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Research Article

The Language of Praise and Worship: A Corpus Analysis of Register Variation in Christian Songs

Raymund T. Palayon & Irish Mae F. Dalona

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Abstract

Songs play a central role in Christianity, not only as musical expressions of faith but also as powerful tools for influencing beliefs and behavior. Some churches utilize hymns, while others prefer contemporary Christian songs. Despite their significance in shaping religious views and practices, the language of Christian songs remains underexamined in linguistic research. Previous studies have analyzed only a small number of texts and focused on limited linguistic features, providing a limited understanding of their stylistic functions. This paper examined the key linguistic features in the two sets of Christian songs—church hymns and contemporary Christian songs—to illustrate their register variation, using multidimensional analysis, key semantic tag analysis, and key part-of-speech analysis. From the analyses, the church hymns display features associated with scriptural texts (e.g., God, salvation, Jesus), adoration (e.g., glory, bless, rejoice), and appreciation (e.g., gracious, thankful, grateful), illustrating the informational and context-independent characteristics in these songs. The contemporary Christian songs display features associated with life-related situations (e.g., breakdown, failure, loss), spiritual relationships (e.g., me, you), and an engaging style of communication (e.g., I, we, your), illustrating the context-dependent and persuasive characteristics in these songs. This study provides a framework for characterizing the linguistic features of worship songs from non-Christian contexts, enabling future research to compare religious music across different traditions.

Author Information:

Raymund T. Palayon

raymund.pa@kmitl.ac.th

orcid.org/0009-0007-4676-606X

Lecturer/Researcher

General Education Department,
King Mongkut's Institute of Technology
Ladkrabang, Chumphon Campus
Chumphon, Thailand

Irish Mae F. Dalona

irishmae.fernandez@g.msuiit.edu.ph

orcid.org/0000-0002-1131-7295

Associate Professor

College of Arts and Social Sciences,
Mindanao State University—Iligan
Institute of Technology
Iligan City, Philippines

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Praise and worship through songs play a crucial role in Christianity, fostering a deeper connection between individuals and their faith (Cameron, 2023). Along with sermons, they are a key part of the services of Christian religious groups, preparing members or attendees mentally and emotionally for the divine message (Betakore et al., 2023). Through music and lyrics, individuals can express love, hope, faith, joy, sorrow, gratitude, and devotion to God (Hamilton et al., 2017; Vincent, 2019). Both hymns (Blake, 2020) and contemporary Christian songs (Tönsing, Wepener, & Vos, 2015) are used to convey biblical teachings, highlighting Christian values and principles (Bradley, 2023), which makes it easier to remember key aspects of the faith. Many songwriters find inspiration to produce and perform songs dedicated to praise and worship, contributing to the ongoing development and enrichment of Christian music.

Christian hymns have a rich history dating back many centuries (Marini, 2002; Mouw, 2004). In the earliest days of Christianity, believers sang hymns inspired by Jewish traditions and Psalms, and the roots of Christian hymnody can be traced to the early Christian church (Donahoe, 1908; Milfull, 1996). As time passed, hymns have developed from early Christian hymnody to Reformation and Protestant hymnody (Brown, 2005). Therefore, identifying which term (such as traditional hymns) to use for hymns in this study became problematic. Since some Christian religious groups have their own hymn traditions, this diversity allows us to use the term 'church hymns' to refer to church variations of hymns, such as the hymns of Baptists and the hymns of Jehovah's Witnesses. The hymns from various Christian religious groups are categorized into one dataset or corpus in this study. This grouping is based on their shared general characteristics, facilitating a comparison with a dataset exhibiting different characteristics in expression. Hymns exhibit various characteristics based on their musical and lyrical forms, which differentiate them from contemporary Christian songs. They often have a metrical structure, which means that the lyrics are organized into lines or stanzas with specific syllable count and rhyme scheme (e.g., Petersen & Petersen, 2015). They are also typically written with harmonies to accompany the melody, allowing for different vocal parts (such as soprano, alto, tenor) to be harmonized. Furthermore, hymns often directly quote or refer to scripture in their lyrics, with biblical themes serving as the primary focus of expression. They are characterized by poetic language and often include rhyme and meter to create a lyrical quality (Plett, 1986).

While hymns have a long-standing history in Christian worship, contemporary Christian songs have emerged as a significant form of expression in modern Christian music. These are characterized by their modern musical style (such as pop, rock, folk) and lyrical content, and have gained popularity in Christian worship settings, especially in churches that embrace a more contemporary or informal worship style (Ruth, 2015; Baker, 2022). In terms of their form, contemporary Christian songs have repetitive melodies that are easy to sing and remember (e.g., Tomlin, 2023). While not always as overtly scriptural as church hymns, they often include biblical concepts to convey the spiritual features associated with Christianity. To facilitate worship in a modern setting, churches often utilize contemporary instrumentation, which includes guitars, keyboards, drums, and synthesizers. Services featuring these songs are typically led by bands with vocalists and instrumentalists. Notably, some hymns, such as "Amazing Grace", have been revised and performed in a modern style and are now considered contemporary Christian songs (see <https://tinyurl.com/4wh3mf73>).

The characteristics and impact of Christian songs allow scholars to examine the linguistic features in these texts. However, previous studies on Christian songs analyzing their registers have used only a small number of texts and have identified a limited set of linguistic features. For example, Yende (2021) investigated Zulu traditional hymns to understand their original meaning, emotional depth, and significance in contemporary Christian worship. This study contributed to characterizing the language of praise and worship by highlighting how original Zulu traditional hymns express deep emotional, spiritual, and cultural meanings. Although this study yields significant findings related to hymnal research, it does not provide a comprehensive illustration of the language of praise

and worship. The specificity of the texts analyzed limits the range of linguistic features covered. Additionally, Thornton (2016) analyzed and evaluated the genre of contemporary congregational songs, including their musical, lyrical, and extra-musical elements, their production, producers, and the engagement of Christians with these songs. This study contributed to characterizing the language of praise and worship by analyzing the lyrics. However, the texts analyzed were limited to only twenty-five of the most popular contemporary congregational songs sung in churches worldwide. This limited scope may not comprehensively represent the language of praise and worship. Therefore, the present study aims to analyze sets of Christian songs that contain sufficient key linguistic features to illustrate the language of praise and worship.

While previous studies have provided valuable insights, their methodological aspects and findings could benefit from a different perspective, particularly a quantitative approach, to ensure broader applicability. To address this, this paper examines the registers in two sets of Christian songs using three corpus-based analyses. The aim is to identify different patterns of meaningful linguistic features in each dataset. The first set of songs consists of church hymns. The second comprises contemporary Christian songs commonly used in the services of various Christian denominations. The primary analysis for register identification was a multidimensional analysis (MDA) based on Biber (1988, 1989). The findings from MDA were verified through a key semantic tag analysis focusing on content (Rayson et al., 2004) and a key part-of-speech (POS) analysis focusing on communication style (Culpeper, 2009; Lin, 2015; Rayson, Wilson, & Leech, 2002). This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the dominant dimensions in church hymns and contemporary Christian songs as identified through multidimensional analysis? (2) What are the key semantic tags in church hymns and contemporary Christian songs as identified through key semantic tag analysis? (3) What are the key part-of-speech tags in church hymns and contemporary Christian songs as identified through key part-of-speech analysis? (4) How do the findings from the three corpus-based analyses illustrate register variation between church hymns and contemporary Christian songs?

The identified features may enable a clear distinction between the language of praise and worship as seen from the perspectives of content and communication style in church hymns and contemporary Christian songs. This study is important because it provides procedures for characterizing the registers found in other types of songs within the Christian context, such as short choruses, as well as in songs of non-Christian religions, including Islam. Furthermore, it expands the research perspective on religious language by analyzing the linguistic features of religious songs, which is an aspect of religion where beliefs are reflected. This work also contributes to the field of register studies by showing how register variation appears in a specific religious context. By analyzing register in song lyrics, this study demonstrates how specific linguistic features can influence individuals and reinforce the beliefs promoted by religious groups.

Methodology

The language of praise and worship songs is powerful because it employs specific registers that evoke emotions and establish connections (e.g., Omatayo, 2023). From a linguistic perspective, a register refers to the manner in which language is used. It encompasses the linguistic choices and characteristics used in a particular situation or for a specific purpose (Goulart et al., 2020). This concept suggests that language adapts and changes in response to the communicative context and the linguistic features associated with that context (Biber, 1995; Biber et al., 2006). In songs, the register often differs from ordinary spoken or written language. For instance, religious songs frequently use metaphorical and symbolic language to convey deeper spiritual meanings. Such language is less common in everyday conversation (Aslan, 2018). In a religious context, registers in songs reflect the art of music and word choice, the song's purpose, the style of word expression, and underlying beliefs. Therefore, the choice of words in the lyrics and the manner of expression are worth examining. This

helps us characterize how the songs are expressed in a particular setting. To explore this further, we need two sets of religious songs. To explore this, we selected Christianity as the context due to its specific use of songs for worship. We chose church hymns and contemporary Christian songs for comparison. This allows us to identify how register varies and contributes to the language of praise and worship. These two song categories are relevant to our study because they are widely used across Christian denominations, making them useful for analyzing language in praise and worship.

To identify patterns of linguistic features in registers of church hymns and contemporary Christian songs, we first compiled our two data categories. The first category included hymns from Jehovah's Witnesses (see www.jw.org), the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Southern Baptist Church (see www.hymnary.org). The second category included works by Don Moen (see <https://tinyurl.com/mvuxy36k>), Michael W. Smith (see <https://tinyurl.com/53fx53v7>), Gaither Vocal Band (<https://tinyurl.com/bdd5uzej>), Hillsong Worship (see <https://tinyurl.com/mtskum28>), Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir (see <https://tinyurl.com/5awfdvrs>), and Kingdom of Jesus Christ (see kingdomofjesuschrist.org). We cleaned all texts by excluding linguistic and non-linguistic elements not useful for analysis, such as repeated choruses, introductions, and numerical elements. Next, we verified dataset sizes, following the methods outlined by Pojanapunya and Watson Todd (2021) and Palayon and Perrodin (2023). The resulting dataset sizes, measured in tokens, are sufficient because they contain enough linguistic patterns for illustrating register variation. To ensure valid comparisons, the target and reference corpora should be comparable in content and structure. Table 1 below presents the sizes of the datasets.

Table 1
Sizes of the Two Datasets in Three Analyses

Religious Songs	Multidimensional Analysis		Key Semantic Tag Analysis		Key Part-of-Speech Analysis	
	Tokens	Type-Token Ratio	Semantic tag types	Semantic Tag Tokens	Part-of-Speech Tag Types	Part-of-Speech Tag Tokens
Traditional hymns	50,75	161	294	50,742	63	52,411
Contemporary Christian Songs	52,574	173	276	52,006	63	53,025

Note: A token refers to any individual unit in the text.

To examine the registers within the two datasets, we employed corpus analysis. This methodological approach uses a collection of texts and computer programs to identify patterns of meaningful linguistic features that characterize the language concepts in the corpus (Baker, 2010; Bondi & Scott, 2010; Sinclair, 2004). Corpus analysis for register characterization is common in applied linguistics. However, using multiple corpus-based methods to characterize registers in religious songs may be less explored. One study (Wang & Zhang, 2019) compared the language of traditional hymns and contemporary Christian songs from a single analytical perspective. This yielded limited findings and wider methodological application. To expand the methodological dimension and draw a range of linguistic evidence, this paper used multiple corpus-based methods for comprehensive data interpretation in this context.

The primary corpus-based method employed in this study is Multidimensional Analysis (MDA), a framework developed by Biber (1988; 1989). This method identified co-occurring linguistic

features that correlate with specific communicative functions across different types of texts. These sets of features formed six dimensions: (1) involved and informational discourse, (2) narrative and non-narrative concerns, (3) context-independent and dependent discourse, (4) overt expression of persuasion, (5) abstract and non-abstract information, and (6) online informational elaboration. Since registers are positioned along the dimensions, these six dimensions were used in this study to describe the registers in the target corpora. To determine the dominant dimensions that describe registers, the Multidimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT) is used (Nini, 2019). This computer program employs multivariate statistical procedures to identify correlations among a large number of linguistic features. The distributed features are clustered together to determine the dimension of variation based on the dimension scores, which provide a general textual characterization (Biber, 2014; ; Biber & Conrad, 2014; Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998). This tool automatically calculates the statistical scores (dimension scores and z-scores) and provides a list of syntactic features. The dimension score patterns enabled us to identify the dominant dimensions in both datasets. The z-scores helped us to identify the important syntactic features that illustrate the dominant dimensions (see Palayon, Watson Todd, & Vunghthong, 2022, for further details on identifying these dimensions). After the tool generated the dimension scores, all syntactic features in the lists were grouped based on their z-scores. The syntactic features with positive z-scores were separated from the features with negative z-scores. This step helped us identify the syntactic features that describe the dominant dimensions. All features were interpreted functionally to further explain the characteristics of the target data (Biber, 2014; Biber et al., 1998; Nini, 2019).

After identifying the dominant dimensions, we applied key semantic tag analysis (Rayson et al., 2004) and key part-of-speech (POS) analysis (Culpeper, 2009; Lin, 2015; Rayson et al., 2002). The key semantic tag analysis reveals the semantic groups of words (e.g., S9 Religion and the supernatural). These highlight content elements in each dataset. The key POS analysis reveals the grammatical groups of words (e.g., FPP1 First-person pronouns), showing the communication style elements in each dataset. These methods let us further characterize dominant dimensions by examining significant semantic categories for religious registers and grammatical tags for language styles in church hymns and contemporary Christian songs (see Palayon & Perrodin, 2023, for more information on these methods). We used the English USAS semantic tagger (Rayson et al., 2004) to semantically tag words and MAT for syntactic tagging. After tagging, we used AntConc 3.4.4w, a free multiplatform corpus analysis toolkit (Anthony, 2005), to identify important semantic and part-of-speech tags in each dataset. We compared the frequencies of tags in each dataset, with one serving as the target corpus and the other as the reference corpus (see Kheovichai, 2020; Palayon, Watson Todd, & Vunghthong, 2020, for more on these comparisons). To quantify the importance of these tags, we used the log-likelihood (LL) probability statistic. This metric is well-suited for identifying features that illustrate language characteristics in church hymns and contemporary Christian songs. Its principles and use in prior studies make this statistic suitable for our study as well.

After the AntConc tool showed the lists of features, we needed to determine the cutoff point in each list to identify the final features for characterization. There are three possible cutoff methods to determine the thresholds: (1) a probability-associated value (e.g., Esimaje, 2012), (2) Top N (e.g., Pojanapunya & Watson Todd, 2018; Palayon et al., 2020), and (3) a proportion of the range of LL scores (e.g., Pojanapunya, 2017; Pojanapunya & Watson Todd, 2021). However, the Top N approach was deemed the most appropriate in this study because it enables us to identify more meaningful patterns that can be used for characterization. This method involved examining the top linguistic features with very high LL values in the list (e.g., Top 5) to observe the major content and style features. However, it can be extended (e.g., Top 15) to identify any new information or additional tags that would either characterize the target corpus or confirm existing patterns of meaningful linguistic features. Therefore, we began by examining the first five key semantic and POS tags and continued until a saturation point was reached. This process resulted in 12 key semantic tags and seven key POS

tags for the church hymns, and nine key semantic tags and nine key POS tags for the contemporary Christian songs.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the three corpus-based analyses and discusses their functions and implications based on the research questions. The first subsection illustrates the dominant dimensions, as evidenced by significant syntactic features. The second subsection reports the key semantic tags, describing the content features of the two sets of songs. The third subsection reports the key part-of-speech tags, describing the communication styles of the two sets of songs. The fourth subsection illustrates the language characteristics of the two sets of songs, highlighting the distinctive features of the language of praise and worship.

Multidimensional Analysis of Church Hymns and Contemporary Christian Songs

Table 2

Dominant Dimensions in the Target Songs

Dimension (D)	Range of Dimension Scores			Dimension scores	
				Church Hymns	Contemporary Christian Songs
(D1) Involved and informational discourse	-30.000	↔	60.000	0.20	10.46
(D2) Narrative and non-narrative concerns	-10.000	↔	20.000	-0.62	-2.40
(D3) Context-independent and dependent discourse	-20.000	↔	20.000	2.51	-0.68
(D4) Overt expression of persuasion	-10.000	↔	20.000	-1.20	1.33
(D5) Abstract and non-abstract information	-5.000	↔	20.000	-1.16	-1.79
(D6) On-line informational elaboration	-6.000	↔	10.000	-1.52	-1.34

Table 2 presents the patterns of dimension scores, allowing us to determine the dominant dimensions in the songs. From the scores, the first, third, and fourth dimensions display patterns. Both scores of the two datasets in the first dimension are positive, indicating that the two sets of songs share common characteristics. However, the significant difference in the scores indicates that contemporary Christian songs exhibit a high level of involvement, whereas church hymns display a very low level of involvement. This suggests that the church hymns tend to be informational. In the third dimension, the scores indicate that church hymns exhibit context-independent characteristics, whereas contemporary Christian songs display context-dependent characteristics. In the fourth dimension, the positive score of the contemporary Christian songs indicates the clear expression of persuasion in these songs.

Table 3

Syntactic Features Characterizing the Dominant Dimensions

Church Hymns		Contemporary Christian Songs	
Syntactic features	z-scores	Syntactic features	z-scores
PASTP - Past Participial Clauses	4.25	PRMD - Predictive Modals	3.21
PHC - Phrasal Coordination	3.59	SPP2 - Second-person Pronouns	3.10
NN - Total Other Nouns	2.36	FPP1 - First-person Pronouns	2.71
ANDC - Independent Clause Coordination	2.21	PRED - Predicative Adjectives	1.38
TSUB - That Relative Clauses on Subject Position	1.63	TSUB - That Relative Clauses on Subject Position	1.25
PRMD - Predictive Modals	1.57	PHC - Phrasal Coordination	1.19
FPP1 - First-person pronouns	1.33		
SPP2 - Second-person Pronouns	1.32		
WHQU - Direct WH-Questions	1.17		

Table 3 presents the sets of syntactic features that can be used to linguistically characterize the dominant dimensions identified (see Biber et al., 1998, for the categories of grammatical features). The co-occurrence of past participial clauses (4.25), total other nouns (2.36), and independent clause coordination (2.21) with fairly high z-scores, and that-relative clauses on subjective position indicates the characteristic of the church hymns associated with informational production, while the co-occurrence of first-person pronouns (1.33), second-person pronouns (1.32), and direct WH-questions (1.17) with low z-scores indicates the involved characteristic of the church hymns. The co-occurrence of second-person pronouns (3.10) and first-person pronouns (2.71) with fairly high z-scores, predicative adjectives, and that-relative clauses on subjective position in the contemporary Christian songs indicates the highly involved characteristic of these songs. The phrasal coordination with a z-score of 4.25 in the church hymns indicates the context-independent characteristic of these songs, whereas the phrasal coordination with a z-score of 1.19 in the contemporary songs is likely to suggest a low level of this characteristic, resulting in context-dependent characteristics of these songs. The predictive modals indicate the expression of persuasion in the songs. However, this feature, with a z-score of 3.21 in the contemporary Christian songs, suggests that the expression of persuasion is clear in these songs.

Key Semantic Tag Analysis of Church Hymns and Contemporary Christian Songs

Table 4

Key Semantic Tags in the Church Hymns

Rank	Key Semantic Tags	Lexical Items	Freq.	LL
1	S9 Religion and the supernatural	anointed, church, salvation, God, Jehovah	1802	142.5
2	S8+ Helping	support, shield, serve, protector, Savior	437	134.2
3	E4.1+ Happy	glory, bless, cheerful, delight, rejoice	376	107.1

Rank	Key Semantic Tags	Lexical Items	Freq.	LL
4	L1- Dead	dead, death, die, died, dying, tomb, slay	266	92.6
5	Z1 Personal names	Mary, Emmanuel, Jesus, God, Jehovah	825	54.7
6	G2.2- Unethical	evil, guilt, shame, sinful, sinners, sins	241	43.5
7	E2+ Like	adoration, beloved, love, loving, tender	389	37.7
8	Z2 Geographical names	Bethlehem, Calvary, Israel, Galilee	158	36.1
9	O4.3 Colour and colour patterns	brightest, brightness, gloom, golden	155	35.0
10	X5.2+ Interested/excited/energetic	ardent, gladly, passion, revives, zeal	45	31.9
11	S7.1- No power	humble, obedience, servants, surrender	137	30.9
12	S1.2.4+ Polite	gracious, grateful, thankful, thankfulness	51	29.0

Based on Table 4, most tags in the church hymns display religious concepts and these can be found in the tags S9 Religion and the supernatural (e.g., salvation, God, church), L1- Dead (e.g., dead, death, die, tomb), Z1 Personal names (e.g., Mary, Jesus, Jehovah), G2.2- Unethical (e.g., evil, sinful, sins), Z2 Geographical names (e.g., Bethlehem, Calvary, Galilee), and S7.1- No power (e.g., obedience, servants, surrender). These findings suggest that the concepts in church hymns are often associated with universal religious concepts, most notably reflecting scriptural concepts such as the death of Jesus Christ, as indicated by the tag L1- Dead (Marini, 2002; Wang & Zhang, 2019).

Additionally, these songs contain features showing the expression of adoration. This expression can be seen in the tags S8+ Helping (e.g., shield, support, protector), E4.1+ Happy (e.g., glory, bless, rejoice), E2+ Like (e.g., adoration, love, tender), O4.3 Colour and colour patterns (e.g., brightest, gloom, golden), X5.2+ Interested/ excited/ energetic (e.g., ardent, passion, zeal), showing intense admiration or worshipping to God with great devotion (“What tender love! what holy fear”). The songs also contain feature that illustrates the expression of appreciation, as seen in the tag S1.2.4+ Polite (e.g., gracious, grateful, thankful), conveying feelings of gratitude and reverence to God (“Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home”).

Table 5
Key Semantic Tags in the Contemporary Christian Songs

Rank	Key Semantic Tags	Lexical Items	Freq.	LL
1	X9.2- Failure	breakdown, failed, lose, lost	131	36.8
2	X2.1 Thought, belief	believe, feel, think, thinking, trust	276	36.2
3	X7+ Wanted	choice, chose, desire, plan, purpose, willing	232	30.0
4	M1 Moving, coming and going	coming, drifting, fall, follow, marching	1041	22.3
5	X2.2+ Knowledgeable	knowing, looking, remember, wisdom	521	20.4
6	X2.5+ Understanding	understand, realize	41	19.5
7	S6+ Strong obligation or necessity	faithful, faithfulness, need, promise	371	18.5
8	W4 Weather	clouds, flooding, rain, storms, thunder, wind	137	16.2
9	A2.1+ Change	become, change, get, restored, transformed	96	13.6

Based on Table 5, most tags in the contemporary Christian songs display psychological concepts, and these can be seen in the tags X2.1 Thought, belief (e.g., believe, feel, think), X7+ Wanted (e.g., choice, desire, plan), X2.2+ Knowledgeable (e.g., knowing, remember, wisdom), and X2.5+ Understanding (e.g., understand), often associated with life-related situations (“Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul”, “And on that day when my strength is failing”). We also found two tags expressed in a metaphorical way, which display common implications (Aslan, 2018; Omotayo, 2023). These tags are X9.2- Failure (e.g., breakdown, failed, lost) and W4 Weather (e.g., storms, thunder, wind), which express life challenges (“When the oceans rise and thunders roar, I will soar with You above the storm”). The implications of these tags are likely to be associated with the tags A2.1+ Change (e.g., restored, transformed, changed) and M1 Moving, coming, and going (e.g., drifting, following, marching), showing that after encountering challenges, life must move forward with faith and a spiritual perspective. The tag S6+ Strong obligation or necessity (e.g., faithful, need, promise) is frequent in the songs, and it adds impact as the lyrics highlight the nature of God, who is faithful to his words (Hunt, 2015). These tags suggest that contemporary Christian songs focus more on self or personal development through faith within the Christian context.

Key Part-of-Speech Analysis of Church Hymns and Contemporary Christian Songs

Table 6

Key Part-of-Speech Tags in the Church Hymns

Rank	Key Part-of-Speech Tags	Freq.	LL	Lexical Items
1	ANDC - Independent Clause Coordination	765	578.6	and (preceded by a comma and followed by it, etc.)
2	NN - Total Other Nouns	13,431	512.4	Jesus, Mary, God
3	JJ - Attributive Adjectives	2,837	341.3	eternal, everlasting, faithful, amazing, anointed
4	PHC - Phrasal Coordination	665	113.9	and (that is preceded and followed by the same tag)
5	NOMZ - Nominalizations	519	81.4	adoration, almightiness, amazement, creation
6	CONJ - Conjuncts	44	48.7	instead, therefore, thus
7	TPP3 - Third-person Pronouns	1,847	41.1	he, himself, she, their, them, they

As reported in Table 6, the church hymns display a frequent use of nouns, which is associated with the frequent use of nominalizations, independent clause coordination, and phrasal coordination. These tags suggest that the language in these texts is more informational. These features often convey abstract scriptural or theological concepts in the songs (“As on the cross the Savior hung, And wept, and bled, and died; He poured salvation on a wretch”), which reduce personal connection and emotional engagement. Additionally, these texts contain attributive adjectives, such as eternal, everlasting, faithful, amazing, and anointed, suggesting a focus on describing divine qualities or spiritual attributes (“In God’s eternal book, And grace has brought me to the Lamb”). Such adjectives emphasize praise and admiration, as highlighted in the key semantic tag analysis, and support the theological content of the lyrics. The target texts also contain conjuncts and third-person pronouns. The frequent use of conjuncts suggests that church hymns often present explanatory relationships, which reflect an informational language style (“Thus might I hide my blushing face, while his dear cross appears”). The frequent use of third-person pronouns suggests a more objective or narrative

tone (“To show God’s love aright, she bore to us a Savior”). It implies that church hymns often focus on scriptural characters rather than the worshippers or individuals (Marini, 2002), which can limit personal connection or direct engagement.

Table 7

Key Part-of-Speech Tags in the Contemporary Christian Songs

Rank	Key Part-of-Speech Tags	Freq.	LL	Lexical Items
1	FPP1 - First-person Pronouns	5145	425.0	I, us, my, me, our, we
2	SPP2 - Second-person Pronouns	2771	397.2	you, your, yourself
3	VPRT - Present Tense	4737	198.5	am, are, praise, love
4	QUPR - Quantifier Pronouns	154	165.8	anyone, anything, everybody
5	CC - Coordinating Conjunctions	1135	128.5	and, or, but
6	PRMD - Predictive Modals	1006	81.3	'll, shall, will, would
7	PRED - Predicative Adjectives	437	51.2	amazing, faithful, holy, mighty
8	EMPH - Emphatics	390	51.2	more, really, so
9	TIME - Time Adverbials	414	36.8	lately, now, tomorrow, yesterday

For contemporary Christian songs, these texts frequently utilize first-person and second-person pronouns (Yeo & Ting, 2014), indicating that the lyrics express personal and spiritual relationships with God (I, you), direct address (you, your), and collective relationships (us, we, our), as shown in Table 7. These elements help to develop connection or engagement in the songs (“I love You, Lord, And I lift my voice”). The use of the present tense is also frequent, suggesting that the lyrics create a sense of ongoing connection between individuals and God (“Lord, you catch me when I’m falling”). This tense also makes the experience of praise and worship feel active and personally relevant, as if the actions, emotions, or declarations are happening in the moment. The use of quantifier pronouns is evident in the songs, implying that these texts aim to reach a broad audience and convey that spiritual concepts, such as God’s love, are accessible to everyone (“Everybody dreams of going home, it seems”). The frequent use of coordinating conjunctions in the songs helps to link thoughts associated with emotions, spiritual concepts, and life-related concepts, which increase the influence or impact of the songs (“But home is so much more than windows, walls, and doors, It’s a warm embrace and smiling faces awaiting you”). Additionally, the contemporary Christian songs contain predictive modals, indicating that the lyrics express hope, assurance, and confidence about God’s words and future actions (“I will soar with You above the storm, Father, You are King over the flood, I will be still, know You are God”). The songs also include predicative adjectives (e.g., amazing, faithful, holy, mighty) and emphatics (e.g., more, really, so), which increase the intensity of spiritual concepts, such as emotions (“Oh, praise my soul, God really loves us”). Lastly, the frequent use of time adverbials suggests that the lyrics create a sense of reflection or anticipation associated with life-related concepts (“I am a flower quickly fading, Here today and gone tomorrow”). Its presence helps to ground the songs in the present moment, while reflecting on the past and expressing hope for the future in the context of God.

Register Variation Between Church Hymns and Contemporary Christian Songs

According to the multidimensional analysis findings, both sets of songs exhibit an involved characteristic. However, the difference of the dimension scores and grammatical features shows that

the church hymns tend to be very low in involvement resulting in informational production (e.g., “King of kings, yet born of Mary, as of old on earth He stood, Lord of lords, in human vesture”) and the contemporary Christian songs tend to be high in this (involved) characteristic (e.g., “You are my desire, No one else will do, Help me find the way, Lead me back to you”). This analysis also reveals that the church hymns display context-independent characteristics, as these songs often refer to biblical or theological concepts (e.g., “King of kings, yet born of Mary, as of old on earth He stood, Lord of lords, in human vesture”) that do not rely on the worshippers’ or individuals’ immediate situation or feelings. In contrast, contemporary Christian songs display context-dependent characteristics, as these songs frequently refer to personal emotions, life-related situations such as struggles, or immediate experiences (e.g., “When the oceans rise and thunders roar, I will soar with you above the storm”). The characteristics of contemporary Christian songs, being highly involved and context-dependent, make these songs more personal and persuasive. These findings are supported by the key semantic tag and key part-of-speech findings, establishing reliability through significant linguistic patterns that align with the communicative purposes of each song type.

Based on the linguistic patterns, church hymns focus on religious concepts associated with specific scriptural texts or theological concepts (such as the death of Jesus Christ) and display expressions of adoration and appreciation towards significant scriptural figures (such as God or Jesus Christ). These features confirm that church hymns are more informational in nature (“We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Mary’s Son, who descended from his throne, and for us salvation won; by whose cross and death are we, rescued from sin’s misery”). This characteristic occurred because hymns are often written in poetic or metrical style, with structured rhythms and patterns that prioritize theological or doctrinal content (Breed, 2024; Plett, 1986). Although these songs contain features commonly found in contemporary Christian music, such as adjectives (amazing, faithful, eternal), the use of these features in hymns primarily serves to illuminate theological or scriptural concepts. These findings align with the works of Marini (2002), Mouw (2004), and Breed (2024), showing that hymns tend to emphasize doctrinal or theological content. However, the findings of this study, from a multidimensional analysis perspective, highlight that these songs are characterized by low engagement and context-independence, indicating a more structured style rather than one that engages with the immediate emotional or experiential context of the audience. In addition, church hymns contain conjuncts (therefore, instead, thus) and third-person pronouns (he, she, himself), characterizing these songs as formal and objective in style. These findings add to the characteristics of hymns identified in the previous studies, which have shown that these songs are often marked by a more theological or doctrinal tone.

The key semantic tag features in contemporary Christian songs generally associate with psychological and life-related concepts. The psychological concepts focus more on emotions (feelings, desires, trust) and faith (trust, belief, wisdom, faithfulness, thought). The life-related concepts include ideas or topics connected to human existence (such as belief and purpose), personal experiences (such as failure and realization), and life’s journey (such as knowing, marching, and restoration). These features are linked to the frequent use of first-person (I, us, me, we) and second-person pronouns (you, your), establishing a connection between the worshippers or individuals to God (“And you’ve told me who I am, I am yours, I am yours”). Yeo and Ting (2014) strengthened this finding by demonstrating how personal pronouns are used for student engagement. These features are also associated with the verb present tense (am, are, love), making the praise and worship relevant to the present situation (“My soul will rest in Your embrace, I am Yours and You are mine”). These elements make the contemporary Christian songs highly engaging. In addition, life problems (such as failed and lost), God’s nature as faithful (faithfulness, promise, amazing, holy, mighty), and transformation or restoration (such as realize, transformed, restored, change) are included in the lyrics (“Amazing grace, How sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me, oh, I once was lost, But now, I’m found, Was blind but now I see, Oh, I can see it now, Oh, I can see the love in Your eyes”),

showing the importance of spiritual beliefs or faith for personal or life development. With a high inclusion of life-related and spiritual relationship concepts, as well as various personal expressions about life and faith, contemporary Christian songs are able to display specific contexts, indicating a form of context-dependent discourse. The frequent inclusion of life-related and spiritual concepts allows the songs to employ quantifier pronouns (such as anyone and everybody) and coordinating conjunctions (such as but), which increase the level of involvement. The presence of time adverbials (such as “yesterday” and “tomorrow”) in the lyrics allows worshippers or individuals to reflect and contemplate. These characteristics— being engaging, personal, relatable, and reflective— make the target songs persuasive. According to studies by Khan (2024) and Matara and Solong (2025), these elements have a significant influence on communication. This persuasive characteristic is further demonstrated through the presence of emphatics and predictive modals, such as “shall” and “will” (Biber et al., 1998). The emphatic words such as more and really tend to magnify some content features in the lyrics (“I need You more, More than yesterday, I need You more, More than words can say, I need You more, Than ever before, I need You, Lord”. The modal words, such as “shall” and “will,” describe the sense of determination as an aspect of life and spirituality (“I will love You, Lord, my shield, I will love You, Lord, my rock, Forever, all my days, I will love You, God”).

From the findings, church hymns tend to display an informational characteristic, marked by low involvement and context-independence. This implies that these songs tend to focus on Christian religious information over interaction, presenting messages in a more formal, structured, and generalized manner. On the positive side, this characteristic allows hymns to convey theological information and doctrinal teachings across time and place. The context-independent nature makes these songs suitable for use in various Christian religious settings, ensuring a shared language of praise and worship that transcends individual experiences. However, these characteristics also lead to reduced interpersonal connection, as the language lacks personal connection or closeness, emotional connection, and situational relevance. In religious communication, this may create a sense of distance between the message and the worshipper, making it harder for some individuals to engage personally with the lyrics. While informational hymns support biblical and doctrinal concepts, their limited emotional appeal may hinder the depth of spiritual communication, as some individuals tend to seek more relational and experiential forms of praise and worship.

For contemporary Christian songs, these texts often demonstrate high involvement or engagement, utilizing personal pronouns and direct messages that address the individual's life situation. This characteristic makes these songs relatable and emotionally powerful. It also makes the songs persuasive, helping individuals feel comforted, inspired, or moved to take action. The context-dependent nature of these songs allows them to speak directly to specific life situations, making worship feel more personal and relevant. However, this characteristic also has limitations. Since the focus is on feelings and personal experience, the songs often carry less information about biblical or Christian teachings. As a result, some songs may lack depth in terms of theological content. In religious communication, these characteristics can be both helpful and limiting. It helps people connect emotionally and feel spiritually uplifted, but it may not always support deep understanding or learning of Christian principles. Still, the engaging and persuasive characteristics of these songs play an important role in modern worship, especially for younger or more emotionally driven audiences.

The findings of this study enhance our understanding of the language of praise and worship by demonstrating how various linguistic features influence the communicative styles of Christian songs. The key linguistic features identified in this study also extend the dimensions of the findings in previous studies (e.g., Marini, 2002; Thornton, 2016; Yende, 2021), by highlighting additional language registers that were not previously emphasized. Furthermore, these features also provide linguistic insights for studies on worship songs that do not focus on language analysis but share common song themes identified in this study (e.g., Blake, 2020; Tönsing, Wepener, & Vos, 2015). Comparing the

church hymns and contemporary Christian songs highlights how language choices, such as level of involvement and amount of information, affect how worshippers or individuals experience and interpret the songs. These insights help church leaders, composers, and worship teams become more aware of the effects of different registers on individuals' emotional connection and spiritual understanding. Additionally, the language characteristics of church hymns and contemporary Christian songs have important implications for composers of religious music, particularly in Christian contexts. Composers who are aware of these features can be more intentional in their compositions, specifically in choosing language that balances emotional engagement and informational depth depending on the spiritual needs of their community. In churches that use pure hymns, pure contemporary Christian songs, or both types of songs, this balance can be powerful, enabling worship to be both biblically or theologically grounded and personally meaningful. Therefore, the linguistic choices made in composing praise and worship songs are not just stylistic decisions. They directly shape the spiritual experience of worshippers and the theological direction of the church.

Conclusion

This study aimed to distinguish the linguistic characteristics of church hymns and contemporary Christian songs within Christian religious communities by identifying the key linguistic features present in each set of songs. By employing multidimensional analysis (MDA), key semantic tag analysis, and key part-of-speech (POS) analysis, we identified language registers associated with each set of songs. Church hymns and contemporary Christian songs contain distinct linguistic registers that contribute to communication within Christian religious contexts. Church hymns exhibit low engagement and informational production, reflecting their context-independent nature, which is rooted in scriptural texts. In contrast, contemporary Christian songs exhibit high engagement and low informational production, reflecting their context-dependent and persuasive qualities. These findings underscore the importance of striking a balance between engagement, informational production, context independence, and context dependence in the communication and understanding of song themes and purposes.

The presence of engagement in discourse, characterized by emotions and words associated with life stories, can enhance persuasion in communication and foster a deep connection. Incorporating informational production in discourse enhances individuals' knowledge of key principles, while context-independent characteristics facilitate the understanding of universal aspects of discourse, empowering individuals to deepen their understanding of religious principles. Context-dependent characteristics aid in comprehending the communicative purposes of discourse, emphasizing specific elements associated with life-related and spiritual relationship concepts. Finally, the expression of persuasion serves as a powerful tool to achieve specific communication goals and outcomes, further enhancing the impact of worship songs within religious communities.

While this study focuses specifically on songs within the Christian religion, its implications extend to the broader cultural diversity of the ASEAN region. By examining the key linguistic features of Christian worship songs using multidimensional analysis, key semantic tag analysis, and key part-of-speech analysis, this research lays the groundwork for other non-Christian religious groups, such as Buddhists and Muslims, to similarly characterize their worship songs. Through the methods employed, religious communities beyond Christianity can gain insights into the linguistic elements of their own sacred texts, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of their religious characteristics. Beyond religious studies, the findings of this research offer valuable insights for English Language Teaching (ELT), specifically in contexts where English is used to explore narratives, cultural concepts, and religious expressions or beliefs. The identified linguistic features associated with persuasion, religious concepts, and life-related concepts can be incorporated into ELT materials to teach language in a more meaningful and reflective way. Using worship songs as authentic

texts allows learners to engage with religious dimensions, guiding them to deepen their cultural and spiritual awareness. In multicultural and multilingual ASEAN classrooms, this approach can not only enhance students' language skills and psychological aspects but also promote respect for religious and cultural diversity.

The methodology employed in this study provides valuable insights for future research on register characterization in songs, based on the findings identified through multiple and complementary corpus-based approaches. The combination of Biber's multidimensional analysis (MDA), key semantic tag analysis, and key part-of-speech analysis (POS) allows for a more comprehensive understanding of register variation in medium-sized religious song corpora. Specifically, the use of log-likelihood (LL), z-score, and the Top N cutoff method strengthens the identification of key linguistic features by ensuring both statistical reliability and the discovery broader pattern, thereby addressing limitations found of earlier studies, such as (e.g., Thornton, 2016; Yende, 2021) with a narrowly focused dataset or had a limited focus on linguistic features. Multidimensional analysis, conducted through the MAT tool, establishes the analytical foundation by identifying the linguistic dimensions of the songs. Key semantic tag analysis (using the English USAS semantic tagger and AntConc) and key part-of-speech analysis (using the MAT tool and AntConc) then strengthen these main findings by providing objective scores on linguistic features. These analyses enrich the findings, which are crucial in understanding the language of praise and worship. Overall, this integrative methodological system not only strengthens the validity of the register findings but also provides a replicable and adaptable framework for analyzing linguistic variation in similar discourse domains.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

AI Disclosure

The authors declare that ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used only for minor language editing in limited parts of this manuscript. All AI-assisted edits were reviewed and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content.

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