

It's Just a Flow of Its Own: Hip Hop Styles, Ideology, and Intergroup Distinction

In his study of styleshifting, Alim (2004) brings to the fore the reflexive relationship between local ideologies and practices. Drawing on this scholarship, I explore style as a resource for intergroup distinction by examining the role of ideology in the contrastive production of two socioculturally-differentiated Hip Hop styles.

In recent years, several Houston Hip Hop artists have signed with major recording labels, bringing “the Houston sound” (Sanneh 2005) to a national audience. Through their lyrics, these and other artists reproduce local discourses on the significance of place (affiliation with neighborhoods in “H-Town”, as well as Texas and the South more generally), success, and power. Such MCs employ the linguistic resources of local Black speech communities, drawing on not only phonological and morpho-syntactic repertoires, but also lexical items and expressions, such as “awready” and “bleedin the block”, which index a reality they help to reflexively create. The repeated deployment of such elements, as well as their “recognizability” (Alim 2004) as locally-rooted, contribute to the production of a linguistic style distinctive of commercially-successful Houston Hip Hop.

Compared to this style, the lyrics and delivery characteristic of some Houston artists stand out. These artists rarely employ indices of local affiliation, let alone explicitly proclaim such communal ties (a practice common among local MCs). They also espouse alternative perspectives on local discourses, oftentimes criticizing commercial Hip Hop for the lifestyle it portrays. I argue that these artists exploit linguistic-ideological representations of local and non-local Hip Hop styles in the dialogic production of a style consonant with their locally-unorthodox personae. This analysis is based on data collected through a perceptual task, and it is informed by ongoing ethnographic research on Houston Hip Hop.

Members of local Black speech communities were solicited to participate in a task which involved listening to thirteen short clips (1.5-3.5 seconds) and answering questions about them. These excerpts (chosen on the basis of phonological variables, such as /i/ lowering in a pre-nasal environment) were taken from Hip Hop cappellas, ten of which came from recordings obtained through fieldwork with local artists, three of which came from non-local sources. After the participants heard an excerpt, they were asked: Where do you think the artist is from, and why? In nearly every case, artists openly aligned with commercially-successful MCs were judged to be from the South and, in a number of cases, Houston specifically. By contrast, the artists most critical of commercial Hip Hop were judged not to be from the South in the majority of cases and, in many instances, the participants suggested that these artists were from the East coast. A range of elements were cited by participants as influencing their decisions, including phonological variables (eg. monophthongal /aw/) and prosodic features (such as intonation patterns). I propose that the repeated attribution of an East coast place-identity to certain artists points to shared ideological representations of certain elements as non-local. Moreover, I argue that practical and discursive knowledge of these ideological representations makes possible the co-construction of distinctive Hip Hop styles.

References:

- Alim, H. Samy. *You Know My Steez: An Ethnographic and Sociolinguistic Study of Styleshifting in a Black American Speech Community*. PADS 89. Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- Sanneh, Kelefa. The Strangest Sound in Hip-Hop Goes National. *The New York Times*. 17 April 2005.