'Saying Things That You Can't Say Tomorrow Day': Accommodation Theory & Authenticity in Alex Turner of Arctic Monkeys

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1. Introduction

British indie rock band Arctic Monkeys achieved immediate success when they released their debut album *Whatever People Say I am, That's What I'm Not* (*WPS*) in 2006. Its themes were relevant to British youth, specifically youth in the band's hometown of Sheffield, and fans could not only relate to frontman Alex Turner's tongue-in-cheek lyrics about the curiosities of nightlife, but also the way Turner sang. He had kept his Sheffield accent instead of singing with an Americanised accent as many British singers often seem to do. This heightened the band's authenticity which played an enormous part in their success (Beal 2009, 223-224). However, fans and media alike were perplexed when the band released their fifth album *AM* in 2013, as the band's style had drastically changed. Many commented that Turner's Sheffield accent was gone and that he now sounded American (Flanagan 2019, 83).

According to 'accommodation theory', speakers alter their speech style to match the style of their interlocutors, so they are perceived more favourably (Giles and Powesland 1989, 232-33). The same can be said for performers and their audiences: Performers also alter their speech style to win the audience's approval (Bell 1989, 234). This has been one of the explanations as to why some British singers modify their native accent when they sing (Beal 2009, 226-27).

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether Turner began to accommodate to American audiences instead of British audiences during *AM*. I will conduct an auditory analysis of two songs from each album to see if Turner stopped using typical northern English linguistic features between the albums. I will argue that while Turner accommodated to young British audiences in *WPS*, it is unclear who he is accommodating to in *AM*, because despite a decrease in northern English phonological features, Turner continued to use words that indexed his British roots.

2. Theory and previous studies

This section will present studies from Trudgill (1989) and Simpson (1999) who identified the most common American linguistic features that British singers adopt and the reasons for this phenomenon. Building on this framework, Beal (2009) studied Turner's rejection of these linguistic features, and how it helped create the band's early authentic image. Flanagan (2019) has since studied how Turner's language has changed throughout his career. This study will work within the framework set by these four studies to understand which audiences Turner accommodates to.

2.1. Trudgill (1989) & Simpson (1999)

Sociolinguists have long been interested in why many British singers adopt an Americanised accent when singing (Simpson 1999, 343). Trudgill (1989) and Simpson (1999) have both addressed this phenomenon, and based on the framework provided by Trudgill, Simpson compiled a set of common linguistic features that British singers use in their singing style, but not in their spoken accent, called the 'USA-5 model' (Simpson 1999, 345):

1. The use of the flap [ɾ] or [d] instead of [t] and [ʔ] in positions of intervocalic /t/.
2. The use of [æ] instead of [a] in words such as *dance* and *last*.
3. The use of a distinct /r/ sound in non-prevocalic positions such as in *girl*.
4. The use of [a] instead of the diphthong [aɪ] in words such as *life* and *my*.
5. The use of [ɑ] instead of [ɒ] in words such as *body* and *top*.

Trudgill notes that though many British varieties share some of the USA-5 features, no single variety has all of them and that most British singers only use them when singing (Trudgill 1989, 252). Simpson adds that 'the USA-5 is rarely if ever implemented fully in any given singer's repertoire' (Simpson 1999, 346), because the model is based on many different singers' linguistic behaviour, and therefore, it cannot be applied to all. Still, the model provides a good starting point to illuminate the phenomenon.

Trudgill proposes several different explanations as to why British singers adopt these features, one of which is accommodation theory (Trudgill 1989, 252-254). By changing their linguistic behaviour, such as pronunciation, to match those of their interlocutors, speakers hope to be perceived more positively by reducing the differences between them, thus showing that they identify with them. Or the opposite: Asserting one's own identity or distance from the interlocutor by keeping to one's own style of speaking (Giles and Powesland 1989). However, Trudgill writes that this only explains what happens in conversations, and therefore, accommodation theory cannot be applied to British

singers and their audiences (Trudgill 1989, 253). Beal writes that the model of 'audience design' by Bell (1989) makes up for this limitation, as here, the audience takes the place of the interlocutor (Beal 2009, 227). Style shifting is then a response to a change in audience, with the same purpose of winning that audience's approval (Bell 1989, 243-244). Still, a singer cannot always be sure that the audience is indeed the intended (Beal 2009, 227). Trudgill finds the best explanation to be 'acts of identity' by Le Page. Here, speakers model their linguistic behaviour and pronunciation to resemble those they want to identify with. British singers adhere to the above pronunciations because America dominated the music industry at the time. Therefore, the road to success was to imitate American pronunciations, and the linguistic features above were what British singers thought of as typical American pronunciations (Trudgill 1989, 253-254).

Simpson's (1999) study adds that discourse and context also matter for which accent singers choose to sing in. Simpson took a general and diachronic approach in his study, and he analysed various British pop and rock artists between the 1980s and 1990s. He found that singers style-shift and modify their accents depending on the themes and settings of their songs, not just their intended audience. Singers, therefore, adopt mediated personas with different linguistic behaviours when performing (Simpson 1999, 351-354). He concludes that one should focus on three points when studying why singers' accents change: 'the nature of the perceptual linguistic model aspired to, the nature of the pop and rock bands who adopt it and the nature of the bands' targeted audience' (Simpson 1999, 364).

2.2. Arctic Monkeys according to Beal (2009) & Flanagan (2019)

Based on the findings of Trudgill (1989) and Simpson (1999), Beal (2009) studied Turner's language use through a qualitative study of the song *Mardy Bum* from Arctic Monkeys' first album *WPS*. She found that Turner rejects the features of the USA-5 model and instead makes use of distinctive northern English linguistic features in the song. She argues that the 'language-ideological' framework best explains why Turner does this. In the language-ideological framework, 'linguistic features … become associated with social values so that they acquire indexical meanings' (Beal 2009, 229). The linguistic features Turner uses index both local and youthful values, and thereby, identity and authenticity (Beal 2009, 235). Her study highlights Simpson's (1999) three focus points, and thereby, the influences that caused Turner to perform in his own accent, and how Arctic Monkeys came to be perceived as authentic:

(1) The nature of the perceptual linguistic model aspired to: Turner makes use of phonological features that are general to the speech of northern British youth, such as the northern BATH and STRUT variants and /h/-dropping, but also features that are directly related to local

Sheffield speech, such as the pronunciation of *right* as [ɾeɪʔ] and the use of the lexical item *mardy*, a local insult that means 'moody' or 'easily upset' (Beal 2009, 234-235).

(2) The nature of the band who adopts it: Arctic Monkeys can be classified as an indie band, a genre where bands market themselves as opposed to the general 'global marketing machine' (Beal 2009, 230). As such, the band has rejected the norms of mainstream popular music such as participating in interviews and award ceremonies. A rejection of these goes in hand with a rejection of the USA-5 model linguistic features (Beal 2009, 225, 230).

(3) The nature of the band's targeted audience: Culturally, the people of northern England are often seen as working-class, tough, but friendly with a strong work ethic. Similar to the indie genre, northerners are more likely to also reject global mainstream values (Beal 2009, 230). Trudgill notes that the core audience of 1970's British punk and new wave bands was 'British urban working-class youth' and that these bands reduced the features of the USA-5 model (Trudgill 1989, 262). The same can be said about Arctic Monkeys: They were aware that their target audience was the youth of Sheffield, in addition to university students from larger cities such as Leeds and Manchester. Because their target audience shared the values as the band, it was appropriate for Turner to not follow the USA-5 model (Beal 2009, 230).

All this suggests that Arctic Monkeys performed 'their Sheffield identity in a very knowing and sophisticated manner' (Beal 2009, 224). The use of local linguistic features indexed local values, which added to their authenticity, and the band seemed to be aware of the effects of their choices (Beal 2009, 238).

Beal writes that a quantitative analysis is needed to fully understand Turner's style-shifting (Beal 2009, 236), and this is provided by Flanagan (2019). Flanagan had noticed that Turner had begun to adopt more features of the USA-5 model for the band's later albums instead of keeping his own accent. To find if Turner's accent had changed, he conducted a large-scale diachronic study of Turner's use of non-standard phonology, lexis, and grammar throughout Arctic Monkey's six albums. He found that during the band's third and fourth albums, Turner's use of northern English phonological features was in a steady decline which culminated in their fifth album *AM*. In *AM*, Turner's use of the northern variants of STRUT and TRAP/BATH vowels and /h/-dropping was very low compared to *WPS* (Flanagan 2019, 91-93). Flanagan connects the decline to the fact that Arctic Monkeys' albums were recorded in America after their second album (Flanagan 2019, 82), and that Turner had moved to America in these years (Flanagan 2019, 88). Moreover, the band had evolved musically with each album, taking on different styles and genres. *WPS* was fast-paced and guitar-riff heavy (Petridis 2006), and it reflected the band's upbringing in Sheffield and their experiences of nightlife and youth culture. Though *AM* dealt with similar themes of nightlife, it

was groovier, darker, and incorporated elements of hip-hop, a traditionally US genre (Flanagan 2019, 88-89). Turner's use of his own accent's phonological features in their first album did heighten the band's authentic image, but the subsequent decline of northern English phonological features reflects the band's changing musical style and living situations (Flanagan 2019, 96-97). He concludes that 'every utterance performed by Turner … is a performance of linguistic identity – a language ideological act which expresses a range of attitudes in the performer towards their own selected place in relation to other actors and entities within the industry' (Flanagan 2019, 96). Does this also signal that Turner began to accommodate to American audiences instead?

3. Methodology

To figure out if Turner accommodated to American audiences in *AM*, I conducted an auditory analysis to see if Turner's use of glottalisation, non-initial /t/ as [ʔ], and *th*-fronting, /θ/ as [f], changed between *WPS* and *AM*. I followed the methodology of Flanagan (2019) as both our studies were diachronic and quantitative, though my analysis was done on a much smaller scale. While Flanagan conducted a large-scale analysis of every Arctic Monkeys album, I compared Turner's language use between two songs from *WPS* and two songs from *AM*. The songs from *WPS* are 'The View from the Afternoon' and 'Still Take You Home', while the songs from *AM* are 'Do I Wanna Know?' (from which the title of this paper is taken), and 'Why'd You Only Call Me When You're High?'. Henceforth, they are shortened as 'View', 'Still', 'Wanna', and 'High'. See the Reference List for the sources of the songs and lyrics.

I decided to study consonants, as Flanagan's (2019) phonological study mostly focused on the vowels from the USA-5 model. My choice of glottalisation and *th*-fronting came from Beal (2009) where several Sheffield and general northern English variants were identified. These were present in the 1990s at the time of Turner's upbringing, and therefore, present in his language use in *WPS* (Beal 2009, 232). Although both glottalizing and *th*-fronting are found throughout Britain, Beal writes that these are especially normal in both the Sheffield accent and in the speech of young people (Beal 2009, 234). The use of these, thus, indexes both local and youthful values and identities (Beal 2009, 236), and so the abandonment of the variables in *AM* signals the opposite; that Turner is accommodating to another audience, or least a wider audience than his original target audience.

Before analysing the songs, I noted down the environment the two variables could occur in. [ʔ] is a conditioned allophone of /t/, meaning that it can only occur in certain environments. Beal writes that it is found in places with non-initial /t/ but does not identify the environment any further (Beal 2009, 232). Therefore, to make my analysis more manageable, I have specified the environment. Glottalisation can occur at the end of syllables and in final position. In these cases,

the preceding sound can either be a vowel or sonorant (nasals and liquids) and the following sound can either be an obstruent (plosives, fricatives, and affricates), nasals, semivowels, and non-syllabic /l/. It also occurs in intervocalic positions between stressed and unstressed vowels (Bohn and Caudery 2017, 60; Wells n.d.). [f] is a free variant of /θ/, meaning that /θ/ is produced differently depending on the individual person and their regional dialect, not factors such as those found with conditioned allophones. As there is no specific environment where it can occur, *th*-fronting is possible in every position no matter the surrounding sounds (Bohn and Caudery 2017, 53).

In the same style as Flanagan (2019, 88-91), I started by identifying wherever the linguistic variables were possible in the songs by looking at the lyrics, keeping in mind the above conditions. I then analysed if the linguistic variables were indeed present by listening to the songs by ear, so I ended up with the tokens, the actual occurrences of the variables. I also counted repeated words to see if Turner was consistent. This was done over two days; I went through the songs once per day to ensure my findings. Flanagan (2019) had a third party verify his analysis; however, this was not possible for my study. Like Flanagan (2019), I did not include lyrics sung by backing vocalists. After identifying every token, I calculated the average in percentage to get an overall picture of how Turner's use of the variables changed.

4. Results

The results from the auditory analysis of Turner's use of the variables are illustrated in figures 1 and 2, and both figures show a decline of glottalisation and *th*-fronting in *AM*.

Figure 1 displays Turner's use of glottalisation which is highest in the two songs from *WPS*. But, as evident in figure 1, Turner does not always glottalize. In 'View', Turner glottalizes in 54 out of 76 possible occurrences. The occasions where /t/ is not realised as [ʔ] are in words such as *disappointment, entertainment*, as well as some occasions of the words *out, got, what's,* and *put*. In the word *writer*, medial /t/ between a stressed and unstressed vowel is also not realised as [ʔ]. In these cases, /t/ is realised as [t] or the flap [ɾ]. Otherwise, Turner is consistent in realising final /t/ as [ʔ], as he does this throughout the song in repeated words such as *that, tonight, want,* and *set*. The percentage of glottalisation is a little lower in 'Still', where Turner glottalizes in 24 out of 41 possible instances. Turner continues to be consistent in glottalizing /t/ in final position in words such as *that, it, what,* and *don't*, though with a few exceptions as with 'View'. Turner is not as consistent in glottalizing medial /t/. There are five occasions where this is possible, *beautiful, eating, tarted,* and two instances of *forgotten*, but Turner only glottalizes *forgotten*, though he does it both times. Overall, Turner almost always glottalizes /t/ in final position; however, medial /t/ is not as consistent. Where /t/ is not glottalized, Turner realise /t/ as [t] or [ɾ].

Though Turner does not always glottalize, there is still a much higher percentage of tokens in *WPS* compared to tokens found in *AM*, where glottalisation has become much less common. In 'Wanna', Turner glottalizes in three out of 50 possible instances. The words where he does so are *guts, shuts*, and *wanted*, which are all found in the same verse. The same happens in 'High', where Turner glottalizes two out of 27 possible times. The two instances, *partner* and *get*, are again found in the same verse. Otherwise, Turner has begun to follow the pronunciations of the USA-5 model: /t/ is realised as [ɾ] or [d] in the rest of the possible instances in both songs.
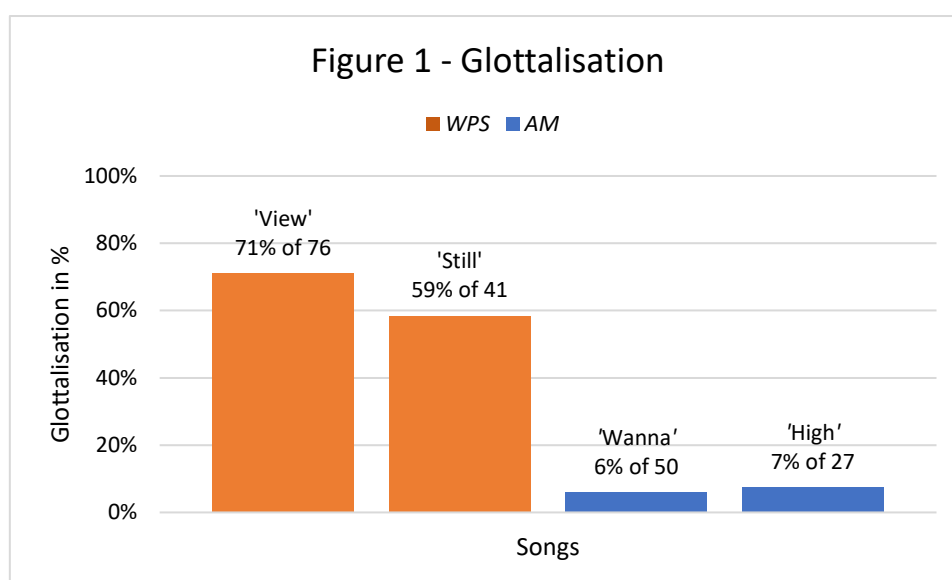

Figure *1*: Percentage of instances where glottalisation is realised across four Arctic Monkeys songs.

Figure 2 shows the instances of *th*-fronting in percentage. Generally, *th*-fronting happens less than glottalisation as there are fewer words where it is possible. Still, *WPS* again shows the most realised instances of *th*-fronting. In 'View', *th*-fronting is realised three out of three possible times across two words, *things* and *three*. In 'Still', *th*-fronting is realised eight out of nine possible times. The word *nothing* is repeated six times in the song, all in the choruses, but the last *nothing* in the second chorus is realised as [θ]. But again, Turner shows consistency in his use of northern English phonological features in *WPS*.

As with glottalisation, Turner's use of *th*-fronting dropped between *WPS* and *AM*. Out of 19 possible instances across the two songs, *th*-fronting occurs only once in 'Wanna' in the word *thought* in the last chorus. That this is a case of *th*-fronting is clear because it is immediately followed by *through* which is realised with [θ].
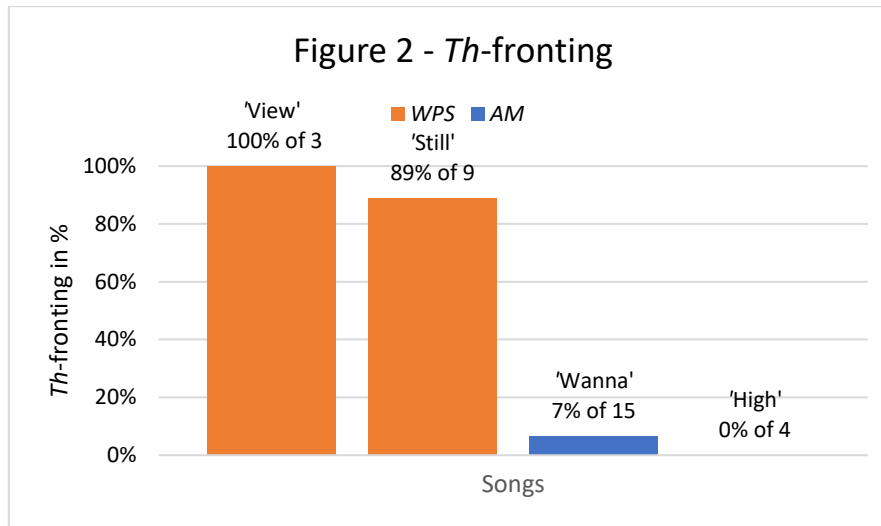
Figure *2*: Percentage of instances where *th*-fronting is realised across four Arctic Monkeys songs.

5. Discussion

Based on the findings of the previous studies and my own analysis, I argue that accommodation theory is an adequate explanation of Turner's linguistic choices during *WPS*. However, as shown by figures 1 and 2 and Flanagan (2019), there was a decrease in northern English phonological features in *AM*. In the discussion, I will also explore whether this was because Turner accommodated to American audiences instead. Though the model of audience design (Bell 1989) specifically describes accommodation towards audiences, I will use accommodation theory throughout the rest of the article, as the speaker in both theories modifies their language for approval whether the recipient is an interlocutor or an audience (Beal 2009, 227).

Trudgill's (1989) main concern with accommodation theory was that the speaker could not be sure that the audience was the intended audience, but as Beal notes, Arctic Monkeys from the beginning seems to have had a clear audience in mind: northern British youth (Beal 2009, 230). This is evident in the lyrical contents of *WPS* and the fact that Turner delivers them using his own Sheffield accent. As mentioned before, *WPS* is about Turner's observations about northern British youth culture, nights out, and relationships (Petridis 2006). With that comes many references to areas around Sheffield and the use of local slang, so to appreciate the lyrics, the listener must have an understanding of the topics at hand which the intended audience would have (Beal 2009, 224). Beal reported that Arctic Monkeys had been less successful in America at the time of her article, and she speculated that this was because 'the social indexicality of features of northern English dialects is not meaningful in the United States' (Beal 2009, 226). As northern British youth was the audience that most likely could relate to the lyrics, Turner accommodated to them accordingly by using his own Sheffield accent.

The vernacular, a speaker's regular and non-formal speaking style, signals local values, and the use of this makes the speaker appear authentic, even in highly mediated performances (Coupland 2009, 284-286). As previously stated, authenticity is important for both the indie genre and northern British audiences, and conformity to the pronunciations of the USA-5 model is seen as inauthentic. Because Turner indexed local values in his lyrics in *WPS*, it would have been inauthentic of him to follow the USA-5 model, and he might not have gotten the audience's approval, thus failing to accommodate to them. But as seen by the different analyses of Turner's language use, he did perform in his own vernacular, and this coupled with his lyrics and the band's overall rejection of the values of mainstream popular music, the band was perceived as authentic by their audiences, even to outsiders of their core audience (Coupland 2009, 294; Beal 2009, 224). This, then, connects Trudgill's (1989) preferred explanation of acts of identity with accommodation theory. In acts of identity, singers adopt the linguistic features their intended audience considers prestigious, as opposed to adopting the linguistic features of the actual audience. Turner does both: He uses the variety of his actual audience which also happened to be what the audience considers prestigious (Flanagan 2019, 84).

What, then, caused the critique of Turner's change towards the USA-5 model in *AM*? It was disapprovingly noted by fans and the media that Turner sounded American (Peters 2017; Milton 2016; Wilkinson 2016), and Liam Gallagher from fellow British band Oasis also commented negatively on the change, indicating that he thought Turner was inauthentic in his new style (Reilly 2017). Flanagan writes that 'speakers of English are particularly sensitive to what features they use in their speech and that it can be a "risky business" when style-shifting to varieties with different levels of prestige (e.g. US English in pop music performed by British acts), which an audience may not appreciate' (Flanagan 2019, 86). It seems that the authentic image the band created in their early years shattered when Turner began to drop his Sheffield accent in favour of the features of the USA-5 model on *AM*, the very thing the band sought to avoid. This made Turner appear inauthentic.

So, was the decrease in northern English phonological features in *AM* because Turner accommodated to an American audience instead? Beal linked the band's initial lesser success in America to the fact that the features and the social values they indexed were not meaningful to an American audience (Beal 2009, 226), and so, the abandonment of this in *AM* signals that Turner does not wish to index the same social values. As mentioned earlier, *WPS* and *AM* share similar themes, and all four songs I analysed concern pursuing girls after a night of drinking. However, *WPS* is deeply rooted in Turner's experience as a teenager. In all the songs on the album, Turner comments on different aspects about Sheffield, its nightlife, as well as the band's beginning (NME

2006). Bucholtz writes that '… speakers still use language creatively in specific local contexts to achieve particular social and interactional goals, and in the process both language and culture are reshaped to fit new, locally meaningful identities' (Bucholtz 2000, 282). It is important to remember that we can only speculate about Turner's intentions; however, he does index specific things in *WPS* via his lyrics. As Beal suggests, music artists seem to be aware of the effect the use of a specific accent has; it suggests identities (Beal 2009, 224; 230), and the use of phonological features native to Turner's accent was a motivated decision to achieve this effect (Flanagan 2019, 97).

In *AM*, there is not the same kind of localised setting as in *WPS*, and so, the album's themes seem more universal and more readily relatable to a larger audience (Beaumont 2015), which is then reflected in the toned-down use of northern English features. Still, though the number is small, there are instances of glottalisation and *th*-fronting in 'Wanna' and 'High', and a larger sample of songs from *AM* might have presented more. Despite a drop, Flanagan's analysis does show that Turner still used the northern variants of the STRUT and BATH/TRAP vowels and /h/-dropping (Flanagan 2019, 92), signalling that Turner has not completely changed his accent. Furthermore, Flanagan notes that Turner's use of non-standard lexis and grammar went up in *AM* (Flanagan 2019, 94-95). This is also evident in the two songs from *AM* that I analysed, as Turner makes use of non-standard words mostly used in British regional dialects. In 'Wanna', Turner uses *summat*, a British non-standard form of *something* (CED Online 2021, s.v. *summat*), and *settee*, a non-standard British word for *sofa* (CED Online 2021, s.v. *settee)*. In 'High', Turner uses *shite*, a British slang term meaning the same as *shit* (CED Online 2021, s.v. *shite*). The continued use of these types of words means that Turner still indexes his British roots, and this, in turn, suggests that Turner has not forgotten the audience from *WPS* (Flanagan 2019, 96).

As stated earlier, Turner's changing singing style might be due to the natural progression of the band's musical style, recording their later albums in America, as well as Turner's move to America. Generally, Turner has been exposed to many different types of linguistic input due to the nature of his career, and so, it is natural to pick up linguistic features of other accents (Wilkinson 2016). This helps Turner in 'strategic inauthenticity': purposefully stylising one's singing style to something different from one's actual accent (Flanagan 2019, 86). Turner is aware of his old audience from his beginnings in Sheffield, but a combination of different factors has resulted in 'an overt awareness of the different prestige accorded to the different varieties' (Flanagan 2019, 96), which Turner then uses to achieve certain effects. Turner is not accommodating to American audiences specifically, nor is he accommodating to British audiences in *AM*. Instead, he has broadened his audience to encompass both groups by deliberately performing with different linguistic features, though this came at the cost of his authenticity.

6. Conclusion

This study has argued that accommodation theory provides a good explanation for Alex Turner's linguistic choices for Arctic Monkeys' first album *WPS*, as the use of his own accent shows that he was aware of his audience. However, the same cannot be concluded for their fifth album *AM*. As Arctic Monkeys progressed musically and recorded and lived in America, their audience might have become less clear. Turner could no longer accommodate to a specific audience which is why we see the decline in distinctive northern English phonological features at the same time as we see an increase in other non-standard features that indexes Turner's British roots. However, Turner's authenticity was still affected. The use of Turner's own accent heightened Arctic Monkeys' authenticity in *WPS*, but the decreased use of this in *AM* made Turner appear inauthentic. Still, as the localised setting and themes of youth in Sheffield made it appropriate to use northern English features in *WPS*, the more universal themes of *AM* also made it appropriate for Turner to follow the pronunciations of the USA-5 model. This study has analysed Turner's accent in recorded form, following the example set by Flanagan (2019), but further studies and comparisons of how Turner sounds in live versions of songs and how he sounds in interviews could provide further insights into how Turner's accent has changed.

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