

The role of code-switching in rap and hip hop culture



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While Hip-Hop is a relatively new cultural movement that is largely prevalent all over the world now, it originates in much earlier Black North American history as far back as the era of enslavement. It is still misunderstood as solely a form of music although it is rather an entire culture consisting of dance, “deejaying”, and visual art (usually in the form of graffiti) in addition to rap. However, in the larger culture of hip-hop, rap is the linguistic code that is used in an artistic manner to convey messages, often in figurative and poetic forms. It was common to use Ebonics, or African American English, as the primary linguistic code in rap as it is the form of English that was predominantly used in North America when modern rap came into being. At one time, it was the code used to address the Black population in the United States to ignite socio-political protests and marches, but over time has evolved to include other linguistic codes and has become a means to communicate many subjects outside of politics. Though African American vernacular is still a major constituent of modern rap and is seen as the “standard language” for English rap, there is a great deal of code-switching that occurs including not only the switching from language to language, but also switching from vernacular to intellectual vocabulary in rap.

Code-switching is defined as the “use of two or more languages by the same speaker within the same turn/utterance.” While code-switching in conversation is a natural phenomenon that occurs largely between bilingual or multilingual individuals, it is a very different phenomenon when it occurs in rap. In her essay titled *Multilingualism, Ethnicity and Genre in Germany’s Migrant Hip Hop*, Jannis Androutsopoulo claims that “internal code switching” or switching linguistic code within a stanza is a rare occurrence

and does not have as much prevalence as “ external-code switching” in which there is a clear structure to the alternation of linguistic codes. This claim supports the argument that there is a level of similarity between conversational code-switching and code-switching in rap in that it occurs sporadically without a specific structure, however I claim that this is not the case. In pre-written raps meant to be heard by an audience, there is always an underlying purpose for code-switching whether it is for a proper rhyme scheme or to make a cultural statement, making it vastly different from the spontaneous while still purposeful code-switching of conversation.

In addition to this argument, I assert that the distinction between spoken word and rap is that rap must be performed to a rhythm or “ beat,” so while it may be spontaneously performed at times in the event of “ rap battles” where one rapper is pitted against another in a competition of which rapper can more successfully create an allegedly impromptu rap, it is still a different process of utilizing a linguistic code than that of conversation. For example, it could be argued that the famous bilingual rap group, Cypress Hill, use their code-switching in the song “ Latin Lingo” as if it were being used in conversation because there is no proper distribution or evident planning of the structure of code-switching. Sen Dog of Cypress Hill raps, “ Freak to the funk that no-one else is bringing/ Sen Dog with the funky bi-ling/ Yeah thats the nombre(name) heard the homey/Peace to Mellow and Frost en el deporte (Frost is in the game).” Sen Dog continues to seemingly distribute the use of Spanish in the rest of the song randomly, but as can be seen from this small excerpt, Sen Dog is actually using Spanish to rhyme with the preceding line and maintain proper meaning at the same time. He also chooses to use

words that would be recognizable not only to the Spanish-speaking community, but also to English speakers who are aware of basic Spanish. This perpetuates the idea of globalization in hip hop, allowing a wider range of audience members to access the meaning of the rap without compromising the rapper's ethnic identity.

As discussed in lecture, rap has been a powerful linguistic tool that has permeated international borders through the process of globalization, and it then the process of localization in which rappers and members of the community transform the global linguistic code creatively into their own vernacular. Janis Androutsopoulo refutes “ an assumption favored by hip hop's language ideology, which views rap as capitalizing on ‘ authentic’ vernacular speech (e. g. Potter 1995).” Instead, Androutsopoulo claims in agreement with linguists Bentahila and Davies that because of the audience that rap is usually performed to and deliberate nature of rap performances, the code-switching patterns in rap require analysis with regard to its specific background rather than generalizing the patterns to the given community at large.

This idea of “ authenticity” lends itself to the idea that there is a “ standard” way to speak in each language as a code. It makes the claim that all speakers of that language should limit their linguistic creativity to attempt emulation of the linguistic “ norm.” For example, the Black vernacular is often suppressed on an institutional level as discussed by H. Samy Alim in the article *Creating an Empire Within and Empire*. Alim examines the “ attempts to eradicate [the language of Blacks in the United States] and linguistic practices in favor of the adoption of White cultural and linguistic

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norms” in the school system of America. The attempt to “ correct” the speakers of African American English to speak a standard, White-dominated form of American English is greatly oppressive towards the linguistic creativity of its speakers and makes the claim that their way of speaking is inferior and incorrect when compared to the form of American English spoken by White speakers.

In turn, this implies that the standard and expected way to use the linguistic code of English in rap must be African American English. Many modern rappers challenge this idea by rapping in different languages and by code switching in and out of an intellectual lexicon.

In the case of Sen-Dog, he uses “ Spanglish” to expand the target audience by being inclusive of both of his nationalities as a Mexican-American. As defined by Barthes, the notion of ‘ language as a symbol’ “ implies that a language as a whole is understood as a signifier to which a new signified is attached. A language comes to symbolize (to stand for) its speakers or the country in which it is spoken in.” However, monolingual rappers in the mainstream rap and hip hop music industry may also use “ token” words in another to be discriminatory in that they reduce a minority national language to its commonly used token words or phrases, such as the commonly stereotyped phrase “ mi amigo!” in Spanish as used by English speakers. The internationally acclaimed rapper, Kanye West, often uses token phrases in his raps.

For example, in his song “ Dark Fantasy,” he raps, “ How you say broke in Spanish? Me no hablo/ Me drown sorrow in that Diablo” While he uses

Spanish as the last word of each line in order to rhyme, he mocks the stereotypical phrases that reductively symbolize the Mexican community in America. Although this is generally seen as a negative and condescending use of another language, this kind of code-switching contributes to the globalization of hip hop. Additionally, code-switching in and out of an intellectual lexicon as Kendrick Lamar does in many of his songs rejects the claim that Whiteness as an “ ideology of linguistic supremacy” exists. Lamar mixes vernacular with extensive vocabulary in his song Poetic Justice, “ A little bit high maintenance/ Everybody else basic/You live life on an everyday basis/ With poetic justice, poetic justice/ If I told you that a flower bloomed in a dark room, would you trust it?/ I mean I write poems in these songs dedicated to you when/ You’re in the mood for empathy, there’s blood in my pen.” Not only does he employ complex metaphors and high-level vocabulary, but he manages to do so while maintaining vernacular that is specific to Compton, the city he hails from.

Lamar uses the phrase “ Everybody else basic,” using the word ‘ basic’ to describe commonplace, ordinary people and disregarding the grammatical rules of “ proper” American English with the exclusion of the word ‘ is’. Here, Lamar expands his audience reach by including content and creativity that would be relatable to his following from his hometown as well as to a wide range of highly educated individuals.

Rappers like Kendrick Lamar and Sen-Dog of “ Cypress Hill” challenge the linguistically limiting notions of society by employing various methods of code switching that include language switching as well as intermixing vernacular with language that is considered to be “ standard” in American

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English. They demonstrate the versatility of linguistic creativity and refute the notion that language is a rigid code that must be adhered to in order to be understood. Rap is a creative linguistic code in the global culture of hip hop that continues to expand to include languages from all over the world, thus evolving over time as it makes use of a variety of codes to communicate often important societal messages