

Not for your average brain: the social meaning of metaphor in an underground hip-hop community

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Transcripts

(1) "Listen to the whole thing"

1 So it's basically sayin, y'know,
2 if you have enough-
3 just say, y'know, you wanna know what it is,
4 I mean, you would go and find out what it is.
5 Listen to it, listen to it, listen to it.
6 "Oh, that's what it means," y'know
...
7 When other people listen to him,
8 they're like, what is he talkin about?
9 I'm like, listen to the name of the track
10 and listen to it, y'know you-
11 don't just listen to the lyrics or the beat,
12 listen to the whole thing
13 and you'll understand it.

(2) "There is like a code"

1 The people that are underground?
2 They've- ... they've been doin it for so long
3 that there is like a code, y'know, like- ...
4 there's like a code of (pause)
5 of what you understand ...
6 They've been doin it for so long,
7 they've been in it for so long,
8 so- so- so one of like a brethren or - y'know,
9 that we call our MCs brethren, like a brother -
10 and say he says something,
11 y'already know what he's saying ...
12 "Oh, tha's dope," y'know? so ...
13 I guess it's for the average person to scramble.

(3) "You're not gonna please everybody"

1 J: So either way it's-
2 you're not gonna please everybody,
3 and you don't hear like- like-
4 not a lot of, y'know, elder people
5 listening to our music, and y'know-
6 Int: And does that-
7 does that bother you, or-
8 J: No, that stuff doesn't bother me.
9 I'll- I'll- I don't care.

(4) "It's a metaphor"

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

(5) "You have to solve it to- respect the music"

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

(6) "Brain Anatomy 101"

1 That Brain Anatomy's just talkin about how- ...
2 it's like a philosophy kinda, y'know ...
3 like how you usin the brain, Brain Anatomy 101,
4 and how I use the brain to spit lyrics, y'know ...
5 an it gets really- really intricate in there, y'know,
6 almost like real- really hard to understand
7 what I'm talkin about but ...
8 if you're either smart and you know a lotta words...
9 or if you're an MC,
10 you know what I'm talkin about
11 and you can get it, y'know, and that's what it is.
12 It's Brain Anatomy 101, y'know, it's- ...
13 it's not for the average brain.

Overview

In this study, we explore the uses and meanings of metaphor for the members of ILL Methods, an underground hiphop crew. 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 hiphop 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 hiphop performances, owing to their contrasting language ideologies. Our participant argues that the features of his crew's discourse that have become "enregistered" (Agha, 2007) among outsiders – and possibly linked to stereotypic personae of youth – fail to capture the complexity of the music, and present a distorted view 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.

Second, in his descriptions of "getting into" hiphop communities of practice, and in his exegesis of his crew's lyrics, our participant insists that hiphop be considered on equal terms with the kinds of literate production traditionally valued in formal schooling. To take this language ideology seriously is to problematize the discussion in the educational literature about whether, and how, hiphop should be incorporated into formal schooling. Our participant feels strongly that his crew's music is "not for the average brain": becoming a "real hiphop artist [who's] ... real true to the art," or even a "real" hiphop listener, involves a process of situated learning or "brainwashing" that, while it does not resemble schooling, is equally deserving of respect. The issue, according to our participant, is not so much whether hiphop lyrics are taught in literature classes, but whether people – even those without access to the underground "code" – are appropriately respectful of hiphop performances. This call for respect reflects the time and effort the performers have invested in "hiphop education," and the high level of learning or skill they have attained as a result.

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