Analyzing Hip Hop Discourse as a Locus of 'Men's Language'

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1. Introduction

One of the most intriguing linguistic aspects of contemporary hip hop culture is *battling*, a highly competitive and creative style of discourse whose aim is the verbal domination and embarrassment of one's opponent through a combination of creative rap lyrics and effective delivery. Rapper Jay-Z (2001) has called battling "the truest essence of hip hop," alluding to its central role in hip hop culture. Alim (2006) refers to the *cipher* (or *cipha*), the street-corner arena where many battles take place, as "the hyperactivated, communal Hip Hop lyrical testing and stomping grounds of verbal mastery." Recently, battling has gained popular recognition as a result of growing interest in hip hop as a whole. Films such as Eminem's *8 Mile* (1999), Kevin Fitzgerald's *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme* (2002), and magazines such as *Smack* are dedicated to bringing viewers and listeners the best street battles. However, even despite a growing interest in establishing a history of hip hop, there are still considerable gaps in the public understanding of the art form and the social implications of hip hop culture in general. Battling is a useful starting point for an analysis of hip hop culture, as many of the themes present in battling resurface elsewhere not only in hip hop culture, but in the discourses of other cultural groups. An analysis of hip hop discourse may in turn be applied to other research projects in sociolinguistics and anthropology.

In this paper, I examine the text of a battle between Minneapolis-based rapper Eyedea and New York rapper Shells, taken from the final round of the 2001 Blaze Battle competition, which is commonly considered one of the premier battling competitions worldwide. This particular battle was broadcast on television and is widely discussed on Internet forums dealing with battling. My analysis of the battle is mostly informed by literature in the field of gender and language and discourse analysis, with the following ideas as the primary bases for discussion. First, battle discourse is intended to negotiate respect and social status, while simultaneously functioning as a creative outlet for verbal art and craftsmanship. It is an intensely competitive speech genre whose aim is the verbal domination and humiliation of one's opponents so as to decrease their status and increase one's own. The notion of status corresponds to Bourdieu's (1991) argument for the

existence of a "linguistic marketplace" in which language is rarely used strictly for communicative purposes. Instead, using language becomes a way to accrue social capital or respect, which in turn gives future utterances greater credibility and provides a framework for the incremental accumulation of respect over time.

The second key point I consider is Elijah Anderson's (1999) notion of the "the code of the street," which governs behavior in inner-city communities, where hip hop originated and still finds its roots. As Anderson astutely notes, respect is hard to gain but easy to lose. Consequently, battling is often fiercely competitive, as losing means enduring a blow to one's respect and credibility, making it that much harder to negotiate future transactions in the very hostile environment of hip hop culture's linguistic marketplace. Although a comprehensive history of hip hop culture is beyond the scope of this paper, I will discuss some of the aspects of hip hop culture and inner city life that give rise to gendered language in Section 3, "The Sociolinguistic Construction of the Hip Hop Persona." For a more detailed history of hip hop culture, please see Chang (2005) and Fricke and Ahearn (2002).

Later, I examine some more recent research on "men's language," mainly through an analysis of the work of linguist Scott Kiesling (1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2001, 2004) and anthropologist and hip hop scholar Tricia Rose (1994). Finally, I argue for the conclusion that the sociological realities of contemporary masculinity, particularly masculinity in the hip hop community, deprives men of the power that some have asserted comes with practicing stereotypically masculine behaviors.

2. Anatomy of a Battle

The battle I analyze in this paper is not meant to be taken as representative of all battles in the hip hop community. I have chosen it in part for its relative accessibility and in part for the way in which it exemplifies the themes I wish to discuss in this paper. A typical battle takes place within a cipher, with each participant *freestyling* (creating extemporaneous rap lyrics) in alternating turns until the spectators in the cipher drown out one of the competitors with boos and catcalls, signaling that he has lost. The winner often remains to take on the next challenger, and the cycle repeats. Because it is taken from an organized battling competition, the battle I analyze in this paper uses a slightly different format – the battle is four minutes long, with the contestants alternating one-minute freestyles. In particular, I will be analyzing Eyedea's second verse from the 2001 Blaze Battle, which is reproduced below:

(1)   1 Aiyyo, you straight bring the worst game
        2 Couldn't be the one if KRS was your first name
        3 I grab the microphone and let you know I'm mad tight
        4 I'll let you know I coulda been your dad right?
        5 Matter of fact, I was with your mom last night
        6 Matter of fact, I'm the reason your little sister's half white!
        7 /unclear/ where'd you go, I'm straight terrible!
        8 I'll beat you so bad I'll let your fuckin parents know
        9 Here goes the mic and I straight just, talk
        10 I've won more battles than your bitch ass has lost
        11 And that's a lot
        12 You know I straight rap for props
        13 This is just another wack cat on my jock
        14 I grab the microphone and straight smoke a clown

15 I'm beatin him in his own fuckin hometown
16 Now how dope does that make you?
17 On the mic I'll break you
18 Even if you was a bitch with her legs open
19 I would rape you
20 That's how it goes
21 On the mic he straight bust wack
22 Look at this cat's 25, can't grow a mustache
23 What's up with that?
24 Your whole style is weak
25 You get defeated depleted
26 Your whole style is cheap
27 Yo, I grab the mic and straight disconnect your face
28 Yo, it's your turn, but you got second place

3. The Sociolinguistic Construction of the Hip Hop Persona

Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL; see Alim, 2003, 2004; Spady, Lee, and Alim, 1999) is the primary means by which the members of the Hip Hop Nation (HHN) express their unique and diverse cultures. Although linguistic research on HHNL has only begun in earnest in the past decade or so, academic interest in African American English (AAE) has produced a considerable base of related research. From 1965 to 1993, sociolinguists produced five times as many publications about AAE as any other variety (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998: 169). The structural parallels between AAE and HHNL are considerable, but what is perhaps more important is the similar ideological space these two language varieties occupy in contemporary society. As a result, it is useful to contextualize HHNL as derived from AAE, with the caveat that certain linguistic aspects of HHNL, particularly its lexicon, do not overlap entirely with those of AAE. The morphosyntactic, phonetic, and semantic features of AAE are well documented in scholarly literature, and even a cursory examination will reveal that HHNL shares many of these features, such as plural –s absence (e.g. *two mile* for *two miles*), absence of certain copula forms (*You ugly* for *You are ugly*), and absence of third person singular –s affixes from verbs (*He walk* for *He walks*). Rickford and Rickford (2000) discuss many of these structural similarities in more detail, while Smitherman (2000) delves into the shared lexicon of AAE and HHNL.

Studies on language variation (e.g. Labov, 1972a, 1972b; Wolfram et. al., 2002) have consistently shown a significant correlation between language behavior and social identity, and the HHN is no different in this regard. Preliminary sociolinguistic studies of hip hop have confirmed the status of certain linguistic features as identity markers. In his study of the North Carolina-based hip hop group Little Brother, Ryan Rowe (2004) examines the speech of group members Phonte and Big Pooh in both conversational and recorded contexts. Rowe considers three core morphosyntactic and phonetic features of AAE and HHNL in his analysis: copula absence, third person singular –s absence, and word-final consonant cluster reduction. His study reveals significant increases in copula absence and third person singular –s absence in recorded contexts, owing to what he terms a "hyper self-conscious register." This study suggests that users of HHNL consciously modulate their speech to appeal to the notion of covert prestige and in-group acceptance which comes with the use of hip hop language.

The sociolinguistic space of the U.S. is characterized by an enormous number of ideologies jockeying for position and influence and seeking to seize more territory whenever possible (Morgan, 2002). Interaction between speakers of AAE and HHNL and speakers of Standard English has resulted in a language contact situation of the type described by Morgan, in which speakers of the non-standard varieties rely on their language to carve out a certain measure of social agency for themselves, but the use of AAE and HHNL has always been a double-edged sword. Wolfram (2003) notes that language ideologies "[affect] how we view and treat people and how they view themselves." Thus, language is part of a real-world system tightly linked to financial stability, class values, and access to opportunity. The value systems of the hip hop community are often at odds with those of mainstream society, and adherence to or rejection of those values can exclude speakers from certain cultural groups and opportunities. It is therefore necessary to examine the value systems of both mainstream society and the HHN in order to understand some of the discourse-level behaviors of HHNL speakers. The major value system at work in this linguistic environment appears to be that of respect.

Elijah Anderson's (1999) work *Code of the Street* investigates the value system of inner-city communities in considerable detail. His work is applicable to hip hop because of the intimate connection between the hip hop lifestyle and the urban neighborhoods where it was developed. Anderson describes the conditions faced by many poor families on a daily basis and the way of life which has arisen from these socioeconomic circumstances. In a world where violence, drug trafficking, and broken families abound, the norms which govern "decent" (Anderson, 1999: 32) behavior do not always apply. Anderson's verbal walk down Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia shows a steady decline in standard of living from the upscale, mainly white shopping areas in the northwest corner of the city to the boarded-up windows of the southern end of the Avenue. Central to Anderson's description is the "code of the street," a set of unwritten rules by which behavior in the inner-city community is governed. He contends that "decent" families are those who aspire to middle-class values, while the more "street"-inclined families live their lives by the code, which he outlines in some detail. Minimally, all residents of the area must have some familiarity with the code to avoid conflicts which may arise from infractions of the code's social norms. Anderson describes the code with exceptional eloquence below:

> At the heart of the code is the issue of respect – loosely defined as being treated "right" or being granted one's "props" (or proper due) or the deference one deserves. However, in the troublesome public environment of the inner city, as people increasingly feel buffered by forces beyond their control, what one deserves in the way of respect becomes ever more problematic and uncertain…In the street culture, especially among young people, respect is viewed as almost an external entity, one that is hard-won but easily lost – and so must be constantly guarded. The rules of the code in fact provide a framework for negotiating respect. (Anderson, 1999: 33)

The commodification of respect in the hip hop community reflects the conditions encountered by many young MC's coming up in the city. Rappers such as Jay-Z and 50 Cent readily admit selling drugs to alleviate some of the excruciating poverty they encountered early in their lives. These two rappers, along with other nationally recognized artists with similar backgrounds, take pride in having escaped the poverty trap and reached the pinnacle of financial success, which carries with it a certain measure of respect. Rather than let these success stories speak for themselves, however, many rappers fight

even harder to sustain this new-found level of respect. In a fickle music industry, there is no guarantee of continued success over years or even months; thus, confrontational, in-your-face behavior becomes necessary to maintain record sales, financial stability, and consequently respect.

4. Gender and Language in Hip Hop

The prevalence of gendered language in battling virtually demands that any linguistic study of battling be informed by existing literature on gender and language. I would therefore like to preface my analysis of the battle in question with a discussion of a perspective which has arisen more recently in the literature of language and masculinity. In his work on the expression of masculinity in fraternity members, Kiesling (2004) offers the following observation:

> One of the problems with early work on language and gender, and with masculinity studies as well, is the lack of an accounting for differences among men, especially when talking about men's power. Power is one of the defining characteristics of masculinity in most societies, but it is not something that all men subjectively feel they have. In fact…I had been convinced of the advantages and privileges of the social group that I belonged to…but on a daily subjective level I did not feel this privilege. When I experienced power relations, it was to feel powerless…Thus, even though statistically people of my group have more social power than people of other groups, many individuals in my group at some point feel powerless. (Kiesling, 2004: 232)

Kiesling's discussion of the status of male power in society accomplishes two major goals. First, it problematizes views of men that portray them as universally empowered; second, it alludes to the possibility of everyday interaction as staging ground for the negotiation of power. Kiesling's work emphasizes that a binary classification of empowered versus powerless is not sufficient to capture the vast array of experiences of men from often-diverging backgrounds. In sharp contrast to the "purely positive results" Lakoff (1975) claims men experience, he shows not only that male hierarchies are constantly in flux, but also the proactive ways in which men use language to manipulate power relations. This appraisal of power relations is telling – it gives utterance to the fact that the power granted by speaking men's language and coming from a socioeconomically advantaged background does not necessarily yield advantages in social situations. Finally, his work opens the door to a discussion of the inverse situation of that which he describes. If socioeconomically privileged groups can be made to feel powerless and inferior by the fluctuations of social status economies, it stands to reason that members of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups can use language in an attempt to proactively manipulate their own social status in a similar way.

Shifting contexts from fraternities to the hip hop community, I believe that the socioeconomic realities faced by many men in the hip hop community preemptively negate the granting of certain aspects of mainstream power to these men. More specifically, the use of men's language does not translate directly into increased upward mobility, nor does it remedy the poverty and lack of quality education so distressingly prevalent in many inner city communities. At best, the use of men's language by members of the hip hop community may help to accrue local status or temporary power, but as I have noted above, power and status in the hip hop community are subject to revocation at any time. The volatility of social status in the community in turn helps to perpetuate the use of men's language. Further, the desire of many men to acquire longer-lasting and higher social status manifests itself linguistically as progressively more aggressive and

extreme expressions of hegemonic masculinity

The rhetoric of respect is one of repetition – it will simply not do to establish respect one time and expect it to endure. Rather, members of the hip hop community who seek respect must consistently engage in behaviors that align with community norms and therefore merit respect. Similarly, the rhetoric of gender is based on repetition, in that it is not sufficient to assume that gender will proceed straightforwardly from biological sex, nor is it sufficient to assume that once a person attempts to establish gender, that gender will never be called into question. A large amount of existing literature on language and gender focuses on gender as performance, or as a summation of behavior over time, rather than an inborn human trait. As Cameron (1998: 49) succinctly states:

'masculine' and 'feminine' are not what we are, nor traits that we *have*, but effects that we produce by way of particular things we *do*. 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a "natural" kind of being.'

Many men in the hip hop community repeatedly assert their gender as heterosexual masculine behavior, whether through lexical items such as "bitch" or "faggot" or through narratives describing their sexual exploits with women. These behaviors can be prompted by the desire of rappers to construct status for themselves. Cameron (1998: 61) suggests that to perform these two language behaviors may even be the best way to assert one's own masculinity:

In [the context of] a private conversation among male friends [i]t could be argued that to gossip, either about your sexual exploits with women or about the repulsiveness of gay men…is not just one way, but the most appropriate way to display heterosexual masculinity. In another context (in public or with a larger and less close-knit group of men), the same objective might well be pursued through explicitly agonistic strategies, such as yelling abuse at women or gays in the street, or exchanging sexist and homophobic jokes.

With this in mind, the next section of this paper analyzes Eyedea's battle verse for themes of gender and sexuality as introduced above.

5. Analysis

With the clock running and just one minute to make his case to the crowd, Eyedea pulls no punches, beginning his verbal assault right out of the gate. He begins by establishing the hierarchical relationship between himself and Shells, then segues smoothly into a tale of sexual dominance, as shown in Example 2 below:

(2)   1 I grab the microphone and let you know I'm mad tight
          2 I'll let you know I coulda been your dad right?
          3 Matter of fact, I was with your mom last night
          4 Matter of fact, I'm the reason your little sister's half white!

With his second line above, Eyedea places himself above Shells in the male hierarchy, by implying that he is Shells' father and is therefore due a certain amount of power and respect in the relationship. Especially interesting is that Eyedea's claim that he "coulda been [Shells'] dad," further implies that Shells would not necessarily recognize his father. This subtle nod to class distinction shows that Eyedea, who is white, has an awareness of what a man of Shells' socioeconomic background's family circumstances might be, and in

so doing, he further tips the balance of power in the battle. In lines 3 and 4 above, Eyedea then proceeds to establish his sexual dominance over the perceived "weaker" members of Shells' family – his mother and little sister. Although jokes about another person's mother are a common feature in African American competitive discourse and are recognized as an integral part of "the dozens" (Smitherman, 2000), Eyedea takes the theme a step further by claiming he was "with" (i.e. had sex with) Shells' mother. Thus, this excerpt is a good example of the overtly expressed heterosexuality which is prevalent in battle discourse. After a few more lines, Eyedea lets loose with Example 3:

(3)   1 I've won more battles than your bitch ass has lost
        2 And that's a lot
        3 You know I straight rap for props
        4 This is just another wack cat on my jock

In this excerpt, Eyedea immediately classifies Shells as a "bitch," a common epithet both in battling and elsewhere. "Bitch" has been the subject of some intriguing linguistic analysis, specifically Sutton's (1995) suggestion that "bitch" serves a double function – it places the target not only as a female, but as an animal. The implication of "bitch," then, is that someone who is classified as both an animal and a woman has no chance in the power hierarchy against a human and a male. In line 4 of the above excerpt, Eyedea refers to a phenomenon known in the hip hop community as "dick riding," in which a male admires another male's skill, e.g. in rapping, to such a degree that the admiration borders on homosexual attraction. Using the phrase "on my jock (penis)," Eyedea suggests that Shells is "dick riding," but cannot compete in the battle. The next excerpt, Example 4, takes a decidedly more controlling turn:

(4)   1 Even if you was a bitch with her legs open
        2 I would rape you

This is perhaps the most direct sequence in Eyedea's verse; he resurrects the theme of sexual dominance as shown above in Example 2, only this time he turns the lens on Shells himself. "Bitch" appears again here, reaffirming the hierarchical relationship, but this example differs significantly from Examples 2 and 3 in that Eyedea uses the transition between lines 1 and 2 in Example 4 to assert his agency in the situation. His suggestion that even if Shells were "a bitch with her legs open" – that is, willing to have sex – Eyedea would override that willingness and commit rape. This is doubtlessly a violent image, and Eyedea uses it to show the extent of verbal force he is willing to apply to wrest control of the situation away from Shells. Finally, in Example 5, Eyedea scales back his tone a bit and pokes fun at Shells' inability to perform stereotypically masculine behaviors:

(5)   1 Look at this cat's 25, can't grow a mustache
        2 What's up with that?
        3 Your whole style is weak

Eyedea shifts his focus somewhat here, starting with a command that the audience look at Shells, 25 years old and allegedly a grown man, yet unable to grow facial hair, which is often one of the most overtly visible signs of manhood. The crowd is further let in on the joke with the second line above, the rhetorical "what's up with that," encouraging the crowd to think of the myriad possible explanations for Shells' perceived lack of masculinity. Also of interest is the segue from line 2 to line 3, which may signal a dual function for "what's up with that"; namely, the line invites the crowd to consider just how

weak Shells' rhyming style is. Altogether, Eyedea combines the various techniques described above to great effect, as Shells is unable to counter well enough to win the battle, and Eyedea is declared the Blaze Battle champion.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown the various ideological underpinnings of battling, particularly those in which gender is emphasized. By analyzing the social forces which give rise to this style of competitive discourse, we can learn more about the way language is used to replicate (or, in some cases, selectively defy) the cultural Discourses which specify gender roles. Tricia Rose, in her book *Black Noise*, offers the following crucial observation regarding the state of gender in hip hop:

> Rap music and video have been wrongfully characterized as thoroughly sexist but rightfully lambasted for their sexism. I am thoroughly frustrated but not surprised by the apparent need for some rappers to craft elaborate and creative stories about the abuse and domination of young black women. Perhaps these stories serve to protect young men from the reality of female rejection; maybe and more likely, tales of sexual domination falsely relieve their **lack of self-worth and limited access to economic and social markers for heterosexual masculine power**. (Rose, 1994: 15; my emphasis)

Although Rose does not specifically address battling in the above quotation, I would like to address two parts of her argument as a closing. First and foremost, Rose's assertion that hip hop culture has been "wrongfully characterized as thoroughly sexist" bears mentioning in light of the subject matter covered in this paper. Hip hop culture is not pathological – it was originally conceived as a way of bringing people together and has been shaped over time to reflect the social realities facing many of those who adopt the culture. Second, echoing Anderson's claims, Rose notes the historical disenfranchisement of inner-city African American males, noting that they are only afforded "limited access to economic and social markers for heterosexual masculine power," and the accompanying "lack of self-worth" they experience. This lack of self-worth is due at least in part to the exclusion of urban African Americans and those affiliated with the hip hop community from participation in a social economy based on middle-class values such as financial and educational status. In response, a parallel social economy has appeared in which respect, authenticity, and ability to control the environment are prized over more conventional markers of status. That is, the code of the street is the primary factor in determining an individual's worth. Given the socioeconomic restrictions already in place in the hip hop community, it becomes that much more important for its members to explore alternate means of pursuing and acquiring power.

Although further research into the topic is warranted, it might seem that the language of the hip hop community is paradoxical. On one hand, it is an attempt to create agency in a situation of institutionalized racism and oppression; on the other, it is perpetuating those very same institutions by lending credence to the public perception of hip hop culture. Hip hop is not going away; its prevalence and undeniable influence in popular culture must be acknowledged, and further research is definitely in order on the culture and especially its language. To paraphrase the Brooklyn MC Mos Def, hip hop is going where we as people are going, and the study of hip hop offers insights into many different areas of language and culture.

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