

Simlish is less distracting than English in background music during a conversation

August 3 2021



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Linguist Susanne Brouwer and a group of her students conducted three experiments to see how well people understand each other when music is playing in the background. For this study, she used a selection of Katy

Perry songs, including Simlish versions of the hits; the language used in the popular computer game The Sims. It appears that people understand each other less well when the English versions are playing compared to the Simlish versions. People seem to understand each other the best with the instrumental versions of her songs. Brouwer and her team will be publishing their research in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*.

In this research project, Brouwer and her students wanted to find out whether it is more difficult to recognize sentences when there is singing in the background and when the lyrics make sense. Katy Perry proved to be an excellent choice for the study. "She has released her songs in Simlish, an invented language that sounds like English and is used in The Sims, a popular computer game among students," explains Brouwer.

Lass frooby noo

In Simlish, 'Last Friday night' is translated as 'Lass frooby noo.' Simlish may sound like a language, but it is incomprehensible. "So we used Simlish as a condition whereby vocals are present, but the lyrics are meaningless (because no one understands Simlish)."

During the experiment, the researchers subjected more than 100 participants to sentences from the three versions of the hits 'Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)' and 'Hot N Cold' at different volume levels. In each situation, the participants had to indicate which sentences they could hear being spoken by a virtual conversation partner while different versions of the songs played in the background.

Songs with meaningful lyrics impair understanding

The research shows that [background music](#) with lyrics has a negative

effect on the ability to understand the other person in a conversation. The unintelligible Simlish also had a negative impact, but less so than the English [version](#). The instrumental version had the least [negative effect](#). Brouwer: "Songs with lyrics most likely require greater cognitive effort to filter them out; this also applies to Simlish but to a lesser extent."

Brouwer: "Music is played everywhere these days: in restaurants, shops, when you visit people at home. It is useful to know what kind of music to play in [public spaces](#), for example, if you want people to understand each other properly." Brouwer has since started a follow-up study with familiar and unfamiliar Disney songs.

More information: Susanne Brouwer et al, "Lass frooby noo!" the interference of song lyrics and meaning on speech intelligibility., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/xap0000368](https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000368)

Provided by Radboud University

Citation: Simlish is less distracting than English in background music during a conversation (2021, August 3) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-08-simlish-distracting-english-background-music.html>

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