Rap the Language


Rap music has become one of the favorites of the American public because it is not only a particular genre but it also represents the lives and the sociopolitical points of view of a certain social group. Rap music has recently expanded its sphere of influence outside of the United States but it is still undervalued because of the content of the songs and the language it uses. This article focuses on the use of English in rap music as a case of American slang and as a representative of the Hip Hop Nation Language. The origins and the status of rap will be analyzed through two different rap songs: “Stan” by the white, world-famous Eminem; and “In Da Club” by the African American rapper 50 Cent. The features of slang that are linguistically relevant and the phonological, lexical and grammatical characteristics of the two songs will be highlighted in order to draw conclusions and establish the main characteristics of the language used in rap.

If we consider that rap music is related to the African American Language, we can already advance that rap music presents characteristics of this variety. Probably, this will be seen in the song by 50 Cent. But does Eminem use the same kind of language? Does he use a genuine and authentic Hip Hop Nation Language, or does he present some differences in his speech? Probably Eminem uses a variety close to the language used by 50 Cent, although they may present some differences because of their social backgrounds and their previous life experiences. This analysis will focus on the linguistic importance of rap language in the realm of language evolution: we will see how it reveals the natural evolution from isolating languages to agglutinative or even inflecting languages.

BACKGROUND OF RAP

According to Henry A. Rhodes, Professor of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, the origin of rap goes back to the West African singers and storytellers known as Griots. A. Rhodes affirms that rap music cannot be considered as a genre separated from the Hip Hop culture, since both are interrelated. The Hip Hop culture encloses the practice of graffiti, break dance, and a very particular way of dressing. The origin of the Hip Hop movement began in the area of the Bronx in New York City when a group of teenagers started to bully around and this triggered the appearance of street gangs that would wander around the Bronx for the next years. This is important in the sense that a lot of rappers from the Hip Hop tradition have been members of some street gang, and therefore rap music reflects street life. Also, the graffiti tradition of the Hip Hop culture is one of the legacies of these gangs, which used it as promotion and as a way of marking boundaries between gangs. Near the seventies the American society started to associate street gangs and graffiti with the hip hop culture, a social group with their own codes of behavior and their own language variety.

A. Rhodes also claims that Jamaican music influenced the American rap music, through the so called Jamaican “toasting”; which had as a main characteristic the speech of disc jockeys over the music. This sounds similar to rap music, and according to Edward Finegan and John R. Richford in Language in the U.S.A, rapping is “the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats” (2004:387). Thus it seems that there is a connection between the Jamaican toasting and rap. A. Rhodes explains that the content of the lyrics of the Jamaican “toasting” were mainly about boasting and insulting, which is similar to the content of rap songs.
Because of these contents rap music has been stigmatized by some sections of the society that find rap music offensive, violent, and undesirable.

Peter Trudgill in *Accent, dialect and the school* dealt with the relationship between dialect and accent; and social and regional background. He showed this relationship in a social pyramid in order to exemplify the panorama of dialects and accents in Britain (1986: 21). This social pyramid can also be used to illustrate the linguistic situation in the United States. At the bottom of the pyramid or the social scale there are the dialects and accents which are more likely to change from place to place, whereas at the top of the pyramid there is the Standard variety, with little regional and social change. At the top of the pyramid there are high-class speakers whereas people belonging to the lower classes are found at the bottom. Thus low status accents and dialects are also placed there. People at the top of the pyramid present less differences in their language, they speak more close to the standard variation whereas people at the bottom of the pyramid present more variation in their speech.

Rap language would be located at the very bottom of the social pyramid because of the social context in which it was originated: in poor neighborhoods, with street gangs, alcohol, drugs, and violence. Rap music deals with those issues, as seen in the song “In Da Club” by 50 Cent, which talks about alcohol and drugs: “you can find me in the club, bottle full of Bud / Mama, I got that X, if you into takin’ drugs”. Thus the rap language should be analyzed in the realm of diastatic variation because rap is commonly associated with low-class people and this is why nowadays it is not well recognized among people who are at the top of the pyramid. The language used in rap presents a lot of variation since it is a representative of American slang and it changes rapidly. Therefore it differs considerably from the standard variety and some people, particularly old generations and people at the top of the social pyramid, may be unable to understand the lyrics of rap song.

**IS RAP A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?**

In 2003 the CNN published a piece of news that explained that a high court judge said that when he tried to understand the lyrics of a rap song he could not guess the meaning of the words. The judge affirmed that the rap language was somehow related to English but that it was “for practical purposes a foreign language”. Many people nowadays would probably think the same because they may not understand most of the lyrics of a rap song. Professor A. Rhodes explains in his article “The Evolution of Rap Music in the United States” that he asked one of his American students whether he always understood the lyrics of rap songs when he listened to rap music. The student answered that he did not always understand the lyrics and that he only paid attention to whether he liked the rhythm of the song or not when listening to rap music. A. Rhodes hypothesis here is that these attitudes of the audience can make some rap songs that contain racist or violent contents achieve a lot of popularity, despite their politically incorrect lyrics.

The rap music industry has grown immensely in the last years and it has reached people of different classes and backgrounds. However, some sections of the society still consider rap dishonorable and a musical genre that should be avoided because of the language it uses. This, along with the slang nature of rap, has made some people consider rap language as a foreign language. Peter Trudgill in *Accent, dialect and the school* deals with the social attitudes towards the language and affirms that people make judgments about the type of language spoken by certain social groups. According to Trudgill, these judgments are based on social rather than on linguistic reasons. He affirms that different groups of people are considered to have more prestige than others. Thus the dialects or accents also become more or less prestigious depending on the social group they are associated with. Trugill affirms that the judgments about “good” or “bad” language are based on the “social connotations of dialects and accents rather than on anything inherent in the linguistic varieties themselves” (1968: 28). Standard English is associated with speakers of higher status in society and is considered a more prestigious variety because of that, whereas rap language is related with people of low
social status and it is commonly regarded as a “bad” language. The concept of language correctness is also commonly identified with Standard English, while other varieties may be deemed “incorrect”. Peter Trudgill also affirms that “from a purely linguistic point of view, it makes no sense to talk about “right” and “wrong” in language” (2004: 38), and that no dialects or varieties are better than others. Thus the language used in rap can be considered as one of the many varieties of English.

**LANGUAGE USED IN RAP**

Rap language makes use of many slang expressions. In Finegan and Rickford’s *Language in the U.S.A*, slang is defined as “usually deliberately chosen over more conventional vocabulary to send social signal -to mark informality, irreverence, or defiance; to add humor; or to mark one’s inclusion in, admiration for, or identification with a social group, often a non-mainstream group”, slang is “vocabulary with attitude” (2004: 375). This definition of slang is clearly related to the language used in rap, since it is a language that tries to mark the social background of the Hip Hop culture. Rap language tries to create a sense of identity, a sense of belonging to a certain social group and to a certain culture. According to Finegan and Rickford, slang is used mostly in young generations, and it is ephemeral since it changes quickly. It is mostly used to portray types of people, relations, social activities, conducts and behavior (2004: 374). This is indeed a characteristic of rap language, since it often portrays the way of life of the people belonging to the Hip Hop culture, a non-mainstream culture which is gradually gaining more popularity.

The language used in rap can be classified under a broader term, the Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL). Hip Hop Nation Language can be defined as a language which has its origins in the African American Language and it is one of the many different varieties used by African Americans. Nowadays it is not only spoken in the United States, but it is also used by different ethnic groups inside and outside the nation. The Hip Hop Nation Language has its own grammar, vocabulary and phonology, and it is best seen as a mixture of speech and music. It reveals the attitudes and the language of the Hip Hop Nation, it is crucial to develop the sense of identity of its members and it also presents regional variation and individual variation according to personal life experiences. Moreover, it also reflects the sociopolitical points of view of the members of Hip Hop Nation. (Finegan and Rickford, 2004: 393)

Adrienne Anderson in *Word: rap, politics and feminism* affirms that rappers found in rap music “documentaries of what was going on in their neighborhood or bigger issues that were affecting their neighborhood and their community”. As the rap music industry started to grow, some women were allowed into the world of rap, but at the beginning women were invisible in this genre, which was seen as mainly masculine and often directed violence against women (2003: 20). This is the case in the song by Eminem that we will analyze. This song has instances of violence against women: “if she suffocates she will suffer more, and then she’ll die too”. Despite his offensive language, Eminem has managed to triumph and to reach people from different backgrounds. Eminem’s lyrics perform a violent and slang language to raise provocation, annoyance, irritation, and to make people realize what is actually happening in the society nowadays. Eminem aims to tell his audience about the poorest neighborhoods in the United States and about the people that belong to non-mainstream cultures; he sticks to the principle of free speech and this is why some people may find his lyrics politically incorrect.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF RAP LANGUAGE**

The following sections try to state the main characteristics of English that are probably more representative of Hip Hop culture. Songs by Eminem and 50 Cent, the two most popular rappers of the beginning of the 21st century, will be analyzed. From the former rapper, we have concentrated on the song “Stan” and from the latter rapper on the song “In Da Club”. Both songs have been their greatest hits representative of the way they
use English in rap songs. We are going to present our own descriptive analysis of the use of English by these two different rappers in the fields of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

VOCABULARY

With regard to vocabulary, these songs present many words that belong to the slang register and that may be unknown by most of non-native speakers. Most of the words could be labeled as “curse” words or “bad” words and they usually belong to the semantic field of sex, drugs and discrimination. Sometimes the rappers play with the words: they shorten them or change them so as to so as to adapt the number of syllables to the beat or to make the words rhyme with previous and subsequent words.

In “Stan” there are words that may be new to a non-native speaker such as fat ‘cool’, to diss ‘to show disrespect to’, bitch ‘prostitute’, dogg ‘friend’ and fucked up ‘screwed up’. There are also words such as c’mon ‘come on’ and bout ‘about’, which have been shortened so as to adapt them to the beat and the rhythm of the song. There are also words that belong to another language variety but are used in the song. This is the case with the word autumn; which is typical of British English and its counterpart in American English is fall. In this case the word autumn is used to make it rhyme with the previous and the following line: “I left my cell, my pager, and my home phone at the bottom/ I sent two letters back in autumn. You must not-a got’em” Here the word autumn /’a:təm/, bottom /’ba:təm/ and got’em /’ga:təm/ are very similar phonetically speaking. By contrast, the word fall would break with the rhyme of the song.

In 50 Cent’s song “In Da Club”, there are many words that may be new for a native speaker: shorty ‘lady’, Benz ‘Mercedes-Benz’, x ‘ecstasy’, ho/hoes ‘whores’, homie ‘friend’, nigga ‘colored person’, pimp ‘a man who controls prostitutes’, Holla ‘a loud utterance’,shawty ‘friend’, crib ‘house’ ya ‘you’ and yo ‘your’. There are also some dissyllabic words such as because and about that have been made monosyllabic: cause and bout. “In Da Club” also presents Spanish words such as playa and loco. In this case the word playa has acquired a new meaning: ‘pimp’ whereas the word loco ‘crazy’ has maintained the same meaning as in Spanish.

GRAMMAR FEATURES

Regarding grammatical structures, the most relevant feature in “Stan” is the addition of the suffix –a to some verbs. This suffix can be added in different contexts and may also have different meanings: in coulda and musta the –a suffix stands for the auxiliary have of the perfective form as in “you coulda signed an autograph for Matthew” or “we coulda been together” and “I musta missed you”. This affix can also be added to the negative particle not when it is preceded by a modal verb and it has the perfective function as can be seen in “you must not-a got’em”. The –a suffix is also added to the verbs get and want but in this case it stands for the preposition to as can be seen in “if you didn’t wanna talk to me” and “well, gotta go”. This affix is also added to the verb to be as in “I’m a name her Bonnie” and it stands for the form ‘I am going to’. Apart from verbs, this affix can also be added to other words belonging to a different category. For instance the noun kind appears with the suffix –a, but in this case, the affix stands for the preposition of as in “that’s kinda how this is”.

There are also some other features that are very common in American slang and are used in “Stan”. The word fucking is used as an intensifier as in “you’re like his fuckin idol”. There is also lack of concordance between subject and verb as in “how fucked up is you” and also between subject and auxiliary “she don’t know you like I know you Slim”. Also the form ain’t functions as an auxiliary verb with two possible meanings: the auxiliary be as in “I ain’t like you” and also the auxiliary have as in “you still ain’t called”.

The song “In Da Club” also presents some instances of the –a suffix attached to a verb such as want as in “now they wanna show me love”. This song also contains instances of the form gon’ as a shorter form of the
verb *to be going to*. This can be seen in the example “we gon’ party like it’s yo birthday/ we gon’ sip Bacardi like it’s yo birthday.” “In Da Club” also presents the form *ain’t*, which not only works as an auxiliary verb as in “you ain’t know where” but it is also used as the negation of the verb *to be* even if it does not work as an auxiliary as in “I ain’t concerned” and “I ain’t into making love”.

“In Da Club” also shows the lack of the verb *to be* as in “if you into getting rubbed” and “50 you hot”. This omission also happens when the verb to be functions as an auxiliary verb: it occurs with the present continuous as in “if you talking bout money” and “she feeling my style, she feeling my flow” and also with the present perfect as in “if she smiles she gone”. The song also presents a lack of the auxiliary *have* for the perfective form, as can be observed in the sentence “you ain’t know where we been nigga”. Also the song does not present inversion in questions with the verb *to be*, and even more, it does not even contain the verb *to be* as can be observed in the question “nigga you mad?”. This is a very common structure in rap English as well as in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and it is a way of simplifying grammatical structures without losing its meaning. There are also some examples of double negation which is a very common structure in AAVE: “but homie ain’t nothing”. Here the form *ain’t* serves as an auxiliary used in the negative and the pronoun *nothing* is also negated.

**PHONETIC AND PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES**

The phonetic and phonological features of these songs are characterized by a process of simplification and adaptation to the beat of the song. Both rappers pronounce in a general American accent but there are also some peculiarities that distinguish both singers.

In “Stan”, the diphthong /aI/ in personal pronouns is pronounced [a:], as in I [a:] and my [ma:]. This pronunciation is also very typical of AAVE and it is very noticeable at the very beginning of Eminem’s song “Dear Slim, I wrote you but you still ain’t callin. I left my cell my pager and my home phone at the bottom”. The /ŋ/ sound of the –ing ending of the verbs in the continuous form is pronounced /n/. This is highly perceptible when listening to the song and reading the lyrics because in this case spelling reflects pronunciation: the –ing morpheme is spelled <-in>. For instance, the verb *growing* /grouIŋ/ is pronounced [grouin] and spelled <growin>. This can also be observed in the rest of the verbs in the continuous form such as clownin, tryin, screamin, or doin.

In “Stan”, initial /h/ sound is sometimes dropped. This feature is very noticeable when Eminem says “I hope your conscience eats at you” and “I hope you get to read this letter, I just hope it reaches you in time”. Eminem sometimes pronounces the word *hope* [oup] and some other times [houp]. This feature de-stresses the syllable and makes speech even more fluent and quick. The dropping of the /h/ sound is also extended to consonant clusters containing the letter h. For instance, the post-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ is not pronounced, and instead Eminem pronounces the alveolar fricative /s/. The word *shit*, for example, is sometimes pronounced [sit] instead of /ʃIt/ as in “I even got the underground shit that that you did with Skam”, “I like the shit you did with Rawkus too” and also “I don’t really got shit else so that shit helps when I’m depressed”. This song also presents omission or simplification of sounds so as to make the verses shorter and adapt them to the beat of the song. This can be observed for instance in “I’m bout to be a father”, “I’ma name her bonnie”, “I driffed away and put’em on” and “how’m I supposed to send this shit out?”

In “In Da Club” the diphthong /aI/ in personal pronouns is pronounced [a:] I /aI/ is pronounced [a:] and my /mal/ is pronounced [ma:]. This is highly noticeable in “my crib, my cars, my clothes, my jewels. Look nigga I done came up and I ain’t change”. The second person pronoun is pronounced [jo] and [ja] in the possessive and the oblique form respectively: “we gon’ party like it’s yo birthday/ we gon’ sip Bacardi like it’s yo birthday’ and
“I wink my eye at ya”. This is also an example of how spelling has been adapted to pronunciation since these pronouns are spelled <yo> and <ya>.

In nouns, the /r/ sound of the morpheme –er /ər/ is usually dropped and this dropping is also reflected in spelling. For instance, the word nigger is spelled <nigga> and pronounced [nigg]. In this same line, the final r of the word whore /hoːr/ is dropped [ho] and its spelling <ho> has clearly been adapted to pronunciation. “In Da Club” also presents omission of sounds so as to shorten the words so as to adapt them to the beat and make the song more fluent as in “If you talking bout money” and “go ‘head switch the style up”. In this song it is also important to mention that the syllables that have been omitted are marked with an apostrophe. Therefore people do not misinterpret the meaning of the words. This can be seen in words such as gon’ ‘going to’, takin’ ‘taking’, ‘cause ‘because’, ‘head ‘ahead’...

COMPARING RAP AND RACE

Before starting to analyze the language in rap songs we considered the possibility that Eminem and 50 Cent use a different language because one of them is white American and the other is African American. However, after describing the main features of the language used in their songs, we can consider that they use the same language, even though there are still some differences that are perceptible.

The AAVE influence on rap English is not highly noticeable in the fields of phonology. Generally speaking, the pronunciation of both rappers is typically American. Both rappers pronounce most phonemes in the exact same way, but still there is a very recognizable difference in their voice. The pronunciation of Eminem is clearly the pronunciation of a white American, except for the [aː] pronunciation of the diphthong /aI/. On the other hand, the pronunciation of 50 Cent is the pronunciation of an African American speaker.

In the field of vocabulary, both rappers use words which belong to the semantic fields of sex, drugs, discrimination and violence, and therefore could be labeled as ‘curse words’. However, both rappers differ in one particular aspect: they use different tags. Eminem uses tags such as man “he want to be just like you man” dude “some dude was drunk” and bitch “shut up bitch!” From our perception, these words are related to white people, whereas their counterparts to refer to colored people are homie, shawty and ho, which coincidentally, 50 Cent uses in his songs. This is obviously connected to the foucaultdian idea of discourse. For American speakers, the words bitch and ho are synonyms, however, it is embedded within them that a bitch is likely to be white whereas a ho is more likely to be colored. The exact same thing happens with the tags dude and shawty, both words are generally used to refer to someone that is a good friend, yet the dude would be your white friend while the shawty would be the African American friend.

With regard to grammar, it is very hard to talk about a specific language variety. Both rappers use similar structures that are characteristic of American Slang, AAVE and HHNL such as the use of the shortened forms coulda, musta, kinda, wanna, gonna and gon’, the use of the form ain’t as an auxiliary verb or as the negative form of the verb to be, double negation as in “but homie ain’t nothing”, the use of the affirmative structure to form questions as in “nigga you mad?”, the lack of concordance between subject and verb as in “how fucked up is you” and also between subject and auxiliary “she don’t know you like I know you Slim”, the lack of the verb to be as in “if you into getting rubbed” and “50 you hot”, the dropping of the auxiliary be in the present continuous as in “if you talking bout money” and also with the present perfect as in “if she smiles she gone” and finally the lack of the auxiliary have for the perfective form as in “you ain’t know where we been nigga’. Some of these features such as double negation or the lack of the verb to be have long been regarded as characteristic from AAVE. However, nowadays some of these structures have been expanded to other varieties of English, particularly American slang. Therefore nowadays the dividing line between AAVE and American
slang is quite blurred. Yet we could conclude that from a grammatical point of view, we could consider that they use the same language, namely HHNL.

LINGUISTIC RELEVANCE OF RAP LANGUAGE

The language used in rap songs is very relevant from a linguistic point of view because it is an example of the constant evolution of languages. Rap is an oral tradition and therefore language evolves faster. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836) languages can be morphologically classified into isolating, agglutinative and inflecting. In an isolating language, one independent unit has one single meaning, whereas in an agglutinative language one morph has a single meaning and in an inflecting language one morph may have more than one meaning. Isolating languages evolve to agglutinative languages through a process of phonological reduction. Agglutinative languages through a process of morphological fusion evolve to inflecting languages, and inflecting languages evolve to isolating languages through a process of phonological reduction.

Present Day English (PDE) is a highly isolating language even though it still contains some traces of its synthetic past. Languages have a dynamic nature and therefore they are constantly evolving. English is in a constant evolution and this evolution can be traced with examples of rap English. In Present Day Standard English, modal verbs used in the perfective form such as ‘could have + ppl’ and ‘must have + ppl” present an isolating nature because every independent unit has one single meaning: could and must express modality and have expresses tense. However, in rap English these structures have undergone a process of grammaticalization through phonological reduction and they present the agglutinative forms coulda and musta as in “you coulda signed an autograph for Matthew” and “I musta missed you”. In these cases, the –a suffix stands for the auxiliary have of the perfective form. The forms coulda and musta are no longer analytical but agglutinative because two previously independent units have merged into a plurimorphemic word, each of the morphs of which has one single meaning: could and must express modality and –a expresses tense.

In PDE, the verbs got and want are sometimes followed by the particle to and another verb such as “I got to go home now” and “I want to pass the exam”. These forms are also isolating because each independent unit has one single meaning. However, in the language variety used in rap songs, the structures got to and want to have merged into the morphological compounds gotta and wanna as in “if you didn’t wanna talk to me” and “well, gotta go”. In we analyze these structures in a deeper way, we realize that the –a suffix is an agglutinative form of the particle to. In rap English the –a suffix in the form wanna has become an inflection that requires the presence of another verb: the sentence “I wanna some chocolate” is grammatically incorrect whereas “I wanna eat some chocolate” perfectly correct. Therefore rap English has acquired the new distinction between want / wanna and got / gotta: while want and got can only be followed by a noun or pronoun, wanna and gotta can only be followed by a verb.

In rap English the –a affix is also added to the verb to be as in “I’m gonna name her Bonnie” and it stands for the form ‘going to’. The form to be going to was clearly isolating even though the verb to be is not when it is conjugated and the form be going to does not literally mean ‘to be going somewhere’. This is because the form be going to has undergone a grammaticalization process through which the literal meaning of go has been lost. The form to be going to has eventually become inflecting because it has suffered a phonological and morphological reduction. The resulting morpheme ma has inflecting features because it expresses 1st person singular, futurity and intention. In “In Da Club”, the form be going to presents an alternative evolution, as can be seen in the example “we gon’ party like it’s yo birthday/ we gon’ sip Bacardi like it’s yo birthday.” In this example the evolution from we are going to towards the more grammaticalized and analytical way of expressing futurity and intentionality gon’ could be represented as follows: we are going to > we are gonna > we gonna > we gon’.
CONCLUSION

As we have seen from the analysis of the songs, the language of rap has its own history, its own social background and its own grammatical, phonological and lexical features. Thus the language of rap, which belongs to the sphere of the Hip Hop Nation Language, is a distinct variety of English with its own characteristics. The rap language is innovative, it breaks with standard constructions of English and it creates its own means of expression. Rap language is a variety of English that shows the reality of certain social groups, and it grows apart from the prescriptive rules that make the language stick together.

Rap English is commonly labeled as “bad” English by most speakers. We have to bear in mind that there is no such thing as “good” or “bad” language, because a language is a tool for communication, and different varieties are used depending on different contexts and different speakers. Thus rap English cannot be considered “bad” English because it is a vehicle for communication between rappers in the context of street life.

The language varieties which are located at the extremes of the pyramid are a great source of evidence of language evolution. Rap shows language in its pure and natural state. Rap language presents the evolution of few structures towards the next step in the natural cycle of language evolution. Moreover, nowadays the hip hop culture is gaining a lot of popularity among young people, and therefore, more people are becoming exposed to the language used in rap. Thus many young people become familiar with the expressions and features typical from this variety and start to use them in their daily lives. Bearing in mind the descriptive nature of the English language, could these new structures give way to new formations and lose those formations which are standard nowadays? This could raise new questions for further research about the rap language and its role in society and language evolution.

Bibliografía


