**Song lyrics and the disruption of pragmatic processing: An analysis of linguistic negation in 10CC’s ‘I’m Not in Love’**[[1]](#endnote-2)

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**Abstract**

The lyrics of 10CC’s ‘I’m Not in Love’ revolve around a musical persona asserting that he is not in love and directing his addressee not to mistake his behaviour as an indication that he is in love with her. However, despite the negative assertions and imperatives, the feel of the song is that the musical persona is in fact in love. This article examines how the complex multimodal context of a song interacts with the prototypical pragmatic processing of negation to allow listeners to reach an interpretation of the song that contradicts the assertions made by the musical persona. The article outlines the nature of negation and examines the language and musical features that create a context of mixed messages that interferes with pragmatic processing.

**Keywords**

Cognition, lyrics, music, negation, pragmatics, text world theory

## 1. Introduction

This article examines the way in which the multimodal context of song, as a discourse type, can impact on the usual processes involved in making sense of utterances containing linguistic negation. Linguistic negation is the textual realisation of a salient absence. It is prototypically, though not exclusively, used in the context of its corresponding positive (e.g. I’m not in love/I’m in love), or at least in a context in which the hearer expects (or is presented as expecting) the positive to be the case (Givón, 2001; Hidalgo-Downing, 2000; Nahajec, 2012, 2014, forthcoming). The implications of the negated positive generally form the basis of inferring contextually dependent meaning. For example, a hearer in an everyday conversation may infer from the utterance ‘I’m not in love’ something like ‘we are only friends’ or ‘find another partner’. Pettijohn and Sacco (2009: 298) suggest that song lyrics ‘tell stories and communicate with audiences in a manner similar to how people have conversations with each other’. We might then expect those listening to 10CC’s ‘I’m Not in Love’ to interpret the musical persona’s assertion that he is not in love as something like ‘we’re only friends’, and so on. However, it seems, in the context of this song, the usual way of processing negation is disrupted

The lyrics of song involve a musical persona asserting that he is not in love and directing his addressee not to mistake his behaviour as an indication that he is.[[2]](#endnote-3) However, despite the negative assertions and imperatives, listeners can reach an interpretation that the musical persona is in fact in love and that this is a love song. Furthermore, the composers, Stewart and Gouldman,, in a 2015 BBC Four documentary, said they had intended to write a love song, but one that avoided clichés. The lyrics were inspired by a conversation between Stewart and his wife in which she complained that he did not say ‘I love you’ enough. In an interview for Buskin’s 2005 review of the song for Soundonsound.com, Stewart said:

That statement led me to try to figure out another way of saying it, and the result was that I chose to say ‘I’m not in love with you’, while subtly giving all the reasons throughout the song why I could never let go of this relationship (Buskin, 2005).

This raises the question of how we go from the musical persona’s insistence that he is not in love to a listener’s interpretation that he is and that this is a love song. While we might simply suggest that the musical persona ‘doth protest too much’, we need to ask *how* the prototypical processes involved in understanding linguistic negation are sufficiently disrupted to allow for an interpretation that seems to contradict the assertions made.

My discussion of ‘I’m Not in Love’ focuses on how multimodal features of song can impact on natural language processing. It specifically considers the way interpretations of linguistic negation (realised as *not* this data) in a contemporary rock-pop song can be affected by the lyrical, structural and musical context. I suggest that the song as a whole (words, structure, and musical quality) creates an environment of mixed messages; that is, whilst the musical persona continually asserts that he is not in love, the listener is required to process textual and musical cues that contradict his assertions. These mixed messages provide an environment that requires the listener to focus on the possible presence of love whilst minimising the pragmatically processed meaning of its absence.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Context is crucial in considering the pragmatic processes of comprehension and the discussion here proceeds on the premise that this song constitutes a discourse type (Sarangi, 2000) within which is embedded the activity type of a conversation (Levinson, 1979). A song constitutes a discourse type in so much as it will tend to have features that are socially constituted as a song as distinct from a poem, a greeting, and so on. At a minimum, a song consists of a combination of words and music, even where the music is realised *through* the words rather than with musical instruments.

The discourse type and embedded activity type in this song correspond to a two-level model of discourse architecture (Short, 1996) akin to that seen in drama. In other words, the song constitutes a message communicated to the listening audience by the performer. The message consists of the configuration of music and lyrics. The lyrics, in turn, enact a second level of message through a conversation between ‘characters’ in a story world.



Figure 1. Discourse architecture of ‘I’m Not in Love’ (based on Short, 1996: 169).

The listener, then, is making sense of negation that is not addressed to them; they are ‘overhearing’ the pretence of a conversation constructed to convey the performer’s meaning. It is worth noting that the song will be experienced by listeners in a specific context of use (e.g. radio, TV/film soundtrack, advert, mood music) which is likely to impact on possible interpretations and this discussion focuses on one of those possible interpretations[[4]](#endnote-5).

Any consideration of pragmatic meaning must consider words in their context of use. As such, analysing lyrics from a pragmatic perspective must consider words in their musical context. For the discussion here, the data consist of 10CC’s original studio recording which is marked by features specific to the recording and music production techniques which contribute to the singular, and potentially most widely encountered, version of the song.

The analyses below (section 3) outline ways in which the lyrics and music create the environment of mixed messages that disrupts the conventional interpretation of negation. I examine the unusual frequency of negation and consider the impact of this frequency on listeners’ cognitive work. Using text world theory (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999) as a framework, I consider how such repetition prompts listeners to continually construct mental representations of being in love. The analysis of the lyrics also considers how the musical persona’s addressee is constructed as believing him to be in love, and how grammatical ambiguity and incompleteness contribute to these mixed messages. The final part of the analysis examines the way in which the musical qualities of the song work in tandem with the lyrics. It focuses on musical mood, the relationship between lyrical and musical phrases, and the role of the singing voices. However, as a foundation for the analyses that follow, section 2 outlines the prototypical way that negation is likely to be processed in the context of use.

## 2. Negation and prototypical pragmatic processing

To examine the conditions in which the prototypical pragmatic processing of negation is disrupted, it is necessary to outline the nature of negation itself. Despite millennia of interest, only recently have scholars begun to examine it from a pragmatic perspective (e.g. Geurts, 1998; Horn, 1985; Tottie, 1991) and consider its role in communication. More recently still, scholars such as Werth (1999), Hidalgo-Downing (2000), Sweetser (2006), Norgaard (2007), Dancygier (2010), Jeffries (2010) and Nahajec (2009, 2012, 2014, forthcoming) have begun to ask what effects negation has in discourse, particularly (although not exclusively) in literary discourses. A long history of research has produced variation in understanding just what negation is. For the discussion here, negation is defined as the recognition and linguistic expression of a contextually significant absence. Absence, however, is contingent on the possibility of presence; we cannot conceive of an absence without considering the possibility of its presence.

Understanding negation is a matter of understanding the significance not only of an absent situation, event, or entity, but also of the possibility of its presence. Experimental approaches to language comprehension (e.g. Wason, 1965, Kaup et al., 2007, Hasson and Glucksberg, 2005, and Levine and Hagaman, 2008) suggest that not only is significant cognitive effort expended in comprehending negation, but that both the positive and its absence are cognitively available during processing. Significantly for the discussion here, studies undertaken by Giora (2006) and Giora et al. (2004, 2005, 2007) suggest that a negated positive is not dismissed in deriving meaning from negation, but retained as part of an ongoing discourse:

we propose that information introduced via negation would be retained and tinge the interpretation of the negated item so that the outcome is a mitigated product involving both the negativity of the negation marker and also the expressed meaning of the negated item. (Giora et al., 2005: 239)

Giora and Giora et al’s Retention hypothesis is particularly relevant to the analysis and discussion here: although they suggest that the negated positive is normally retained in comprehending ongoing discourse, I suggest that the lyrical and musical environment in which the negation occurs enhances this retention whilst suppressing the recovery of meaning implied by marking something as absent.

Experimental approaches largely work with syntactic negation (e.g. *not*), but negation can also be realised through a wide variety of linguistic forms (see Nahajec 2012 for a discussion on the variety of forms that linguistically realise absence). These varied textual realisations of absence occur against a complex cognitive background and the possibility of presence. Negation itself operates by drawing attention to what is expected to be the case either as an existing or as a projected part of the shared knowledge between language users. In effect, negation is intersubjective (Verhagen, 2005); it is a process of cognitive coordination concerned not with an object of discussion, but with others’ conceptualisations of that object. In an assertion such as ‘my door is not blue’, the speaker and hearer are attending to an expectation about the door rather than the door itself. A hearer may or may not have any expectations regarding the colour of the door, but the use of negation draws the hearer’s attention to that specific absent feature, marks it as significant and treats it as part of the common ground knowledge between interlocutors.

Negation has long been recognised as presuppositional (e.g. Givón, 2001; Hidalgo-Downing, 2000; Jordan, 1998; Nørgaard, 2007; Pagano, 1994; Tottie, 1991; Werth, 1999), where information within the scope of the negator is being treated as, in some sense, expected to be the case. For Givón (2001), negation not only treats the negated positive as if it were part of the shared knowledge between speaker and hearer; it also treats hearers (and potentially wider discourse participants) as if they expected or believed the positive to be the case:

a negative assertion is made on the tacit assumption that the hearer has either heard about, believes in, is likely to take for granted, or is at least familiar with the corresponding affirmative proposition. (Givón, 2001: 336)

Givón goes on to note that this presupposition is pragmatic in nature, and presupposes what hearers think, rather than that a situation is true. For example, taking Leech’s (1983) example, ‘our cat’s not male’, whereas the use of the noun phrase ‘our cat’ logically presupposes that it is true that the cat exists, the negation ‘not male’ pragmatically presupposes that the hearer has a particular thought about that cat.

At sentence level, negation is ostensibly uninformative relative to affirmation; technically, it does not tell us anything about the cat, only what it is not. Negation appears to prompt language users to infer at utterance level what speakers intend to mean when they mark something as absent. Let’s put the cat assertion in a hypothetical context:

Speaker A: Some cat has been terrorising all the other cats in the neighbourhood.

Speaker B: Our cat’s not male.

At sentence level, Speaker B’s response seems unconnected (Speaker A does assert that Speaker B has a male cat). Speaker A may infer from Speaker B’s utterance something along the lines of ‘male cats terrorise other cats and you’re wrong to think our cat is terrorising the other cats in the neighbourhood because my cat is female’. Leech (1983:101) notes that whilst the meaning of ‘female’ is readily available, the sentence is still ‘marked’ and ‘…requiring special interpretation as a denial of what someone else has asserted’; the contextual informativeness, then, of speaker B’s assertion only becomes apparent through inferencing.

 Leech (1983) suggests an implicature-based account of the expectations associated with negation. He suggests that, all things being equal, negative sentences are less informative than positives, and will only be used ‘for a special purpose’ (1983:101), He invokes the maxims of quantity and manner, but also introduces the sub-maxim of negative uniformativeness to account for this and argues that negative sentences will be used when a speaker wants to deny some prior proposition which has been put forward. Leech’s approach is concerned with the function of negative sentences as denials, but, depending on the context of use, negation can imply more than simply a denial (see Nahajec 2012)

The process of understanding negation in context, then, is a matter of inferring implied meaning. I suggest elsewhere (Nahajec, 2012, 2014, forthcoming) that understanding negation relies on taking into account the textual form of the negator, its presuppositional value, and the context in which it occurs to determine an implicature. Grice (1975) proposed that language users orient towards the notion of co-operation in understanding language in context. That is, hearers will assume that speakers are intending to be contextually meaningful even where their utterances appear to lack relevance, clarity, or truthfulness, or have too much or too little detail. In order to account for the difference between what is literally said and what is inferred, Grice (1975: 45-46) proposed the Co-operative Principle, with the attendant set of maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. He suggests that all things being equal, interlocutors will orient themselves towards these maxims and, where they are overtly disregarded, it will be for the reason of implying more than is literally said. In the case of negation, speakers appear to flout the maxims to imply rather than affirm meaning directly. For example, Speaker B’s utterance in the example above flouts the maxims of relevance (no mention by Speaker A of Speaker B having a male cat). The process by which meaning can then be inferred is by considering what it would mean if the state, event or attribute that is negated were present, and then reversing that meaning by the degree of emphatic force of the negator itself. Given the contextual knowledge that male cats can be territorial, if ‘our cat’ were male, it may well be responsible for terrorising other cats. However, it is not male, and is therefore not responsible.

Underpinning a language user’s understanding of negation, then, are two pragmatic processes: negation is presuppositional in that it treats the negated information as if the hearer expected it; and, since it is ostensibly uninformative, the hearer assumes the intention to be meaningful, and infers contextually dependent implied meaning. For example, the core negative assertion of Stewart and Gouldman’s song ‘I’m Not in Love’ presupposes that the addressee believes/expects the speaker to be in love. In addition, as there is no prior assertion to which the first line of the song responds (and it is not, at this point, evident that this is a love song), it flouts the maxims of relation and quantity. Contextual knowledge would suggest that, if the speaker were in love, he would be committed to the person that he loves, be emotionally involved, care what happens to him or her, consider the person to be important to him, and so on. As noted in the introduction, in an everyday conversation the negation of such an assertion may well imply something like ‘you are mistaken in your understanding of our relationship and it is just casual’, or ‘we’re just friends’. Furthermore, someone overhearing this utterance in an everyday conversation (not a direct addressee) would probably draw the same inference. Interpreting negation in Stewart and Gouldman’s song seems to deviate from this prototypical processing; the words, structure and musical quality appear to keep to the fore the presuppositional and retention aspects, but suppress a listener’s recovery of implicatures, allowing them to reach an interpretation that the musical persona is in love despite his assertions to the contrary.

## 3. Analysis: linguistic and musical mixed messages

The following sections focus on the ways that elements of lyrics and music combine to create the context in which the presuppositional aspects of negation are foregrounded and the potential implicatures that arise from its use in context are supressed. I argue here that the song as a whole creates an environment of ‘mixed messages’; whilst the musical persona continually asserts that he is not in love, the listener must conceptualise not only the negated positive (being in love), but also a world in which he seems to be demonstrating that he is in love. There is, then, a tension between what he is asserting and what he is demonstrating. It is this tension that allows for the suppression of the implicature-based inferences at the level of performer to listener. In making this argument, although I examine the language and musical content separately, the analyses necessarily overlap, and particularly so where features of musical composition complement language content.

**3.1 Lyrical content**

I noted above that the discourse architecture of the song is such that the listener is positioned as someone who overhears a conversation between the musical persona, ‘I’, and his addressee, ‘you’. In brief, the musical persona tells the addressee that he is not in love and that she should not forget that fact. Nor should she mistake his behaviour (calling her up, wanting to see her, and keeping her picture on his wall) as signs that he is in love. Furthermore, she should not tell her friends about the two of them. He characterises his behaviour as ‘just a silly phase’, and tries, but fails, to give a reason for it when he says ‘it’s because’. He also appears to reinforce his lack of love when he tells her that she will ‘wait a long time’ for him. Despite this apparent lack of love, the musical persona appears to be crying as a female voice tells him not to cry, saying ‘big boys don’t cry’. The song largely follows a typical format of a rock-pop song with verses, repeated chorus and bridge; it consists of three lyrically distinct verses, with verse 1 repeated at the end of the song. There is a minimal chorus comprising ‘I’m not in love. No, no! It’s because’, which is repeated three times. There is a musical bridge between chorus 2 and verse 3. However, there is also a deviation from this typical structure with a spoken section (female voice) before verse 3, and a further interlude before the repeat of verse 1 that features the lines ‘ooh you’ll wait a long time/ooh you’ll wait a long time for me’ twice.

Although song structure typically relies on repetition both lyrically and musically, it would seem that the repetition of negation and its quantity are particularly foregrounded (Short, 1996). In a corpus-based study of the relative frequencies of negation in spoken and written interaction, Tottie (1991: 17) noted there was a frequency of 12.8 negators per 1,000 words in written texts, and 27.6 negators per 1,000 words in spoken text. We might consider that the data here are a blend of both written and spoken; it is written in that it has been composed and edited in advance but spoken in that it appears to imitate conversation. Although Tottie’s data did not include song lyrics, they do act as a benchmark for the levels of negation that we might expect. The song consists of 30 negators across 196 words, which equates to 153 per 1,000 words. Even taking into account the repetition, the first three lyrically distinct verses equate to 106 negators per 1,000 words. In terms of clauses, this means that just over 50% (22 out of 41) of the clauses are negated, with seven being repetitions of the negative declarative ‘I’m not in love’ in verse 1 (and its repeat), in the chorus, and in the final two lines. The female voice repeats ‘big boys don’t cry’ four times between verses 2 and 3, and there are two semantically linked negative declaratives: ‘That doesn’t mean you mean that much to me’ (verse 2), and ‘it doesn’t mean that much to me’ (verse 3). There are nine negative imperatives: three in verse 1, one in verse 2, two in verse 3, and three in the repeat of verse 1 (see Figure 2). Furthermore, in verses 1 and 2, affirmative clauses are grammatically dependent on the main negated clause: ‘and just because I call you up/don’t get me wrong’, and ‘so if I call you/don’t make a fuss’.

Clearly, then, negation outweighs affirmation in the structure of the song. However, its real significance lies in how listeners cognitively manage the repetition of both whole phrases and negation more generally. Text world theory (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999) focuses on the cognitive dimensions of text comprehension and theorises what happens in readers’ minds as they build mental representations of discourses. It proposes three levels of discourse processing. First, the level of the discourse world, which contains text producer and receiver, and their shared contextual knowledge (equivalent to the top level of Short’s (1996) discourse architecture). These discourse participants jointly construct a text world, which is the world of the ‘story’ (second level of Short’s discourse architecture). Third, departures from the main text world constitute sub-worlds in Werth’s terms, or modal and switch-worlds in Gavins’ terminology. These departures include deictic worlds, shifts in location and time, attitudinal worlds relating to obligations and desires, and epistemic worlds such as hypothetical situations or negated situations. Textual cues prompt the construction of mental representations, which include world-building elements and function-advancing propositions. World-building elements include features concerning location, time, objects and characters. The function-advancing propositions are concerned with those textual elements that push the discourse forward and capture the changes in the text world (Gavins, 2007).

Within this framework, listeners construct mental representations of the text world with world-building elements that include the musical persona ‘I’ and the addressee ‘you’ as characters within a story world created through a one-sided conversation. The location is unspecified, but the time is marked for the most part by the present tense. I will come back to the world-building elements below, but for the moment my focus is on the relationship between the text world of affirmations and the negated worlds of unrealised situations. In constructing mental representations of the discourse, listeners construct a main text world, but, alongside this, they also construct negated worlds of states and prohibited actions that are unrealised in the main text world but realised in the dependent worlds (Figure 2). In other words, listeners must conceptualise, again and again, the very states and actions that are absent in the main text world of the musical persona and his addressee.

|  |
| --- |
| Negated worlds |
| Unrealised states: ‘not’/‘don’t’ | Prohibited actions: ‘don’t’ |
| [I] in love (x7)[you] mean that much to me (x1)[big boys] cry (x4)[it] mean that much to me (x1) | forget it (x2)get me wrong (x2)think you’ve got it made (x2)make a fuss (x1)tell your friends about the two of us (x1)ask me to give it back (x1) |

Figure 2. Negated clauses.

|  |
| --- |
| Non-negated clauses |
| Main text world | Hypothetical world | Deictic world (future time) |
| It’s just a silly phase I’m going through (x2)It’s because (x3)I like to see you And just because I call you up (x2)I keep your picture upon the wall (x1)It hides a nasty stain that’s lying there (x1) | If I call you (x1) | Ooh, you’ll wait a long time for me (x2)Ooh, you’ll wait a long time (x2) |

Figure 3. Non-negated world-building features/function-advancing clauses.

Compared to the negated worlds, the main text world is relatively underdeveloped (see Figure 3) and focuses the listener’s attention on the possible and expected, but unrealised, positives. The repetition of negation keeps in focus the embedded negated worlds rather than the main text world. However, there are elements that build the main text world, although these construct the musical persona’s world as one in which his behaviour appears to reflect the activities of someone who is in fact in love. Habitual activities that demonstrate some emotional attachment to the addressee are constructed in verses 1, 2 and 3:

 2a. ‘I call you up’

 3a. ‘I like to see you’

 4a. ‘I keep your picture’

In fact, the negation that follows 2a, 3a and 4a presupposes intended behaviours and beliefs that would indicate that the addressee takes these habitual actions as meaningful of a loving relationship:

2b. ‘don’t get me wrong, don’t think you’ve got it made’

 3b. ‘that doesn’t mean you mean that much to me’

 4b. ‘I know you know it doesn’t mean that much to me’

Here, then, the musical persona does things, calls, likes and keeps that are constructed as meaningful of a loving relationship by the very fact that he needs to negate that meaningfulness for the addressee. Again, there is a tension between his assertion that he is not in love and the background of his loving behaviour. Alongside these behaviours, there are world-building features that contribute to this same background. Existential presuppositions in ‘your picture’ in 5 and ‘the two of us’ in 6 populate the text world with objects that imply a relationship between addresser and addressee:

5. ‘I keep your picture upon the wall’

6. ‘Don’t tell your friends about the two of us’

It is also notable that the first-person plural pronoun ‘us’ is used here as it presents the characters not just as separate entities in the main text world with ‘I’ and ‘you’, but also as a unit, indicative of a relationship that has the potential to be spoken about to friends.

Where the behaviours of the musical persona are constructed through affirmation, the supposed behaviours of his addressee are constructed through negation. As noted above, the negation projects what the musical persona thinks his addressee believes, expects and intends to do. Through negative imperatives, he projects an expectation of her intended actions; in 7 and 8, the addressee is constructed as misinterpreting his behaviour as showing that he is in love and intending to behave in a way that indicates that she believes him to be in love with her:

 7. ‘Don’t get me wrong, don’t think you’ve got it made’

 8. ‘Don’t make a fuss/Don’t tell your friends about the two of us’

As with the negative declaratives, listeners construct mental representations of negated worlds in which they conceive of the very actions that the musical persona is prohibiting. So, not only must they continually expend cognitive effort on conceptualising the possibility of his being in love; they must also conceptualise her intended behaviours that indicate that she thinks that he is in love.

The final element that I want to examine in relation to the linguistic construction of mixed messages is the indeterminate referent in the use of the pronoun ‘it’ in verse 1, and the grammatically incomplete clause ‘it’s because’ in the chorus. Whilst ‘it’ in 9 anaphorically refers to the negated concept ‘I’m in love’ of the opening line of the song, the ‘it’ in 10 is problematic as it does not have a clear antecedent to which it can refer:

 9. ‘So don’t forget it’

 10. ‘It’s just a silly phase I’m going through’

It is not clear what the subject of the complement in 10 is. Listeners must infer a referent based on the projected beliefs of the addressee presupposed in ‘I’m Not in Love’. The musical persona is perhaps referring to whatever behaviours have led his addressee to hold the belief that he denies. It would seem that this behaviour, elaborated later in the lyrics as calling, liking and keeping a picture, are what constitutes the ‘silly phase’. However, in order to make sense of this line, the listener must again conceptualise the positive world where he *is* in love.

This same implied referent is likely to be the same antecedent for ‘it’ in the chorus in 11:

11. ‘I’m not in love, no, no. It’s because’

Although the musical persona has attempted to delimit this implied behaviour as merely a ‘silly phase’, the lack of a clause following the conjunction prompts the possibility of an explanation for his behaviour but fails to supply it. Any number of reasons could have been given to account for the behaviour that she has taken to indicate love – that he is bored or lonely, or that it is simply a bet, and so on. Although he does supply a rather prosaic reason for having her picture on the wall (‘it hides a nasty stain that’s lying there’), this repeated incomplete phrase opens the possibility of an explanation that is in fact absent. Given the other features that seem to indicate that the musical persona is in love, the listener may well assume that he is unwilling to say that he is in love, but also unwilling to provide another explanation that may well be untrue.

To summarise these observations of the lyrical content, we can say that negation is significantly foregrounded. The repetition of negated worlds (prompted through both assertions and prohibitions) requires that the listener continually conceptualise the musical persona being in love. Furthermore, the attribution of intended behaviours means that the listener is also continually conceptualising the musical persona’s addressee as believing that he is in love with her. The main text world of the conversation between the ‘lovers’ also seems to contain world-building elements and habitual behaviours that imply loving behaviour. The next section examines how the music works in tandem with the lyrics to maintain focus on these mental representations of a loving relationship rather than a focus on the absence of love.

**3.2 Musical quality**

Zbikowski (2009: 363) suggests that words and music have distinct functions and proposes that the ‘primary function’ of music is ‘to represent through patterned sound various dynamic processes that are common in human experience, chief among these dynamic processes [being] those associated with emotion’. He goes on to suggest that, whilst words and music are different cognitive domains, they nonetheless ‘draw on some of the same cognitive resources for constructing meaning’ (2009: 376). Zbikowski suggests that music works as metaphor and can be seen to produce ‘sonic analogs’ that complement linguistic meaning. I have suggested above that the musical qualities of ‘I’m Not in Love’ work alongside the lyrical content to create the environment of mixed messages. In this section, I look at the overall mood of the song, and in particular at how musical phrase structure works with the words and at the contrasting effects of distinct singing and speaking voices.

Hennion (1983: 163) notes that a song becomes what it is at the moment not of composition but of arrangement:

The song is nothing before the ‘arrangement’ and its creation occurs not really at the moment of its composition, but far more at the moment of orchestration, recording and mixing.

The studio recording of ‘I’m Not in Love’ consists of three primary elements: the sung lyrics, the instrumentation, and the background of vocal harmonies. The arrangement of the background harmonies involved the creative and innovative use of technology, with the band themselves referring to the result as a ‘tsunami of voices’ (BBC Four, 2015); the ambient quality of the music is made up of a series of recording loops of four voices that are recorded singing 13 separate notes. These recordings were used like a musical instrument as the ground for the instruments and sung lyrics. This gives the composition and arrangement a harmonious and consistently smooth background musical texture. Bennett (2007: 20) notes that this recording technique creates a ‘dreamlike, ambient soundscape made up entirely of human voices’. Although Morini notes that there is no clear correspondence between music and meaning, and that musical ‘meaning’ is rather impressionistic (2013: 163), it is possible to see this ambient background harmony as a sonic analog for an emotion that, if not specific, is at least non-confrontational. The harmonisation of voices suggests cooperation rather than conflict. This musical texture on its own does not constitute a romantic love song, but does create a musical mood that may well trigger schematic knowledge (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010); it is possible that the ambience of musical mood would cue for the listener a recognition of a particular genre of romantic rock-pop music, and therefore make cognitively available a set of expectations of love associated with that genre.

While the musical background contributes to the mood of the song, particular musical structures serve to foreground elements within the lyrics that echo the tension between the assertion of not being in love and the demonstration of being in love. The composition is structured in regular 4/4 time (four beats to the bar) in F Major at 112 beats per minute. The melodic line for the verses is structured around the repetition of three musical phrases:

FIG 4 HERE

Figure 4. Phrase 1a.

FIG 5 HERE

Figure 5. Phrase 2.

FIG 6 HERE

Figure 6. Phrase 3.

Each verse consists of phrases 1a + 2 + 3 + 1a + 2 + 3. This corresponds to the lyrical phrases: for example, ‘I’m not in love’ to phrase 1a, ‘so don’t forget it’ to phrase 2, and ‘it’s just a silly phase I’m going through’ to phrase 3. This leads into the melodic line for the chorus, which is structured around three phrases: a variation on phrase 1 (the final note of the phrase is one beat shorter in the chorus) – ‘I’m not in love’; phrase 4 – ‘no, no!’; and phrase 5 – ‘It’s because’. Phrase 4 varies slightly between iterations in the three chorus sections, but follows the same basic structure:

FIG 7 HERE

Figure 7. Phrase 1b.

FIG 8 HERE

Figure 8. Phrase 4.

FIG 9 HERE

Figure 9. Phrase 5.

Phrases 1a, 1b, 2 and 3, unlike the bass rhythm line that starts on the first beat of the bar, begin 1.5 beats into the bar, creating a sense of mismatch between the background beat and the foregrounded lyric. The lyric, then, is behind the beat and rushes breathlessly to catch up, creating a sonic analog for a sense of anxiety and anticipation. Furthermore, while the musical phrases correspond with the linguistic phrase ‘I’m not in love’ in the verses and chorus (phrases 1a and 1b), the timing of the musical phrase corresponds to the cognitive effort in constructing mental representations of being in love. While ‘I’m not in’ takes only 2.5 beats and appears rushed, ‘love’ takes four beats in the verse and three in the chorus, and falls on the first beat of the bar. Thus, ‘love’ is foregrounded both through negation and through the musical structure.

While the phrase structure in phrases 1a, 1b, 2 and 3 set up a pattern through repetition, phrases 4 and 5 deviate from this pattern, both marking the chorus as distinct from the verses, but also, as the words fall on the beat, emphasising the lyrical phrases ‘no, no!’ and ‘it’s because’. These phrases would seem in part to support the musical persona’s assertion that he is not in love, and the musical structure lends emphasis to this. However, it is also worth looking in more detail at phrase 5, ‘it’s because’. This was discussed in section 3.1 above in terms of the grammatical incompleteness of the phrase. Curiously, the musical structure here counteracts the grammatical incompleteness. Zbikowski (2009) notes the similarities between language and music, and it is worth considering here this similarity in terms of intonation patterns in English, which themselves have discourse functions (see, for example, Wells, 2006). For example, a rising intonation pattern can indicate that the utterance is functioning as a question, while falling intonation can indicate the end or completeness of an utterance. In phrase 5, the musical structure provides an intonation shape through the fall of two full notes from A on ‘it’s’ and the first syllable of ‘because’ to an E on the second syllable. This single note E is then held across four bars (16 beats) in chorus 1, three bars (12 beats) in chorus 2, and two bars (8 beats) in chorus 3. This fall in note corresponds to a falling intonation pattern in speech, which suggests a sense of a complete utterance. This clashes with the grammatical incompleteness of the phrase. However, the unchanging single note on the second syllable of ‘because’ emphasises the absence of the reason that is prompted by the phrase; nothing is proffered for the end of the phrase, either musically or lyrically.

The rushed nature of the line beginnings creates a sense that the musical persona is anxious to let the words out. In contrast, when trying to explain his behaviour in ‘it’s because’, the musical persona seems both unwilling and unable to finish the concept, unable to let the words out, and therefore unable to explain away the behaviours inferred from the negative assertions as indications of being in love. This is further compounded in the final lyrical and melodic lines of the song, with ‘I’m not in love’ being repeated twice. I noted above that the melodic line is structured around the repetition of phrases 1 to 5, but there is, an internal deviation (Short, 1996) on the final ‘I’m not in love’. Here, the musical phrase accompanying ‘I’m not in love’ is altered from its previous iterations in phrases 1a and 1b (Figure 10):

 FIG 10 HERE

Figure 10. Final foregrounded melodic phrase.

While the musical phrases in 1a and 1b begin and end on a D, the phrase in this final line begins two full notes higher up the scale on an F, and ends one further note up on a G. This rise up the scale mimics a rising intonation pattern in contrast to the previous iterations of this musical phrase. What we appear to have, then, is a final line that introduces a sense of incompleteness, even doubt, to the musical persona’s assertions that he is not in love. Again, this encourages the listener to focus on the presence rather than the absence of love.

Finally, I want to focus on a feature that is related to musical quality tangentially through the voices of the characters within the story world of the song. Hennion (1983: 163) suggests that ‘the pop song tells a story and comments on it in order to provoke in the listeners the feelings appropriate to the song’. The musical voices within the song provide the ‘characters’ for storytelling. There is an obviously male main singing voice, but this is contrasted by a brief but significantly foregrounded female voice (‘Be quiet, big boys don’t cry’). Further, the lines voiced by the female participant are spoken rather than sung,[[5]](#endnote-6) a contrast that heightens the tensions already apparent in the song. The inclusion of a second voice, albeit brief, adds to the conversation-like construction of the lyrics; the use of direct address through negative imperatives and the second-person pronoun ‘you’ implies the presence of an addressee who holds beliefs and who intends to carry out prohibited actions. The female voice, although not directly engaging with what the musical persona is saying, provides the sense in which this is a dialogue. Further, the combination of an affirmative imperative, ‘be quiet’, and a negative declarative, ‘big boys don’t cry’, implies that the musical persona is in fact crying. This would seem to contradict an implicature that the listener may recover from ‘I’m not in love’ (limited emotional involvement, casual relationship, etc.).

This female voice provides a counterpoint to the male singing voice, but this section of the song also structurally contrasts with the second interlude where the male voice sings ‘ooh, you’ll wait a long time’. These two sections contrast in several ways. The first is female voice, spoken with no melodic line and accompanied by a stepped falling scale on the bass rhythm line. The second is a male voice that is sung with a distinct melodic line and a bass rhythm line similar to the verse and chorus. The musical contrasts mirror the contrast in language content. While the first interlude implies that the musical persona is crying (and is therefore emotionally involved), the second emphasises his asserted lack of love by telling his ‘lover’ that there is no relationship (at least now). Again, both lyrics and music work to create the environment of mixed messages that interfere with the recovery of an implicature from ‘I’m not in love’, allowing the listener to hold on to the notion that the musical persona is in fact in love.

## 4. Conclusion

The analyses in this article constitute the tentative early steps in adopting stylistic principles to question how we engage with and are affected by song, and to investigate what song can tell us about language in a multimodal environment. The above discussion has, I hope, addressed the issue of how language processing is shaped and disrupted by the structure of song – the inseparability of music and words, and the repetitive structure of song, interfere with what we might consider the standard types of pragmatic processing. Whilst the presuppositional elements of negation appear to be foregrounded through repetition, the implicature level of understanding is impacted by the very same repetition and by the tension with the positive text worlds constructed through the one-sided conversation. Listeners find themselves forced to make sense of a set of negated assertions and prohibitions relating to the absence of love against a background of things that seem to demonstrate love in action. This may well account for the idea that, whilst ‘I’m Not in Love’ is a love song, it seems to be a rather melancholy one.

On a final and more tentative note, the fact that the complex and multimodal nature of song can interfere with language processing may suggest a need to think about this discourse type in a distinct way. In his exploration of how language users infer humour from discourse, Mulkay (1988) posits the ‘humor mode’ wherein the expectations of discourse consistency, coherence and inferencing processes shift away from the non-humorous or ‘serious mode’. Given that song, as a discourse type, can interfere with prototypical pragmatic processing, we might posit, by analogy with Mulkay’s ‘humour mode’, the notion of a ‘song mode’ wherein the expectations of song discourse shift away from our expectations of everyday conversation. Language users, whilst drawing on an understanding of everyday conversation, may well shift into a ‘song mode’ in order to make sense of the strategies that Hennion (1983:163) suggests ‘provoke in listeners feelings appropriate to the song’.

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Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



1. Composed by Eric Stewart and Graham Gouldman, released as a single by 10CC in 1975. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Pronouns here are used on the basis of the assumed genders of the musical persona and the brief inclusion of a female voice rather than any reference to genders within the lyrics themselves. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Whilst the argument here is that song structure has the potential to disrupt conventionalised pragmatic processes in this particular composition, the variation in songs as a genre is such that this potential is likely to vary widely. In fact, in her pragmatics-based analysis of seduction strategies in blues lyrics, Khun (1999) demonstrates how a kind of conventionalised attention to interactional features contributes to a sense of realism. She suggests that writers make use of such things as linguistic politeness strategies in performing high cost requests for sex within the frame of song lyrics. For some song lyrics, then, pragmatic processes can be observed to operate in much the same way as such things as conversation. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. For example, 10CC’s ‘I’m Not in Love’ appears on the soundtrack of the 2014 superhero film, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, where it goes beyond the words and music to a role as sociocultural artefact; it functions as part of the cultural references that bind one of the central characters to his origins on Earth. In an interview for IGN.com, director James Gunn said: ‘[t]he music and the Earth stuff is one of those touchstones that we have to remind us that, yeah, this is a real person from planet Earth who’s just like you and me’ (Tilly 2014). This kind of understanding of the song relies on repeated hearings; this in itself may impact on interpretations. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. The female voice in the original studio recording is that of the secretary at Strawberry Recording Studios. This iconic line to some extent came about by serendipity as it was part of the arrangement and mixing process during recording (BBC Four, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)