



# 'I don't know why man's calling me family all of a sudden': Address and reference terms in grime music

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines address and reference terms in the lyrics of Grime artists to understand how they negotiate their interpersonal relationships. 589 nominal terms were extracted and coded from a corpus of 16 songs by six artists from London, Cardiff and North England. Results revealed that all artists displayed adherence to implicit rules of the address and reference system. This conformity suggests that their relationships are characterised by solidarity within an imagined community. The research highlights the value of (1) Grime music as a means of understanding emerging new multi-ethnic dialects, and (2) resistant music, more broadly, in exploring the social structure of marginalised adolescents in an increasingly globalised world.

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*'Each tongue hoards the resources of consciousness, the world-pictures of the clan.'*

(Steiner, 1998, p.243)

## 1. Introduction

Commenting on the impact of globalisation, Stuart Hall (1997, p. 44) notes that 'there has simultaneously been a fragmentation and erosion of collective social identity'. In this era of new cultural flows, Bucholtz and Skapouilli (2009) argue that adolescents can broaden our understanding of these processes because their experiences are shaped by intense exposure to a highly connected world. In particular, youths from marginalised, multi-ethnic areas lend important insights, especially into the ways relationships are formed and maintained. One dominant practice among these adolescents from inner cities of Britain is Grime music. The lyrics of this genre have received little attention in the area of sociolinguistics. This research seeks to emphasize their value in understanding how those on the fringes of society position themselves in an increasingly globalised world. The study focuses on address and reference terms, an aspect of language which is central to the formation and continuation of human relationships (cf. Braun, 1988; Brown and Gilman, 1960; Clyne et al., 2006; Knox, 1969; Labov, 1982). It is an exploration of how six young MCs<sup>1</sup> from three areas of Britain use address and reference terms in their songs. As Brown and Gilman (1960) argue, exploring these forms requires an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond linguistics into the fields of psychology and sociology. Only then are we exposed to the work of researchers such as Jan Svannevig whose (1999) framework on the dimensions of interpersonal relationships forms the core of this paper. It presents an extension of his work, highlighting that relationships between these adolescents are not built on affect or familiarity, but solidarity within an imagined community (Anderson, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> An MC/emcee (Master of Ceremonies), is someone 'who raps over a beat to inspire people with clear, concise and compelling content. (Adaso, H. The Art of Emceeing (Emcee). ThoughtCo. [online] <https://www.thoughtco.com/art-of-emceeing-2857348> Accessed 5th May 2017.

## 2. Grime music and British multi-ethnic dialects

Grime music emerged from pirate radio stations in Bow, East London, in the early 2000s but the genre has now spread to other cities of the UK. While it is often compared to Hip-hop, other influences include Drum 'n' Bass, Jamaican Dancehall and Jungle (Zuberi, 2010). The lyrics focus on the everyday, as opposed to the more aspirational themes surrounding Hip-hop. Melville (2004) goes further to suggest that it is 'the cri de coeur of the dispossessed, the narrative form of urban life'. Grime also differs from Hip-hop in that it has a faster beat but the genre still centres around the MC. While MCs traditionally uttered rhythmic phrases to excite the audience, their role in Grime extends to entire verses where they boast about their MCing abilities and insult rivals using complex metaphors and rhyming schemes (Reynolds, 2013). The MC is usually part of a crew, another pivotal component of Grime, which Joy White (2011) defines as a 'group of like-minded individuals who (usually) have been friends and share a common interest, in this case – music'. She argues that being part of a crew allows members to develop their musical abilities and increase their knowledge of the scene. Crews are fiercely competitive and often motivate the notoriously violent postcode wars which heavily dominate the media discourse surrounding Grime. Territoriality is another defining feature of the genre but despite such rivalry, there is an overriding sense of community. Dedman (2011) observes this in his research on Grime among working class youths in five British cities. He notes that participants from Lewisham had the strongest affinity with Grime, and they did not see it as tied to a particular race, but rather a particular social class: 'Grime music was, and is, *their* music' (p. 519). In other words, he found that it was perceived as belonging to those who have survived London's deprived neighbourhoods. Therefore, while it is predominantly associated with young, black males, Grime is not seen as racially exclusive.

In terms of key influences, UK Garage collective So Solid Crew are seen as making the crucial 'evolutionary step in the pre-history of today's vibrant grime scene', with their number 1 single *21 Seconds* (Jones, 2016). Their music was frequently subject to criticism for glorifying violence (Jackson, 2005), but according to Lisa Mafia, the crew's only female MC, the song 'gave hope to young, black Britain' (Beaumont-Thomas, 2017). Other foundational London crews include Pay As U Go, Ruff Sqwad, Heartless Crew, More Fire Crew, and N.A.S.T.Y. Pay As U Go featured Wiley, an MC from East London, whose solo release of the instrumental beat *Eskimo* in 2002 is often regarded as the beginning of the genre (e.g. Complex, 2013; Fraser, 2015). He is known as the Godfather of Grime (e.g. Duggins, 2017; Hancox, 2017), and according to NME Editor-in-Chief: 'He's the man the rest of the scene looks up to, and the figurehead of the most exciting musical movement in a generation' (O'Connor, 2017). Another pivotal moment was when Dizzee Rascal, Wiley's mentor, released *Boy In The Corner* in 2003, which won the prestigious Mercury Prize. Dizzee Rascal went on to release several hugely successful albums, and continues to command immense respect for paving the way for other Grime artists (e.g. Lester, 2010, Kitts, 2011). The following year, in 2004, More Fire Crew member Lethal Bizzle released *POW! (Forward)*, which featured ten other Grime artists, such as the influential D-Double E from Newham Generals crew. *Pow!(Forward)* became an iconic Grime song that was banned in venues because it created unstoppable energy, and contained controversial lyrics (Hancox, 2011). Its influence was evident in the media, for example, NME wrote: 'Once in a generation, a record comes along that causes people to sit bolt upright, a rallying cry to the masses, a barometer of social discontent that turns venues into mosh-crazed riots. In 1977, it was the Sex Pistols' *God Save the Queen*. In 2004, it's Lethal Bizzle's *Pow! (Forward)*' (NME, 2004 in Hancox, 2011). In 2005, a new crew formed called Boy Better Know, featuring brothers Skepta and JME from North London, as well as Wiley. The crew continues to play a huge role in Grime, with American Hip-Hop artist Drake even joining recently to further push its presence on the music scene. Taken together, all of these artists were hugely significant in creating an original sound that was perceived as threatening by wider society, but inspiring by its listeners.

The significance of Grime for sociolinguistic research lies firstly in its close connection to British multi-ethnic dialects. The emergence of a multi-ethnic dialect in London can be traced back to the large influx of immigrant communities in urban areas of the city during the 1980s (Kerswill, 2014). Research was foregrounded by Hewitt's (1986) *White Talk Black Talk*, an exploration of relations between black and white adolescents in South London which emphasized the prevalence of Creole and black culture. Since its publication, various ways of conceptualising London's multi-ethnic dialect have been documented, such as contemporary urban vernaculars (Rampton, 2015) and multi-ethnolects (Cheshire et al., 2011). Cheshire et al. (2011) referred to this multi-ethnolect as Multicultural London English (hereafter MLE), which they argue is best understood using the concept of the feature pool whereby different input varieties affect the variants available to speakers (Mufwene, 2001 in Cheshire et al., 2011). Research on aspects of MLE include *man* as a first person pronoun (Cheshire, 2013), the objectification of MLE by the media (Kerswill, 2014), and the interaction between ethnicity and friendship networks of MLE speakers (Cheshire et al., 2008). Most noteworthy is the fact that it is spoken by adolescents from deprived boroughs and, while Cheshire et al. (2008) suggest that ethnic divides are present between Anglo and minority ethnic groups, they also found that features are typically shared across ethnicities. In other words, the socially exclusive, racially inclusive nature of MLE mirrors Grime, which suggests that the genre may be an alternative way of understanding MLE and interpersonal relationships among adolescents from multi-ethnic areas of London. The presence of MLE features in other British cities has also started to receive attention. Drummond (2015) found the use of *man* in Manchester as well as the discourse marker *you get me*, arguing for the existence of a Multicultural Manchester English, and potentially a Multicultural Urban British English with each urban centre having its own set of specific features. The presence of linguistic features similar to MLE in other multi-ethnic cities shows that Grime can potentially further our understanding of multi-ethnic dialects and interpersonal relationships among adolescents beyond London as well. Although there have been very few studies on Grime in sociolinguistics, there is an abundance of research on Hip-hop as a window of observation for African American English among teenagers around the world (e.g. Alim, 2002; Alim et al., 2008; Cutler, 1999). Pennycook (2003, p. 525) argues that rap and Hip-hop are interesting from a linguistic perspective

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