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Latino rap in Barcelona: Diaspora, languages and identities

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the sociolinguistic and semiotic aspects that make up Latino style in Barcelona. It draws on interviews, songs, video clips, and observations collected ethnographically, from February to May 2015, with young people from Latin America who produce rap in Barcelona. It examines the role of the dynamics of diaspora, hip-hop discourse, and the experience of schooling in the construction of Latino identity in Barcelona. It finds hybridity in identification and language practices, as well as a disconnection with schooling, which echoes the findings of prior research carried out with Latino youth in Barcelona. This paper contributes to the conceptualisation of authenticity in hip-hop in relation to migratory experience, speech styles, and locality in Barcelona.

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I like to go to places and get to know the rap from that place because that is the music that lots of people regardless of language, religion, skin colour, language or whatever identified with under the same flag, that was that music you know? and I realised when I went to Paris seventy per cent of people didn't understand shit about what I was talking about but they were there and they were standing and saying "I don't understand but I'm not leaving", which is the same as what we used to do when rap started and it was in English and we didn't understand shit and you went and said "fuck I feel it" and my mum would say to me "but do you understand what he says?" I don't understand mum but I love this shit. . . this is rap. . .

Rxnde Akozta, Barcelona, February 2015

1. Introduction

From February to May 2015, Corona, one of the co-authors, carried out research with 4 young people from Latin America who produce hip-hop in Barcelona, and this is the main data presented in this article. In total 6 interviews, two video performances, and 17 video clips were collected and organised into a database. These accounts and lyrics echoed some of the interviews Corona had previously done with young people telling him about their migratory trajectories and their experiences in Barcelona, during his PhD

research (see following section). In this article, selected data from Corona's first study are juxtaposed to the songs produced by the rappers in the more recent fieldwork. It seeks to answer the following questions: (a) how discourses produced by participants in the first study are echoed in the rap produced in Barcelona and (b) what the sociolinguistic and semiotic aspects that make up Latino style in Barcelona are. The article starts with an introduction on what it means to be Latino in the Barcelona context and on the relevance of the concept of diaspora. It follows with a presentation of the methodology, the participants, the corpus, and the analysis carried out to answer these two research questions.

2. Latino in Barcelona

In late 2005 Corona began his ethnographic PhD research in a neighbourhood situated in the outskirts of Barcelona, an area that was home to a significant number of immigrants from Latin America (Corona, 2006). The murder of a Latin American boy in 2004 and other incidents of violence involving young people began to raise certain social alarms, which led government agencies such as the Barcelona City Council to create programs targeted at helping young Latin Americans.

Frequently, immigration was viewed as a problem for the ongoing 'normalisation' of Catalan, a minority language that is the language of instruction of schooling in Catalonia (Unamuno, Tuson, & Corona, 2008). Latin American immigrants appeared in these discussions as the most 'problematic' collective because they spoke Spanish, so their presence would potentially increase the use of the Spanish language in classrooms, thereby undermining

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normalisation efforts. It was common as well to find newspaper articles talking about Latin American students as school dropouts very likely to form Latin gangs. Corona's particular interest was not centred on the then infamous gangs (e.g. Latin Kings, Ñetas, Trinitarios, Dominicans Don't Play) popularised by mass media outlets, but on their school trajectories and the role of the languages of the school curriculum in the construction of that Latino identity. Such an identity was very much defined by the media as a product of the contact between young people from different Latin American origins.

In the context of the young people studied and the school used as fieldsite, 'Latino' referred to a specific style. The term 'style' is favoured here over 'variety' because, as Opsahl and Royneland (this volume) argue, a sociolinguistic style includes a wider range of semiotic symbols than a variety, which is restricted to linguistic items alone. Style may be defined as a clustering of resources, including linguistic resources, and an association of that clustering with social meaning and with an identifiable aspect of social practice. Importantly whereas the study of varieties is basically structuralist in its approach to variation, the study of styles sees variation as a resource for self-positioning in social space, and is more concentrated on how social meaning is created through language (Opsahl and Royneland, this volume).

The Latino style was fundamentally related to an anti-school attitude, which was asserted as fundamentally male and was built on social dynamics of discrimination inside and outside the school. Indeed in the Latino boys' discourse, the organisation of the school, as well as its disciplinary mechanisms, clearly emerged as central elements of their feelings of marginalisation. Thus the existence of a Latino or several Latino groups could be understood as reflecting the need for these boys to create a space of protection within school. Moreover, belonging to the group of Latinos offered them some social success that the school, from an academic point of view, denied them.

In Corona's initial study, not all adolescents from Latin America identified with this Latino style. For example, it was particularly noteworthy that that Argentinean, Uruguayan, Chilean and some Ecuadorian youths affiliated with the school and openly distanced themselves from Latinos. 'Latino' had a negative connotation for the school so many young people of Latin American origin tried to get away from it. Furthermore, some data showed that a racial dimension was important in the construction, or in the conception, of who was Latino and who was not: for example, many Argentinean and Uruguayan boys stated that they were not Latinos because they were whiter than their Latin American peers. On the other hand, the Latino group believed that Latin American people could not hide their origin, saying "*todos somos negritos, indios o morenitos*" ("we are all black, Indian or brown").

A sense of commonality across countries of Latin America, not only in racial, but also in cultural, linguistic and social terms, was therefore central to these youths' discourse. They emphasised that "*somos más o menos lo mismo*" ("we are more or less the same") rather than paid attention to possible differences; thus they seemed to prioritise being Latino over their possible national identities. In short, 'Latino' emerged as an interethnic identity that brought together adolescents of different backgrounds and appearances and expressed their disaffiliation with the institution of schooling but at the same time, drew them further away from the local students.

When Corona finished his PhD thesis in 2012 there were many issues which he would have liked to study more carefully; one of these was the role of hip-hop discourse input the construction of Latino identity in Barcelona. For this reason, at the beginning of 2014, he began to get in touch with some rappers of Latin American origin who were doing rap in Barcelona. He started to follow them

on YouTube and then also on Facebook; by doing this fieldwork, he found a large number of videos. In many different ways, and with widely ranging professional aspirations, hundreds of young people used their computers to turn their rooms into actual recording studios and were producing music and videos on what Barcelona rap means for them. Before turning to the methodology followed and the data collected as part of this second stage of fieldwork, a brief introduction to the Latin American diaspora in Barcelona is in order.

3. The Latin American diaspora

Latin American migration to Spain went from being almost inexistent in the early 1990s to being one of the most significant incoming demographic movements at the beginning of the year 2000. Statistics reflect these important changes in the country's demographics, which affected above all the largest cities such as Barcelona and Madrid. The economic growth of Spain, which had recently become a member of the eurozone, coincided with the recurrent economic crises of Latin America. Furthermore until 2001, people from countries such as Bolivia, Peru or the Dominican Republic did not need a visa to come to Europe as tourists, which contributed to the number of Latin Americans migrating to Spain. What the statistics do not usually reveal, although it is possible to infer by looking carefully, are the stories behind the data.

Latin American migration to Spain, especially Barcelona, was essentially feminine (Pedone, 2006). The emerging Spanish middle class found itself increasingly in need of people to clean their homes, look after their elderly relatives and work at the tables and in the kitchens of restaurants. Thousands of women arrived from Medellín, Bogotá (Colombia), Santa Cruz (Bolivia), Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), Guayaquil, Quito (Ecuador), and Trujillo (Peru). Afterwards, with the construction boom, men were also needed to build residential complexes, many of which are now empty as a result of the financial crisis facing Spain since 2008. Often the men who came to Spain to work in the construction industry were the husbands of the women who had come first. During his ethnographic work on being Latino in Barcelona, Corona had heard time and time again the story of children who saw their parents leave home in Latin America and who were looked after by their grandparents or uncles/aunts. They saw their parents once every three or four years, but they received money each week. From a distance, parents and children planned the time when they would live together again, called "family reunification" by Spanish government agencies that regulate migration. In the majority of cases, this family reunification took a long time, as it required one of the parents to obtain legal residency in order to be able to request their children join them in Spain. Thus, children who stopped seeing their parents when they were eight years old, saw them again when they were 13, 14 or 15.

This narrative seems distant, now that the financial crisis in Spain has destroyed so many jobs that Latin Americans as well as many Spaniards have started migrating again looking for ways to sustain themselves or their families. The diasporic situations resulting from this recent migratory history have an impact, not only in demographic, but also in social and linguistic terms: for instance Márquez Reiter and Martín Rojo (2015) demonstrate how, as result of those processes of mobility, individuals renegotiate their identities through linguistic practices in interaction with host societies. The rap produced by young Latinos in Barcelona can be seen as one of such linguistic practices, in which participants display various linguistic as well as visual (through video clips) resources to express their way of understanding the various meanings of the Latin American diaspora in Barcelona.

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