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“We can speak we do it our way”: Linguistic ideologies in Catalan adolescents’ language biography raps

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ABSTRACT

The article reports on workshops aimed at developing students’ plurilingual repertoires through language biography raps as opportunities for self-reflexivity and social critique. The workshops are part of a larger socio-educational project targeting adolescent school dropout. The audio-visual products of the workshops – raps produced by adolescents in their English, intertwined with other linguistic resources in their repertoires – are analysed for local processes of identity production and linguistic ideologies. The analysis suggests that Hip Hop, as a popular, non-institutionalised culture, allows for counter-narratives of teenagers’ plurilingualism and their everyday language experiences. The students’ raps interrogate linguistic ideologies in education as detached from popular culture and their local, urban communities. By and large, the students’ linguistic performances are non-standard, playful and linguistically fluid, contrary to the norm in mainstream educational contexts. The Hip Hop based intervention thus provided a space for transgression from traditional notions of language education compatible with Critical Hip Hop Language Pedagogies (CHHLP) and pedagogies of plurilingualism.

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1. Introduction

The goal of this article is to analyse the audio-visual products of language biography workshops – raps produced by adolescents in their English, intertwined with other resources making up their repertoires – in order to explore adolescents’ linguistic ideologies and local processes of identity production (Pennycook, 2007). It is organised as follows. We begin in this introduction with a brief overview of the sociolinguistic context of Catalonia, and of the general status of language learning among Catalan youth (note that we refer to Catalan youth generically, to denote the school-aged population in Catalonia, while recognising the enormous social, economic, linguistic and cultural diversity in this population). We continue, still in the introduction, by presenting the Hip Hop workshops we conduct each summer, before situating these workshops within the Hip Hop scene in Catalonia more generally. In Section 2, we propose a theoretical justification for our critical plurilingual, Hip Hop pedagogical approach. After that, in Section 3, we introduce the workshops and the research data in more depth, before turning in Section 4 to an analysis of the linguistic ideologies and

processes of identity production emerging from some of the raps. The article concludes with a brief discussion of our tentative findings.

1.1. A brief sociolinguistic overview

Catalonia is an officially bilingual (Catalan and Spanish) and *de facto* multilingual region in Northeast Spain, bordering France. This multilingualism is the result of demographic movements into the region since last century: from different Spanish regions between the 1930s and 1970s; tourism since the 1960s; transnational migration in the past 15 years; and university exchange programmes. Within this multilingual scenario, the Catalan language is constructed socially and politically as Catalonia’s ‘own’ or ‘proper’ language – *vis à vis* Spanish – through an ideology of authenticity (Gal & Woolard, 2001; Woolard, 2008). However, it is further constructed as neutral, public and accessible to everyone regardless of language background – what Gal and Woolard (2001) and Woolard (2008) refer to as an ideology of anonymity – and thus as the language of social cohesion within a context of diversity (Pujolar, 2010). Catalan is the language of ‘normal’ use in public institutions, including all levels of schooling; thus, in pre-tertiary education it is the vehicular language, in a bilingual immersion approach, for the majority of the curriculum.

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In this educational model, students' Spanish competence is ensured; in fact, the results of the Spanish government's most recent General Diagnostic Evaluation tests from 2010 show that the scores obtained in linguistic competence in Spanish by second year high school students are about at Spanish average and above some Spanish 'monolingual' regions. Furthermore, in urban areas, Spanish remains the majority language and main language of social interaction amongst students from all origins. As [Cots and Nussbaum \(2008\)](#) report, many students associate non-academic contexts at schools with speaking Spanish; a situation that is more pronounced in geographic areas with higher numbers of families who identify as mother tongue Spanish speakers or families of immigrant origin.

Finally, it must be noted that public school children in Catalonia begin their compulsory English studies quite early, at the age of 6, and continue them throughout their primary and secondary education. Despite this, it is no secret that students in Catalonia (and in Spain) have lagged behind in foreign language learning, with a predominance of prescriptive teaching and high dependence on private sector language academies – out of reach for many – for obtaining proficiency. Foreign language teaching, like language teaching in general, has often promoted parallel monolingualisms ([Heller, 1999](#)), rather than more dynamic plurilingualisms ([Nussbaum, 2013](#)) or translanguaging ([García & Li Wei, 2014](#)). Despite institutional and methodological developments (e.g. life-long learning initiatives for teachers, teaching innovation through the inclusion of digital technologies, integrated approaches), Catalonia still lags below the Europe 2020 targets for foreign language learning. Most concerning is the correlation between academic results in English and low socioeconomic status ([Consell Superior d'Avaluació del Sistema Educatiu, 2008](#); [European Commission, 2013](#)). Although we do not align with neoliberal understandings of plurilingualism inherent to certain official European discourses ([Flores, 2013](#)), it is in legitimising linguistic repertoires of adolescents that transcend curricular norms that our workshops aim to make a small difference.

1.2. *Campus Ítaca and the “English” workshops*

In this broader context, our article focuses on workshops run within a socio-educational programme called Campus Ítaca, based at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). The students are about 15 years old, from schools within the Barcelona province, and going into their final year of compulsory secondary education. They have been identified by their teachers as having academic potential, although they might not continue their education into pre-university and university studies for an array of reasons. These include general adolescent disaffection for schooling, as well as processes of social alienation from higher education. That is, many of the students come from family backgrounds in which university studies might not be an obvious or a realistic option (e.g. they would be first generation university students, or are students for whom university would not be financially viable without the support of scholarships).

Campus Ítaca aims to stimulate these adolescents to continue to non-compulsory education. The highlight of the programme is a two-week (per cohort) summer school with university teachers in which students participate in workshops, projects, debates, sports, field trips and other activities on and beyond campus, although participating students are tracked through their studies and onto university, and are able to opt for scholarships to help them attend higher education on top of the financial assistance already provided by the government. Apart from promoting the academic success of the teenager participants, Campus Ítaca also aims to promote Catalan as a vehicle for group cohesion and social inclusion, since many of them come from Spanish-dominant environments. In 2013

and 2014, when the data presented in this paper was collected, the programme accepted a total of 440 and 432 students respectively, who all produced raps like the ones we analyse in this article, and of whom only 5% and 3.3% were “immigrants” from outside the Spanish state according to the organisers. This figure is well below the average of roughly 13% for the entire school-aged population in Catalonia. However as the selection of pupils to attend Campus Ítaca depends on each school, we do not have access to information that might clarify the reasons for the disparity. It is also important to note that only students without Spanish citizenship are considered “immigrants”, while many more have recent family histories of migration or adoption, leading to a more multicultural and multilingual student cohort than the figures suggest.

Within this framework, the two authors created and run two-hour “English language” workshops for groups of 24 students at a time inspired by critical plurilingual and Hip Hop pedagogies (see Section 2).¹ One of the authors (Garrido) is a critical sociolinguist who has been in contact with the local Hip Hop scene since the late 1990s, and has an avid interest in the pedagogical affordances of Hip Hop. The other (Moore) approaches plurilingual practices in learning contexts from an interdisciplinary perspective, with a particular interest in critical plurilingual/translanguaging approaches to language education, while Hip-Hop is something she approaches as more of an outsider.

In planning these workshops, the guiding objectives were to break away from what could be considered mainstream, school English learning and to engage students with language learning through self-reflexivity about plurilingualism and social critique. Our choice of rap as an element of Hip Hop was grounded in its affordance for limitless ([Alim, 2011](#)) communicative practices; that is, translanguaging (which includes but go beyond standard, monolingual language uses) was encouraged as resources for task completion. As one group of participants told the class in their rap, “we can speak we do it our way”; this being a powerful message about the expressive potential of their repertoire that we have included in the title of this article. Our choice of Hip Hop was further based on its potentially critical nature. Both of these features – limitlessness and criticality – marked a discontinuity with traditional language teaching in Catalan high schools. Hip Hop is also a familiar element of Catalan youth culture, an issue to which we turn in the following section.

Reflecting further on our positionality in planning and delivering these workshops, we were representatives of a public university – not of the students' high schools – and our mission was to encourage them to continue studying. We did this through rap and by valuing the students' entire communicative repertoires (i.e. beyond school languages and varieties), thus constructing an ideological contrast with traditional schooling. In this regard, we consider ourselves and the workshops to be an ideological combat zone in the sense that we departed from an institutional space meant for learning English and sought to break away from monolingual ideologies, linguistic hierarchies and traditional school genres. In terms of Hip Hop, we were not trying to indoctrinate students into the culture, but to use it as a means of expression that has connotations of critique. Listening to, producing and performing rap is central to the workshop and is not simply an attractive vehicle to teach hegemonic, curricular contents to teenagers. We do not see ourselves as Hip Hop activists, but rather as people who use their institutional position to question hegemonic discourses on school multilingualism and construct linguistically hybrid and plural alternatives. In this regard, our use of Hip Hop is not unlike

¹ We initially designed and implemented together with Xavier Oliva in 2013 and 2014. Júlia Llompart implemented the workshops with us in the 2014 edition. We want to thank both for their contributions.

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