

Vantage theory, statistics and the mental worldview[☆]

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Abstract

The paper investigates Polish punk and hip hop (rap) song lyrics broken down into frequency lists. In an analysis inspired by MacLaury's view of categorization, the construals of punk and hip hop worldviews are shown to vary in the distance of the observer from the world, the width of the viewing frame, as well as the granularity and density of the world picture. The two bodies of lyrics also reveal different tendencies in the positioning of the first-person speaker vs. other personae or the world of discourse. Evidence for differences in worldviews come from the frequency of lexemes, the use of deictic pronouns, or the pronominal and verbal references to people.

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1. Introduction

The goal of my research is to identify and portray the **worldviews** construed in the Polish punk and hip hop (rap) subcultures. Punk and hip hop are primarily names of rock music genres but also of teenage alternative cultures or subcultures with their own ideology, art, fashion and lifestyle. As music styles they appeared in the 1970s: punk in Great Britain (Sex Pistols) and hip hop in New York's Bronx (DJ Kool Herc). As alternative youth subcultures they spread in the 1980s and 1990s. Ideologically, both subcultures are founded on the feeling of social alienation, uncertain future, unemployment, oppressive acts of the state and its officials. In Great Britain, punk emerged in young workers' communities facing the economic crisis of the mid-1970s; hip hop arose in poor African-American communities of America's East Coast metropolises. In Poland, punk was the "new sound" of the 1980s, that is the period of the marshal law and the "Solidarity" struggle against the communist system; hip hop arose in the late 1990s and its generation experienced the Polish transformation of the political and economic system. The frustrations of the young generation are manifested in the music of punk and hip hop bands, whose members are treated as idols and whose lyrics contain a characteristic appraisal of the world and a system of values. The singers and authors of lyrics are the mouthpiece of their generation but a creative one.

[☆] The paper is a substantially extended and elaborated version of Niewiara (2004).

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In this paper I try to reconstruct the worldviews of the two subcultures in order to find differences between them that are not directly expressed in texts and could have their origins in the specific cultural and historical background. The investigation is based on punk and hip hop song lyrics (about 40,000 words of running text for each subculture), transcribed from tapes and broken down into frequency lists.¹ I think the “static” statistical data reflect dynamic mental processes and a frequency list is like a paused film clip, in which traces of mental activity of the representatives of a given subculture are possible to investigate. The list is treated as a special “non-textual” representation of the mental worldview of a particular subculture and the statistics are entailments which reflect the perception of the world by punk and hip hop authors.

Although frequency lists are usually investigated for key words or collective symbols, I think that an attempt to reconstruct the inner organisation of the worldviews of the two subcultures is well worth the effort, as is an application for the purpose of some ideas of cognitive linguistics, especially vantage theory (MacLaury, 1997). Vantage theory is helpful as a theory that stresses the way in which people build categories: through the processes of “zooming-in”, “panning-out”, attention to similarity or difference, projection of a recessive or dominant vantage, or the granularity of the emergent picture. I combine statistics and MacLaury’s ideas to obtain information on some parameters of the construals of the worldviews: the distance between the conceptualizer and the perceived world, the width of the viewing frame, the number of elements which fit into the purview, emphasis on particular elements (the salience of figures), or the inner tension between the elements and their organisation into higher structures. This allows me to formulate basic conclusions on the differences between punk and hip hop attitudes to the world.

2. Granularity and density of the picture

The starting point is an observation about the granularity and density of the picture projected by the punk and hip hop observers. I first compare the two frequency lists with regard to the number of distinct (different) lexemes in the respective corpora in order to establish the number of elements in the viewing field (Table 1). The lexemes are treated as “figures” against the background of text words and make up the granularity and density of the picture.²

In the punk corpus, 5470 different lexemes constitute 13% of text words while in hip hop 6316 distinct lexemes constitute 17% of text words. The smaller number of lexemes in punk indicates that the punk observer operates with fewer categories, fewer objects fit into his or her purview. The bigger number of lexemes in hip hop indicates that the subculture operates with a bigger number of categories, more figures fit into its viewing field. In my opinion, this can be treated as different density the two analysed pictures. The term *density* is treated here as the level of detail of narration (as it is understood in Talmy, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 456–457, where the number of details given in a particular narrative structure, such as description, indicates sparse or dense narration). The punk picture of the world (as well as its narration) would be then more sparsely populated and less detailed because the number of figures (lexemes) mentioned in punk texts is smaller. In contrast, the density of the hip hop picture (and narration) is larger because hip hop lyrics mention more details about the world.

At the same time, the frequency of occurrence of a particular lexeme shows that the emphasis given to a figure in punk and hip hop also differs. Punk authors speak about their objects more frequently than hip hop authors: their figures seem to be more salient. Statistically, in punk an average lexeme is uttered almost eight times, while in hip hop fewer than six times. In my opinion, this is evidence for a different granularity of the picture. The higher frequency of an average lexeme (as in punk) makes the figures in the picture clearer and

¹ The investigated corpus comes from the tapes of following groups: PUNK – Alians, Apatia, Armia, Bunkier, Dezerter, Defekt muzgu, Ewa Braun, Farben Lehre, Hałas, Karcer, Klinika, Klon, KSU, Post Regiment, Psy Wojny, Radical News, Siedem Godzin Snu, Smar SW, The Bill, Zielone Żabki.; HIP HOP – Paktofonika, Asphalt, Eldo, Fenomen, Grammatik, Inespe, Kaliber 44, Liroy, Molesta, Slums Attack, Tede, Thinkadelic, WWO, Wzgórze Yapa. The apparent disproportion in number of punk and hip hop groups is connected with the fact that punk texts are much shorter than hip hop ones. Song lyrics have been manually transcribed and broken down into frequency lists.

² The term *lexeme* is understood as a discrete item of the lexical system, having a particular meaning and specific grammatical functions. Texts words are linguistic forms which represent lexemes in texts; e.g. the lexeme PUNK is represented by the text words *punk* (Nom. Sg.), *punkiem* (Inst. Sg.), *punkowi* (Dat. Sg.) etc. (cf. Lyons, 1977).

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