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Standard language in urban rap – Social media, linguistic practice and ethnographic context



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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a case that compared to previous studies of hip hop language, is surprising; a group of adolescents in Copenhagen increasingly use more monolingual, standard linguistic practices in their hip hop productions on YouTube. We argue that to fully understand this development, it is necessary to take into account the local, socio-cultural meanings given to particular linguistic resources, and that this cannot be fully captured without attention to the ethnographic and sociolinguistic context. We find that the hip hop language and literacy practices in this context are related to both traditional educational norms and artistic aspirations.

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1. Introduction

The linguistic and literacy practices of hip hop youth are by now well-studied in sociolinguistics (e.g. [Androutsopoulos, 2003](#); [Pennycook, 2007](#); [Cutler, 2007](#); [Terkourafi, 2010](#)). According to the language focussed hip hop research vernacular, non-standard and hybrid linguistic practices are described as characteristic of this cultural genre (though see [Stylianou, 2010](#)), and within educational studies the creative and counter-hegemonic language use is considered a significant part of the pedagogical and political potentials of hip hop ([Hill, 2009](#); [Alim et al., 2009](#); [Alim, 2011](#); [Pennycook, 2007](#)). Since online communication sites are by now common vehicles for self-expression, content sharing and engagement in both worldwide and local interest communities social media has, more recently, become an important field site for researching such popular cultural practices ([Varis and Wang, 2011](#); [Androutsopoulos, 2006, 2007, 2009](#)).

In this article we report from a study of a group of adolescents in Copenhagen identifying as rappers and engaging in various rap events and mentoring initiatives. The functions and affordances of social media are significant for the construction of their local rap community. In fact, the creation of rap identities and the existence of the rap community partly depend on these communicative platforms. However, compared to previous studies of hip hop language, the development of the adolescents' rap videos on YouTube reveals the somewhat surprising observation that the young rappers increasingly use more monolingual, standard linguistic practices in their rap productions ([Madsen and Karrebæk, in press](#); [Madsen, in press](#)). We argue that to fully understand this development, it is necessary to take into account the local, socio-cultural meanings given to particular linguistic resources and its relation to wider cultural models, and that this cannot be fully captured without attention to the ethnographic context and the sociolinguistic economy in which they are situated. By including these aspects

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we demonstrate that the language use in the rap videos is partly related to the approach of the local rap mentors and the influence of hegemonic language ideological beliefs linking linguistic standard and correctness to intelligence. But the dominance of standard-linguistic practices in the rap productions is also related to audience considerations and ambitions of success as musician (see also Madsen, *in press*).

Research on CMC and social networking sites is often motivated by a primary interest in the social media as such. As a consequence of this many studies typically focus on a particular type of social media and investigate, for instance, general user behaviour (Miller, 2008; Larsen, 2009), the media's impact on social relationships (Livingstone, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007), its impact on peoples' engagement in popular culture (Leppänen and Häkkinen, 2012; Rymes, 2012) or the development of new communicative and linguistic genres within social media such as status updates on Facebook (Lee, 2011; Sørensen, 2012), weblogs (Miller and Shephard, 2004) or 'netnolect' (Li and Juffermans, 2011). Yet, any study of the social and linguistic life of contemporary youth can hardly overlook that a significant part of young people's everyday communication involves or takes place in social media, and this is our prime rationale for engaging with CMC. Studying CMC from this perspective entails, on the one hand, that social media is not examined as detached from other areas of everyday life and, on the other hand, that social media communication is included in our accounts of contemporary sociolinguistic processes in Copenhagen. In this way our work aims to contribute to current CMC research by carefully studying the contexts – also offline – for the local CMC activities, and it contributes to contemporary sociolinguistic research by including CMC as part of the sociolinguistic everyday life.

To achieve this we proceed with an introduction of our data, and we elaborate on how social media data can be approached from a linguistic ethnographic perspective. As a basis for discussing the language use in the rap productions in our case study in relation language in hip hop elsewhere, we continue with a brief review of the main findings of sociolinguistic and literacy pedagogical studies of hip hop. The wider sociolinguistic context of our field site is significant to understand the linguistic practices of the young rap musicians, and we describe this before we turn to the participants and the ethnographic context of the local rap community. These contextual accounts provide the foundation for our analysis of the adolescents' rap videos from YouTube, and we conclude with a discussion of the linguistic development we observe in the videos, in relation to our other ethnographic and linguistic data.

2. Data and approach

Our work is part of a collaborative project focused on adolescents and children from a culturally and linguistically diverse area of Copenhagen (Madsen et al., 2013). As part of our project we have carried out ethnographic field work in teams (Blackledge and Creese, 2010) in two secondary school classes during their final three years where the participants were on an average 13–15 years old. Our fieldwork covered most of the adolescents' everyday lives. We observed and participated in activities at school (in classes and during the breaks), leisure time activities, and some of the team members visited the adolescents in their homes (Ag and Jørgensen, 2013). Combined with this data collection we also carried out extensive online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008, 2013). We collected rap videos made and uploaded by the adolescents on YouTube, recorded their interactions while they were engaged in internet searching and other CMC activities, and we created a Facebook profile called 'The language researchers' on behalf of the project. After informing the participants about our presence on Facebook we began to receive friend requests. We never took initiative to befriend the adolescents online, and the participants have given us explicit consent to use the data provided that all names are anonymized. In this article we focus on three boys, Isaam, Bashaar and Mahmoud, who formed a rap group, and we discuss different types of data covering their rap activities. These include their YouTube videos, interview data, field diaries and recorded interactions in the youth clubs they attended.

International hip hop scholars and critics usually treat rap music as a distinctive element within the wider frame of hip hop culture. Hill (2009, p. 33) describes how the youth he studies deploy the distinction between 'rap' and 'hip hop' as a distinction between 'real' (hip hop) and 'fake' (rap) representations of this popular culture. Yet, the participants in our study as well as their rap mentors exclusively use the term 'rap' to refer to their cultural practices. Therefore we use the term rap when we are concerned with the participants and the local rap environment, but when we relate to the international research we use the wider circulating term hip hop.

As a tool for daily communication, language and linguistic styles through repeated use come to be associated with particular people, places and purposes (Agha, 2007; Coupland, 2007). This makes language use a prime heuristic for tracing the experience and construction of personal and social identities, cultural interpretations, social differentiation and alignments. Communication is often indirect and linked to activities and background understanding, and for research perspectives that overwhelmingly look to explicit claims and propositions for its evidence (e.g. in interviews and surveys), this is hard to capture. We seek to meet this challenge by approaching our study of social media and rap practices from the perspective of *Linguistic Ethnography* (Rampton et al., 2004; Blommaert, 2007), and a significant principle here is that the contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. This approach sees social categories and structures as dependent on their (re)production in everyday life. It therefore focuses on lived local realities, and consequently investigates how these provide insight into larger-scale socio-cultural processes. The combination of an ethnographic focus on insider-knowledge, rich contextualization and participant reflexivity and the analytical refinement of linguistics is a particular strength. This allows us to analyze the details of communicative activities and their relation and sensitivity to the social contexts in which they are produced. Furthermore, consideration of the local, socio-cultural meanings given to particular semiotic resources and their relation to wider cultural models can be accounted for through the notion of *indexicality* (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 2003). Indexicality refers to the associations between forms and (typical) usage, contexts of use and

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