

# What are the Chords?

## Understanding L1 and L2 Lyric Writing

**Brian Cullen**

This paper is part of a larger study which aims to better understand the processes involved in L2 songwriting and to assist L2 songwriters to write better songs in English. This is a highly complex area that includes issues from L2 writing, creativity, music composition and many other research disciplines. In this paper, an attempt is made to gain understanding of the L2 songwriting processes by reducing the number of variables studied. Songwriting involves many different processes. In the same way that a song can be thought of as being divided into music and lyrics, so the songwriting process can be conceptually divided into music composition and lyric writing. While many songwriters do both at the same time, it is useful to try to isolate the two processes in order to investigate them separately. This paper reduces the amount of music composition by asking the participants to write lyrics to a supplied piece of music. It does not completely remove the music composition element, as considerable melodic freedom is possible in the task. It presents data from two L1 songwriters and two L2 songwriters. The main research question behind this study is to identify what processes these L1 and L2 songwriters use as they write lyrics to a piece of music.

### **Data collection**

Over the last few years, I have been holding English songwriting workshops for Japanese songwriters. In these workshops, I work one-

to-one with the songwriters to help them develop better English songs, and more importantly in the long-term, better songwriting skills. For the purposes of the study described in this paper, I asked several of the songwriters to carry out a lyric writing exercise. I wrote a simple song, arranged it and asked the songwriters to write lyrics to it. A link for downloading an mp3 version of this file is given at the end of this paper. The song is a chordal arrangement based on piano, bass and drums. It does not include a melody. No other parameters or constraints were specified. The song was written outside the workshop in order to avoid interference from the researcher. In subsequent workshops, I interviewed the songwriters to investigate the steps that they followed in writing the song. These interviews were transcribed to allow for later analysis. In addition, the songwriters showed me the notes that they had made as they wrote the songs. I photographed these notes and they constituted an additional valuable form of data. One other tool that I used was thinkaloud protocol, a type of verbal protocol analysis.

## Results

The results and discussion in this paper are limited to four songwriters, two Japanese (referred to as K and D) and two native English speakers (referred to as S and B). The following sections provide a description and analysis of the processes that the four songwriters went through in writing lyrics for the song. This is followed by a summary of the processes in table 2.

### *K: Happy Birthday*

I gave the song to K on a CD during one of our first songwriting workshops. K studied English in high school and a little in university. Later, he briefly visited English-speaking countries which increased his enthusiasm for learning English. He has not taken the TOEIC test, but based on experience with other Japanese students, I estimate his score to be about 480. Occasionally, he uses English in his work to write email, but

as can be seen in the lyrics below, his vocabulary is generally limited to what he learned in high school.

### **Happy Birthday**

#### **Verse 1**

Sunday morning, wake up early, sun is rising, birthday of my darling  
Sky is blue, wind is warm, ready for drive, happy birthday  
Sea is blue, heart is warm, sun is bright, happy birthday

#### **Chorus**

Driving to the shining ocean, driving to the shining ocean, driving to the shining  
ocean, with darling  
Happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday, and I love you

#### **Verse 2**

Sunday night, birthday party, friend is coming, birthday of my darling  
Smile is cute, lots of fun, lovely time, happy birthday  
Ring for you, stay with me, sing together, happy birthday

#### **Chorus**

Driving to the shining ocean, driving to the shining ocean, driving to the shining  
ocean, with darling  
Happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday, and I love you

### **First reactions**

When K listened to the song for the first time, his first thoughts were that it was very simple. Indeed, this was one of the first reactions of all the songwriters. I had made it deliberately simple so that they could move quickly into the lyric writing. Before beginning to write the lyrics, K thought about his image for the song:

My imagination [for this song] is not serious, kind of happy, so feeling is for example Sunday morning, or just excursion trip. So my image is of a drive, or a small excursion, or picnic or something with a friend. So I'd like to try to write such a song, very beautiful scenery, mountains or something, drive, driving a car, the rhythm is like hopping, so maybe an excursion is my image.

In an earlier paper (Cullen, 2006), I have examined the source of these images in detail and noted that they can emerge from various levels of consciousness or the subconscious. In this case, K says that he got the image "from the simple melody ... I think not serious ... not like a love song, but very more friendly, but a little bit hoppy ... like Saturday or Sunday .... from the backing music and the melody." This image did not come to him immediately. Instead, it was "maybe the second or third time I heard that CD... the first time was nothing, just a simple, ... but I try again. I think, I thought that [image]." So K starts his lyric writing by identifying the mood of the music through its rhythm and feel and then listens several times in order to build up a vivid mental representation of the scene that he will use in the lyrics.

### Development

After identifying the major focus of the scene, he adds details to it, partly through my questioning and partly through his own explanations. He explains that an "excursion" image means "very happy, very relaxed and very fun, good fun....a very beautiful location, beautiful scenery, beautiful place, for example, the mountain...very beautiful green and sky blue, nature." K appears to be a strong visual thinker. To verify this, I asked several questions to try to clarify whether he is also using words within his head, which would imply a verbal style of thinking, or whether he only sees the picture. In addition to the value of understanding his dominant thinking style, I was also trying to determine whether carrying out a thinkaloud protocol could be effective with him.

B: So now, when you're using words now like 'blue, green, nature', when you were listening were you thinking about this in pictures; did you get a picture in your head, or were you thinking in words?

K: Yeah, a little bit.

B: And were you talking to yourself? For example, were you saying to yourself, maybe in Japanese, *kore ga kirei de, keshiki no ii tokoro*, were

you talking to yourself when you were thinking?

K: [perhaps somewhat confused] Yes. Very difficult question. oh yeah, just naturally the picture comes unconsciously, maybe naturally.

As K notes, it can be very difficult to identify whether the pictures in our heads are purely visual or whether they also involve an internal verbal description.

B: And you could actually see the picture?

K: Not the exact picture, but a kind of an imaginary picture, ... just a feeling

Here, he seems to be retreating from his earlier remarks about a clear internal picture.

B: When you were listening, did any words come to your head [Still probing for thinkaloud possibilities]

K: Just ... [opening his bag] I tried to write a diary

B: Great

Without my request, K had begun to keep a diary of his songwriting. When I heard this, my interest was aroused because I imagined a diary being used to explore his thoughts and saw it as a powerful methodological tool. However, rather than being a record of his thoughts before, during, and after he wrote the song, his 'diary' was primarily a collection of his lyrics, complete and incomplete. For K, the diary is not a way to explore his own thoughts but serves merely as a memory aid, acting as an extension of memory and cognition into what has been termed a distributive cognitive system.

K: Because, for example one week before's memory, sometimes I cannot remember so it's very good [to write] in a diary.

However, Ken's diary is where he works out many of the initial sketches

for his songs and it does offer insight into his songwriting processes. When he is writing in his diary in English, he generally thinks in English, but in his words "English is poorer vocabulary so sometimes if I can't find English, I use kanji or come back later." The diary provides a flexible sketchpad that offers an extension of the memory resources available for his songwriting, a type

On an ethical note, while the mention of a diary may raise questions of privacy, Ken did not mind me looking at this diary although I did notice some rather personal-sounding references. He seems genuinely interested in helping me find out more about the songwriting process and also to take advantage of the sessions as useful lessons.

In K's diary, the next step of his songwriting process was evident in his diary. Both words and melodies are scribbled down in many places. Like many Japanese (even non-musicians), K is quite proficient at writing down melodies that he hears. In this case, he had listened to the song on the CD and written down the melody. In addition, he had created chord charts that allowed him to play the song on guitar. After writing down the melody and chords from the CD, he began to play the song with guitar and piano.

B: Did you write this as you listened?

K: Yeah and then I tried my guitar and which chords ... tried guitar and piano ... duh, duh, [humming] ... using guitar and piano. And my image is ... [pointing at the diary at a place he had forgotten] a birthday ... and an excursion ... so the first time, I think about walking on a birthday ... or driving

This extract demonstrates that he has kept (or perhaps recalled) the image in his head as he moves from the process of listening to the CD to the process of playing the guitar. This conversation took place in the workshop one week after I had given him the CD. At that time, the song was not complete. K had already figured out the chords for the song, and

had a strong image for the lyrics, but he had not begun to write the lyrics. However, he had written a few words and sentences in his notebook.

Since the song was not complete, I abandoned the idea of eliciting his songwriting processes through interview and instead decided to take advantage of this as an opportunity to try thinkaloud protocol. I explained the concept of saying your thoughts out loud to him and gave several examples, but after several minutes, he either still did not understand the procedure or else was too shy to try it out in front of me. Assuming that it was shyness, I told him that I would leave the room for five minutes and leave the video camera running. On watching the video tape later, the results were disappointing. K occasionally hums along with the music sometimes but there was still no vocalization.

As TAP did not seem to be successful, I decided to interview him directly about what he had been doing in the time that I wasn't there.

B: So, you had about eight minutes. Can you tell me what you did?

K: ... I tried to make lyrics.

B: How did you try to make the lyrics?

K: First, from the diary I wrote some words. Which word is suitable for this melody? So sometimes the melody is this length [indicating a length with his hands] but the words are too short, so if the word is just too short for the music, I'd like to adjust the length of the lyric with song.

B: So you listen to the melody and you look for words that would suit.

K: Sometimes, they suit perfectly. Sometimes too short or too long. In that case, I try to find another word.

K tried to match the words with the melody. When the rough words in his diary were unsuitable, he tried to come up with alternative words. As he finds words that fit, he writes the words under his melody in the appropriate place.

B: So you look at these notes and you see there is 1-2-3-4

K: Yeah. 1234, [then in rhythm and tapping] 1-2-3-4

B: Then what do you do? You look at the notes and then, do you look at the diary again?

K: Oh yeah, look at the diary again.

B: So you have an idea of driving with your darling. So is this phrase the same theme [pointing to the verse melody. I was wondering whether he was simply matching words to notes randomly or whether he was maintaining the theme of the song]

K: Oh yes, same idea

B: So you wrote 'Sunday morning, woke up early, today the birthday of my darling'. Oh yeah, I think this is going to be a good song.

K: But, I write this sentence, but when I try to fit to this note, this is ok [writes words under melody notes], but the last two bars, so I try to fit those with what I am just thinking. So I just try to fit them.

K recognizes that some the repeating theme of the song should probably be a chorus and thus is most concerned about getting these words right. He switches to piano because he feels that it is easier because "how it rings, I can feel the ring as the words, I can feel [presumably 'ring' means hibiku or vibrate]."

When he says "I write this sentence, but when I try to fit to this note, this is ok [writes words under melody notes], but the last two bars, so I try to fit those with what I am just thinking", we can see that he is learning to improvise in English.

By now, we were running out of our allotted one hour for the workshop, so I enquired about how he would proceed.

K: not complete yet. maybe I think when I make a song, maybe the ending will change. Another imagination will come. so the story changes maybe. Sometimes I write to the end. But sometimes if I don't like, I like to change here or something like that .... at first, afterwards thinking again, so from beginning to the end. So I feel if this doesn't fit, I like to change just a little bit, change change, change.

B: How many verses will this song have?

K: Maybe two and two [pointing]. I'm not sure.

Although he has a clear image, for K the process is not a linear one and his image is not completely fixed. He realizes already that his image may have to change and he is not even sure how many verses there will be. Clearly, he is following the spirit of the exercise more than strictly following the structure and melody of the arrangement that I gave him.

The following week, in the workshop, K has completed the song. When I offer to play the CD, he says that "actually, it's a little bit changed ... changed the order ... a little bit. And I just add a prologue", so he played the song on guitar rather than singing along with the CD. He has changed the structure of the song and added a new part. He felt that this new introduction to the song was more "natural for me" instead of starting with the chorus as the original arrangement did. These changes in structure are a clear sign of growing responsibility and ownership for the song, a phenomenon that we will revisit with another songwriter later. He also changed the song structure by shortening the length of the verses because

... tried to make lyrics, but many, how do I say, very difficult to make lyrics. Same again and again. And with a similar melody. So I think it's better to cut into more short and then go to a (thinking for two seconds and looking back at paper) chorus.

As a non-native speaker, making longer lyrics takes more time and is troublesome, but as we shall see later, this issue is not only limited to non-native speakers. K also felt that it was too repetitive ("it's too again and again").

As he wrote the lyrics, he played the piano, alternating between the piano and writing down words in his diary. The previous week, he had been very concerned about matching the lyrics exactly to the phrase length, but he now seems more relaxed.

B: So, last week, you talked about matching the words and the music. Do

they match exactly?

K: Well (wondering), I think it's ok. I think not exactly match. Sometimes a little bit not match. But if I can sing, smoothly I think no problem .... Not exact length is difficult so way of singing, I can adjust, way of singing.

He has realized that English offers a greater freedom than Japanese in placing different stresses on words and thus allowing phrases of different length. After completing the lyrics, he sings it on guitar and considers adding harmonies. In the workshop, he asks me to try singing a higher part. At this point, the song is mainly finished and he asks me to check it for any mistakes. Although the vocabulary and concept of the song are simple, K has created a very solid, catchy pop tune.

#### *D: Bank Account*

I dropped the CD of the song for the exercise into D's house a couple of days before the songwriting workshop. When I arrived there, he had the lyrics written out completely. This is in contrast to K who took several weeks to complete the writing. This difference may be due to D's greater experience of songwriting and exposure to English. D has written songs for over 20 years and has done a lot of English to Japanese translation work. Although he makes grammatical and lexical errors, he is very confident when speaking English. Unlike most Japanese songwriters, he is willing to improvise lyrics in English as he sings. He says that he learned this improvisation ability from a blues singer friend that he stayed with for two weeks in the United States. Overall, we can see from the lyrics below that his level is much higher than K.

<b>Mister Bank Account</b> Everyday, I'm working', for what I don't know It's been so many years to find Everyday I'm counting on what is coming I got so many words to say Last night I saw him, singing after you' There was so many ears to hear Till the day I'm dying, soon it's for sure It's just the time for your eyes to blink	The last day I'm going, cause what I've done It's been so long long way to go The last time I saw you, no matter I did You know I got myself to be Everything I'm singing, singing just for you There are are so many prayer to be 'Till the day you're dying, soon it's for sure My gift is brand new white suede shoes
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## First reactions

The title of the song, *Mr. Bank Account*, had emerged in an email between us after I had dropped off the CD to his house. D had written that he was busy with work because "Mr. Bank Account" was not happy, so I suggested that as the song title.

D: Yes, you just gave me the title and then you sat down, I was drinking and I put the CD and I could see the chord progression [I hadn't given him a chord sheet; he means in his mind] and I just write it down.

Brian: And you wrote down the chord progression?

D: No, no, the lyrics.

As we saw with K, D is immediately able to identify the chords in the song. This is not surprising because it is a very simple song that utilizes a common chord progression. He did not need to write the chords down as he could 'see' them in his mind. From these chords, he began to write down the lyrics. The following extract shows how listening to the CD immediately created a strong *musical* image for D. This is in contrast to K who had a strong *visual* image in his head. The difference may lie in D's greater musical experience. He tends to understand new music in terms of music that he knows rather than in terms of visual images.

D: Well, [when I first listened to the CD] I had a certain idea that it was more like Celtic, kind of. But this is really, how should I say, good sound, really ordinary, kind of popular sound. Yeah, it is very, nani Dylan no uta

ja nai. (starts playing chords on guitar)

Brian: 'I shall be Released', is it?

D: (singing) 'Then you ...' (from Like a Rolling Stone ?)

Brian: Ah yeah, 'Like a Rolling Stone', it is the same chords, isn't it.

D: 'Then you ...', because it is so popular, that chord progression.

Brian: Yeah, it's very simple, G - Am - Bm -C.

D: Yeah, it's just going up. So you can do whatever with it. Because it's really harmonic. So you can do whatever with it. If you want to.

Just by listening to the CD once and recognizing the chord progression, D has called up other musical images from his memory such as the Bob Dylan song. Rather than seeing the chord progression as a cliché, he demonstrates his musical experience by recognizing that the simple chord progression is open to a far greater number of possibilities than complicated chromatic progressions.

D: Yeah, and it's like a do-re-me-fa-so-la-ti-do (singing scale), you can play every note everywhere if you want to because the chord progression is so certain and it's so beautiful ... these days, J-Pop is (plays a very chromatic chord progression), these kinds of songs. Really complicated and the melody has to be a certain note. Otherwise it's going to clash (hitting hats together to emphasize) each other.

B: Yeah, that's true. When you look at most of the songs in the 60s, I mean the 60s especially, they were all these simple chord progressions.

D: Yes, but the melody is more alive. These days, kind of rap music or J-Pop music, melody is not really alive. More like shouting and, you know?

.... Yes. Ah yes, I listened to the sound from the machine and I played the guitar first, I think. this is cool, I thought. So simple, but I can do whatever, I thought. And 'everyday' (playing country blues phrase on guitar). 'Everyday everybody working' (playing old talking blues phrase on guitar). It's more like blues.

Shortly after the songwriting workshop began, D sang his lyrics to the accompaniment of the CD arrangement. Immediately, it became apparent that he had taken a lot of liberties with the song. The initial arrangement

did not have a melody, but the rising chord progression (G-Am-Bm-C) suggested very strongly a rising melody to match. Whereas K had used the implied melody and made each of his phrases equal in length in order to match the repeating rhythm on the CD, D had used phrases of different length with appropriate stressed syllables to each rhythmical phrase. For example, the first four bars of the verse are given below in piano notation. The rhythm is set with the first bar and continues unchanged. It can be heard as boom-cha boom-cha, a country music type of feel.



D:Everyday,	I'm working,	For what	I don't know
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K:Sunday morning,	Wake up early,	Sun is rising,	Birthday of my darling
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The two songwriters' lyrics are shown underneath the notation for the first four bars. D has adjusted the feel of the song to suit his own blues-influenced style of music. You can get a feel for the difference by comparing the syllable count and noticing how his phrases start before the first beat of each bar. While K sticks closely to the straight rhythm of the original song, D has immediately incorporated his own rhythm which includes swing and syncopation. Steffensen (1979, in a well-known schema theory research study, describes how when people read a story about a wedding in a foreign culture and were asked questions about it afterwards, they added details that were present in their own schema of a wedding but had not been in the story that they read. In the same way, an experienced musician such as D seems to automatically incorporate the idiom of his own schema into his composition even though they are not in the original song.

Because D's version is already incompatible with the CD version, he picks up the guitar and starts playing it in his own style. He suggests changes to the arrangement such as shortening a verse, changing a major chord to a minor chord at the end, and adding backing harmonies to the chorus. He has assumed ownership of the song and responsibility for its development much quicker than K. Like most things, it is only when we assume responsibility for something that we really start to get good at it. Over the next few weeks, K did indeed begin to make changes, a good sign that his confidence and songwriting skills were growing.

D: So, Wednesday, I had no idea. Because it's just the chords and it's a really beautiful song, but there is no melody.

B: Yeah, no melody.

D: There's no lyrics. It's more like kind of joking. I just made it kind of serious lyrics. Kind of blues, kind of gospel.

This conversation again shows D's acceptance of responsibility and ownership of the song. He recognized the 'joking' feel of the song, but decided to make it serious.

### Development

Next, let us examine the development of the lyrics from the title. The first word of the song was the most difficult. Although he had a title, an image and a feeling on guitar, he did not yet have any lyrics. To find a starting point, he looked to one of his favourite musical styles:

So, I just stole it from the blues idea. So 'everyday', the first word, it took several minutes for that to happen. But I just write down 'everyday' and then everything goes on [he gestures in a wavelike motion to show how it happened smoothly after that]

He develops these lyrics by using some things from his own life and some ideas that he has stored up.

B: So 'Everyday I'm working for what, I don't know'. Is that a cliché or is that a true thing?

D: Half and half

The next extract illustrates what D meant above by 'serious lyrics'.

D: And it's kind of a metaphor. Because 'bank' means there's a river and this side and the other side, so like *veneresse* (?) or *nancy* (?) or as they say in Japan, 'this side is life and that side is dead', kind of bank .... If you really cross that river, that means we are dead .... [it's in] Greek mythology and India, too. And in Japan. I think it's a really old archetype kind of idea ....you know ... not in the sea, it's a river... something to do with the deeper really subconscious side of ourself. For all human beings. So 'bank account' ... 'bank - a - ccount', ha, ha, ha.

D's English is good enough to allow him to make puns and here he is playing upon the meaning of word 'bank'. This pun was his starting point which enabled him to move from the usual meaning of 'bank account' into a metaphorical representation of death where the dying crossed from one 'bank' to another. On first hearing the lyrics of the song, it is not clear what they were about. In contrast to K's very clear love song lyrics, D's lyrics are much more abstract. However, when we hear the metaphor behind the song, the lyrics become much clearer. He is not finished punning on the title for he breaks down the word 'count' and comes up with "And 'count', counting somebody, counting (counts with fingers), but I'm counting on you." Clearly, D is talented at playing with words, an asset for a songwriter and also a common feature of good language learners.

In contrast to K's clear identification of characters in his lyrics, D himself is not even sure of the identity of the personal pronouns in his lyrics. He asks and self-answers: "Who is 'him'?! I don't know." He is willing to accept this ambiguity and move on with the lyrics. Again, this ability to accept ambiguity is a feature of good writers (and good language-

learners) in general. It is important to be able to write freely without self-editing at too early a stage. However, he will eventually need to clarify these ambiguous pronouns and other meanings if he wanted the listener to understand without explanation of his metaphor. As we talk about the song, he makes changes as he clarifies the meaning in his own head. For example, he changes the last line from 'blue suede shoes' to 'white suede shoes' after a discussion of angels.

As D talks, he refers to musical idioms such as The Beatles, southern gospel music, Elvis Costello and the blues. If his lyrics were a building, they would be based upon the foundation of his death metaphor, but the columns of the buildings would be these musical idioms. His personality and life experience affect his songwriting deeply. While we can now begin to understand that his lyrics emerge from a combination of his musical experience and world view, one of his final remarks about this song indicates that we will probably never truly understand the songwriting process:

The audience can just choose" whether there is a real bank account or whether it is all metaphorical .... bank' is just the line ....you can go over, you can come back. But it's just the same thing on this side as on the other side. It's black and white. But black means white, white means black. At the same time, if there's no light, there's no shadows. So, 'ambiguity' .... 'ambiguous' is the essential word for this song. (laughing)

### **Sam the Monkey**

Sam the Monkey is of course not actually a monkey, but the preferred pseudonym of a native-speaker songwriter who carried out the songwriting exercise. Sam wrote many songs years ago, but is just starting to write and perform again after a break of 18 years. His lyrics are shown below.

<p><b>I Think About Your Smile</b></p> <p>wordless 4-bar intro - no repeat - same tune later appearing as chorus</p> <p>When I'm feeling like a jerk For something dumb I did at work The other guys just watch and smirk And things get bad</p> <p>When I'm feeling overstressed Can't just give it all a rest I gotta get it off my chest And I get mad</p> <p>When I'm feeling mean and rotten Hate the web that I've been caught in Wish the day could be forgotten Through and through</p>	<p>When I'm feeling kicked and down and Sinking like I'm gonna drown, I don't want anyone around Not even you</p> <p>4-bar chorus: (But) every time I start to doubt you Wishing I could live without you Then I start to think about your Smile</p> <p>Coda: repeat chorus and close</p> <p>Every time my life goes blurry You tell me I shouldn't worry Then the world becomes a furry, Fuzzy place</p>
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### First reactions

His first and repeated comment about the exercise was that there were too many verses. Sam's other first reaction was similar to K who had said that he thought the song sounded 'happy'. Sam felt that it required "bubblegum" lyrics and "nothing profound ... cheerful, silly, funny if possible. However, words in the lyrics such as 'smirk', 'jerk', 'overstressed', 'kicked' and 'drown' add up to convey a much darker image than this. At the end of the interview, he refers to this himself: I don't think I achieved [the bubblegum lyrics] ....there's more than a bit of dark side in them." Rather than having a dark visual image in his head, he noted that the dark nature of the lyrics reflected a dark period in one area of his own life, in other words a mental representation of a real issue, in contrast with K's imaginary issue. This could be construed in the terminology of visual recall (Sam) and visual construct (K).

As he listened to the CD several times, he made notes about the song such as 'dissonant 4-bar intro', 'later same tune used as chorus', and 'rising melody 16-bar verse'. By making these notes, it appears that he was

trying to make a map of the entire song to figure out what needed to be written. This mapping out of the song made him realize that it had "severe repetitiveness." This led him to a conception of what the lyrics should be like.

I mentally noted the severe repetitiveness, and (more or less consciously) thought that parallel-construction lyrics would suit that best. Sometimes that kind of thing can work well – I think of John Denver in that regard. He was pretty masterful at that.

The dark mood probably led naturally into the first line. He started out writing the lyrics by "basically trying to fit some kind of words to the rhythm pattern." After he had put a few into place, he continued his "parallel construction" by trying "to come up with thematically similar additional lines." His frustration at the repetitiveness and lengthy verses were expressed in comments within the lyrics such as "the chorus should appear here instead of 8 more bars down the road", "another 16-bar verse!!! oh, groan!!!" and "stop!!!! stop!!!! sto-o-o-o-ppppp!!!" The final version of his lyrics is not long enough for the entire song, but of course, there is no reason that the song could not be shortened or for some of the verses to be replaced by an instrumental solo. An important point to note is that his motivation was high at the beginning, but fell as the task dragged on and on due to the overly long verses.

### **B: Research Song**

When I wrote the song, as with many of my songs, it started out as a simple musical exercise, in this case on the piano. While the fingers practice, the mind tries to make the exercise more interesting by throwing out phrases that seem to fit. This can be thought of as a combination of visual recall like Sam and a musical image (or auditory recall) like D. As my mind wandered, phrases came out about my frustration at research not proceeding smoothly. The lyrics below show how I thought that the

idea of a song about research was funny and could offer some catharsis, if not actually achieve much.

<p><b>Research Song</b></p> <p>chorus</p> <p>Research really gets me going All those things that needed knowing Now we have the methods to have fun</p> <p>verse</p> <p>J.D. Brown, he's no clown He's got his statistics down He could quantify most anything David Nunan set me swoonin' With the nonsense he's impugnin' Some people think that he's the method king</p> <p>Cohen is so hard to swallow Tho' you'd never say he's shallow Just wish he'd use less words to explain Sandra McKay, she made my day When I read what she did say The classroom is a place of love and pain</p> <p>repeat chorus</p>	<p>Constipated quantitative Data on an L2 native Chomsky never dreamed it'd go so wrong Steven Pinker, he's a thinker, But Words and Rules was a stinker A thousand pages, maybe more, too long</p> <p>Qualitative paradigm, Now there's an easy word to rhyme Oh yes, I think description should be thick Keep describing, diatribing God, it drives me to imbibing Your stack to do is thick as a brick</p> <p>repeat chorus</p>
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I had just finished a book by J.D. Brown and fitted his name onto the rhythm. This led immediately to a rhyming phrase, rhyming 'clown' with 'Brown'. Later phrases in the song came to mind because of the rhyming pattern that has been set up, so the rhymes became a controlling force

As I thought about further names in this research field, I fitted in the ones that fitted the rhythm. Sometimes the pressure of the rhyme caused me to come out with lines that I didn't really believe in, but with apologies to David Nunan, 'swoonin' and 'impugnin' was too good a rhyme to miss. The rhyme appears to have leading the message rather than simply being a poetic device. The second verse continues the research theme, but puns on key words from the research literature rather than names. The second verse was much easier to write because the melody and rhyming pattern

has already been established in the first verse.

### **Summarizing the Songwriting Processes**

This table shows a summary of the actions followed by each of the songwriters. Although, they are recorded roughly in the order of observation, they do not necessarily represent a linear progression of actions. Determining whether these are consecutive or simultaneous will require further study.

#### **K**

- Listen to song
- Identify a mood as suggested by rhythm, melody etc.
- Build up visual representation
- Add details to visual representation
- Write down melody
- Play the song on guitar or piano while keeping mental visual image
- Write some words and sentences in notebook
- Consider which words are suitable for the melody
- Switch to piano for parts where it is difficult to match words to melody
- Improvise words where there is nothing available in notebook
- Continue to match lyrics and change structure/melody of song if necessary
- Change mental image if necessary to match developing song
- Add new intro because it was more natural
- Shorten musical structure of verses because there are too many lyrics
- Play melody at piano, stopping to write down lyrics in diary
- Think of harmonies

#### **D**

- Listen to the song on CD
- Identify the chords mentally
- Pun on title to create mental metaphor and related images
- Start to play the chords on guitar
- get first word from blues cliché
- Begin to write down the lyrics;
- Write lyrics based on representation of current mood but set in terms of the metaphor
- Transform the rhythm in the song to suit own style of music
- Transform the structure of the song by playing the song and making changes immediately to make the sound right
- Extend original ideas in song while retaining certain ambiguities

**Sam**

- Listen to CD several times
- Make notes like "dissonant 4-bar intro, later same tune used as chorus" and "rising melody 16-bar verse"
- Suggest change in structure such as "the chorus should appear here instead of 8 more bars down the road" and "wordless 4-bar intro"
- Get feeling for lyrics (bubblegum)
- Try to fit the words to the rhythm pattern
- Try to come up with thematically similar additional lines
- Get frustrated as task grows tedious because of too many verses
- Cut verses

**Brian**

- Practice piano riff
- Mind wanders to current problems as I get bored
- Produce phrases out of frustration about research not proceeding smoothly
- I think that the idea of a song about research is funny and offers catharsis
- Fit the first names onto the rhythm and add in a phrase which sets up a rhyming pattern
- Think of more phrases to match the rhyming pattern that has been set up; let the rhymes have become a controlling force
- Think about further names in this research field; used ones that fitted rhythm
- Add phrases to the names
- Add key words from the literature and made puns
- Write second verse based on melody and rhyme pattern that was established in first verse

**Conclusion**

This paper provides only a preliminary analysis of the data provided by the songwriting exercise. Its main purpose has been to describe the lyric writing processes of L1 and L2 and songwriters. Later work will expand on this by examining several important areas including:

- the variation between writers
- the driving forces of the writing process such as rhymes, visual images, or metaphors
- the validity of this exercise for songwriters who may not write in this manner
- refinements in methodology

Even with the current preliminary analysis, a few interesting points can

be raised. First, the exercise acted as a spur to the songwriting process. D and Sam had not written a song in several years and this exercise drew them out of that dry spell. This reminds us that the first part of the process of songwriting is having a motivation to write. Second, all of the songwriters broke the rules of the exercise and adapted the song to their own style. Third, all the songwriters had a musical image and thematic image, but the strength of each varied between writers. Finally, the driving force behind the lyric writing seems to differ between the L1 and L2 songwriters. The L1 songwriters felt the need to use rhyme and sometimes let this pressure lead or even override thematic considerations. The L2 songwriters used no rhyme at all and let the visual image or metaphor drive their lyric writing. This important distinction will be examined more closely in future work.

## References

The song used for this exercise may be downloaded from:

[http://www.edsys.center.nitech.ac.jp/lang/allngr01/Music/Write\\_lyrics\\_for\\_this\\_song.mp3](http://www.edsys.center.nitech.ac.jp/lang/allngr01/Music/Write_lyrics_for_this_song.mp3)

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