“Keepin’ it real, mate”:
A study of identity in Australian Hip Hop

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Abstract

This paper examines identity construction among Australian hip hop (AHH) artists. Data was gathered by comparing phonological differences between artists’ performance speech and regular speech. After examining the gathered information, a pattern became clear where the AHH artists tended to use a Broad Australian English (AusE) accent when performing, while using Standard AusE in regular speech. The use of Broad AusE is argued to be used by the artists to differentiate themselves from their US hip hop counterparts, and to show unity in the Australian hip hop community.

1. Introduction

This paper will examine the areas of identity construction and hip hop in the US and then in Australia and the trends that have been found. Levy (2001) suggests hip hop constitutes

a global urban subculture that has entered people’s lives and become a universal practice among youth the world over. From a local fad among black youth in the Bronx, it has gone to become a global practice, giving new parameters of meaning to otherwise locally or nationally diverse identities. (Levy 2001: 134)

Linguists (cf. Alim 2002; Edwards 2002), however, have only begun to document the language associated with hip hop. Most of that work explores the relationship of hip hop language (HHL) in rap music lyrics to African American English (AAE) syntactic, discourse, and lexical features (Cutler 2007: 1).

O’Hanlon (2006: 193), however, claims that “the language contained within the music of a youth subculture known as ‘Australian Hip Hop’ (AHH) exhibits some interesting behaviours, in particular, AHH has largely rejected the American English (AmE) phonological trends.” O’Hanlon (2006) points out that in the case of hip hop in Australia, a local identity is maintained linguistically in keeping with hip hop’s philosophy of ‘keeping it real’, that is, being authentic, suggesting that the genre is simultaneously loyal to and distinct from its American origins. That is to say there is great importance placed on expressing one’s ‘Australianness’ in hip hop in Australia. How the artists express their ‘Australianness’ will be studied in this paper by comparing the phonological differences between artists’ performance and regular speech.
2. Hip hop and identity construction in the U.S.

A trend has developed where upper middle-class white youth are practising African American vernacular English (AAVE), among other hip hop related activities. Cutler (1999) discusses the role of hip hop culture in young whites’ motivation to use AAVE features in their speech. Cutler investigated one upper middle class white teenager in New York who employed linguistic features of African American vernacular English (AAVE). Mike, the participant of the case study, showed evidence of practising AAVE from the age of 13, when he started identifying with hip hop culture. Cutler began collecting data from Mike from the age of 15. He was observed by Cutler until the age of 19. Cutler argued that the adoption of African American speech markers is an attempt by young middle class whites to take part in the complex prestige of African American youth culture. Mike was a family friend of Cutler. To collect data she observed and regularly interacted with Mike. She also recorded interviews with Mike and some of his friends in discussion about hip hop and in general conversation. Cutler found, in the case of Mike, that he wanted to participate in an essentialised version of urban black male youth culture, but he was uncomprehending about the restrictions, angered about rejection and worried about being labelled a ‘wannabie’ by his peers.

3. Hip Hop in Australia

Koolism, an Australian hip hop group that won an ARIA award in 2006, said in their dedication speech that they dedicated their award to:

the whole Australian hip hop community … and all the Australians who ‘keep it real’ for want of a better phrase. Be yourself. Enough of that American wannabe trash. (Mitchell 2007: 110)

This speech was made in the presence of a supportive U.S. hip hopper, Kool Herc, and a rather bewildered commercial US hip hop group, the Black Eyed Peas. This was a public declaration that indicated that Koolism found it important to represent themselves as part of a nationally based community which operated outside the parameters of both commercial US hip hop and the mainstream Australian music industry. Koolism’s remarks drew criticism from an Australian representative of Sony Music. At the time, Sony were attempting to manufacture an Australian equivalent of US white rapper Eminem, a US-accented Sydney-based MC called Figgkidd, whose performances and recordings tended to evoke scorn and derision from the more ‘hard core’ members of the Australian hip hop community (Mitchell 2007). This exemplifies the importance Australian hip hoppers hold on expressing an Australian identity in their music.
O’Hanlon (2006) has conducted a study of youth music in Australia and its history of aping American accents. Australian hip hop seems to be different phonologically to other genres of Australian music, defying the conventions of lyrical performance. Her paper examined this interesting sociolinguistic phenomenon by providing a picture of phonological variation within youth music in Australia, enabling a comparison between hip hop and other genres. O’Hanlon argued that performance accent is closely tied to several factors, including cultural identity and genre appropriateness. In the case of hip hop, a local identity is maintained linguistically, in keeping with hip hop’s philosophy of keepin’ it real, suggesting that the genre is simultaneously loyal to and distinct from its American origins.

The Australian English (AusE) accent is employed by AHH artists to aid identification with their target audience, most likely working class youth of the urban centres of Australia, to maintain a local authenticity in keeping with hip hop’s philosophy, and to emphasise a distinction between AHH and hip hop music from the United States (USHH), where the genre originated. The AHH artists not only largely avoid the ubiquitous American pronunciation model, but they also frequently display broad AusE accents, which can be said to contribute to the Australianness of the songs (O’Hanlon 2006).

The methodology employed in O’Hanlons’ (2006) study was based on Trudgill’s (1983) use of the linguistic variable to determine the extent to which artists adhere to an American model of pronunciation. O’Hanlon selected and investigated 30 AHH songs and 30 Australian non-HH songs. She found that 26 of the 30 AHH artists used the standard AusE variable. The 6 AHH artists who used American features did not use them consistently. She also found that there is an introduction of local phonological features in AHH, with 17 of the artists using the broad Australian variant [I] for the (AY) variable, and none of the non-HH artists using this variant.

O’Hanlon suggests from these results that AHH artists exhibit predominantly AusE (including broad) phonological features in their rapping because of a desire to identify with young Australians. This can also be attributed to the artists’ desire to show hip hop loyalty and membership within the community. Alim (2002) argues that language is used by hip hop artists to construct an identity of ‘street-consciousness’, and that in fact there is a greater presence of non-standard (including AAVE) grammatical and phonological features in the rapping of Hip Hop artists than there is in their natural speech. Following this, it can be argued that AHH artists use language, including local phonological features, to project a hip hop identity, ensuring membership within the hip hop community and an image of ‘street-consciousness’, with their primary audience. This description of the AHH artists’ linguistic behaviour accounts for their divergence from the youth music pronunciation standards (i.e. ‘American’ standards) which are prevalent in non-HH contexts (O’Hanlon 2006).
The areas of identity construction and hip hop studied in this paper bear a remarkable resemblance to the findings of a linguistic survey of the 1950s on the island of Martha’s Vineyard (Labov, cited in Holmes 2001: 198–199). That survey found a trend similar to the one that is happening in Australian hip hop today, a trend of expressing one’s identity as part of a community through phonological techniques. The study of Martha’s Vineyard found that the locals of the island were using a pronunciation style unique to that island, a style that expressed the users’ association with the island, their connectedness with it, and at the same time the pronunciation style distanced them from the tourists and visitors of the island (Holmes 2001:198–199). This is basically what the hip hop community is doing in Australia. They are using a particular speech style to associate themselves with the hip hop community, to express their hip hop identity.

Taking into account the gaps in research thus far in this area and the trends found in research that has been carried out in Australia and the U.S., this paper will investigate the use of Broad AusE by AHH artists as a tool to express their hip hop identity and membership within the Australian hip hop community. As past research has suggested, AHH artists exhibit predominantly AusE (including broad) phonological features in their rapping because of a desire to identify with young Australians, and also a desire to express their Australian identity and distinguish themselves from their US counterparts. Taking this into account, it is hypothesised in this study that:

AHH artists use an exaggerated Australian accent (Broad AusE) when performing, and a less exaggerated (Standard AusE) accent when not in performance mode.

4. Methodology

The method for data gathering I used is based on the Trudgill (1983) model used in O’Hanlon’s 2006 study. O’Hanlon used 5 phonological variables, such as the (A) vowel, found in words such as ‘can’t’, ‘path’, ‘rather’. She looked for these sounds in 30 hip hop songs and 30 non hip hop songs. Each sound had two or three variants: there was the standard Australian, the American and in 2 cases a broad Australian variant. For this study I gathered data using the two variables that had a standard Australian variant and a broad Australian variant. I collected data from two AHH artists; recorded data from one single released by each artist and one interview recording for each artist. I recorded the number of times I heard each variable, and then which variant of that variable was used by the artist.

5. Data

This study collected data from two songs by two different AHH artists:
1. The Hilltop Hoods: ‘The Hard Road (Restrung)’
2. Pegz: ‘Back Then’

These artists were chosen because of their contrast in performance style - the Hilltop Hoods being aggressive and energetic whereas Pegz is more laidback, having a relaxed delivery and flow - and because both are considered successful artists in the Australian hip hop community, having released multiple records and hit singles. The interviews used in this study were downloaded from the Triple J Radio website (http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/).

The two phonological variables compared in the songs versus the radio interviews were:

**(OE) vowel**, found in words like boat, no, groan
- [au] Broad AusE
- [ou] Standard AusE

**(AY) vowel**, found in words like right, like, climb
- [ɔI] Broad AusE
- [aI] Standard AusE

A number of points were taken into consideration when analysing the data (based on O’Hanlon’s (2006) study):

1. Words such as ‘I’ and ‘my’ often appear in an unstressed and therefore reduced form in speech and singing due to sentence prosody. In these cases, the vowels are not recorded as a possible (AY) variable. This is because vowel reduction in unstressed syllables is a natural speech process (Roca & Johnson 1999) and so would not constitute linguistic modification of the sort being investigated.
2. The variables that appear in the choruses of the songs were counted only once per song, in order to avoid repetition.
3. ‘Samples’ (recordings which are lifted from other pieces and placed in a new song) were ignored in the counting process for several reasons. Firstly, samples are generally not performed by the song’s artist, and secondly the voice is unidentifiable (thus it could belong to an American performer).

6. Results

The data gathered from the song by, and interview of, The Hilltop Hoods are consistent and support the hypotheses of this study. Out of 14 variables of the (OE) vowel, the Broad AusE variant was used over 70% of the time in the song, and out of again 14 variables of the (OE) vowel in the interview, Broad AusE was
used less than 15% of the time. Similarly with the (AY) vowel, out of 17 variables in the song, over 80% were Broad AusE, whereas in the interview, out of 17 variables, less than 24% were Broad AusE variants.

The data from the song and interview by Pegz show a similar pattern to that of The Hilltop Hoods, but to a slightly lesser extent. This pattern still, however, supports the hypothesis. Out of 12 possible (OE) variables in the song, almost 67% were of the Broad AusE variant, whereas in the interview, out of 31 possible variables, the Broad AusE variant was used only 16% of the time. Out of 18 possible (AY) variables in the song, almost 67% were Broad AusE variants, and in the interview, out of 18 variables, less than 35% were the Broad AusE variant.

These results are summarised in Table One below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Hilltop Hoods - The Hard Road (Rapping) (5:06)</th>
<th>(OE) Vowel Possible Variables</th>
<th>(AY) Vowel Possible Variables</th>
<th>(OE)</th>
<th>Standard AusE</th>
<th>(AY)</th>
<th>Standard AusE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>71.43%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>88.24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hilltop Rapsule Interview (5:07)</th>
<th>(OE) Vowel Possible Variables</th>
<th>(AY) Vowel Possible Variables</th>
<th>(OE)</th>
<th>Standard AusE</th>
<th>(AY)</th>
<th>Standard AusE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>85.71%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>68.57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pegz - Punk Thon (5:21)</th>
<th>(OE) Vowel Possible Variables</th>
<th>(AY) Vowel Possible Variables</th>
<th>(OE)</th>
<th>Standard AusE</th>
<th>(AY)</th>
<th>Standard AusE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75.00%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pegz Interview (5:08)</th>
<th>(OE) Vowel Possible Variables</th>
<th>(AY) Vowel Possible Variables</th>
<th>(OE)</th>
<th>Standard AusE</th>
<th>(AY)</th>
<th>Standard AusE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>46.15%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>53.85%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34.78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Results of phonological analysis

Though the results varied slightly between the two artists investigated, a similar pattern appears in both cases. It appears that there is a tendency by AHH artists (certainly the ones studied in this paper) to exaggerate their speech during performances, showing high levels of Broad AusE pronunciation. However, in regular conversational speech, in this case speech recorded during radio interviews, the artists tend to use standard AusE pronunciation more commonly than Broad AusE. These findings are very interesting and lend support to the hypothesis proposed in this paper. Alim (2002) may attribute these findings to his argument that language is used by hip hop artists to construct an identity of ‘street-consciousness’, and that in fact there is a greater presence of non-standard (including AAVE) grammatical and phonological features in the rapping of hip
7. Discussion

This project was undertaken to further study issues of identity and hip hop, but with a more localised Australian perspective, building on the small amount of research previously carried out in this area in Australia. This study suggests there is a trend by members of the Australian hip hop community to express their affiliation, their belonging amongst the community by using a localised/broad AusE accent, even if it means that this pronunciation style needs to be adopted. An interesting point about the findings of this study is that this phenomenon is a contradiction of the hip hop philosophy of ‘keeping it real’ (O’Hanlon 2006). In the case of AHH artists, the data found in this study suggest that they are making a conscious decision to use broad AusE during performances, and standard AusE pronunciation during normal speech. This suggests that, in order to connect with their audience and to express their hip hop identity through rapping, the artists are essentially not being true to themselves, and hence are not ‘keeping it real’.

Though this study does show a consistent pattern, the sample size and data recording techniques could be improved upon. For example, one could analyse data on more phonological sounds, and gather more music samples and more recordings of the artist’s everyday speech. Another improvement could be that instead of using interview recordings of artists, one-on-one interaction with the artists could provide more substantial results. Instead of recording just the data of phonological sounds, one could also investigate the content of the lyrics of AHH artists. With regard to the data recording in this study, it would also have been beneficial to have had a second opinion, comparing the findings with another data collector to ensure the validity of these results.

8. Conclusion

This paper suggests that Australian hip hop artists use language as a tool to construct identities. There seems to be a trend in the Australian hip hop community among its members to express their affiliation, their belonging amongst the community by using a localised/broad AusE accent, even if it means that this pronunciation style needs to be adopted.

As mentioned by Cutler (2007), further study needs to be done in regards to hip hop language (HHL) use in everyday interaction, the regional language variation that local hip-hop scenes have spawned around the USA and
worldwide, the role of gender in hip-hop culture and language, and the processes of identity formation among hip hoppers.

*Author notes
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References