

Not For Your Average Brain: The Social Meaning of Metaphor in an Underground Hiphop Community

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1 Introduction

In our discussion of interpretive practices in one underground hiphop community, we foreground local perspectives on hiphop as social practice, drawn from interview data with an MC (hiphop performer) and founder of a Native underground “crew,” to show how this MC’s use of figurative language – variously described as “riddlin,” metaphor, and “speaking in code” – has a gatekeeping function, in that it creates and reinforces group boundaries, and determines the conditions for group membership, in his hiphop community of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

We treat hiphop as a form of literacy, meaning a “secondary [use] of language” that “build[s] on, and extend[s], the uses of language ... acquired as part of our primary discourse” (Gee, 1989, p. 22-3; cf. Street, 1993). Moreover, it is a collaborative form of literacy in which texts are conceived, pieced together, performed, and interpreted within textual communities (Howe, 1993). Since we are fundamentally interested in what Szwed (1981, p. 422) calls “the *social meaning of literacy*: that is, the roles these abilities play in social life; the varieties of reading and writing available for choice; the contexts for their performance; and the manner in which they are interpreted and tested” (*italics in original*), our goal is to present an ethnographic portrait that is as faithful as possible to our participant’s sense of what hiphop literacy in general, and metaphor specifically, mean to his crew and him. We hold that such meanings are always ideological, in that they are

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“rooted in or responsive to the experience of a particular social position” (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994, p. 58). Two issues related to our participant’s language ideologies, and others’ language ideologies, proved especially significant.

First, in articulating a metalinguistic ideology about the standards by which hip-hop performances should be evaluated, and who is qualified to make such evaluations, our participant positions himself in opposition to older members of his community of origin. In his view, these people make unqualified judgments about hip-hop performances, owing to their contrasting language ideologies. We therefore see in our interview data an example of intergenerational conflict involving competing language ideologies, suggesting parallels with discourses of linguistic purism that disparage young people’s linguistic practice in situations of language shift (see, for example, Lee, 2007).

Second, in his descriptions of “getting into” hip-hop communities of practice, and in his exegesis of his crew’s lyrics, our participant insists that hip-hop be considered on equal terms with the kinds of literate production traditionally valued in formal schooling. Our participant feels strongly that his crew’s music is “not for the average brain”: becoming a “real hip-hop artist [who’s] ... real true to the art,” or even a “real” hip-hop listener, involves a process of situated learning or “brainwashing” that, while it does not resemble schooling, is equally deserving of respect (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The issue, according to our participant, is not so much whether hip-hop lyrics are taught in literature classes, but whether people – even those without access to the underground “code” – are appropriately respectful of hip-hop performances. This call for respect reflects the time and effort the performers have invested in “hip-hop education,” and the high level of learning or skill they have attained as a result.

2 Background and Data Collection

We conducted an in-depth interview (Schensul et al., 1999) with Jay, an MC and the co-founder of ILL Methods, an “Underground Native hip-hop crew comin out the Southwest,” at the Native American Student Affairs (NASA) office room on the University of Arizona campus. Jay (he requested his real name be used) is Navajo, from the reservation border town of Farmington, New Mexico, and has been producing and performing hip-hop for around two years. Unlike other hip-hop linguists and literacy researchers, we do not include our participant’s lyrics in our data analysis, choosing instead to focus on how Jay understands his own practice, as revealed in the interview data. However, we did develop open-ended questions and prompts for the in-depth interview by listening to one of ILL Methods’ recent mixtape CDs, entitled “Phrase, Jay, Knowbody: ILL Methods.” The interview was videotaped, then viewed and logged in its entirety. We transcribed selected segments of the interview, based on our interest in the anthropology of hip-hop literacy and the themes we saw emerging from the data. We then analyzed transcribed segments with reference to the theoretical work cited above and other recent work in linguistic anthropology and education.

3 Theoretical Framework: ILL Methods as a Community of Practice

According to Wenger (1998), membership in a community of practice entails a process of social learning: people with a common interest in a topic work together over a period of time, sharing problems, finding solutions, and creatively advancing ideas as newer members gain knowledge and the ability to participate in a wider range of social

practices. The social practices through which members of the ILL Methods crew construct their identities, and successfully perform their membership in the broader underground community, include listening to and interpreting hiphop tracks, “spittin” intricate verses while performing, soliciting collaborations with other performers, working to create beats and produce tracks, and distributing their music on mixtape CDs and over the internet.

When learners enter a community of practice, as Jay did a little more than two years ago, their ability to participate is limited, but over time, they are socialized into community discourses, and the social practices used to enact these discourses, and gradually become able to participate to a greater extent (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Jay discusses the linguistic aspects of attaining membership in the underground community a number of times in our interview data. He mentions a track in which ILL Methods MCs jokingly refer to “brainwashin people to hiphop,” or getting inside listeners’ heads and “programming” them with the insider knowledge needed to decode their complex metaphors. He also emphasizes the importance of repeated, careful listening (“listen to it, listen to it, listen to it”) in order to gain access to the code, as in the following excerpt:

- (1) When other people listen to him, they’re like, what is he talkin about? I’m like, listen to the name of the track and listen to it, y’know you- don’t just listen to the lyrics or the beat, listen to the whole thing and you’ll understand it.

In a different part of the interview, Jay talks about passing through “phases” as an MC, from his early style to his “storytelling” phase to his present phase, which he describes as “deeper than underground” or “way out there,” and contrasts the way he would compose tracks as an “amateur,” when he had more difficulty fitting words he’d written to a beat, to his current expertise, about which he says, “It’s like muscle memory now.”

In the following excerpt, Jay refers again to a shared code, a set of metaphorical resources the MCs in his textual communities – i.e., the ILL Methods crew and the broader hiphop underground – use to communicate with each other and to differentiate themselves from outsiders, whom he identifies here as “average people” and, elsewhere, as “fake rappers”:

- (2) The people that are underground? They’ve- they’ve um- they’ve been doin it for so long that there is like a code, y’know, like- not like a code ... but like a ... there’s like a code of (pause) of what you understand ... They’ve been doin it for so long, they’ve been in it for so long, so- so- so one of like a brethren or - y’know, that we call our MCs brethren, like a brother – and say he says something, y’already know what he’s saying ... “Oh, tha’s dope,” y’know? so ... I guess it’s for the average person to scramble.

Jay’s language here is revealing: not only have the underground MCs “been *doin it* for so long,” “they’ve been *in it* for so long.” Underground hiphop is not merely something one does; it involves a process of getting into a community and gradually taking on an expert role as a creator and interpreter of tracks. In this context, metaphor serves the purpose of determining who has access to the group’s code and who is ignorant of it – i.e., who belongs and who doesn’t. Jay’s remarks support previous analyses of hiphop language as a “code of communication” used by MCs to create “a cultural space” reflecting the “values, morals, aesthetics, and codes of conduct” of group members (Alim, 2002, p. 288).

In Jay's understanding, ILL Methods' social practices place them within an underground tradition that has more to do with one's love of hip-hop and lyrical prowess than it does with narrowly construed categories related to geography or race/ethnicity. A look at the crew's myspace.com website reveals the central role the internet has played, and continues to play, in extending their social networks and making it possible for them to contribute to the ongoing conversation that is underground hip-hop. ILL Methods' online presence is one way in which members of the crew also experience themselves as members of a hip-hop underground that transcends geography and race. Jay asserts that although the ILL Methods MCs may be Navajo, they do not consider themselves part of a Navajo hip-hop scene *per se*, because they don't want to "limit themselves" to a certain easily categorized style or strive to fit locally-bound definitions of authenticity. At the same time, Jay is aware that his metalinguistic ideologies sometimes bring him into conflict with older people from his Navajo community of origin, and his discussion of this situation provides important insights into the critical role of metaphor in reinforcing what it means to be "underground."

4 Riddlin: Enregistered Signs and Contrasting Language Ideologies

In the following excerpt, Jay defines "riddlin" and expands on its significance for the members of the ILL Methods crew and the underground more generally:

- (3) You know a riddle was like a- hard to solve, right? Well, if you look at a metaphor it's kind of- it's a riddle y'know? And when we say stuff, if you don't understand what we're saying then it's- it's more of a riddle y'know, and it's basically like-saying that you have to solve it to- respect the music, y'know, kind of ... that's what the word kind of means to me, y'know.

Jay's gloss of "riddlin" draws on a rich tradition of wordplay within hip-hop and African-American culture more generally, as exemplified in related terms such as "the cipher." It is also strikingly similar to the original meaning of the word "reading," which, like "riddle," is derived from Old English *raedan*, meaning to "give advice or counsel ... [or] explain something obscure" (Howe, 1993, p. 61). There are two key points here: first, riddles are supposed to be hard to solve, and the difficulty of Jay's riddles or metaphors is a point of pride with him. Second, the act of gathering – whether virtually or in person – to perform, listen to, and interpret esoteric, riddle-laden texts, mostly inaccessible to outsiders, is integral to ILL Methods' sense of mutual engagement in the hip-hop underground.

Jay may be proud that his metaphors are "way out there," but he also refers with frustration to the difficulty they cause listeners who just "see the cover of the book ... they don't read the book": people, that is, who aren't able to "go deeper" into the metaphors he and other MCs use, and instead get bogged down on the superficial level of Jay's imagery, which he admits can appear disturbing. Here, he observes that Navajo elders are unlikely to appreciate his music, while maintaining "that stuff doesn't bother me":

- (4) J: So either way it's- you're not gonna please everybody, and you don't hear like-like- not a lot of, y'know, elder people listening to our music, and y'know-

Interviewer: And does that- does that bother you, or-

J: No, that stuff doesn't bother me. I'll- I'll- I don't care.

Jay goes on to explain the gap in understanding this way:

- (5) Like some of the stuff I say is not- ... it's- it's a metaphor. Like I got this line, I say, "Eat infants to digest effect of dialect" ... and it says ... (*starts rapping*) but I- I know rap is innocent, but I'm a cannibal who eats his own hypocrites, (*stops rapping*) cause rappers are hypocrites, y'know ... well if somebody heard that, a person ... they're not gonna understand it. But they're gonna be like- all they're gonna hear is "eatin' infants," "a cannibal who eats his own hypocrites" ... But a MC would be like, oh, that's pretty dope, y'know like ... like this guy don't care, y'know.

Even this brief example gives us a clear picture of Jay's understanding of performance as "an act of expression ... subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence" (Bauman, 2001, p. 169). Jay is aware, however, that not all listeners will understand how his performance achieves resonance through layering of stylistic resources, such as figurative language, rhyme, vowel harmony, prosodic patterns, voice quality, and gestures (Bauman, 2001, p. 171). Evaluations of Jay's performance – i.e., from "a [non-hiphop] person" vs. "a MC" – will therefore differ, but Jay claims only to be concerned about evaluations from within the underground community.

In simple terms, there is a moral dimension to Jay's argument: not being able to decode his metaphors is an indication that someone hasn't spent enough time listening to the music, which suggests s/he doesn't have "respect" for the music and is therefore not a member of the relevant textual community, with the authority to evaluate underground performances. Judging from Jay's comments above, it even seems that he deliberately employs outrageous metaphors with images of savagery and cannibalism, which he realizes will be objectionable to many people, as a way of showing listeners that "this guy don't care" and challenging them to put forth the effort required to make sense of his performance.

It is also possible to read the quotation above as a deeper criticism of how young people's innovative linguistic behavior is devalued by those outside their communities of practice. From Jay's comments, we can infer that a process of enregisterment has taken place in his community of origin "whereby diverse behavioral signs (whether linguistic, non-linguistic, or both) are functionally reanalyzed as cultural models of action, [and] as behaviors capable of indexing stereotypic characteristics of incumbents of particular interactional roles" (Agha, 2007, p. 55). In other words, certain formal features of underground hiphop performances, such as images used in metaphors, have been enregistered, or have become recognizable and interpretable, among older Navajos. Not only that, but these features may have been "functionally reanalyzed" and linked to stereotypic personae in ways that seem to confirm existing "cultural models of action" or stereotypic images of Navajo youth.

The problem, Jay points out, is that the enregistered features alone fail to capture the complexity of what ILL Methods is doing in their music, and present a distorted view – according to his language ideology – of hiphop performance that amounts to a lack of “respect.” The existence of a contrasting language ideology, with its emphasis on what kinds of images are and are not appropriate to use in metaphors, calls to mind ideologies of linguistic purism that often appear in communities where language shift is perceived to be taking place. There, also, young people’s linguistic behavior can become a site for expressing moral concern and anxieties about language change and loss.

In the interview, Jay does not explain exactly what kind of stereotypic persona his music might index for an older Navajo person. However, we see a similar process of enregisterment at work in Deyhle’s (1998) article about Navajo adolescents who embraced heavy metal music and culture, where features of these youths’ semiotic displays – clothing, hairstyle, choice of music, avowed perspective on traditional culture – were taken to index beliefs or attitudes associated with the heavy metal subculture that her participants did not necessarily share. This is the point Jay seems to be making: to attend only to linguistic and non-linguistic signs that have been enregistered as pointing to stereotypic personae of youth, lacking an insider perspective on hiphop or heavy metal communities of practice, for example, is to disregard “the social meaning of literacy” for participants in those communities.

We are aware that a number of other themes in Jay’s talk might be construed in ways specific to social relations in American Indian communities: a discourse of respect for linguistic innovation that inverts, to some extent, discourses of respect most often associated with elders’ language (Meek, 2007); talk of “brainwashing” that emphasizes repeated, careful listening, such as is expected of novices in some Indian communities (McCarty et al., 2006; Zepeda, 1995); and an appropriation of “savage” imagery that might be read as an implicit critique of outsider stereotypes about Native Americans. On the other hand, most of what Jay says can also be construed in a general sense as merely reflecting the boundaries of his hiphop community of practice, without specific reference to racial identity. To borrow a metaphor from Woolard & Genovese (2007), Jay may be engaging in “strategic bivalency” throughout the interview: in his ambiguous performance, he leaves open the possibility that his talk will be seen to index aspects of his cultural heritage, without insisting on that indexical association. While we acknowledge this possibility, we chose to take Jay at his word – that he does not want to be seen as just a Navajo MC – and not to analyze the interview data strictly in those terms.

5 “So you’re sayin these kids don’t have to go to school no more?”: Reflections on Hiphop Education

Some scholars concerned with improving the academic achievement of minoritized youth, whose voices often go unheard in classes focused on more traditional kinds of literacy, have argued that hiphop has potential as a pedagogical resource (see, for example, Alim, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Low, 2007). Jay does not address the potential for hiphop to benefit formal education in our interview data, but instead reframes the whole debate, making audible unspoken assumptions about the inferiority of vernacular discourses and whether or not they are suitable for inclusion in classrooms. As Jay says, becoming a “true hiphop person” is its own kind of education, a process of “brainwashing” – acquiring knowledge and expertise within a textual community – which one of his ILL Methods crew members contrasts with “going to school”:

- (6) He's like, "So you're saying human beings can use their brainwaves and remember all this?" ... He's uh- "Then (???) won't have to go to school no more," y'know. It's basically he's talkin about MCs, y'know ... "So you're sayin these kids don't have to go to school no more?" And he's like, "So you're done?" And he was like, "Yeah." "So I got culture?" And he's talkin about like hiphop culture, y'know.

"Getting [hiphop] culture" involves practice-based, situated learning, a long apprenticeship that cannot be replicated in school settings where people "get" other kinds of culture. Taking advantage of human beings' natural capacity to "use their brainwaves and remember all this" and "spit it out so crazy," the ILL Methods MCs construct hiphop "brainwashing" as an alternative to formal schooling which, while it differs in methodology, is at least equal in rigor. Jay makes this connection explicitly in discussing an ILL Methods track called "Brain Anatomy 101" and invokes the vocabulary of higher education to demand that hiphop education be considered on equal terms:

- (7) That Brain Anatomy's just talkin about how- music and brain ... it's pretty- it's pretty like uh-it's like a philosophy kinda y'know? ... Like how you usin the brain, Brain Anatomy 101, and how I use the brain to spit lyrics y'know ... an it gets really- really intricate in there, y'know, almost like real- really hard to understand what I'm talkin about but if you're- if you're- if you're either smart and you know a lotta words ... or if you're an MC you know what I'm talkin about and you can get it y'know ... And that's what it is, it's Brain Anatomy 101, y'know, it's- ... it's not for the average brain.

Our purpose is not to argue against the inclusion of hiphop in formal schooling, but only to underline that vernacular literacies are not ideology-free complexes of stylistic features and rhetorical resources that can be neatly appropriated into curricula. Alim (2002) acknowledges that hiphop literacies often reflect "defiance to a standard language ideology that stifles those without access to formal education" (p. 288), and thus exist in opposition to schooled literacies – a fact to which Jay may be alluding in the previous excerpt. As Gilmore (1993 [1985]) noted in her paper on "stylized sulking" and "steps" among African-American elementary school students, literate performances are about attitude and alignment: students may not want to align themselves with the ethos of the school through their "sub rosa," or underground, literacies. They may simply need "the room which is required in order for them to demonstrate their competence" (*ibid.*, p. 70) and to show their peers and elders that their brains are not average in any sense of the word. Membership in the hiphop underground is not open to everyone, notwithstanding Jay's somewhat romanticized view, in which "listening" is the only requirement for admission. In criticizing local processes of enregisterment, however, Jay argues eloquently that, if a person can't "read the book" of his music, s/he can at least occupy a position of respectful not-knowing.

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