From the Periphery to the Core: An Analysis of Hip Hop Language and Culture

from Subcultural Origins to Mainstream American English and Culture

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Content

Abstract:

This paper charts the growth of Hip Hop language and culture from its origins in the South Bronx, New York in the late 1960s to its rise and eventual integration into mainstream American Language and Culture. Examples of Hip Hop language and Culture have been identified and analyzed to illustrate this movement from subculture to mainstream American culture. The investigation was based on the following question: How and through which means has Hip Hop language and culture entered into mainstream American English and mainstream American culture? The investigation was based on qualitative research. As Hip Hop scholarship is in its infancy and Hip Hop knowledge is often socially constructed, both academic and socially-mediated knowledge bases were consulted. This investigation concluded that the Hip Hop subculture entered to the mainstream American culture through the means of music, advertisements and cultural appropriation.

Words: 140

Introduction

Hip Hop culture originated in the late 1960s. At that time, America was undergoing significant social and cultural changes. It was a time of massive social protest including the Civil Rights Movement.[1] The origins of this struggle stemmed from the legacy of slavery in the United States and continuing issues of racial injustice such as segregation and disenfranchisement. Integrationist and Black Power political action groups were demanding political and economic self-sufficiency for Black Americans.[2] Hip Hop developed as a way of expressing and communicating the political, economic and social demands of Afro-Americans in the struggle for equality. This investigation begins with the inquiry "how and through which means has Hip Hop Language and Culture entered into Mainstream American English and mainstream American culture?" This essay argues that what began as a marginal subculture in the South Bronx evolved into a culture that is well entrenched within mainstream American culture and has extended outside of those boundaries into global culture. This evolution occurred through music, advertisements, and cultural appropriation. Hip Hop culture has had a huge impact on the American society, as this movement joined people together within a vehicle of expression for the purpose of sharing ideas, developing opinions and articulating desires to the public.

This topic is important on both general and specific levels. Generally, it represents the process through which a subculture becomes part of a culture, and more specifically, it represents

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[1] Clayborne Carson*, Encyclopedia Britannica*, "American Civil Rights Movement," http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/119368/American-civil-rights-movement[accessed November 16, 2012].

[2] Paul Finkelman, ed. (2009). *Encyclopedia of African American History*. Oxford University Press.

a movement through which a subculture which was historically oppressed rise and become not only an influence on the primary culture, but an active and defining element of that culture. This essay examines Hip Hop culture within an American context and the impact of Hip Hop language on American English. This topic is significant as Hip Hop language and culture has grown beyond the borders of American society to become a global force in the world today.

What is Hip Hop?

Hip Hop is a Global culture. It is not exclusively "for black people" or "by black people." According to the U.S. State Department, Hip Hop is "now the center of a mega music and fashion industry around the world," that crosses social barriers and cuts across racial lines.[3] *National Geographic* recognizes Hip Hop as "the world's favorite youth culture" in which "just about every country on the planet seems to have developed its own local rap scene."[4] Through its international travels, hip hop is now considered a "global musical epidemic."[5]

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a culture is "the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society."[6] In other words, culture is about sharing ideas with a group of people or society. Hip Hop has many definitions and, based on these definitions, can also be defined as a culture. According to *Urban Dictionary*, a Web-based dictionary included

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[3] Al Jazeera, "Leveraging hip hop in US foreign policy," http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/10/2011103091018299924.html [accessed April 13,2013]

[4] Hip Hop: National Geographic World Music. Worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com. [accessed April 23, 2013]

[5] CNN, "CNN.com – WorldBeat – Hip-hop music goes global – January 15, 2001". [accessed April 23, 2013]

[6] Oxford English Dictionary, at http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/culture [accessed April 24, 2013]

by *Time Magazine* on its list of the 50 best websites of 2008 as an important forum for socially

constructed definitions of terms used within youth cultures[7]:

> Hip hop music, also referred to as rap or rap music, is a style of popular music which came into existence in the United States during the mid-1970s, and became a large part of modern pop culture during the 1980s. It consists of two main components: rapping (MCing) and DJing (audio mixing and scratching). Along with hip hop dance (notably break dancing) and urban inspired art, or notably graffiti, these compose the four elements of hip hop, a cultural movement that was initiated by inner-city youth, mostly African Americans in New York City, in the early 1970s.[8]

There are, however, other definitions which reference Hip Hop not only as a form of

music but as a means of communication. According to Joseph Tom, also known as JT the Bigga

Figga, an American producer and rapper who has produced music on over one hundred albums,

Hip Hop is "An Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural

African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America." [9]

Based on these definitions, within the scope of this extended essay, Hip Hop is defined

as: Hip Hop is a type of music originating in The Bronx, New York, representing the four

elements of break dancing, emceeing, graffiti and turntablism, and having a primary purpose as a

means of communication, based on a Africanized English, to express concern of political, social

and personal issues.

It is important to situate Hip Hop geographically, culturally and linguistically to

understand not only the origins but also the structure of this culture. Based on the American

Census results from the year 2000, the racial composition of South Bronx was 35.64% Black or

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[7] Urban Dictionary – 50 Best Websites 2008. TIME, June 17, 2009.
http://www.time.com/time/podcast/2008/50_best_websites/ [accessed April 22, 2013]
[8] Urban Dictionary, "Hip Hop definition"   entry posted December 3, 2006
http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hip%20Hop%20Music&defid=2125133
[accessed April 23, 2013]
[9] PBS, Hip Hop Nation, entry posted 2005, http://www.pbs.org/speak/words/sezwho/hiphop/,
[accessed April 23, 2013]

African American.[10] Hip Hop's origins are therefore directly connected to African-Americans and hence African American language and culture. The socio-economic and sociopolitical factors of the time are important as they situate hip hop within a framework of economic disadvantage and political powerlessness. Hip Hop therefore became the means through which a disadvantaged population could create a voice through comments and social impulsion thus achieve within its own subculture and then within the dominant culture.

Origins of Hip Hop Culture

Hip Hop was originally based on a combination of popular "black" genres such as jazz and reggae.[11] Black neighborhoods in the New York area such as the Bronx, were growing at a fast rate and the living conditions were getting worse as the resources were consumed and standard if living condition declined. The need for social interaction took place and people started meeting in the street to converse and exchanging opinions. Jamaican culture also played an important role in this movement, an example of this is the famous composer Clive Campbell, also known as Kool Herc, a Jamaican-born American DJ who is credited with originating hip hop music in the early 1970s in The Bronx, New York City. [12] "His playing of hard funk records was an alternative both to the violent gang culture of the Bronx and to the nascent popularity of disco in the 1970s."[13] Although the movement was becoming more influential, it remained connected to

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[10] "American FactFinder". United States Census Bureau. Retrieved April 15, 2013.

[11] Stanford University, " The social significance of Rap & Hip Hop Culture,"
http://www.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/mediarace/socialsignificance.htm
[accessed April 28, 2013]
[12] The official DJ Kool Herc Website, http://djkoolherc.com/ [accessed April 28, 2013]

[13] The official DJ Kool Herc Website, http://djkoolherc.com/ [accessed April 28, 2013]

the social and cultural context of South Bronx and an example of a subculture as a cultural group

within the larger, national, culture of the United States.[14]

What Is Mainstream? What Is Mainstream American English?

Mainstream can be defined as the ideas, attitudes, or activities that are regarded as normal

or conventional; the dominant trend in opinion, fashion, or the arts.[15] PBS, the Public

Broadcasting Service, defines mainstream as:

> Mainstream (Standard) American English The variety of English spoken in the United States that is considered "normal." In the United States, the Midland (i.e., Midwest) area is most often pointed to as the location where mainstream English is spoken. Mainstream or Standard English is the language variety that is taught in school. It is considered necessary for participation and success in American society" In other words, mainstream, refers the ideas or the language that are consider normal in a society. This subgenres appeared to be the Southern Accent and the Northern Accent, and now it was accepted the AAVE, as a mainstream social group accent.[16]

The state of the PBS is that AAVE is now accepted as a mainstream social group accent. In other

words, the vocabulary is accepted and actually spoken to by the mainstream American people. It

can be argued that this was an important step towards the Hip Hop culture because it facilitate

the adaptation of the people towards the language.

A.A.V.E (African American Vernacular English)

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[14] Oxford English Dictionary, accessed online at
http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/subculture [accessed June 6,2013]
[15] Oxford English dictionary, accessed online at
http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/mainstream [accessed June 7, 2013]
[16] PBS, "Mainstream (Standard) American English,"
http://www.pbs.org/speak/about/guide/#Mainstream_Standard_American_English [accessed 13 May, 2013]

African American Vernacular English (A.A.V.E) is nonstandard form of American English characteristically spoken by African Americans in the United States. [17] In other words, the African American Vernacular English differs from the conventional American English, and it's used in the "Black community," a community based on the experience, the strength and the power that the Black citizens have in America.[18] Although the origin of this type of speaking and writing is not known there are some theories that explain where it came from. The main theory that is accepted is that it came when the African Slave market arrived in the United States, evolved as a means of slavery.[19] The language was based upon many other languages of different places, and it was developing with time adding new terminologies and more people started using it.

Hip Hop Language and its Relationship with A.A.V.E

As society changes, so does the language. A clear example is the addition of new words to the dictionary, and it was shown that "(o)ver the past 30 years, American dictionaries have grown at unprecedented levels."[20] These changes are given by the growth of the cultures and their introduction of new words; these words represent new ways of expressing itself and new ways to represent their conditions. As said before, the Hip Hop era was born as a vehicle for expression during times of oppression. Hip Hop, by using AAVE, showed a special

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[17] Princeton University , Word Search, http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=aave [accessed June 8, 2013]

[18] Edler, Melissa (Spring 2007). "Acting White". *Kent State Magazine*. [accessed April 21, 2013]

[19] Wolfram, Walter A. (1998), "Language ideology and dialect: understanding the Oakland Ebonics controversy", Journal of English Linguistics 26 (2): pages 108–121

[20] Afrik-News, "Hip Hop: An indelible influence on the English language," http://www.afrik-news.com/article16254.html [accessed April 17, 2013]

characteristic that differentiated it from the rest of the culture, marking it as a unique culture and affiliating it with Black American culture. The language of the culture was very important, because it helped many young people with their emotional and physical situations by providing colloquial language through which meaning could be expressed. The relationship between Hip Hop and AAVE was direct as it was the language used to express the songs.

Hip Hop language is primarily rooted in Black American Culture for several reasons. Firstly, the primary language of Hip Hop is African American Vernacular English. Also it has a political location in society based on Black people, music and cultural forms. The vocals come from Black American culture and are derived from Black American musical tradition.[21] The communication in a culture or in a group depends upon the language code If someone knows this code can express himself or herself (him/herself) and play with different words to create an expression but also understand and know what each other is saying. Within Hip Hop culture, language is used to create a system based on rhyme and rhythm in order to send a message. Rhyme means the similarity in sound of word endings, and rhythm means the regular pattern of beats and emphasis in a piece of music. Slang expressions, largely coming from A.A.V.E., are common in Hip Hop.

Hip Hop Entering the Mainstream.

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[21] Hip Hop archives, "Vocab Fundamentals," http://www.hiphoparchive.org/hiphop-lx/vocab-fundamentals [accessed April 22, 2013]

Hip Hop movement enters to the mainstream through three different means music, advertising and cultural appropriation. During the 1970s and 1980s, mainstream pop culture in American was dominated by disco and new wave music and fashion. [22] At this time, the Hip Hop movement was receiving more exposure and soon was heard nationally. By the end of the 1980s, it had a global presence. An example of this is the duet of the popular American band Aerosmith with the hip hop group Run DMC. In the year 1976, the song hit the Top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100. [23] In the 1990s, Hip Hop got to its peak when large firms such as Nike, Reebok or Coca Cola started campaigns and messages featuring the powerful images of this culture and, in this way, integrating to the mainstream America. An example of these campaigns, involve the Coca Cola brand Sprite, which by the year 1990 the slogan of the soft drink changed to "Obey your thirst." It was primarily set up on the urban crowd with a Hip Hop song. [24]

First Example: "-izzle"

A clear example of what the Hip Hop world's ability to manipulate language and tranmsit the cultural significance to the dominant culture is the suffix –izzle. In "izzle-speak" the word is composed in two parts, the root which is denominated by the affix and the suffix is the second part which defines if it's a noun a verb or the tense of this verb. This form of speech was popularized by Snoop Dogg, now known as Snoop Lion, a Hip Hop rapper born in California. There is a clear example of the use of izzle, in a Chrysler advertisement that says, "Fo' Shizzle,

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[22] Leopold, Todd (2002-08-22). "'Like, Omigod!' It's the return of the '80s". *New York Times*. [accessed April 20, 2013]
[23] The biography channel, "Run DMC Biography," http://www.thebiographychannel.co.uk/biographies/run-dmc.html [accessed June 15, 2013]
[24] Complex Music, "The 25 Biggest Business Power Moves in Hip-Hop History, Number 16" http://www.complex.com/music/2010/12/the-big-payback-presents-the-25-biggest-business-moves-in-hip-hop-history/sprite [accessed June 9, 2013]

That Big Bad Chrysler Really Does Sizzle." In the advertisement, the phrase is said by Snoop Dogg, one of the most recognized hip hop artists who has sold more than 30 million albums worldwide.[25] He is accredited with popularizing this form of speaking and it appears in several of his songs. The clearest example is his famous song, "What's my name (Pt. 2)," where the rapper is having a dialogue with two partners and they use constantly this way of speaking.

"[*Snoop talks over Intro]*

Izzle kizzle, fo' schizzle

My nizzle, what you sizzle?

Fo' schizzle bizzle, ha ha"[5]

The phrase are broken down by pauses, this is the form of showing that is a dialogue. The first phrase (Izzle kizzle, fo' schizzle) translate to "It's okay, for sure," and the reply of this phrase (My nizzle, what you sizzle?) translate to, "My nigger, what you say." The word nigger rise from the year 1786, from the Spanish word negro (black). From the earliest usage it was "the term that carries with it all the obloquy and contempt and rejection which whites have inflicted on blacks. But as "black inferiority was at one time a near universal assumption in English-speaking lands," the word, in some cases, could be used within black communities without deliberate insult.[26] However the last laugh of Snoop Dogg, tells us that it was part of a joke.

This term –izzle had such amount of popularity that Snoop opened his own TV show in MTV, in 2002, "Doggy Fizzle Televizzle." The show lasted for a season of eight parts and the

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[25] Wikipedia, "Snoop Dogg," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snoop_Dogg [accessed April 20, 2013.]

[26] Etymology Dictionary, Word Search: Nigger, accessed online at http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=nigger&searchmode=none [accessed 4 June, 2013]

show consisted in Snoop himself rapping and doing comedy. The phrase became very popular

and that even non-hip hop fans used it. The rules of the izzle-construction consist on maintaining

the root or the affix of the word and replacing the last bit of the word with this terminology. The

most popular example includes 'Shizzle,' which means 'sure,' 'Hizzle' which means 'House' or

'kizzle' which means 'okay.'

This words can also been combined to form phrases as Snoop did in his song (Izzle

Kizzle) and these let the listener or anyone vary with the any word's suffix. There are no rules of

where and when to put a –izzle. There are a lot of words and a very popular one near Christmas

time was "Felizzle Navidizzle" this is an example of the big impact not only in the day-to-day

language but also it impact the advertisement world, firms like Old Navy or it appeared in

movies, for example "Legally Blonde II" were the term "fo' shizzle" is frequently used. This

demonstrates the influence of Hip Hop language affected on mainstream American culture and

language.

The phrase ultimately returns to the Hip Hop community after its corruption in

mainstream culture as seen in Talib Kweli's song "Get By":

We keeping it gangster say "fo shizzle", "fo sheezy" and "stayin crunk"

Its easy to pull a breezy, smoke trees, and we stay drunk

Yo, our activism attackin the system, the blacks and latins in prison

Numbers of prison they victim black in the vision

Shit and all they got is rappin to listen to

I let them know we missin you, the love is unconditional

Even when the condition is critical, when the livin is miserable

Your position is pivotal [27]

In this case, the rapper tries to show another side of the story. His main point is that people believe that talking slang and using the suffix -izzle associate themselves with gangster culture. This can be considered a critique of cultural appropriation. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* appropriate means taking something for one's own use, and cultural appropriations refers to a process aspects from a culture are taken by members of a group from outside that culture and adapted to the purposes of appropriating group.[28] Thus it can be seen how Hip Hop culture has entered the mainstream by being appropriated for the purpose of entertainment, rather than as a means of communication.

Second Example: "Bling Bling"

When we are looking of terms that affected the Mainstream American Language, "Bling Bling" is an important term. This term was added in the *Oxford Dictionary* in the year 2003 proving that Hip Hop is refreshing the nature, the sound and the rules of the English language. This term was composed by Lil Wayne, a Hip Hop rapper from New Orleans, Louisiana. The term appeared on the song, "Bling Bling" on the album "Chopper City in Ghetto," released in 1999. The rapper appears on the song, singing the chorus "Bling Bling." Ever since then the phrase became popular inside the Hip Hop Culture.

"Bling bling

Everytime I come around yo city

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[27] Sing365, "Get by Lyrics – Talib Kweli," http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Get-By-lyrics-Talib-Kweli/1779C0A500FA26D648256CA9002CA79B [accessed 5 June 2013]

[28] Oxford English Dictionary – Appropriate word search, http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/appropriate [accessed 5 June, 2013]

Bling bling

Pinky ring worth about fifty

Bling bling

Everytime I buy a new ride

Bling bling

Lorinsers on Yokahama tires"

The song is constantly punctuated by the phrase "bling bling." But what does it mean? The term was invented as a synonym for luxury, expensive and diamonds. It was based on the imaginary sound of a sparkling diamond. Hip Hoppers often represent it using flashy attire, like chains, earrings or rings shining. The Oxford definition for bling bling is: "[noun] expensive, ostentatious clothing and jewellery." This shows that the Hip Hop language was accepted by the people and it started to gain dominance, showing how people that didn't actually belong to the culture appropriate the ideas from Hip Hop but also undermining Hip Hops ideals of making society better and replacing it with the ideals of making money.

This phrase had an impact of American culture in the 1990s as the decade was denoted as the "Bling Bling" era.[29] This was because Hip Hop culture was culturally appropriated and the image became based upon luxury symbols of wealth. This symbols included, clothes, cars, jewelry and money. The peak was reached during this era, and it could be seen this in his music videos, that generally started showing the rapper in his clothes using gold chains and rings in his expensive sport cars. For example songs like Jay-Z's "Money Ain't a Thang" which depicts Jay-Z dreaming of what his next music video will look like. It all takes place in a giant mansion with

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[29] Wikipedia – "Bling-Bling," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bling-bling [accessed online at June 6, 2013]

elite cars. In Fat Joe's song "Make it rain" He is making it "rain" money and there is a woman writhing on the floor covered in dollar bills.

"Bling-bling" illustrates an element of Hip Hop, and now mainstream American culture, based on a fantasy life of extreme wealth and luxury. The prevalence of this song in American mass media and its popularity on Billboard's Hot 100, illustrates its cultural impact. However, after the huge success of the term, it spread far beyond the Hip Hop culture, and entered into the mass culture, also known as the mainstream. In 2004, the popular music TV channel MTV released a popular cartoon showing the life of this term and how it got over-used to the point where it became unpopular, this famous cartoon ended with a statement "Bling Bling, 1997-2003" as it would die and people should stop using this term. "Bling Bling" was controversial in the Hip Hop world and very criticized by the old fashioned Hip Hop fans because it was not showing the message that Hip Hop started. Hip Hop was meant to send a message political, social or personal, but "Bling Bling" propagated Hip Hop language and culture through appropriation.

Cultural Appropiation: The Other Face of Hip Hop

Hip Hop is originally based on the idea of providing a voice for the voiceless, however there is another face to this culture, which took advantage of the high rate of growth of the culture and their opportunity of reaching mainstream and used this to gain money and power. They try to redefine the meaning of Hip Hop in order to sell it by bombarding consumers with rappers talking about drugs, sex and violence. This not only generated a new way of thinking of the youth that follow this movement on the previous years change, but it also generated groups that opposed this movement because of the bad image that these rappers created. A clear example is that Talented inner-city youth who should "be bright enough to realize the importance

of preparing themselves for the future too often can be demoralized and browbeaten into hip-hop conformity." [30] The cultural appropriation of Hip Hop has mutated its original intent.

Conclusion

From the beginning of this movement, Hip Hop provided a means through which the political, economic and social concerns of the South Bronx could be voiced and communicated. But from its core there is a philosophy based on the idea that self-expression is an integral part of the pursuit of peace, love and unity. Based upon the research question "How and through which means has Hip Hop language and culture entered into mainstream American English and mainstream American culture?" this paper illustrates how Hip Hop, as a language and culture, is entrenched in mainstream American English through vocabulary, through music and advertisements as well as cultural appropriation. Through these means, Hip Hop has become part of mainstream American English and culture and continues to exert influence beyond those borders as a global culture.

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[30] National Center, "How Hip Hop destroys the potential of Black Youth" accessed online at http://www.nationalcenter.org/P21NVHicksHipHop90706.html [accessed June 18, 2013]

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http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/mainstream

Oxford English Dictionary – Appropriate word search,
http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/appropriate [accessed 5 June, 2013]

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