrics.

Indexicality is the main means of expressing identity through language. Humans make signs to represent entities in the real world. Or, in the Saussurian sense, humans combine signifiers (forms) and signifieds (meanings) through a symbol.² According to Bucholtz and Hall, identity expression takes place through the following indexical processes in language:

"Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including: (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epis-

1 Barrett 2017, 7.

2 Cf. Kress/van Leuwen 2021, 9–10.

temic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups.”³

The overt mention of identity categories and labels (a) could refer to use of the labels *metalhead*, *metal fan* or *metal chick* in relation to other intersecting labels such as *cat person* or *queer*. Implicatures and presuppositions (b), on the other hand, refer to the way in which we talk about others or ourselves, or how much we choose to reveal of ourselves. For example, fans of metal music were described in negative terms in the press during the Satanic panic,⁴ while the press coverage today might include a celebration of Indigenous or non-Anglo-European metal creators.⁵ Furthermore, a metal fan may choose not to explicitly express their metal identity at work and speak differently to members of the subculture than they speak to outsiders. The evaluative and epistemic orientation in talk and interaction (c) applied to metal could focus on the emotions (affect) expressed in discourse (e.g., release or catharsis experienced at metal concerts, or the processing of traumatic experiences through writing or consuming metal music and lyrics), or the interactional stances between metal influencers online and their fans commenting, whether they are appreciative and supportive, or dismissive and accusatory. Finally, the linguistic structures and systems (d) could refer to subculture lingo such as the use of specific words like *moshing*, *shredding*, or *brutal*, the classification into numerous sub genres, or the most used words in metal lyrics, including *death*, *doom*, *hell*, and *black*. It may also cover little analysed ways in which metalheads speak to each other, e.g., do they use certain adjectives or expressions more, or do they use more masculine expressions or assert hegemony in some other way,⁶ or whether English words are used when discussing heavy metal in other languages.

Performativity, on the other hand, has been used in the study of gender and sexuality, but it is applicable to minority or subculture identities more widely. Butler argued that gender is socially constructed through repeated signs, such as speech acts and nonverbal communication, that are culturally meaningful and recognised as markers of gender.⁷ A person continuously uses actions, behaviours, gestures, and language through which they form their identity. Bucholtz and Hall follow these lines of thinking and state that identity is best viewed as the emergent, cumulative product and a social and cultural phenomenon.⁸

Sociocultural linguistics is ideally suited to the study of subcultures like metal, as it allows for a combination of ethnographic analysis with interactional and textual analysis of how indexical associations serve to convey subcultural identity. In this

3 Cf. Bucholtz/Hall 2005, 494.

4 Cf. Laycock/Harrelson 2023.

5 E.g., Mills 2021; 2023.

6 Cf. fraternity men’s talk by Kiesling 1998, 2001; see also Milani 2014 for a wider perspective on language and masculinities.

7 Cf. Butler 1990.

8 Cf. Bucholtz/Hall 2005, 588, 590.

way, through the analysis of language, we can link specific sociocultural practices and interactional stances with social groups.⁹ Subculture identities intersect with various other identities in a way that could be called assemblages. The concept of assemblage complements the performativity approach by highlighting the complexity and dynamic nature of identity: we assemble our identities in interaction,¹⁰ or to cite Crang and Cook:

“[A] person’s identity can be understood as an assemblage of thoughts, feelings, memories, ways of doing things, possessions and so forth which does not fit together in a dedicated pattern but is always a compromise, always pragmatic, always in flux and never pure.”¹¹

This means that a metal artist or a metalhead is always more than a metal artist or metalhead, and may, e.g., change and combine elements from the national or colonial past, current discourses, and personal memories. Bucholtz and Hall call this type of assemblage the *relationality principle* of identity construction according to which “identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy.”¹² In other words, we compare ourselves and the metal music to other categories and prototypical representations. Furthermore, Bucholtz and Hall note the existence of “(a) macro-level demographic categories; (b) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles.”¹³ These could be (a) whether the metal artist identifies as male, queer, or Indigenous, (b) whether the band aims to be authentic, funny, or critical in their output, and (c) whether the online comments on a band’s latest videos are posted by haters or fans.

Finnegan has pointed out that a perspective on language as something that is in the mind (as in language as a system of grammatical structures and a lexicon) misses many important things, namely cultural modes such as music, dance and drama and “the gestural, pictorial, sculptural, sonic, tactile, bodily, affective and artefactual dimensions of human life.”¹⁴ Following Finnegan, the concept of language is here expanded in two ways: to include the body and to cover nonverbal semiotic signs.

Bucholtz and Hall provide a wealth of examples of embodied sociolinguistics.¹⁵ Embodied sociocultural linguistic analysis includes not only the words used but also

- embodied indexicality, i.e., the use of voice, style, and self-presentation (e.g., how metalheads change the quality of their voice when talking about a gig or narrate their journey of becoming a metalhead),

9 Cf. Barrett 2017; see also Bucholtz/Hall 2005; 2008; Ross 2023.

10 Cf. Puar 2012; Cordoba 2023.

11 Crang/Cook 2007, 10.

12 Bucholtz/Hall 2005, 598.

13 Ibid., 592.

14 Finnegan 2015, 18.

15 Cf. Bucholtz/Hall 2016.

- embodied discourses, i.e., discourses about the body (e.g., the violence to the body described, or mentions of death, illness, and bodily functions in metal lyrics; the intersections between race or disability and metal music),
- embodied agency including embodied motion and experience (e.g., hand gestures and facial expressions used by metalheads in videos to describe the catharsis that metal music or a concert can provide; headbanging and hand gestures at metal gigs), and
- language, objects, and technology (e.g., how metalheads use language to describe their outfits, makeup and hair, or the rules that govern these embodied ways of being metal; how fans use their social media accounts to create a metal identity).

A recent illustrative example of embodied analysis in metal studies by Eischeid et al. showed that the stress-reducing effects of listening to metal music are connected to metal specific gestures. Blocking these gestures while listening to metal decreases the stress-reducing and calming effects.¹⁶

The semiotic view on language sees language as more than only verbal utterances. Instead, it includes orthographies (e.g., heavy metal fonts), visual representations (e.g., emojis, make up, clothes), and images (e.g., album covers or T-shirt designs). These things have their regularities or grammars, if you will, and they can be studied in detail or to establish tendencies or taxonomies.¹⁷ A critical analysis of images can also reveal stereotypical roles for men and women, various minorities, or even metal fans.

To summarise, the different types of representational modes (embodied, visual, spatial, verbal) are both interconnected and connected to affective aspects and values as a social semiotic.¹⁸ This type of social semiotic or sociocultural linguistic approach can be fruitful for metal studies by providing a holistic yet language-centred way to address the open questions in metal studies, including more a detailed analysis of social media and the role of non-human species and minorities. In practice, this can be conducted by simply using classic thematic content analysis¹⁹ or other methods such as narrative analysis, critical discourse analysis, (digital) ethnography, multimodal analysis, or nexus analysis.²⁰

16 Cf. Eischeid et al. 2019.

17 Cf. Kress/Van Leeuwen 2021.

18 Cf. social semiotic in Halliday 1978; Halliday/Hasan 1985.

19 E.g., Kozinets 2020; see section 6.2.1.

20 E.g., Grbich 2015 (narrative analysis); Fairclough 1989 (critical discourse analysis); Hjorth et al. 2016 (digital ethnography, see section 6.2.1); Bateman et al. 2017 (multimodal analysis, see section 6.2.1); Scollon/Scollon 2004 (nexus analysis, see section 6.2.2).

6.2 A Selection of Blind Spots from the Point of View Sociocultural Linguistics

This section aims to illustrate a sociocultural linguistic approach to some of the underexplored or still open questions in metal studies mentioned in the beginning of the article, namely the role of social media; centring and inclusion of minorities and non-human species; linguistic and simultaneously multimodal and embodied ways of being or performing metal; and connections between different subcultures. The examples illustrate the complexity, or assemblage nature, of a metal identity and the metal music scene.

6.2.1 Social Media

Metal music, like other music genres, has a prominent social media presence. Artists and bands use social media to promote tours and albums or to advertise their merch, fans interact with each other or the creators, and influencers post reviews or fashion shots. A very fruitful way of investigating digital communities and the virtual manifestations of subcultures such as metal is digital ethnography. The essence of digital ethnographic fieldwork is 'hanging out' in digital spaces, observing the signifying practices of specific fora or online communities, thus using a modified version of classic (participatory) ethnographies.²¹ It aims to understand cultural and social domains of human interaction in different internet spaces. This field could include the analysis of specific hashtags on Instagram or X (formerly Twitter) used to express political views or forms of activism,²² examination of YouTube comments to identify types of responses to specific performances or songs,²³ or the positioning of fans toward a TV show or an actor, or how we commemorate the dead and deal with the persistence of personhood on Facebook and similar platforms after death.²⁴

So far, the study of metal on social media has been relatively limited in metal studies, with a few notable exceptions. For example, Robertson has conducted a study on the use of the word *kvlt* on the Metal Archive Forums and Reddit.²⁵ He defines *kvlt* as an index in the black metal community that contributes to identity work and boundary policing, and to debates about authenticity in the metal community. Herbst and Mynett have also analysed the use of a metal concept on online message boards for musicians and music producers, namely the concept of heaviness.²⁶ The use of the *heavy* metaphor in the metal creators' discussions is analysed taking into consideration the contexts and strategies of being heavy. Herbst and Mynett employed

21 Cf. Hjorth et al. 2016.

22 Cf. Moreno-Ortiz 2024.

23 Cf. Schaap/Berkers 2014.

24 Cf. van Ryn 2016.

25 Cf. Robertson 2023.

26 Cf. Herbst/Mynett 2022.

Kozinets' netnographic analysis²⁷ that involves the coding of large amount of data from different sources.

For a more political or critical analysis, we can focus on the following three recent examples. First, Sackl-Sharif examined the dark side of metal influencers.²⁸ She follows the impact of a video that features a nazi salute at concert in 2016 by the performer (Phil Anselmo) and was posted on YouTube leading to a discussion about racism. She describes the digital metal landscape more widely and shows how social media can be used in the metal community to engage with political and social issues and how the platforms are used for political and other activism. Second, Schaap and Berkers studied vocal covers on YouTube.²⁹ They discovered that women were severely underrepresented in this genre/activity and their presence in the virtual metal scene of vocal covers was primarily tokenistic. In the comments, women received more advice on the technical aspect of their performance compared to men, were subjected to romantic and/or erotic appreciation, and received more comments on the breaking of gender roles. Interestingly, the comments were mildly supportive and encouraged women to keep making covers and join or start bands, a sentiment summarised in the comment: "god bless metal chicks."³⁰ Third, Kennedy has studied racism in online metal spaces by analysing the comments on Indigenous Australian and Native American peoples performing heavy metal music. Many of the comments were negative, some misunderstanding Indigenous culture or expressing disbelief that Indigenous artists could perform so well, while others were aggressively and openly racist.³¹ The racist side of metal has been noted in other studies³² and deserves to be analysed further in online spaces with the rise of new platforms such as TikTok.

To illustrate a critical multimodal study into metal, we could pick a selection of metal hashtags on Instagram and the way they match the photos posted. We could choose hashtags relating to women in metal and thus expand Schaap and Berkers' YouTube comment study mentioned above, Hill's interview- and print-media-based study on metal music and sexism,³³ and Jocson-Singh's interview study of extreme metal music as a form of vigilante feminism.³⁴ The first step is to identify the hashtags to be studied and which other hashtags they co-occur with. The hashtags could be compared to each other, or we could conduct a more detailed analysis of one of them. A cursory analysis shows that *#metalchick* and *#metalgirl* are associated with revealing outfits, tattoos and heavy make-up presented for the male gaze: the women look up in the photos and show cleavage or bare legs. The hashtags *#womeninmetal*, *#darkdivas*, and *#femalescreamer*, on the other hand, portray a more active participant in the metal scene that performs and works hard, is filmed in action, flexing, or in

27 Cf. Kozinets 2020.

28 Cf. Sackl-Sharif 2021.

29 Cf. Schaap/Berkers 2014; see also Sollee 2014.

30 Quoted from: Schaap/Berkers 2014, 112.

31 Cf. Kennedy 2018, 96–97.

32 Cf. Dawes 2015; Venkatesh et al. 2016.

33 Cf. Hill 2016; 2018.

34 Cf. Jocson-Singh 2019.

the company of band members. There is overlap between these two perhaps stereotypical ways of being a woman in digital metal and several associated hashtags, such as *#metalbabe*, *#gothgirls*, *#metalsinger*, and *#metalhead*. A more detailed study of the connected social media identities, including an examination of the responses to the posts is needed. What is clear from this very limited look on Instagram is that women choose their metal identities from different options that are interconnected with other digital identities.

Additional ideas for further study include what happens to the digital presence of the bands that are no longer active or are cancelled. A book-length monograph on the digital manifestations of metal music would be most welcome.

6.2.2 Animals

Animal studies refer to an interdisciplinary field that approaches the role of other-than-human animals from different perspectives, including but not limited to art history, sociology, anthropology, public policy, history, religion, philosophy, or socio-cultural linguistics.³⁵ It seeks, for example, to understand what non-human animals mean to us in our everyday lives, how we are one with animals (e.g., anthropomorphism), how we represent them, and what animals symbolise in different cultures. Examples of research themes are the representation of cats or dogs in Ancient Egypt or in the Viking era, or their role as companion animals in different societies. One could also consider the symbolism or role of birds in different religions or the depiction of horses in paintings, or whether we let our cats roam free and the role of rescue organisations.

The more radically or activism-oriented version of animal studies is called critical animal studies. Taking a critical studies approach to animal studies, it focuses on animal ethics and trans-species intersectionality and views speciesism as being akin to, for example, racism or ableism. It seeks to challenge the Anthropocene and capitalism through environmental and social justice, critical analysis of the underlying role played by the capitalist system, or even human extinction.³⁶ Concepts such as post-human(ism), animalities, and ahuman are at the centre of this type of inquiry,³⁷ and they link to metal studies for example through the work of Patricia MacCormack who has focused on death, the body, flesh, and transgressive media, among other things.³⁸

Animal studies of either type are often not taken seriously because they are relatively new fields (the field has this in common with metal studies), or because animals are part of our everyday lives or pop culture and thus deemed mundane and not worth investigating. The low status of or disinterest in animal studies might also be an indication of our inherent speciesism: we look down on animals and do not see

35 E.g., Waldau 2013; Kalof 2017.

36 E.g., Nocella/George 2022.

37 Cf. MacCormack 2012 (post-human); *ibid.* and Lundblad 2017 (animalities); MacCormack 2022 (ahuman).

38 E.g., MacCormack 2012; 2022.

them as being worthy of academic inquiry. I claim that because of their ubiquitous nature and the fact that humans are also animals, they should be at the centre of scholarly investigations into metal studies. In other words, this blind spot deserves further study: we should include animals in the cultural and critical discussions in metal studies. There are some exceptions, such as studies on the role of wolves to represent wild desires, force, rebellion, and collective identities, goat gods, bats and serpents used as death symbols for example in jewellery, and squirrels as a signpost for folk poetry.³⁹

We could examine the meaning of animals on album covers in detail or comparatively, their symbolic power in metal lyrics, how animals and humans merge in the metal scene, or the affinity between metalheads and certain animals and what that might mean. From a more critical perspective, we could investigate the negative perceptions of animals in metal, or its justifications for bad treatment of animals (I am referring to goat sacrifices, the drinking of animal blood for shock value, or the continued association of certain animals with Satanic practices). We should realise that Ozzy Osbourne's infamous stunt with the bat on stage was abuse of a live animal. We should also perhaps question the popularity of leather jackets and boots in metal, and the merch industry that consumes water and cotton.

I will now provide a few tentative examples of what this recentring from human to animal could look like in metal studies. I will consider perhaps the most widely celebrated and appropriated animal in the metal scene, namely the domestic cat (*Felis catus*). The black cat has been seen as a symbol for evil, the devil, or death, although even that is a misconception. Cats were kept as pets in the Middle Ages, and they were useful in keeping the mouse population down.⁴⁰ In the ancient Middle East, black cats were considered valuable, not to mention their great significance in the Ancient Egypt. Today, cats are ubiquitous and rule the internet.⁴¹ They help us relax with their antics and relieve existential anxiety with their cuteness and the companionship they provide,⁴² and can even relate to political activism.⁴³

The first example illustrates cultural differences surrounding the role of cats in metal. LeVine has studied the North African metal scene. He finds that in Morocco metalheads are accused of eating cats, while in Egypt they are blamed for skinning them. The former, eating cats, is believed by the police in this region overall.⁴⁴ LeVine provides an anecdote:

“During one interrogation, a cop tries to get one of the metalheads to admit that he cooks and eats cats (for some reason, secret police across the Muslim world think metalheads eat cats), but he replies, ‘I don’t eat meat, sir. I’m a vegetarian.’”⁴⁵

39 Cf. DiGioia 2016a, 2016b, Valijärvi 2022, and Swist 2022 (wolves); Špoljarić 2022 (goat gods); Barratt 2016 (bats and serpents); Doesburg 2021 (squirrels).

40 Cf. Walker-Meikle 2011.

41 E.g., Podhovnik 2023; Maddox 2023.

42 E.g., Milutina et al. 2023.

43 Cf. Fryer 2022; Mathers 2020.

44 Cf. LeVine 2022, 36 and 43.

45 Ibid., 36

LeVine does not explain this prejudice. This blind spot can be explained by the fact that in the Muslim world cats are held in very high regard. They are considered to be clean animals who are allowed to enter mosques and not contaminate prayer. Although the story about Muhammed cutting off his sleeve to be able to pray instead of disturbing a sleeping cat may not be true, he did promise hellfire to a wife who tortured her cat.⁴⁶ In the Islamic tradition it is forbidden to eat the flesh of cats, as cats possess *baraka*, divine blessing.⁴⁷ This fact explains the accusations by Moroccan and Egyptian authorities against metalheads: they are regarded as so corrupt and evil that they kill and eat cats, which no decent person would do. This is, of course, false, as many metalheads are animal-loving vegetarians, as the quote above illustrates.

In non-Muslim Anglophone metal, the cat has become associated with cuteness and humour. For example, the Brutal Kittens store sells cat-themed metal merch that feature fake band and album names such as *Cat Sabbath*, *Meowterhead*, *Catallica: Pet 'em All*, *Metalllica: Master of Kittens*, *Cannibal Cat*, and *Meowtley Crüe*. In 2021, The Metal Archives changed all their album covers to cat images.⁴⁸ The singer and social media personality, Anthony Vincent, has written three songs about his cat: 'My Cat is an Alien', 'Cute Aggression', and 'Belly Rub'. The cute and humorous video footage and the silly lyrics are in stark contrast with the musical genre and Vincent's masculine dark looks, moustache, and black clothes. This connection between cats and metal is not surprising, considering the fact that metal has long been full of humour and self-irony achieved through, for example, transgressional incongruity or intertextuality.⁴⁹ The merch store, cat pictures, and cat-themed metal could also be seen as instances where the undoubtedly larger cat community collides with the metal community to hilarious effect and even for commercial gain.

To illustrate a cat-themed linguistic metal study we can focus on the cat-fronted band Cattera. It joins other animal-fronted bands such as Hatebeak where an African grey parrot Waldo is the lead singer, or the no longer active Caninus where the lead vocals were performed by pitbull terriers Budgie and Basil.⁵⁰ Cattera's debut single 'Hunger of the Beast'⁵¹ was released in 2021 on Bandcamp to raise money for Whiskers-A-GoGo, a Brooklyn non-profit cat rescue group. The lead singer, a cat named Rooth-Shakir, was rescued by this organisation and found a forever home. The track is written and produced by Rooth-Shakir's mom, and the singing consists of Rooth-Shakir's meows.⁵² The image of the single features an open cat food tin with a pentagram drawn into the food surrounded by Rooth-Shakir with red eyes on each side of burning flames placed behind the tin. The font used is Panthera style with a larger C and A, while the name of the track is written in a scratchy style reminiscent

46 Cf. Eisenstein 2015.

47 Cf. *ibid.*

48 Cf. Kennelty 2021.

49 Cf. Weinstein 2019.

50 For additional examples of animal-fronted metal bands see Morin 2021.

51 Cattera 2021a.

52 Cf. Scarlett 2022.

of a beast's claw marks. The track was followed by a YouTube video "A behind the scenes look of *Cattera* lead singer Roope Shakir in the studio working on their debut single 'Hunger of the Beast'".⁵³

I will show a preliminary analysis of the 296 comments on the original YouTube audio track. I will do this by using nexus analysis, i.e., I will look at an instance of a "semiotic ecosystem" where "historical trajectories of people, places, discourse, ideas, and objects come together."⁵⁴ The key moment of social action is the audio track posted on YouTube and the associated comments. A close analysis of this action can help us see connections between different discourses and communities (namely cat people and metal people), and thus analyse the motivations of posting under a cat metal video on YouTube. True to nexus analysis, the author-researcher is a participant by being a member of the prime target audience for the video and a relatively active 'lurker' on YouTube. In nexus analysis the focus is often on social issues, which in this case is the role of animals in the metal scene, and perhaps the image of metal music itself as an aggressive genre. I am engaging with (identifying) the nexus of practice and starting to navigate (analyse) and change (challenge) it, to use Scollon and Scollon's terminology.⁵⁵

The comments fall into the following categories (► Tab. 6.1):

1. cat lingo,
2. (mediated) comments from cats,
3. relatability,
4. fandom,
5. expertise, and
6. awareness of the two communities.

Some of the comments are in Spanish, German, French, and Russian, although the majority are in English. In this preliminary analysis, I am using the English data only. However, the content of the non-English quotes is similar to the English ones. The preliminary analysis also excludes emojis and interaction between the commentators. No discourse appears to be more dominant than others, at least not in this preliminary analysis.⁵⁶

53 Cattera 2021b.

54 Scollon/Scollon 2004, 159.

55 Cf. *ibid.*, 9.

56 For a more detailed analysis see Valijärvi (in progress).

Tab. 6.1: Comment categories in response to Cattera's 'Hunger of the Beast' track on YouTube, 30 Mar 2021

Theme	Examples
1. cat lingo	LMEOW ... purrfection This is what we need right meow. I aint kitten. A Meowsterpiece Let's open up that meowsh pit!!!
2. comments from cats	My cat likes it, honestly this is a masterpiece MY CAT APPROVES Everytime the cat meows my cat just looks around like wtf When you cat is so hungry, it's thrashing about the kitchen I let my cat hear this and it melted a baby with its gaze. Me cat heard this and it's eyes started glowing
3. relatability	Damn man, the lyrics are so relatable, and go so hard, like "meow meooooow" is so me What a beautiful track, it speaks to me in ways I've never been spoken to by music before. When he screamed meeeeeeeeeow, I felt that.
4. fandom	Now I need more of this. Whens the tour? Make moooooooreeeee Can anyone post the lyrics? this right here goes harrrd I know i just heard of your band as of today but i will be your loyal follower [...] the cat has some serious vocals
5. expertise	Her vocals are amazing Best metal song on earth This is like when your Dad gets a tattoo: embarrassing. Has Rock music been reduced to THIS? A glorified kitty cat meme?!
6. two communities overlap	Metal and cat lovers unite! i love cats and metal Well this is ass compared to canius or hatebeak.. and I'm a cat guy. I need some brutal hisses and growls in there

Several discourses (or ways of commenting) and historical bodies (or identity constructions) come together in these comments. Cat lingo in the first category shows knowledge of a genre that is common online and is used by cat people, perhaps serving as a bridge between 'us' and 'the Other'.⁵⁷ A related category is direct comments from people's cats or people writing about their cats. These two demonstrate an animal-centred approach to communication and life: cats are family and always with us,

57 Cf. Podhovnik 2023.

even when we are watching YouTube videos.⁵⁸ In other words, cats are ever present in our homes, and we show allegiance through spelling words in a specific way. Relatability is a cheeky way of combining a music lover's emotional reaction to a song with the supposed emotions of the cat by focusing on the meowing in the track. It may seem silly, but it does demonstrate an understanding of the feeling expressed by the cat. Cats are expert manipulators and have learned over the centuries to meow at us in a variety of ways to elicit emotional responses and action,⁵⁹ which is why a genuine emotional reaction would not be out of place. Fandom and expertise are further categories that borrow from music lovers' discourse. The former asks for another track or a tour, while the latter compares to other metal music either positively or negatively. Finally, the meta comments about the two communities show an awareness of popular online discourses and practices, while pledges of allegiance to both demonstrate the complexity of our online and offline identities and senses of belonging. The community belonging may be more explicit ("Metal and cat lovers unite!") or implicit ("I need some brutal hisses and growls in there"). *Brutal* is a metal adjective, cats and snakes hiss menacingly, and both metal singers, and cats and other beasts growl.

This type of analysis may seem trivial for those who are not cat people or animal lovers. We can, however, perhaps agree on the fact that this cross-over content embodies the soft, playful, and warm side of metal.

6.2.3 Lyrics

Recent metal studies have examined the scene in the Global South and outside Europe.⁶⁰ It has been noted that in the Muslim world⁶¹ or among Indigenous peoples⁶² metal has been a vehicle for resistance and empowerment. Metal has also played a role in the fall of the Soviet Union.⁶³ The transgressive power of metal, the experiences of metal creators and fans, as well as the hybrid musical and visual forms have been the focus of these studies.

It is less common however to conduct close analyses of the lyrics, especially in languages other than English. Studies on the role of multilingualism or more specifically the mixing of languages in the lyrics for effect or choosing a language to sing in are particularly rare. In comparative literature, multilingualism and language choices have received a fair amount of attention: there are numerous studies on questions of linguistic belonging and challenges to the power of standard or institutionalised languages, especially English.⁶⁴ Borderlands and decolonial contexts have been especially well suited for this focus. A particularly striking example is the choice of

58 Cf. Owens/Grauerholz 2019.

59 Cf. Schötz et al. 2024; Schötz 2018.

60 E.g., Knopke 2014; Varas-Díaz et al. 2020.

61 Cf. Lee 2018; LeVine 2022; also Grant 2017.

62 Cf. Belén Calvo 2020; Lucas 2021; Rivero-Vadillo 2024.

63 Cf. Haukkala 2017.

64 E.g., Gilmour/Steinitz 2018; Grönstrand et al. 2020; Gilmour 2020; Deganutti 2024.

Ukrainian authors that previously wrote in Russian to switch the language of their literary output to Ukrainian.⁶⁵

The choice of languages is signifying: it can be used to express deep feelings and process trauma, to revive a language and culture, for ease of writing and singing, or for commercial success.⁶⁶ The following proposed taxonomy (► Tab. 6.2) is intended to help studying the output of individual bands, to understand their language choices (and switches therein) and how they are linked to themes, subgenres of metal, or political situations.

Tab. 6.2: A proposed taxonomy for the linguistic output of a metal band or an artist

Language/Variety	Monolingual	Multilingual
English	Iron Maiden (UK)	Skinflint (Botswana)
Standard majority language (e.g., Swedish)	Metsatöll (Estonia)	Kvaen (Sweden)
Regional/nonstandard/dialect	Verjnuarmu (Finland)	?
Indigenous/minoritised (e.g., Maori)	Northern Haze (Canada)	Alien Weaponry (New Zealand)
Ancient (e.g., Latin)	Nazgûl (Italy)	E nomine (Germany)

Excellent examples that connect language choice to culture and society are two recent studies. Saint-Laurent has conducted phononarratological analysis of franco-phone black metal from Quebec and notes that the lyrics express a left-wing separatist-nationalist ideology through ancient myths and nature.⁶⁷ Lucas, on the other hand, has analysed Alien Weaponry's lyrical output and popularity in the light of the Maori *kaitiakitanga* ('protection') and *wāhi* ('participation').⁶⁸

The multilingual category in Table 6.2 varies greatly. For example, Skinflint (Botswana) sings primarily in English but uses vocabulary and associated concepts that are important in African culture and mythology. Northern Haze (Canada) sings consistently in Inuktitut, in contrast with the younger band members of Alien Weaponry. To further illustrate some of the intricacies of the taxonomy above, we can zoom in on two bands: Verjnuarmu (Finland) and Kvaen (Sweden).

The Finnish band Verjnuarmu's (active 2002–2018) lyrics were sung and written in the Savonian dialect. The dialect is characterised by, for example, diphthongs (Standard Finnish *maa* 'land, country', Savonian *mua*), extra (epenthetic) vowels (Standard Finnish *helvetti* 'hell', Savonian *helevetti*), and doubling of consonants (Standard Finnish *sataa* 'it rains', Savonian *sattaa*). The dialect is associated with a folksy and jolly humour and a strong regional identity. Savonian had a revival in the 1990s when

65 Cf. Averbuch 2023.

66 Cf. Valijärvi 2024.

67 Cf. Saint-Laurent 2020; see also Spracklen et al. 2014.

68 Cf. Lucas 2021.

Finland experienced a dialect boom.⁶⁹ Various dialects were used to translate the Bible, Donald Duck, and the national epic *Kalevala*, and they were used in writing in newspapers, blogs, literature, and an MA dissertation.⁷⁰ Verjnuarmu tapped in on this movement and chose to sing in Savonian. The band commented on their choice: “Savon murre on meille ilimaisukeino tarinan kerrontaan” (“Savonian dialect is for us a means of expression to tell stories”).⁷¹ The comments received by the band were occasionally negative and it was seen as a gimmick. The themes in the band’s lyrics and their reception deserves further study.

Kvaen, on the other, is an interesting example of a Swedish black metal band with a strong regional identity that sings in English and Standard Swedish. They are from Kalix by the coast in Swedish Lapland near Finland. The name of the band comes from the Kven people who lived in the area in Viking times and spoke a dialect of Finnish. The language ended up being spoken in two different countries after the border was drawn between Sweden and Finland-Russia, with one variety called Kven remaining in Norway. Today, the variety in Sweden is called Meänkieli. It became endangered due to the colonial and assimilatory policies of the Swedish state. Meänkieli does have official minority status in Sweden and is undergoing language revitalisation.⁷² Most of the speakers are, however, more than 50 years old, and the language is not being passed on to young generations. Meänkieli’s significance for many people is symbolic and the regional identity is expressed through other means such as greetings, place names, or, in this case, band names. The significance of nature in Meänkieli lyrics is great and it functions as an identity marker alongside or instead of language.⁷³ The founding member of Kvaen, Jacob Björnfot describes the significance of place as follows:

“Because of our surroundings, bizarre weather conditions, northern lights etc help shape the way we see and hear things. It affects us more than we think. [...] I think it’s way better to be raised here than in Stockholm for example. I never liked big cities, except for weekend visits. I don’t like the big city attitude; here we are all calm and down to earth. I am in my thirties and most people have either left or returned. I am not planning on going anywhere soon. I still go to my cabin in the woods of Torne Valley and write a lot of music, especially during the winter, which can feel very long and sometimes harsh.”⁷⁴

The echoes of living in the periphery and being connected to the harsh nature are obvious in the quote. The lyrics could be analysed further to show the effects of language loss: the band does not use the language of the region in their lyrics, but they do sing about being outsiders.

69 Cf. Koski 2002; Makkonen-Craig/Vaattovaara 2007; cf. the dialect boom in Austria and the Vienna-based band Alkbottle (thanks to Peter Pichler for this parallel).

70 Cf. Koskinen 2018.

71 Quoted from: Juutilainen 2015.

72 Cf. Valijärvi et al. 2022.

73 Cf. *ibid.*

74 Quoted from: Metalblade Records 2024.

To summarise, a systematic analysis of language choices and their cultural and societal significance would further contribute to our understand of metal. In other words, through a deeper understanding and a more detailed or accurate taxonomy of language choices combined with a thematic analysis of the lyrics, we can understand the sociocultural contexts the bands come from, their ideological leanings, and the fans' motivations for listening to them. This approach would not only be fruitful for metal studies but for sociolinguistic endeavours, language revitalisation, and reclamation of minority and regional identities.

6.3 Conclusion and Outlook

This article has illustrated a selection of the sociocultural linguistic methods that can be used to study the connection between language, society, and culture. The three overlapping case studies have illustrated metal on social media (more specifically, women in metal), animal studies (the role of cats and other non-human species), and lyrics (language choice taxonomy and ethnolinguistic minorities). In particular, the role of animals in metal studies has not been studied enough, and there is so much more to explore on social media. I have peppered the text with ideas for further study. Generally speaking, in addition to digital ethnographies and the analysis of (the language of) song lyrics, work still needs to be done on the linguistic analysis of actual oral conversations in the metal scene focusing on how language itself (words, grammatical forms) builds metal identities. In other words, we should study how linguistics indexes metal identities.

To explicitly return to the topic of this book – the open questions in metal music studies, and what my field, sociocultural linguistics, can contribute to it – we can conclude that sociocultural linguistics is an excellent way to conduct multimodal analysis of linguistic, visual, and digital practices. In addition to its methodological potential, sociocultural linguistics can help to identify overlaps between metal and other identities or affiliations, such as gender, cat people, and ethnolinguistic minorities. Furthermore, by applying a sociocultural linguistic approach, we can better understand how metal is simultaneously used for the purposes of resistance and hegemony, and meaningful emotional experiences and entertainment.

To conclude, I would welcome future studies that approach metal holistically as a social semiotic practice combining the visual with the linguistic, especially in monograph format.⁷⁵ Moving beyond performativity, it would be useful to view metal identities as assemblages that vary depending on time, place, and medium of interaction. One key component in this assemblage is language.

75 Cf. Barrett 2017.

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