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The Enregisterment of English in Rap Braggadocio: a study from English-Afrikaans bilingualism in Cape Town

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**The Enregisterment of English in Rap Braggadocio:
a study from English-Afrikaans bilingualism in Cape Town¹**

Quentin E. Williams

The ambiguous role of English as rap spreads globally in bilingual communities

Introduction

For the last three decades, globalization has been a major theme of sociolinguistics and studies of multilingualism, in keeping with large scale changes evident in late-modern societies (Blommaert, 2010). One of several stances within this research is the importance accorded to English in processes of linguistic globalization (see Leung *et al*, 2009). Three theoretical stances in particular have dealt with English globalization: World Englishes (e.g. Kachru, 1986), Linguistic Imperialism (e.g. Phillipson, 1992) and more recently Global Englishes within a context of modern day rapid transport, electronic media, cultural hybridities and economic migration (Pennycook, 2007). All three approaches emphasise different aspects of the nature of English insertion in multilingual contexts.

The paradigm of World Englishes, captured in a concentric model, has represented a body of research that seeks to understand the spread of varieties of English used in multilingual contexts. For more than three decades it has deployed a particular theoretical perspective and methodological repertoire that underpins the many pedagogical, ideological, and power-related issues central to the debates addressed in its journal (Jenkins, 2003: 15-8). A number of problems inherent in the concentric model remain (cf. Jenkins, 2003: 17-8), some of which are addressed by scholars like Tripathi (1998) and Yano (2001). As Pennycook (2007: 112) stresses “it is impossible to understand the global spread and use of English without considering the local contexts of its use”. Pennycook’s (2003:515) earlier observation that “global language use, and in particular the global spread of English, remains largely tied to an earlier era of sociolinguistics, in which identities are pre-given and tied to nationalities” is no longer true, thanks to the growing volume of work by authors like Pennycook himself, Blommaert, and Canagarajah (2000).

English forms an important part of multilingual speakers’ repertoires in present-day Cape Town. In the practice of hip-hop, the language is used alongside marginalized varieties such

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as Kaapse Afrikaans, isiXhosa and “antilinguistic” registers such as Sabela and Tsotsitaal (Mesthrie, 2008). According to Agha (1999: 216), a register ‘is a linguistic repertoire that is associated, culture internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices’. It is often used in particular spaces and places that define a cultural group, individuals, and community practices (Goebel, 2010). The use of a register relevant to a social or cultural occasion reveals that interlocutors accept and agree to the terms of a speech event, and that that register will ‘itself reconfigure the sense of occasion’ (Agha, 1999). Multilingual speakers perform registers by drawing on large stores of repertoires that index social practices and social categories. According to Agha (2007: 18) repertoires can become *enregistered*, via “processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population”). In this paper, I want to propose the notion of ‘deregisterment’ to argue at the same time practices of English partake of conditions of enregisterment process deregisterment are at play in the use of other languages.

This paper aims to add to the growing body of research on how a global language is practised and performed in local contexts by focusing on the notion of “enregisterment”. In particular I will use examples from the local hip-hop community in Cape Town to show the creative use of English in the performance of a rap genre, *braggadocio* (bragging). I will also discuss how the use of English opens up the conditions for its ‘deregisterment’ against the salience of multilingual repertoires of present-day Cape Town.

This study is based on a multi-sited ethnography documenting a local hip-hop show, entitled, “Stepping Stones to Hip-Hop”, staged in a popular night club in the Northern Suburbs of Cape Town. Performances were documented using audio and video recordings. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with patrons, rappers, break dancers, Disc Jockeys (DJs), graffiti artists, hip-hop fans, entertainment journalists and curious onlookers who came to the club for the first time. Fieldwork also included gathering promotional posters, rap music compact diskettes, and photographs of the hip-hop show.

Performing English in Rap Braggadocio

In the transcultural global flow hip-hop, which celebrates rap styles and boasts about success, has become a ubiquitous practice across many localities. This genre is called *braggadocio*: when emcees (Microphone Controllers) wax lyrical about their sexual exploits, physical attractiveness, accumulation of money and linguistic skills (Alim *et al*, 2009). In such

performances, emcees not only ‘self-praise’ but performatively signify aspects of authenticity in the process of negating ‘...someone else’s attributes while praising one’s own’ (Keyes, 2002: 137). The performance of braggadocio here is understood as a contextually situated activity that is transformed into ‘text’ as a decontextualized and recontextualized discourse practice. This process was called entextualization by Bauman and Briggs (1990: 73), i.e. “...the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production in a unit – a text – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting...rendered decontextualizable...which incorporate aspects of context, such that the resultant text carries elements of its history of use within it”.

The venue for the performance of braggadocio is a night club in the Northern Suburbs of Cape Town: Club Stones. Regularly, on a Wednesday night between 20H00 and 02H00, Stones plays host to a gathering of youths comprising rappers, DJs and fans who are there to enjoy the hip-hop show, ‘Stepping Stones to Hip-Hop’. On the 19th March 2009, Lil Holmes and CC hosted the hip-hop show there. The evening started with a set program comprising of emcees to perform, drinking games, and promotions. As the Club filled with hip-hop fans, party revellers, and regular patrons, and with the clock ticking away to 21H00, Lil Holmes ascended the stage and started proceedings. He turned to DJ Earl Scratch and motioned to him to play rap instrumentals. At this juncture, emcee MoB and emcee M.D.K ascended the stage shaking their heads, and with the audience cheering, a short call and responseⁱ ended between the emcees, as MoB started to rap:

EXCERPT:

Start and Opening: Rap Performance

MoB:

1 Ok/
2 Let me do this M.D.K/
3 Come on/
4 Yeah/
5 After all it’s a man’s world/
6 But her universe/
7 And my verse/
8 Every sixteen I call it [inaudible]/
9 And I’m hard to cross/
10 Like a boarder/
11 Bottomless lines/
12 Serving me/
13 Kind of a tall order/
14 Till we slaughter/
15 So don’t mess around/
16 Because we don’t drop bombs/

53 One two, one two/
 54 Is ja almal/
Oh yes everybody
 55 Die's paranaⁱⁱⁱ opgetek/
The piranha's opened up
 56 En wanneer skarrel die cat/
And when the cat hustles
 57 Om 'n kroon te maak/
To make money
 58 En dai is hoe ek dwala in jou bek/
That's how I run across your mouth
 59 Die's impossible flows/
This is impossible flows
 60 Ek wil 'n hospital bou/
I want to build a hospital
 61 Vir al die beseerde Emcees/
For every hurt Emcees
 62 Kyk hoe verpos is julle nou/
Look at how forlorn you right now
 63 [pointing to MOB and M.D.K] Die's 'n klomp mad goeters/
These guys are mad performers
 64 [inaudible]
 65 La't die vloere noug late bless/
Blessing the floor
 66 Maak die stage warm/
Warming up the stage
 67 En berei soes change Labarang/
And prepare like change to Labarang [local term for Eid festival - QW]
 68 Julle kan my nie vriet nie/
You can't consume me
 69 Ek's soes vark vleis op Labarang/
I'm like Pork on Labarang
 70 [inaudible]
 71 Right, die tyd stoot/
Right, time's ticking
 72 Djy se djy's groot/
You say you mature
 73 Djy's a pikining^{iv}/
You still a boy
 74 Wat nog toet wys word/
That becomes conscious of the pussy
 75 Audience: [the audience cheers!]
 76 One two, One two/
 77 Bo op die track/
On the track/
 78 My gazi^v hoe djy gecheck/
My brother, how did you check
 79 [inaudible]/
 80 Ek rep my plek/
I represent' my place
 81 Dan staan my tande/
My teeth stand up
 82 Soe uit my bek/ [lifts hand up into the dark lit air to motion, up]
Like this out my mouth
 83 Audience: [the audience cheers!]
 84 Dan ons move met respek//
Then we'll move with respect

MoB prides himself on being a very good lyricist, an attractive rapper, and someone who chases *the paper* (the money) for the rap group, Suburban Menace. His entextualization of braggadocio is based on a hustling style which can be grouped along four themes. He makes exotic the world of the female in relation to his own (from lines 5-8, 31-34). He sings his own praises about individual lyrical brilliance (from lines 9 to 13, 20-23 and 36-39). And he boasts about the MoBCoW crew by keeping it real and representin' the lyrical unity of the group (from lines 14-19, and 24-30).

Regarding language, MoB uses English to make ironic statements that offer meta-commentary on the overwhelming dominance of being a male in the hip-hop culture. In his understanding, the female is the 'universe' that overwhelms his small world. Relations with females are important to him as much as recording sixteen bars of music, as he performs, "and my verse every sixteen I call it universe". And after 23 lines of rhyming this theme, MoB re-emphasizes the importance of relations with the opposite sex as a rapper. As he performs, although it is a "still a man's world" (line 31) men alone cannot manage it.

What we find in MoB's performance is an emphasis on enforcing of his rap groups' lyrical coherence, linguistic virtuosity, work ethic, and hip-hop cultural philosophy in English. He expresses the risk rival groups take in confronting his family members, by informing the audience present in the club that MoBCoW will "slaughter" (line 14) any emcee who dares to cross their path. Forewarning, "So don't mess around" (line 15), MoB linguistically performs that when MoBCoW rappers respond, it will be lyrically explosive ("...we don't drop bombs", line 16) because "mortars" (line 17) will be shot. The reason for this is obvious: MoBCoW family members are "lauded" (line 18) and "applauded" (line 19).

MoB's performance then develops into boasting about staying consistent in the face of adversity and financial difficulties that plague non-commercially signed rappers. By taking an aggressive tone and body comportment, he dismisses encroaching adversity by means of commercial imagery. He and the family always find new ways to navigate the rough seas: "So fuck the tide/We stay above water/We deliver flawless shows/", (lines 24 to 26), by producing "The best sixteen/And entertainment" (lines 27 and 28). He is therefore able to dispense advice that is somewhat hyperbolic: lyricising, "Stay consistent/Stop all the payments", (lines 29 and 30).

Part of rap braggadocio is the artful performance of self-awareness in a rapper's overall performance (Higgins, 2009: 113). In the case of MoB's performance, he asserts his rap and English linguistic virtuosity as a particular authentic style that stands out from the rest of the

MoBCoW family. Nobody can assail him lyrically because he is “hard to cross/like a border” (lines 9 and 10). This is because he has in store an infinite amount of lyrics and rhymes that are ‘bottomless’ (line 11). And if any emcee would ascend to any rap or lyrical battle with him, they would invariably lose (“Serving me/Kind of a tall order”, lines 12 and 13). He compares himself figuratively to a race car that changes lanes quickly and to rapid torrents of a river (“Can switch lanes quicker/Can switch flows quicker than a river”, lines 20 to 23). But more importantly, as he performs to the audience members and his hip-hop peers in Club Stones, although he is part of a crew he is an individual rapper who is able to rap over any type of music (“I stay behind bars, line 36) for as long as it takes (“Serve out my sentence”, line 37). And he reasserts this toasting of individual lyrical consistency and brilliance by inviting anyone of the emcees present to provide him with an instrument to write with (“Hand me the pen”, line 38) because, as he ends the performance, he’s “still be comprehensive” (line 39) in English.

MoB’s organization of his on-stage performance and lyrical content postures clearly the themes he boasts openly about. His performance emphasised aspects of gender identification, English lyrical creativity, and he “convincingly act [ed] as though something were at stake beyond the entertainment of those who are watching” (Goffman, 1974: 125) him. After he finished his last poetic line, Emcee Cole reframed his braggadocio performance by entextualizing the genre not through English but through a local variety of Afrikaans: Kaapse Afrikaans, deregistering English in favour of a marginalized variety.

Emcee Cole’s rap performance breaks with the global English so omnipresent in global hip-hop, by using a local variety spoken on the Cape Flats of Cape Town, and, by doing so, he paths the way for other local varieties and register to be entextualized in braggadocio. Whereas MoB’s performance had a clearly organized group of lines that concentrated on sexual exploits, boasting of lyrical fitness and finesse, and celebrating the present and future successes of the MoBCoW, Emcee Cole used his opportunity to frame braggadocio through a socially acceptable and very local language variety used by speakers in Club Stones.

He starts his performance with almost ten initiatory lines to acknowledge the call and response interaction with the audience (see lines 47 to 54). He then raps about how he works for money and that it is necessary to *hustle* (‘work’). He then compares himself to piranha, a fish known for its killer instinct when hunting in numbers (*Parana*, line 55). Emcee Cole toasts his particular style of rap through the use of local words, such as *dwala*, which means to *interrupt*, to *make quiet*, or to speak out of turn by interrupting others. The use of the form

dwala is a form used in local registers such as Tsotsitaal and Sabela in the townships of Cape Town. It forms part of registers that are shared among youth on the Cape Flats who encounter specific practices of multilingualism not only in hip-hop genres, on stage, but in their everyday language practices. The linguistic form that appears in Cole's performance is linked to his further use of the word *kroon*. As the emcee toasts about "impossible flows" (line 59) and about building a hospital *vir al die beseerde Emcees* ('for all the injured emcees' line 60), he poetically constructs lyrics and rhymes in Kaapse Afrikaans.

With further boasts Emcee Cole's rap style is made to seem incontestable. Lines 68-69 are particularly forceful in light of local religious beliefs: *Julle kan my nie vriet/Ek's soes vark vleis op Labarang* ('You can't consume me/ I'm like pork at Labarang'). *Labarang* is the local term (from Malay or Javanese) for the international Islamic Eid festival celebrating the end of the fast.

Emcee Cole indexes Islamic ritual celebrations to boast about his individual lyrical and linguistic creativity in Kaapse Afrikaans as akin to the inedibility of pork. He thus registers his style as taboo, not to be replicated.

Lines 72 to 74 comment on the culture of rearing and adulthood amongst the races in the township, the emcee draws on *culture-internal stereotypes* (Agha, 2007) through Kaapse Afrikaans and invoke maturity (adulthood) and the physical attributes as linked to sex and gender.

Emcee Cole's performance of representation is accomplished through Kaapse Afrikaans lyrics and rhymes, and not English. He concludes his braggadocio by the audience members and his fellow peers are privileged, as he closes his: "Dan staan my tande/Soe uit my bek/Dan ons move met respek" ('My teeth stand up/ Like this out my mouth/ Then we'll move with respect', lines 81, 82 and 84). Thus, in the concluding lines of Emcee Cole's braggadocio a link is made with Kaapse Afrikaans to performing local rap music intertextually, but such a process of enregisterment is at the same time a deregistering of English.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper a number of interesting issues emerge in the rap braggadocio by the two rappers regarding the role of English in globalization. In the first instance, the examples illustrate how easily rap genres in performance accommodate multiple languages, varieties and registers. English is by no means the only language in which local rap genres are performed. What implications does this carry for an understanding of English globalization?

Firstly, it must be stressed that speakers who use English globally often encounter it through different multilingual genres and performances. In multilingual spaces, different languages may be enregistered for specific purposes at specific moments. Multilingual speakers understand that English is not the only semiotic mode in the practice of multilingualism. Instead, there is added value when they shift, cross, mix and bend language when the moment is called upon.

Secondly, in times of globalization and late-modernity the argument goes beyond whether English suppresses, restricts, or excludes people, but how multilingual speakers use the language for inclusion in different spaces. In post-apartheid South Africa, English is spreading even further as it is used by multilingual speakers to shape and navigate inclusion. A theory of practice (Pennycook, 2010) would do well to illustrate that on a very local scale multilingual speakers are not threatened by a language such as English, but are acutely aware of how to manipulate (or deregister) it for the purpose of multilingual enregisterment in performances. The examples in this paper refute the fatalistic arguments pursued by Phillipson (1992) because they demonstrate the uptake and distribution of English to negotiate the use of other languages, at least in creative performance.

Thirdly, the examples I have offered here corroborate calls by Pennycook (2007: 23) to understand “global Englishes that focuses on both a critical understanding of globalization and a critical understanding of language” (Pennycook, 2007: 23). Where English occurs in the performance of rap braggadocio, it appears in unfixed ways. It is used as a prop, in a ludic sense, and enables the framing of marginal languages such as Kaapse Afrikaans. This is an important implication to observe which neither Pennycook nor Crystal alludes to.

The notion of enregisterment has been useful to prise open the use of speech forms to index transgressive meaning and social categories. Agha’s semiotic theory helps us understand how Kaapse Afrikaans is integrated in the process of enregisterment as a powerful resource in the hip-hop community of Cape Town. The concept of deregisterment brings further insight into the language globalization processes.

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ⁱ Smitherman states call and response is "spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all the speaker's statements ("call") are punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener" (1977: 104).

ⁱⁱ While this interaction is accomplished in English, the audience responds by fulfilling their role theatrically by responding "...indirectly, glancingly, following alongside, as it were, cheering on" (Goffman, 1974: 127).

ⁱⁱⁱ A piranha is a freshwater fish known for its predation on other animals.

^{iv} The word *Pikinini* (meaning 'young boy') is used in pidgin Zulu, Kaapse Afrikaans and the prison register Sabela.

^v The form *gazi* is used in Bantu languages across the sociolinguistic landscape of South Africa. The form is most present in the urban landscape. On the one hand, *gazi* translate as *blood* and is present in the register of Sabela and Tsotsitaal used by the Numbers Gangs in South African prisons (cf. Hurst, 2008). On the other hand, when used in a phrase such as, *My gazi* (in Afrikaans or English) or *My gazilam* (isiXhosa), it means *my brother*. In the townships of Cape Town where it is most commonly used, the form circulates and recurs with ambiguous meanings. Emcee Cole's use of the form relates to the second meaning, with positive connotations.