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Talking Hip-Hop: When stigmatized language varieties become prestige varieties

José L. Magro*

Department of Hispanic and Luzo-Brazilian Languages and Literatures, The Graduate Center (CUNY), United States

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ABSTRACT

Focusing mainly on contrasting methodological approaches, this article presents a study on language attitudes in New York City toward Spanish heritage language in an urban context characterized by inequity. It is anchored in Labov's (1966) language stratification theories and builds on the work of several authors to explain why heritage language speakers in New York City perceive their variety of Spanish as being less prestigious compared with the Spanish varieties imposed in formal/academic contexts. The methodology used included an innovative matched-guise technique with rap followed by an interview. In the context of Hip-Hop, the results suggest that the stigmatized vernacular variety becomes the prestige variety. The social and educational significance of these findings is discussed. Furthermore, reflection on the research methods adopted in the study lends support to qualitative approaches for studying language attitudes.
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The discussion presented in this article consists mainly of an evaluative comparison of quantitative and qualitative methodologies for studying language attitudes, understood as "any affective, cognitive or behavioral index of evaluative reactions toward different language varieties of their speakers" (Ryan, Howard, & Sebastian, 1982, p. 7), with a particular focus on Spanish heritage students. The main focus of the study reported on was to identify the challenges associated with designing and conducting a matched-guise technique and interviews to study language attitudes. Additionally, this investigation also makes an incursion into linguistic ideologies, understood as "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (Irvine, 1989, p. 255), in order to be useful for the development of valid pedagogical tools for Spanish heritage students. Although language attitudes and linguistic ideologies are fields of study on their own, this article understands language and attitudes as epistemologically compatible since attitudes are influenced by ideologies and both fields feedback on each other. Moreover, the definition of attitudes proposed by Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) explicitly links ideologies and attitudes: they define attitudes as "a socially derived, intellectualized or behavioral ideology" (p. 61).

The study was carried out in a Spanish heritage language class at a public university in New York City (NYC from now on). The participants were Dominicans or Dominican descents belonging to low or middle-income families.

This work has a double theoretical anchor. First, the theories of language stratification and the concepts of overt and covert prestige (Labov, 1966) are drawn on to study both attitudes and linguistic ideologies. In sociolinguistics, prestige is the respect granted to a specific language variety within a particular speech community, in relation to other varieties. Labov's theories explain that prestige can be separated into overt prestige and covert prestige. Both are used when changing speech to gain prestige but do so in different ways. Overt prestige is linked to the linguistic practices of the culturally dominant group. Covert prestige is related to membership in an exclusive speech community, rather than in the dominant cultural group. For example, using inner city language varieties with covert prestige, such as some varieties of African American Vernacular English, would grant more 'street cred' than those with overt prestige, such as academic English. Even though the dominant cultural group generally sees the variety with covert prestige as being inferior, using language fitting with the local community would lead to earning respect among those members in the community too.

Second, this study is rooted in the conclusions drawn from the work on Spanish heritage language students in the United States conducted by García, Evangelista, Martínez, Disla, and Paulino (1988), Zentella (1990), Urciuoli (2008), and Del Valle (2007). These authors explain that Spanish-speaking students in the United States often perceive their own Spanish as lacking prestige. Such students

* Correspondence to: Department of Romance, German & Slavic Languages & Literatures, The George Washington University, 2121 I St NW, Washington, DC 20052, United States.
E-mail address: jmagro@gwu.edu

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are frequently less privileged socioeconomically, as is discussed in the aforementioned studies. This is particularly true in NYC, where ideologies of linguistic standardization make their way into the classroom setting.

On the one hand, Spanish heritage speakers bring their linguistic varieties to the academic setting. These varieties come from everyday and family contexts. They have different dialectal features depending on their country of origin (for example, Dominican Spanish, Colombian Spanish, etc.) and particular diastratic features associated with the socio-economic conditions where these speakers live (for example, Spanish spoken by working class Dominicans versus Dominican Spanish spoken by university professors). The study reported on in this article involved NYC Dominican Spanish speakers.

Therefore, the selection of NYC Dominican Spanish speakers was based on methodological reasons: having a more homogeneous group regarding their diatopic features increased the chances of controlling this variable compared to having students from different national origins. Moreover, it is important to take into consideration for the present study that these varieties share what Zentella (1990) has called New York Spanish inter-dialect, a process of dialect leveling as a result of the accommodation of lexicon among the largest Hispanic groups in NYC: a "'New Yorker Spanish' lexicon" (Zentella, 1990, p. 1094). Furthermore, as Otheguy (2011) explains, these varieties of Spanish usually coexist with English, the language of formal education and professional environments, in a similar way to Fishman's (1967) diglossia. In this case, Spanish would be the low language/variety and English the high language/variety. Nevertheless, the use of Spanish in public spaces (usually stigmatized varieties) connotes solidarity and camaraderie among speakers (Gibson, 2004). Other speech communities share this practice, for example, certain African-American communities which use African American Vernacular English (Rahman, 2008).

On the other hand, standard Spanish is the variety that accounts for prestige (at least in academic/formal settings), although depending on the region of origin, multiple standard Spanish varieties exist (e.g. academic Spanish of Peru, Spain, etc.). However, with the exception of certain regional dialectal features such as the use of /θ/, vosotros, voseo, etc., these varieties tend to be relatively homogeneous as they are part of a highly standardized code. It is also important to mention that these standard Spanish varieties, regardless of their geolectal base, generally index middle-class speakers with formal education.

For the matched-guise test used in this study, a central Peninsular variety was selected. The following two reasons justified this choice: first, the voice in the matched-guise test was capable of interpreting this variety naturally; second, of all the standard Spanish varieties, because of inherited language ideologies, this variety is, perhaps, the one that is most indexical of standardization and accuracy (which, as we shall see, is reflected in informants' responses to the test).

Particularly relevant for this research is how popularly discredited vernacular varieties are used in cultural practices associated with Hip-Hop, creating a space where language conveys identity, affiliation, solidarity, and representation of the familiar, as well as emotional proximity. Studies on code-switching between Spanish and English in New York Bachata music (Flores-Ohlson, 2009, 2011), on the one hand, have pointed out how the use of Spanish is a tool used by artists to express emotional closeness. On the other hand, the switch to English is used to represent distance, which is also a practice used in NYC's Hip-Hop in Spanish (Magro, 2013, in press). Thus, among heritage speakers, standard varieties of Spanish would play a similar role to English in code-switching, emotionally distancing interlocutors. Due to the enormous prestige of Hip-Hop within the target group of this research (NYC Dominican young males and females) and taking in consideration that "the rap made in Spanish is starting to have an important influence in areas where Spanish isn't the majority language" (Corona and Kelsall, 2016), this study focuses specifically on Hip-Hop rap.

Based on these arguments, this study tested the hypothesis that, in the informal context of Hip-Hop in Spanish, stigmatized varieties become the prestigious one. Although theories of linguistic stratification in sociolinguistics predict the confirmation of this hypothesis, it must be demonstrated empirically in the context of Spanish (language) Hip-Hop in NYC. Different linguistic ideologies could affect the hypothesis in the opposite direction. It is possibly the subject of a separate study, but the explanation may be that standard varieties could also be the prestigious ones in the context of Hip-Hop in response to particular language ideologies. For example, influenced by these ideologies, an artist might think that a standard variety would be more appropriate to index intelligence and academic background. Similarly, a given artist could think of a broader audience than his/her immediate social or regional community when recording. In this case, s/he could try using, for example, a more similar variety to that of a television news broadcaster than the one used on his/her street corner.

Thus, this study was based on a matched-guise technique and a semi-structured interview. The goal was to find out if the perception that the participants have regarding their variety compared to others is modulated depending on the context, and how. The results stimulated an illuminating analysis of the methodology used to investigate linguistic attitudes.

My long-lived Hip-Hop career (as a Graffiti artist first, later as an MC) provided me with a unique perspective that has been enriched through numerous artistic experiences and the consequent development of a social network of Hip-Hop artists and activists from all around the world. This career started in the late 1980s and it was launched through the publishing of my first album with my music group El Club de los Poetas Violentos (CPV), Madrid Zona Bruta (1993, Yo Gano), a pioneering album in introducing "real" Hip-Hop to Spain through an innovative rap style that adopted and adapted lyrical structures from American East Coast rap in a process of translocality (Alim, 2009). These new rhyme patterns and structures, alongside heavy social content that reflected the realities of Madrid Sur and other working class neighborhoods of Madrid, laid the template for upcoming MCs and were foundational elements for the current established scene of Spanish Hip-Hop and the development of it in different Latin American countries such as Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, or Cuba. Likewise, CPV led the struggle to legitimize Hip-Hop as the cultural production of underprivileged youth in a country that in the 1990s started to fulfill its neoliberal aspirations while creating different forms of otherness within its borders due to the growing incoming population of African and Latin American immigrants.

This triple positionality, as a sociolinguist, teacher, and insider in Hip-Hop, is particularly important to understanding the Hip-Hop in Spanish community of NYC, which is part of the wider Latin Hip-Hop community and is different (sometimes even explicitly opposite) from the reggaeton scene (although on occasions, such as festivals or music conferences, they share spaces; see Corona & Kelsall for a discussion on Hip-Hop and reggaeton in Barcelona). Since I moved to NYC in 1999, I helped to develop this community with concerts, festivals, recording sessions, meetings, and other activities. Artists from different Spanish-speaking countries, but mostly Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Mexicans who were first and second generation immigrants compose the Hip-Hop in the NYC Spanish community, sharing their passion for rap in Spanish over Hip-Hop beats. Furthermore, my experience developing and implementing an educational program, which articulated Hip-Hop with critical thinking and literacy, also contributed to understanding the

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