Mayan language revitalization, hip hop, and ethnic identity in Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the language ideologies and linguistic practices of Mayan-language hip hop in Guatemala, focusing on the work of the group B'alam Ajpu. The members of B'alam Ajpu use a mix of Spanish and Mayan languages in their music and run a school that combines lessons in hip hop (rapping, break-dancing, etc.) with efforts to promote the use of Mayan languages among children. The language ideologies associated with B'alam Ajpu intersect and challenge the ideologies associated with both language revitalization and with hip hop. The linguistic practices of B'alam Ajpu also challenge hegemonic assumptions regarding ethnic identity in Guatemala.

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1. Introduction

Research on language revitalization across indigenous communities demonstrates that the language ideologies in these communities are far from uniform either within or across communities. As Field and Kroskrity note, "American Indian language ideologies not only are historically very different from each other but today, *even within a single community,* as complex, heterogeneous, contradictory, or even contentious" (2009: 7). In many indigenous communities, language revitalization efforts have further complicated the mix of language ideologies by introducing Euro-American language ideologies that differ from traditional indigenous language ideologies in a number of ways. For example, Euro-American language ideologies are characterized by linguistic nationalism which equates the use of a single language with a national identity (Anderson, 1983; Silverstein, 1996). This linguistic nationalism typically involves iconization in which the linguistic features associated with social groups "appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a group's inherent nature or essence" (Irvine and Gal, 2000). In Native communities, such iconicity between language and identity may result in the essentialization of ethnic identity as uniform and homogenous (e.g. Bunte, 2009; Field, 2009) and in indigenous purism associated with linguistic uniformity (Kroskrity, 2000: 337). This linguistic nationalism often conflicts with indigenous ideologies of variationism in which in which dialectal variation is not hierarchized but is instead naturalized as the expected outcome of family and individual differences." (Kroskrity, 2009: 193). In Guatemala, such a variationist language ideology has traditionally linked linguistic variation with local village identity, so that particular forms of speech are understood as resulting from the natural variation across regions.

The introduction of linguistic nationalism among the Maya in Guatemala conflicts with this variationist view by presuming an essentialist view of speakers of a single language as sharing a common identity (see Reynolds, 2009; French, 2010; Fox Tree, 2011). In addition, language ideologies in indigenous communities may differ from Euro-American ideologies

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in terms of their understandings of the functions of language. While Euro-American ideologies may "emphasize the denotational and referential functions of "words for things," many Native Americans possess language ideologies that view language and speech more "performatively" – as a more powerful and creative force that "makes" the natural and social worlds they inhabit." (Field and Kroskrity, 2009: 10). These competing views of the function of language may complicate efforts at language revitalization (Whiteley, 2003).

This paper examines the ways in which emergence of hip hop music in Mayan languages challenges the nationalist language ideologies associated with language revitalization in Guatemala. The paper focuses on the group B'alam Ajpu, who perform in a mix of Spanish and three Mayan languages (Tz'utujil, Kaqchikel, and K'iche') that are spoken around Lake Atitlán in central Guatemala. Although B'alam Ajpu is not officially associated with other organizations involved in language revitalization (such as the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala), they strongly promote the use of Mayan languages both through their music and through their independent educational programs. The language ideology of B'alam Ajpu promotes an understanding of language variation as natural and language function as performative, in sharp contrast with the promotion of standardized varieties associated with language revitalization.

As with language revitalization, studies of language and identity in hip hop show tension between conflicting language ideologies. In particular, hip hop artists negotiate between linguistic forms that index participation in a global hip hop movement (or Hip Hop Nation) and an ideology of "keeping it real" by proudly emphasizing local identities and local language varieties that index artists' commitment to their communities of origin (Alim et al., 2009). The ways in which hip hop artists negotiate this tension varies across different types of linguistic communities. The spread of hip hop into secure national languages like German (Androutsopoulos, 2009), Japanese (Condry, 2004), or Korean (Lee, 2004) often involves lexical borrowings from African American English or appropriated poetic structures. For example, Japanese hip hop uses patterns of rhyme borrowed from Western hip hop (Tsujimura and Davis, 2009). In contrast, for speakers of minority and indigenous languages, the celebration of marginalized vernacular culture in hip hop may allow speakers of so-called endangered languages to construct hip hop identities grounded in indigenous languages or minority cultures (see Alim et al., 2009). Across global contexts, some rappers see hip hop as a universal movement (that cannot be "owned"), while others emphasize historical or political connections with African American culture. Thus, artists in minority cultures may produce hip hop identities through alignment with the history of discrimination, ethnic violence, and language denigration found in the African American roots of hip hop. For example, Brazilian rappers (Roth Gordon, 2009) use alignment with African American culture to challenge the ideology of Brazil as a "race-less" nation. Similarly, aboriginal rappers in Australia use hip hop to emphasize the similarities between their own historical experiences of racial discrimination and those of African Americans (Pennycook and Mitchell, 2009). In the case of Mayan language hip hop in Guatemala, rappers produce music that incorporates elements of hip hop with lyrics that maintain highly traditional Mayan poetic structures. Members of B'alam Ajpu recognize that hip hop may challenge the denigration of Maya languages in Guatemala in the same way that early hip hop celebrates a denigrated language variety (African American English).

The research presented is primarily based on fieldwork conducted in the summers of 2013 and 2014 in San Pedro la Laguna and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. In addition to interviews and ethnographic observations, I worked closely with Tz'utu Baktun Kan (the only Maya member of the group) to analyze various song lyrics, focusing primarily on the songs from B'alam Ajpu's recently released album, *Jun Winaq Rajawal Q'íj/Tributo a los 20 Nawales* (Tribute to the 20 Nawals). Because Tz'utu does not use the standard orthography associated with the Maya Movement (the Unified Mayan Alphabet), I worked with him to use this analysis in order to standardize the spellings (but not variation within or between languages) in the written lyrics before the CD was released in July 2015. In the fall of 2014, I spent an additional two weeks working with Tz'utu in Kentucky where he gave various concerts and lectures about hip hop in Guatemala.

2. Ideologies of ethnic identity and language revitalization in Guatemala

Dominant understandings of ethnic identity in Guatemala have traditionally been based on a binary opposition between two ethnic groups, *indigenas* (indigenous) and *ladino* (non-indigenous). Although the Maya are not the only indigenous group in Guatemala, the Maya make up the majority of the nation's population and the term *indigena* is typically equated with Maya identity specifically. The distinction between indigenous and *ladino* identity is primarily cultural. The strongest markers of indigenous ethnicity have traditionally been the use of traditional clothing and speaking Mayan languages (von den Berghe, 1968: 519). Because the ethnic division is primarily cultural, it has been possible for individual Maya to "pass" as *ladino* in specific contexts (or permanently) through cultural assimilation. Although movement in the opposite direction (*ladino* becoming indigenous) was possible, it was typically limited to cases of interethnic marriage (von den Berghe, 1968: 520). Discourses of identity in Guatemala have long privileged *ladino* identity as inherently superior, with Maya identity being portrayed as primitive and ill-suited for life in contemporary society (Montejo, 2005; Hale, 2006).

Of course, the binary opposition between Maya and *ladino* ethnicity erases the many distinctions within these two categories and marginalizes those who do not easily fit into either category, including Chinese Guatemalans or other indigenous groups such as the Xinca (Uto-Aztecan) or the Garifuna (Arawakan). The binary ethnic model also produces a chasm between *ladino* and Maya that is wider than that found in most other parts of Latin America. The concept of *mestizaje*, or mixed indigenous and European culture, is not widespread in Guatemala. In contrast to *mestizo* identity in countries like Mexico, *ladino* identity in Guatemala is not generally viewed as involving aspects of indigenous culture. Given that language is central to ethnic categorization in Guatemala, language ideology has played an important role in maintaining *ladino* dominance.