



MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University
**Montclair State University Digital
Commons**

Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects

5-2003

The Word Out : A Stylistic Analysis of Rap Music

Claudia Coscarello
Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd>



Part of the [Applied Linguistics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Coscarello, Claudia, "The Word Out : A Stylistic Analysis of Rap Music" (2003). *Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects*. 800.

<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/800>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

THE WORD OUT:
A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS
OF RAP MUSIC

by

CLAUDIA COSCARELLO

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

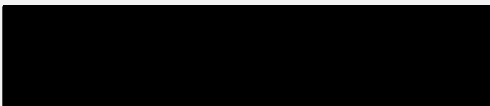
For the Degree of

Masters of Arts in Applied Linguistics

May 2003

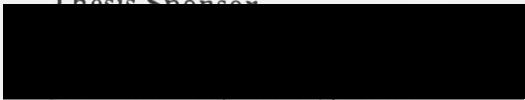
College of Humanities and Social Sciences Thesis Committee:

Linguistics Department



Longxing Wei, Ph.D.


Thesis Sponsor

Certified by:


Steve Seegmiller, Ph.D.

Committee Member

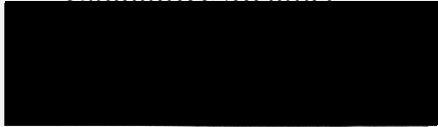

Dean: Richard J. Gigliotti, Ph.D.


Eileen Fitzpatrick, Ph.D.

Committee Member

Date

April 7, 2003


Eileen Fitzpatrick, Ph.D.
Department Chair

RAP: THE WORD OUT
A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF RAP MUSIC

by
CLAUDIA COSCARELLO

A THESIS
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in
The Department of Linguistics in
the Graduate Program of
Montclair State University
May 2003

Copyright c 2003 by *Claudia A. Coscarello*. All rights reserved.

ABSTRACT

Rap music is a particular socio-culturally bound music phenomenon that was conceived on the streets and birthed within the African-American communities in the urban boroughs of New York City during the 1970's. It was developed as a particular kind of linguistic self expression in the form of music for African-American youth. Rap music is a display of ethnic creativity and cultural pride which gives expression to a speech community's voice as it declares the stark reality of urban life.

For close to three decades, rap music has maintained its position at the forefront of the youth culture across the nation. Although rap music was not quickly embraced by the mainstream culture, it displayed such an impact on the youth population that the mainstream culture could not easily dismiss it. Since its beginnings, rap music has crossed socioeconomic lines and has been accepted as a part of the musical genre of the times.

Since every speaker or writer is a rational actor, each individual makes choices in relation to sounds, words and structures as he or she communicates. Social constraints may be ascribed to those choices by social forces but the decision of choosing which linguistic means to use lies with the individual. In effect, it is the individuals who make the choices they deem necessary to achieve their intentions. In fact, many rap artists have chosen to violate some social norms in their choice of language to achieve their intended purpose.

Rap music's characteristic linguistic features are its signature. They distinguish rap music from any other musical form. Perhaps no other musical genre before it has rivaled rap's dynamic force and impact. Its unique format incorporates many linguistic elements from its rich African-American oral tradition. Through its phonological staccato rhyme, its choices of dynamic lexical items and ingenious

syntactic sentence patterns, rap music becomes a linguistic verbal performance which is able to emphatically express itself and communicate its message.

Using examples from rap lyrics as illustrations, this study will analyze how rap artists use phonology, the lexicon and syntax to achieve their communicative intention. This study uses a literary stylistic approach that is traditionally employed to analyze communicative intent in fiction. Here this approach is used to determine the communicative intent behind the rap artist's choice of specific linguistic features that involve phonological arrangement, lexical choices and syntactic patterns. This study will also include rap music's sociolinguistic significance as a voice of African-American cultural expression.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks are extended to my thesis committee. Their support and encouragement have proven invaluable to me. A most heartfelt thank you goes to my advisor, Dr. Longxing Wei. Without his enduring spirit, patience and guidance this research project would never have become a reality. His expertise proved most beneficial in all aspects of the writing and editing process. A most sincere thank you and deep gratitude go to Dr. Eileen Fitzpatrick for her gracious spirit and helpful suggestions in assisting with the entire editing process. I am also indebted to Dr. Mary Emily Call for her careful editing and encouragement. Special thanks are extended to Dr. Steve Seegmiller for his time and input in the reading and commenting on the thesis.

Next, I am grateful for the love and confidence of my family members, Frank, Michael, Mark, and Maelissa. They displayed great patience and understanding while I labored to complete this task. I also thank my sisters, Giovanna and Linda for their undying confidence in me. Most sincere appreciation goes to my closest friends Helene, Josephine, Maria, Mary and Rosemary for their prayers and encouragement.

Very special thanks are extended to my colleagues, Jackie Cassidy, Lenore Rosenbluth, Kathy Carucci and Cindy Allred for their kind words and faithful support. I also thank Dr. Robert Stevens for his willingness to share his knowledge of rap music. Genuine notes of gratitude go to Dr. John Yasin, whose expertise and friendship will always be treasured. Many thanks are extended to all the rap artists for such a uniquely fresh linguistic phenomenon.

Finally, my most humble thanks go to All Mighty God through His son, Jesus Christ without whose grace this paper would never have been possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Tables.....	viii
Chapter 1 Introduction	
1.0 Research Background.....	1
1.1 Overview of Rap Music.....	3
1.2 Theoretical Motivation for the Study.....	4
1.3 Goals of the Study.....	5
1.4 Research Design.....	6
1.5 Organization	7
Chapter 2 An Overview of Stylistic Approaches to the Analysis of Literary Works	
2.0 Introduction.....	8
2.1 Linguistics and Stylistics.....	9
2.2 Stylistic Approaches and Methods.....	10
2.3 Approaches and Methods for the Current Study.....	12
2.4 Scope and Levels of the Current Study.....	13
Chapter 3 An Overview of Rap Literature	
3.0 Research Background.....	15
3.1 Rap Music: Its Cultural Roots and Tradition.....	18
3.2 Rap Music: Its Social Status in Popular American Culture.....	20
3.3 Rap Music: Its Social Status in Popular American Culture.....	23

3.4 Rap Music: Its Communicative Functions.....	28
3.5 Rap Music: Its Sociolinguistic Significance.....	35

Chapter 4 Rap Music and Its Sounds: Phonological Structure

4.0 Introduction.....	39
4.1 Phonetic Features.....	39
4.2 Phonological Features.....	44
4.3 Metrical Features.....	46

Chapter 5 Rap Music and Its Lyrics: Lexical Structure

5.0 Introduction.....	50
5.1 Lexical Choices and Features.....	51
5.1.1 Verbs.....	52
5.1.2 Nouns.....	57
5.2 Lexical Repetition.....	65
5.3 Lexical Structure and Metrical Patterns.....	70

Chapter 6 Rap Music and Its Sentence Patterns: Syntactic Structure

6.0 Introduction.....	73
6.1 Syntactic Patterns and Features.....	74
6.1.1 Inverted Word Order.....	74
6.1.2 Imperative.....	77
6.2 Syntactic Patterns and Lexical Structure.....	79
6.3 Syntactic Structure and Metrical Patterns.....	81

Chapter 7 Conclusions

7.0 Introduction.....	83
7.1 Linguistic Features of Rap Music: A Summary.....	83
7.2 Socio-cultural Implications and Communicative Function of Rap Music.....	87
7.3 Future Work.....	89
References.....	92

LIST OF TABLES

Table-Exhibit		Page
1	Types of Verbs and Their Frequency Count	55
2	Percentages Indicated By the Use of Specific Pronouns	59
3	Types of Nouns and Their Frequency Count	62

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.0 Research Background

During the late 1970's, the streets of New York's inner city witnessed the birth of a dynamically expressive verbal art form known as rap music. Spawned from within the rich African-American socio-cultural continuum, this linguistic phenomenon became known as the verbal expression of a youth culture. While it was originally thought to be a passing trend, rap music has remained at the forefront of a contemporary pop culture called *hip hop*. "*Hip hop* is the total expression, in attitude, dress, dance, graffiti art and music of an ever growing African-American youth subculture which challenges the status quo and moves them into a crucible for change" (Marriott, 1990: 1). Mike Sager of *Rolling Stone* says, "If hip hop is the nation and homies are the tribe, then rap is the anthem" (1990: 78).

Since language identifies a people and is a basis for solidarity and a framework for interaction, rap music as the foundational language of the hip-hop nation needs to be seriously analyzed. As Bakhtin says, "language arises from man's need to express himself, to objectify himself" (1986: 67). Therefore, a comprehensive linguistic analysis of this genre is worthy of scholarly investigation.

What has caused rap music to become such a popular linguistic art form? The answer to this question is the major focus of this current study. Therefore, this study asks and answers the following specific research questions:

1. What are the characteristic linguistic features that are embodied in rap music?

2. What linguistic means are used to make rap language so powerful and how are the particular communicative intentions achieved through these linguistic features?
3. What is the relationship between the linguistic features and their impact on socio-cultural functions?

This study focuses on the particular linguistic features which are employed in rap music and how they are used to achieve the author's intended purpose. Linguistic analysis of literary works, which is called "literary stylistics," is a commonly recognized, effective approach to understanding the relationship between literary forms and their communicative functions. "Stylistics is an approach to texts using linguistic descriptions" (Leech and Short 1981: 1). A linguistic study based on a stylistic approach draws on the connection between literary meanings and linguistic features by which those literary meanings are realized. Linguistic analysis can also serve as a vehicle for realizing how socio-cultural meanings are conveyed through the use of those linguistic means.

The current study views this relationship as "form-before-function". In other words, a particular linguistic form chosen by the speaker or writer determines not only how the meaning is conveyed but also how the effectiveness and power of that meaning is achieved. In applying a stylistic approach to the appreciation of literary works, linguistic analysis must be carried out at various levels in a well-defined and systematic manner based on the scope and purpose of the research. For this current study, three essential levels of analysis will be identified and defined. They include the phonological level or sound patterns, the lexical level or word choices, and the syntactical level or grammatical structures. These features will be analyzed and discussed to explain how rap music presents and achieves its intended linguistic and socio-cultural meanings.

1.1 Overview of Rap Music

The word “rap” became widely used in the African-American community sometime during the 1960’s. Thomas Kochman defined “rap” as a “fluent and lively way of talking, which is always characterized by a high degree of personal style,” (1977: 241). “Rap”, which is a direct descendant of the African-American tradition of “word battles” began as a verbal competition engaged in predominantly by males (Blair, 1993: 23). This form of repartee was performed as a means of proving one man’s verbal superiority over another’s. A decade later, “rap” was used characteristically to describe that style of “rhythmic rhyming lines that are set to a musical beat” now known as the genre of rap music (Safire, 1992: 8). In addition, the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* defines rap music as a “style of black popular music consisting of improvised rhymes performed to a rhythmic accompaniment; black-American slang for talking or chatting which emerged as a musical genre...” (Hitchcock and Sadie 1986: 828).

Through rap music, African-American youths have developed a mode of expression that is quintessentially their own. By incorporating a “blend of reality and fiction, rap is a contemporary response to the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America” (Smitherman, 1997: 1; Rose, 1994: 2).

Rap music was “first viewed as a faddish sideshow to New York’s carnival of urban decay” (Spencer, 1992: 268). It was considered to be somewhat of “a ritual diversion of social boredom and criminal imagination” which was being put forth “into culturally useful acts of rhetorical invention” (Spencer, 1992: 268). However, “rap has confounded the doubters” (Palmer, 1985: 13). After more than two decades, this phenomenon is still a very present and most popular expressive verbal art form. No other

musical expression has ever employed a combination of lexical items and sound patterns whose syllabic structure interacts with a background beat quite like rap's does (Yasin, 1997: 90).

From its inception, rap music with its socio-cultural and linguistic influence has made an indelible impact upon the African-American community and the American community as a whole. One of the most significant reasons for rap music's acceptance and appreciation by the general American population is that more and more young Americans find socio-psychological self-expressions, thought provoking verbal dexterity and emotionally involving content as saliently conveyed within it. The rap music phenomenon has become so firmly entrenched within the melting pot of American culture that average Americans across the nation have felt its socio-cultural effects. In fact, during the last seven or eight years, its influence has grown and even spilled over into the global community. Today, young people borrow rap music expressions, mimic its lyrics, buy and play its songs. Rap music stands out as an art form of multifaceted influence.

1.2 Theoretical Motivation for the Study

Rap music is a "declaration of African-American cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America" (Rose, 1994: 3). Like all artists, rap artists, as linguistic innovators, are promulgating a particular intention through rap music. The ways in which rap artists manipulate language through deliberate linguistic choices and exercise their verbal skills and strategies determine the manner in which they effectively communicate. They are able to powerfully change ordinary expressions into dynamic images, which depict vivid vignettes, and in turn, paint the often-stark realities of urban street life. The following excerpt is an example:

*Broken glass everywhere
People pissin' on the stairs
You know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
The Message Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (Stanley, 1992: 150)*

All literary works take into serious consideration the relationship between language forms and functions. General readers appreciate literary works mainly through sound perception, visual representation, and semantic interpretation. However, literary scholars appreciate literary works mainly by following the story lines and analyzing the speech contexts within which the author's communicative intentions and cultural meanings are interpreted. Unlike literary scholars, linguists appreciate literary works by analyzing their linguistic features at various levels to explain how the author's intentions and meanings are realized. This study shows that rap artists use three distinct categories of linguistic features to communicate their specific intentions and impact their listeners: sound, structure, and word choice.

1.3 Goals of the Study

Since rap music has emerged as a socially constructed linguistic performance, the fundamental goal of this study is to identify those linguistic forms that rap artists employ, and identify their specific functions to determine how they enable rap artists to realize their communicative intention.

Language as a construct of life has always enabled human beings to reveal who they are, their thoughts, perceptions, and opinions. Rap artists use the poetic power of language punctuated with a rhythmic beat to achieve their specific intention. Laurence

Perrine defines poetry as a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than ordinary language does (1988:509). By employing a poetic format, rap artists determine “to bring us a sense and perception of life,” while they attempt “to widen and sharpen our contacts with experience” (Perrine, 1988: 510).

As Weber states, “any verbal behavior is goal-directed. The aims are different and the conformity of the means used to the effect aimed at is a problem that evermore preoccupies inquiries into the diverse kinds of verbal communication that are expressed” (1996: 11).

Rap music's concern is to communicate heartfelt perceptions of life. “This style of music is considered so powerful and honest in its representation of urban reality that it is called the voice of a nation, an independent culture with its own language, aesthetics and heroes” (Morgan, 1992: 1). Its aim is to reflect social reality through articulate and powerful language.

Although some published and unpublished scholarly studies on the communicative practices of rap language exist, there has been no specific research on rap music from the perspective of a stylistic approach. This artistic form of language use is virgin soil for linguistic exploration.

1.4 Research Design

The focus of this research is mainly analytical; it will venture beyond the level of linguistic description. This study will draw from a qualitative analysis of the lyrics of forty-eight rap music songs. As far as could be ascertained, there is no particular source for the procurement of rap music data. Therefore, the data that have been gathered are from a limited supply of available books of lyrics, and samplings of tapes from friends

and acquaintances. The data consist of rap lyrics that were collected as a result of their accessibility and availability within the public domain. Examples from these are used in the analysis.

In order to explain the power of this verbal art form, this study adopts a stylistic approach. Three levels, as aforementioned, are analyzed. Descriptions and explanations of those levels focus on linguistic forms, features and functions and their socio-cultural meanings and significance. This research is a pioneering effort in the study of rap music from a stylistic perspective.

1.5 Organization

Each chapter of this study begins with an introduction, which sets the discourse for the chapter. The chapter is further divided into several sections to specifically identify areas of discussion. Chapter 2 incorporates an overview of stylistic approaches to the analysis of literary works. This chapter distinguishes among several approaches to stylistic analysis and focuses on how the selected approach serves this study's purpose. Chapter 3 presents a review of literature instrumental to the study. This section also examines rap music's cultural and sociolinguistic significance. Chapter 4 analyzes the phonological structure of rap, focusing on rap's metrical features and their significance within the genre. Chapter 5 discusses the lexical structures and features used in rap. This chapter also sheds light on how specific lexical selections achieve intended communicative purposes. Chapter 6 examines the syntactic structure or sentence patterns. The final chapter, Chapter 7 summarizes the linguistic features used in rap music and their socio-cultural implications. This chapter also includes the results and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2

An Overview of Stylistic Approaches to the Analysis of Literary Works

2.0 Introduction

Language as a communicative system inherently arouses divergent and multi-faceted interest from language researchers. Thus, when an original language phenomenon like rap music progressively dominates part of the repertoire of the human language experience, it causes language researchers to begin to focus their attention on it.

All rational beings desire to express some communicative intention when they speak. The linguistic means to achieve that intention are as varied as the people who express them. Since every speaker or writer is a rational actor, each individual makes choices in relation to sounds, words and structures as he or she communicates. Social constraints may be ascribed to those choices by social forces but the decision of choosing which linguistic means to use lies with the individual. In effect, it is the individuals who make the choices they deem necessary to achieve their intentions. In fact, many rap artists have chosen to violate some social norms in their choice of language to achieve their intended purpose. Within rap music, recurrent linguistic forms appear which assist the rap artists in accomplishing their intention. Rap artists can choose any linguistic form they so desire. There is a large enough repertoire of language choices from which to select. However, specific forms are chosen more frequently than others to achieve a deliberate communicative purpose.

As with all language use, the method of communication must serve the speaker or writer's intention. For example, a person would speak differently to a total stranger than he/she would speak to an intimate friend. This is also true of rap artists. As members of

a particular speech community, they make intentional language choices to mediate particular communicative needs.

To explain the relationship between language choices and their social or communicative functions, a stylistic approach was selected. Stylistics bases its analysis of literary or artistic works on linguistic analysis of language forms and their functions. A stylistic analysis examines various levels of particular aspects of the language forms to ascertain the connection between language features and language choices in order to determine the speaker's communicative intention. In other words, a stylistic analysis goes beyond the surface examination of forms and functions by explaining how particular meanings and intentions are realized through the use of particular linguistic means.

2.1 Linguistics and Stylistics

Stylistics is a linguistic approach to textual analysis. As Leech and Short state, “text is defined as linguistic communication” (1981: 39). It incorporates both spoken and written forms. A stylistic approach seeks to discover that “surface forms are systematically and predictably relatable to underlying abstract semantic contents and structural patterns” (Weber, 1996: 121). Linguists use stylistics to analyze language and look at the linguistic choices that the speaker has chosen within the socio-cultural framework for communicative intentions. They use linguistic knowledge and linguistic analysis to determine how the speaker uses the spoken or written text to achieve his/her intentions.

In addition, any consistent use of patterns and deviations from normal structure is important to examine since it may reveal the function of the patterns and their intent. A stylistic analysis will not only describe the linguistic features of the text but also decipher

their functional significance. This type of analysis also offers linguistic evidence as an explanation for why particular linguistic choices in preference to others are made to achieve the social communicative functions desired by the speaker or the writer.

Without a linguistic analysis, the textual analysis would remain at a descriptive level. However, through linguistic analysis a clearer relationship between the linguistic features and the addresser's intention, including their impact on socio-cultural functions, can be determined.

Particularly important to the area of stylistics is the view that literary works are not transparent and that linguistic choices are vital to meaning. The linguist, using a stylistic approach, proposes to look for “unusual linguistic choices and their relation to meaning” (Johnson and Johnson, 1998: 205). By employing this approach, “the rich potentialities of language choices” can be analyzed to determine why certain words or structures, as among those offered by the language itself, are chosen in preference to others (Turner, 1987: 228). However, within the framework, features are isolated and described in accordance with the field of linguistics to which the linguist subscribes.

There is no single stylistic approach to analyzing texts; each approach implies a different method of performing the analysis of the text. A complete stylistic analysis of text involves description at all the traditional levels (phonological, lexical and syntactic). The linguist analyzing a text from a stylistic approach examines the linguistic forms of the speaker and how the communicative intention is achieved through particular sound, word and grammar patterns. The linguist endeavors to discover how some linguistic features are more effective than others in achieving the speaker's communicative purpose.

2.2 Stylistic Approaches and Methods

There is no single stylistic approach to the study of literary works. There are different approaches and various methods that can be employed within the field.

Linguists who study stylistics, like other researchers, have a variety of interests and each linguist studies the features of language in a variety of ways and for different purposes.

However, each linguist interested in stylistics uses the framework of linguistics to examine spoken or written texts and to isolate and describe the structures inherent within the text. Among many stylistic approaches and methods, three approaches are the most prominent and commonly used.

1. The *Functionalist* approach sees the function of linguistic elements as having great significance in relation to the meaning of the text. Functionalists believe that the patterns that are prevalent within the text carry some specific function or meaning. The functionalist makes a connection between choice and function (Turner, 1987).

2. The *Formalist* approach examines the structure of language noting that form and content cannot be separated. The formal linguistic criteria of generative grammar are used in this approach. Instances of patterns are examined to determine their significance. For example, pattern, parallelism, repetition and alliteration are analyzed to determine if specific meanings are being conveyed through them. A prominent feature that is often used in this approach is foregrounding. "Foregrounding is the use of highlighting a specific linguistic feature to make it more prominent so that it achieves a special effect" (Weber, 1996: 27).

3. *Affective* stylistics is an approach that investigates the responses of the addressee. The focus of this approach is on the reaction the addressee has to the text. In

this approach, linguistic choices are analyzed for their affective considerations (Turner, 1987).

The linguist interested in stylistics can make use of all of the various approaches to the study of language forms, functions, effects and choices and in many instances the various methods overlap. Furthermore, the common theoretical assumption behind stylistics is that through a linguistic examination, the objective interpretation of the speaker's or the writer's communicative intention can be realized. A linguistic analysis can discern what form is used but it doesn't explain the reason why one form is chosen over another. A stylistic analysis identifies what linguistic forms and features are employed and explains why they are more successful than others in achieving the speaker's or the writer's communicative intention.

2.3 Approaches and Methods for the Current Study

Since rap music qualifies as artistic verbal poetics, this research examines rap lyrics from the perspective of *literary stylistics*. The theoretical assumption behind literary stylistics is that language serves a particular artistic linguistic function (Leech & Short, 1981: 13). Literary stylistics investigates why the artist chooses particular linguistic forms for use over others to achieve his/her intention. In this analysis, all of the aforementioned approaches are used and evidence is presented to explain how linguistic means are employed to achieve communicative, social, and artistic functions.

As a form of verbal poetic art, rap's linguistic features and the delivery of those features causes rap language to be different from other forms and use of language. This suggests that particular unusual linguistic features at several distinct levels must be analyzed to ascertain their importance to the meaning of the text. The level of description

ventures into the functional significance of the linguistic features, which determine meaning and assist in the interpretation of the text. Therefore, this study analyzes linguistic features and functions by looking into the internal structure of rap lyrics via the three aforementioned levels. It is the specific and peculiar phonological, lexical and syntactic patterns that cause rap music to be distinguishable as a genre and different from other musical forms. This stylistic analysis displays how the relationship between language choices and their functions conveys the meaning and messages intended by rap musicians.

2.4 Scope of the Current Study

Rap artists creatively use linguistic features to emphasize and intensify rap music. They also rely on the impact those linguistic features will have on their listeners in assisting them in achieving their intended meanings. This study examines the characteristic linguistic patterns and features in rap music and discusses how they are used to exert an impact on the language of rap music and render it more powerful in achieving its communicative function. In addition, this study examines the relationship between linguistic features and their impact on socio-cultural functions. The scope of this paper focuses on how linguistic features are used by rap artists to accomplish their specific communicative intentions.

The sound patterns or phonological features used in rap are idiosyncratic to rap music. From its inception, the characteristic of rhythmic talking distinguishes rap music from other musical forms. Rap music utilizes the highlighting of its phonological elements through its dramatic use of repetitive patterns. The dynamics of repetitive patterns are mixed in various artistic ways. Repetitive phonological patterns play a

significant role in achieving the rhythmical beat in rap music. The rhythmic structure and word stress are relevant to the total composition of the rap since “rap music integrates music and spoken words at the syllabic level” (Yasin, 1997:54).

The rap artist impresses his audience with word pictures to engage them. The choice of words must not only be phonetically appropriate to coincide with the rhythm but they must also be semantically appropriate to convey the intended meaning. By engaging a particular choice of words, rap artists strategically convey their message. Often, the appropriate order of words facilitates the rhythm and cadence of the music. Furthermore, stress on particular words or stress on certain syllables of words is also relevant to the success of the delivery of the message of the text. By skillfully using the lexicon, rap artists dynamically fuel the imagination through methodically chosen word choices. Thus, word choice becomes a key area in stylistic analysis.

In addition, rap artists use recurrent syntactical patterns that foreground information. The use of recurring patterns that position important information at the head of the syntactic pattern adds to the intensity of the rap. These syntactic patterns amplify meaning and emphasize the message. Thus, syntactic placement is important in conveying and achieving the rap artist’s intent.

This study investigates and examines the specific linguistic features that enable rap artists to achieve their socio-cultural communicative intention.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

3.0 Research Background

While rap music has gradually had an overwhelming impact on popular mainstream American culture, it has not received significant recognition in the field of academia as a topic attracting much scholarly research or attention. Nevertheless, since its early beginnings in the 1970's, several books have been written about it from an historical or musical perspective. One specific work, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* written in 1984 by British author, David Toop, chronicles rap music's early urban roots and musical history. His second book, written in 1991, *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop* is a sequel that addresses rap music's broadening audience appeal. Both books display photographs and contain excerpts of interviews with rap artists, who relate how the musical rap sessions began to take shape and gain popularity. Although Toop's works are tailored mainly for devotees, they represent an invaluable array of information regarding the early years of rap music's formation.

In 1994, a critical review of rap music and African-American culture, *Black Noise* appeared in the bookstores. Written by Tricia Rose, this book presents a "complex fusion of the cultural theories that help to explain the complex territory that rap navigates and an interpretation of the voices and spiritual power that sustains rap and African-American people" (Rose, 1994: xii). It examines rap music and the integral role it plays between social forces and black culture in contemporary America. Since its publication, there have been several other books relating to the musical underpinnings of rap and its historical roots. However, for most of rap's existence, the greatest number of printed

matter existed only in magazines and newspapers. Many journalists and music critics who have written articles about rap music were either in favor of it or opposed to it as an illegitimate musical genre. Although the articles are too numerous to list, there are several with varied themes that are particularly noteworthy to mention. These have appeared in *Billboard*, *Rolling Stone* and *Newsweek* magazines while others were featured in *The New York Times*. Those articles which deserve special attention include: James Bernard's "Rap is a Testimonial to Black Pride" November, 1990, Michael Marriot's "Hip Hop's Hectic Takeover," September, 1990, Khephra Burns' "Word from the Motherland," August, 1991, Mike Sager's "The World According to America's Most Wanted Rapper," October 1990, William Safire's "On Language: The Rap on Hip Hop," November 1992, James Bernard's "Pop Music: a Newcomer Abroad, Rap Speaks Up," August 1992, Jerry Adler's "The Rap Attitude," March 1990, and Sheila Rule's "Generation Rap" April 1994.

Even though there have been numerous articles for popular reading, there have not been many publications by members of the linguistic community regarding rap music. Viewing rap music from a linguistic perspective is still largely unexplored territory.

One principal article which specifically addresses rap music and its cultural impact from a linguistic perspective is Geneva Smitherman's, "The Chain Remain the Same" published in the *Journal of Black Studies* (September, 1997). This journal article, which is devoted to the communicative practices of rap artists, includes references to the oral tradition embodied in rap music and it discusses the struggle African-Americans experience in their daily survival in the inner city.

Although there have not been many published articles on rap from a linguistic perspective, there has been extensive research conducted on the language of African-Americans, which is known as African-American Vernacular English. Some of the distinguished works include: William Labov's *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular* (1972), Robbins Burling's *English in Black and White* (1973), John Baugh's *Black Street Speech: Its History Structure and Survival* (1983), and Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (1977). All of the aforementioned are very informative and insightful in gaining an understanding of the African-American oral tradition, the verbal strategies and socio-cultural implications of street vernacular.

Two unpublished doctoral manuscripts proved to be invaluable resources of information for this study of rap music. These two scholarly dissertations, although not written by linguists, contain a wealth of information on the complexity of rap music. "Rappin to the Beat: Rap Music as Street Culture Among African Americans" written by Cheryl Lynette Keyes, (1991) examines rap music from the perspective of an ethnomusicologist. The other, "In Yo Face! Rappin' Beats Comin' at You: A Study of How Language is Mapped onto Musical Beats in Rap Music" (1997) was written by John A. Yasin. Both of these manuscripts have provided a wealth of insight into the discursive practices of rap artists.

Howbeit, there is no specific literature predominantly oriented to the study of rap music from a stylistic perspective. Nevertheless, all of the above references including magazine and news articles by journalists and critics are very valuable resources, which served as inspirations from which to launch a study of rap music.

3.1 Rap Music: Its Cultural Roots and Tradition

Most authors and scholars such as Smitherman, Yasin, and Toop agree that rap music has strong roots in the rich oral tradition of African culture, while it incorporates many communicative modalities that are a part of the greater African-American oral tradition. Smitherman, a linguist, states these include narrative sequencing, call-response, signifying, (ritualized insult) the “dozens” (exaggerated negative talk about someone’s mother) and tonal semantics (use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning) as broad categories (1977: 103, 134). Toop comments that “rap’s forbears stretch back through disco, street funk, radio DJ’s, Bo Diddley, the bebop singer, Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, the tap dancers and comics, The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Muhammed Ali, a capella and doo wop groups, ring games, skip rope, rhymes, prison and army songs, toasts, signifying and the “dozens” (1984: 19). Smitherman explains that, in any culture, “language is a tool for ordering the chaos of human experience. The crucial difference in American culture lies in the contrasting modes in which Black and White Americans have shaped that language, a written mode for whites, having come from a European, print-oriented culture; a spoken mode for blacks, having come from an African, orally-oriented background” (1977: 77). Thus, this oral tradition is the bedrock upon which rap has built its reputation and from which it is sustained.

To appreciate the dynamics of rap music, one must understand that the spoken word is a deep-rooted tradition within the African culture. The zeal for the spoken word originated from the West African bardic tradition of oral performances. The African belief system that enables humans to use language with power comes from the concept of being linked to a universal force through “*Nommo*” (Smitherman, 1977: 78). *Nommo* is

the “magic power of the Word” (Smitherman, 1977: 78). This concept was considered necessary to “actualize life and give man mastery over things” (Smitherman, 1977: 78). *Nommo* is manifest in all that exists; it is the “life force itself” (Smitherman 1977: 78). However, it is through the rhythm of the spoken word that the power of *Nommo* is evoked. All of life, its functions and realities, rest on the productive power of the spoken word. This rich oral tradition and belief system are firmly embedded in the philosophy of life that the West Africans embraced. Therefore, when Africans were brought to America as slaves, this traditional belief survived within their communicative practices and reappeared in slave communities.

Since slaves were forbidden to learn to read or write, this interdiction only served to increase their reliance upon the spoken word and perpetuate their oral tradition. Many slaves created lengthy narratives about their life experiences, and they passed down folk tales and proverbs that they fashioned, most of which were usually recited as chanted rhymes.

This African-American belief in the power of the spoken word has contributed to a high level of verbal acumen within the African-American culture. Smitherman states that the performance of oral competence translates as a “functional dynamic that is simultaneously a mechanism for learning about life and the world and a vehicle for achieving group approval and recognition” (1977: 173). Therefore, within the community, social status is acquired as a result of gaining mastery over the language. Those who achieve this mastery of language use are often elevated to prominent positions and regarded as men of ability who are highly esteemed within the community. Such linguistic achievement has been witnessed in the lives of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,

Malcolm X, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson. These men have experienced an elevation in status and influence within the community through their skillful use of words. They have used language with power and wit to achieve their communicative intentions.

As a result of this rich linguistic background and behavior, rap artists have now achieved a similar status because they are regarded as the orators of their heritage. Rap artists perpetuate the oral tradition by extracting linguistic strategies from its roots and embellishing upon the cultural tradition of the spoken word.

3.2 African-American Oral Literacy Forms

The poetic language of the African-American southern oral tradition of slaves as documented in storytelling toasts, songs, ritualized games of signifying and the “dozens” are important precursors of rap music. Several of these are outlined below.

The toast is a long narrative poem. It is usually recited in the first person and performed by males at parties, pool halls or on street corners. It is a “tribute to the superb bad omnipotent black hustler, pimp, player, killer who is mean to the max” (Smitherman, 1977: 158). The toast deals with the experiences and values of the lower-class African-American community. Many toasts are over 100 lines long and committed to memory, although not always verbatim. A skillful toaster uses the salient features of embellishment, formulaic expressions, metaphor, repetition, tone, pitch, and volume. These innovative variations are “inherent within the oral tradition for it is difficult to fix oral literature in a single form” (Burling, 1973: 80).

Toasts are a reflection of linguistic competence, performance and self-expression. The toaster, a master at oratory, whose style of delivery is more important than his content of storyline, combines auditory and visual imagery with the aforementioned

elements of improvisation “to make statements to depict concrete reality, to fashion out of the chaos of slavery, hero figures and concepts of freedom to protest social conditions and to express aspirations for a better future” (Rose, 1994: 131). Often structurally interwoven within the text of the toast are the verbal competition of signifyin’ and “the dozens”. Both involve a competitive game of verbal sparing where insults are hurled back and forth from opponent to opponent. Signifyin’ is used either to elicit humor or to drive home a specific point. It can include a combination of circumlocution, irony, metaphor and rhythmic fluency. The “dozens,” which is a form of signification, consists of “set responses in versified form” (Smitherman, 1994: 132). Practiced particularly by males, this verbal duel uses negative remarks directed at an opponent’s family members. In fact, the specific verbiage of the dozens is “Yo momma” (Smitherman, 1977: 131). “The game, practiced as a form of entertainment, is one in which boys are inculcated into the masculine-oriented street culture, one in which they gain some independence from their female-dominated families” (Burling, 1973: 84). Its objective is to remain unruffled, as insults fly, while one tries to verbally put down his opponent with the approval or disapproval of an on-looking audience. Often the verbal duel is a test of proving prowess between the opponents. Its purpose is to linguistically outperform one’s opponent to gain the audience’s approval as the linguistic victor.

The following dialogue is an example of light humorous signification:

Sherry: I sho am hongy. Dog

Reginald: That’s all you think ’bout, eating all the time.

John (Sherry’s brother): Man that why she so big.

Sherry: Aw, y’all shut up.

John: Come on Sherry, we got to go.

We’ll catch you later man.

Reginald (to John): Good night

*Sleep tight
Don't let Sherry
Eat you up tonight.*
(Smitherman, 1977: 119)

Two examples of heavy signification are:

Reverend Jesse Jackson, merging sacred and secular siggin' in a Breadbasket Saturday morning sermon.... Pimp, punk, prostitute, preacher, Ph.D. - all the p's - You still in-slavery! (Smitherman, 1977: 120).

A black middle class wife to her husband who had just arrived home several hours later than usual: "You sho got home early today for a change" (Smitherman, 1977: 120).

Although heavy signification "may include elements of sarcasm" it is not as caustic as sarcasm (Smitherman, 1977: 121).

Still another oral form that is used in rap music is the call and response. This oral form, used predominantly in church, emphasizes the participation of the audience to punctuate the statements of the speaker. The preacher chooses a statement with which he knows the audience will be in agreement. He/she proceeds to reiterate it while awaiting a verbal response from his/her congregation. As they respond, he/she continues to repeat the statement and encourages the audience to continue to respond.

Within rap music circles, the participation and response from the audience is vital to the rap artist's status. His/her success as a linguistic performer is measured by the effective interplay between rapper and audience. Rap music has taken this practice to the streets and uses it to achieve the purpose of synthesizing speaker and listener into a "unified, interactive, interdependent movement" (Tannen, 1989: 13).

Through the use of these language forms, rap artists draw upon their rich heritage as they perpetuate and affirm their tradition. Rap artists extract linguistic features from the oral tradition, develop an artistic format around them and effectively create an esoteric

language that communicates an expression of the raw reality of a particular speech community.

3.3 Rap Music: Its Social Status in Popular American Culture

The acceptability of rap music had gone through several stages before it reached its current status. As with any art form, this newly devised form gained recognition over time. Initially, since rap music was specifically intended for the African-American community that created it, its exposure to the mainstream culture was limited.

The city streets of New York were the setting for the debut of rap music. Groups of young African-American emcees and mobile disc jockeys, who were using pre-recorded soundtracks as backdrops, began creating verbal images to document issues affecting the African-American community. These young African-Americans had created a language that expressed the social dynamics of African-American street culture. The streets, as Keyes says, “constitute an institution which operates as a survival center and learning to communicate via skillful street vernacular distinguishes who will survive” (1991: 49). Rap artist, Marley Marl says “you’ve got to be from the streets to know what rap is about” (Fee, 1988: R8). Rap music artists use this particular language style of syncopated rhymes and beats to relate the heart and soul of their own life experiences and to iterate the real life triumphs and tragedies that surround life on the fringes of society.

Rap music's early appeal as dance music drew a large segment of the African-American community's youth to attend *jams* (musical performances), which met in schoolyards and parks (Smitherman, 1994). After a time, due to street gang violence, *crews* (disc jockeys, emcees and their entourage) began to challenge members from

different gangs in competitions at clubs and community functions to battle verbally, breakdance and draw graffiti to ascertain which crew was the *bomb* (best) (Toop, 1984).

Initially, rap music went unrecognized as an art form. In addition, since rap has its roots in a language that the mainstream culture viewed as a substandard form, acceptance of this art form was in no way immediate. The general format of sound patterns, sentence structure and lexical choices were those that the mainstream culture deemed as informal and pertinent only to a particular speech community.

Therefore, from its onset, rap music was not acknowledged as an important part of American culture. It was viewed as an esoteric language of the urban scene. It was not until the release of *Rapper's Delight* in 1979 by Sugarhill Records that rap became publicly recognized as a new genre (Stanley, 1992: 318). As it began gaining increased publicity, rap artists began espousing themes that communicated the concerns of the young African-American urban community (Rose, 1994). *Emcees* (masters of ceremonies) began painting word pictures, which documented issues affecting the African-American community. It was during this time that the tone and tenor of rap quickly changed and became more serious.

Rap music began making its statement about life on the "marginal edge" (Rose, 1994: 94). It was now engaging audiences outside of the African-American speech community (Rose, 1994: 94). Rap music's dynamic linguistic force was unnerving the mainstream culture with its linguistic performance that related to strong social realities. Its appeal and popularity within the youth culture riveted the attention of the mainstream population and forced it to pay closer attention. It had captured not only the attention of the youth culture but also the mainstream culture and was taking its stand to proclaim its

voice. Rap music had begun to challenge the status quo and propel itself as an art form into the dominant culture to reflect a particular social reality and act as a catalyst to effect change.

African-American communities across the United States began to experience the solidarity that rap music was engendering. Chuck D of Public Enemy stated, "Rap has become the means by which teenagers who have never traveled outside their Los Angeles neighborhood learn about their peers in New York or Houston, how they live and the struggles they face" (Bernard, 1992: 1). Rap music had become a vehicle that was binding the African-American communities into a collective voice. Through that voice, rap music's linguistic assaults began to impact a nation through its newly acquired verbal empowerment.

As rap began sweeping across the mainstream culture, new modes of dress and dance styles began to captivate the young. This occurred not only within the African-American community but also outside of it, and not only locally but all across the United States. The hip-hop attitude was viewed as an outcry against established social forces that needed to be addressed. Rap was espousing the problems that surround life on the streets of the inner city and addressing real social issues that confront African-American youth on a daily basis. Rap music was dealing head on with issues of joblessness, and political and social oppression (Smitherman, 1997: 2). By this time, production companies had begun to see the lucrative market that had opened up to them and large record companies began to contract with rap artists to cut albums. This exposure moved rap to the forefront. Gradually, rap's aesthetic appeal combined with its social and political forces began to impact the entire youth culture. Extensive numbers of young

people began to identify with its sentiments as its popularity began to spread like a consuming fire. It appeared that "rap had begun to command considerable influence outside of the genre itself" (Salaam, 1995: 309).

In spite of the young people's acceptance of rap music, mainstream society grew increasingly uncomfortable with its explicit vernacular. Rap's linguistic means were violating the established rules for popular art forms. The language was seen as profane and its content, which centered on drugs, sex, street violence and having a good time was not well received. The general population, via the media, remarked that the expressions and lexical choices involved in rap music were too raw and profane. Featured below is an excerpt, from a rap by Paris, a San Francisco based rapper, nicknamed *P-dog*:

P-dog commin up, I'm straight low
Pro-black and it ain't no joke
Comin straight from the mob that broke shit last time".
The Devil Made Me Do It Paris (Stanley, 1994: 246)

The political content of some of the raps and the violence that they espoused also drew stern criticism of the art form. Note this example, from NWA:

When I'm called off
I got a sawed-off
Squeeze the trigger
And bodies are hauled off
Straight Outta Compton NWA (Stanley, 1994: 241)

However, rap music was dealing with the reality on the streets. Alan Light of Rolling Stone says "The language often used in rap is loud and aggressive...often profane. This is a music that is unabashedly, proudly black" (1992: 2). It was dealing head on with social issues, male/female relationships, unemployment, social status and political oppression. It was communicating the triumphs of love, the violence and aggression in life and the frustrations and challenges faced by a specific language community.

Despite the mainstream culture's sentiments about rap, it did not stop publication of what rappers wanted to say. The following excerpt from Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released in 1982 is an example of the new genre in its raw form as it comments about survival in the 'hood (neighborhood):

*Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers
Pickpockets, peddlers, even panhandlers
You say, "I'm cool, huh, I'm no fool"
But then you wind up dropping out of high school
Now you're unemployed, all nonvoid
Walking 'round like you're Pretty Boy Floyd
Turned stick-up kid but look what you done did
Got sent up for a eight year bid
Now your manhood is took and you're a Maytag,
Spend the next two years as an undercover fag
Being used and abused to serve like hell...*

Refrain:

*So don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
Ah huh huh huh huh
It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under.*

The Message Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (Stanley, 1992: 152)

Rap music's appeal had caught the attention of not only the African-American youth from the east to the west coast but the American youth population from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Rap music's content was dealing with the frustrations of life and the uncertainty of the future. These issues are commonly experienced by all youth as they struggle to find their place in life and society. Its lyrics express emotions, repression, troubles and stresses in all aspects of human life in American cultural history.

Simultaneously as more and more entrepreneurs began to recognize rap music's popularity and profitability, they began to promote it within the mainstream. Rap music received public exposure through albums, TV shows, award ceremonies and

commercials. With its rise, rap began to be recognized for its artistic expression and its ability to communicate to the heart of all young people.

The ability of a structure that could blend together language, meaning and infectious sound patterns, proved too captivating to rap music audiences to allow the genre to be overlooked. Therefore, rap music's popularity continued to spread as it evolved in new directions. Over a sustained period of time, this emotionally charged linguistic form has fascinated a very large segment of the youth culture in the United States and has achieved a high degree of social status. Rap music has been recognized as an identifying mark of a particular community but over time it has become an indispensable element of the American cultural "melting pot". What began as a purely African-American oriented sociolinguistic aesthetic has now become an international phenomenon.

3.4 Rap Music: Its Communicative Functions

Rap music is different from any other form of music in that it is a dynamically rhythmical spoken form. Unlike traditional lyricals, which are sung, "the spoken lyrics in rap replace music melody" (Yasin, 1997: 125). When listening to this form, one can actually hear that "the words are joined together with phrases and poetic statements in time to a musical beat" (Yasin, 1997: 1). This highly original and creative verbal form vigorously uses linguistic features in a novel manner to achieve its communicative purposes. These features and their combinations comprise the dynamics of rap music.

Rap artists use variable rhythmical stress patterns to help convey the meaning of their composition. This practice is called tonal semantics. As Smitherman says, "tonal semantics refers to the use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in

African-American communicative practices” (Smitherman, 1977: 134). Speakers of African-American English rely on the style or manner of speaking with which they pronounce sounds, syllables and words to negotiate meaning. Tonal inflection solidifies the interpretation of a word or expression. For example, in African-American vernacular, *police* is pronounced *po' lice* with the stress on the first syllable rather than the conventional second syllable stress. This shift in stress renders the word as somewhat different from its dictionary representation. Although the word continues to maintain a melodious rhythmical beat, this subtle nuance suggests a different perspective on the word's meaning. Perhaps the non-conventional pronunciation conveys the attitude that the police may be behaving in non-conventional ways when dealing with African-Americans in the urban community. This variability of word stress is a particular characteristic of African-American language that rap artists engage in to accentuate their intended meaning.

A second linguistic feature that is used is phonological repetition. The following is an example of repetition that produces assonance. Assonance is “the repetition of similar vowel sounds in stressed syllables that end with different consonant sounds” (Holman and Harmon 1992: 39). It is often used in rap lyrics. Melodic repetition is a linguistic feature that captures the audience's attention and lures them into involvement. Similar sounding words make the lyrics easier to remember. The following is an example:

Used, abused, without clues
I refused to blow a fuse
They even had it on the news
Don't Believe the Hype Public Enemy (Stanley, 1992: 255)

An article in *Rolling Stone* referred to rap as an acronym for “rhythmic American poetry” (Sager, 1990: 79). Rap artists use various poetic devices to heighten the melodic intensity of rap lyrics. Several of them are alliteration, repetition, and hyperbole. In addition to the aforementioned, rhyme is used as a linguistic means to establish a continuous melodic effect to attract the audience. These linguistic means facilitate rap music’s communicative intention and aid in the expression of rap music’s aesthetic appeal. They assist in captivating the listener to subsequently achieve their communicative function.

Furthermore, the rappers’ choices of words distinctly reflect the speech community of which they are members. They use words, which are specific to African-American English. Smitherman explains, “the rapper must be lyrically/linguistically fluent; he or she is expected to testify, to speak the truth, to come to wit in no uncertain terms” (Smitherman, 1997: 1). Therefore, the rap artists’ choice of words directly expresses what they want to say and to whom they want to say it. These rap artists are speaker representatives of their own speech community and their words reflect the language code of that community. Thus, the choice of words is socio-culturally bound by the speech community. Rap speech makes use of street language; the young members of that language community easily understand the words. For example, the word *fat* (*phat*), which means overweight in American English, is defined as *looking or sounding good* in African-American vernacular. Such inversion of meaning is frequently a hidden transcript in rap music (Rose, 1994: 100). The use of in-group language is foregrounded while the beat is backgrounded. Words that are coded, clipped, reduplicated or rhymed carry significance within the community for specific communicative intentions. For

instance, "to kick it" is coded to mean *to start or perform something*, "pump it up" means *to turn up the volume*. Examples of clipping are *hood* for neighborhood, *tude* for attitude. Rhyme and reduplication are evidenced in phrases like *in it to win it*. The combinations of rhythmic sounding words and particular language choices comprise the quintessential substance of rap music's use of linguistic means to achieve its communicative intention.

As particular language choices are germane to rap music, the sentence structure of rap music conveys another aspect of rap's communicative functions. Rap music employs imperative sentence structure more frequently than any other syntactic pattern. This linguistic feature causes rap to be deliberately emphatic and to the point. The repeated use of specific grammatical structures fixes the focus on what rap artists desire to emphasize. The next example is an illustration:

Clean out your ears then open your eyes
And pay at the door as a donation
To hear the best sounds in creation
Superrappin' Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (Stanley, 1992: 145)

By using the imperative form, these rap artists are communicating instructions to their listeners. They are expressing their will toward their audience by asking them to be alert and prepared to hear not just the average rap song because they are going to hear the best rap music ever created anywhere. They are implying that they are talented and they have something that other people need to hear.

Musical forms that are sung are mainly enjoyed as entertainment. However, rap music is different in that it is not merely regarded as "for entertainment only," but it has become a "voice" of African-American youth.

The basic communicative function of this art form is to express the socio-cultural experiences of the African-American speech community. Rap artists do this through the artful use of linguistic forms crafted within a musical format that was devised specifically for African-Americans by African-Americans. Through their lyrics, they reflect life experiences that deal with socio-political issues, male/female relationships, living conditions, or gang violence. For example, rappers Eric B and Rakim in *Paid in Full* tell the story of underprivileged people who struggle to survive:

*Thinking of a master plan
This ain't nothing but sweat inside my hand
So I dig into my pocket all my money's spent
So I dig deeper - still comin up with lint
Thinking how I'm gonna get some dead Presidents
I need money, I used to be a stick up kid
So I think of all the devious things I did
I used to roll up, "this is a hold up -ain't nuttin funny
Stop smilin ain't still don't nothin move but the money"
But now I learned to earn cause I'm righteous
I feel great, so maybe I might just
Search for a nine to five
And if I thrive, then maybe I'll stay alive.
Paid in Full Eric B and Rakim (Rose, 1994: 94)*

This ability to deliver messages is the core of the communicative function of rap. "From the onset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America" (Rose, 1994: 3). Each rap song becomes the artist/speaker's point of view in expressing his/her ideas, opinions, or emotions. As rap artist Ice Cube says, "You got to talk their language and guide them to the place and that is exactly what we're doing" (Rule, 1992: 42).

During the latter part of the 80's and into the 90's, rap began to abound with profanity and deal with subjects of militancy, revolution, violence and racism. Through

their linguistic battle cry, rappers were projecting the harshness of urban social life. In "Who Protects Us from You?" KRS-One, voices suspicion of and cynicism toward the police, and challenges their role of authority:

*FIRE! Come down fast!
You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you?
Every time you say, "that's illegal," does it mean that it's true? (Chorus:) Un hun.
Your authority's never questioned, no one questions you
If I hit you, I'll be killed, if you hit me, I can sue
(Chorus:) Order, Order!
Looking through my history book, I've watched you as you grew
Killing blacks, and calling it the law, and worshipping Jesus, too
(Chorus:) Bo Bo Bo!
Who Protects Us From You* (KRS-One, 1989)

While rap artists relate heart-felt sentiments through linguistic means to their listening audience, they are also relating the harshness of the urban reality the members of their community experience. Rap artists recite rhymes to tell who they are, what their social relevance is, and how they cope and survive on the streets in their world. Since rappers address and share the background of their audiences, they act as "conduits for their thoughts and expressions" (Stephens and White, 1996: 6). George Nelson of *Billboard* suggests that what the listener hears bears a direct relationship to what is said on the streets, in schoolyards, and in basements around the country (1986: 56). Rap music's powerful outcry communicates the realities of urban life and expresses its sentiments against the "power apparatus that tried to bury it alive" (Smitherman, 1997: 3).

Rappers are negotiators of speech within society. They use speech as a tool to voice their concerns regarding change and to represent social attitudes and behaviors. African-American rappers have individually spoken "about being a witness: talking about what one sees, feels and experiences" (Bernard, 1991: 1). "Rappers have been reflecting

the thoughts and experiences of their core audiences" (Stephens and White, 1996: 6). Rap's communicative function engenders involvement. This involvement is an "observable active participation" (Tannen, 1989: 11) in what is on the hearts and minds of rap artists. They are using this linguistic phenomenon as a tool to usher in changes and promote awareness just as a squeaky wheel gets the grease.

Moreover, no longer is rap now solely oriented toward members of a particular speech community. In its early stages it was intra-racially focused but now it has become inter-racially assimilated. The soaring commercial usage of rap music is an indication that rap has something to say and says it in a way that no other previous genre has in American society. Even large companies like Hershey, who realize the impact rap has had on society, are using rap songs in commercials to help promote their products. With its continued exposure, rap has become socially integrated within a broader audience base to include not only young people but also a variety of age groups and social classes. Children hear it during Saturday morning cartoon shows while older Americans are listening to it to determine what the younger generation is saying. Rap represents the attitude of youth toward daily life, including their personal and social problems, frustrations and expectations for the future. Since rap music's appeal has spread nationally and internationally, its audience has become as diverse as the rappers themselves. In "A Word from the Motherland" Khephra Burns writes, "Be we preachers, players or just plain folks, our ability to wield words with wit and rhythm has given us power when there was none within our grasp. We are a race of rappers from way back" (1991: 44). Rap music's communicative intention has reached beyond the African-American community to include the larger population.

In summation, through the artful use of sound, word choice and sentence structure rap music skillfully articulates the heartfelt sentiments of African-Americans about life in urban America. The use of distinctive linguistic features at all levels allows rap artists to convey their messages with impact and style. Through multilayerings of sound rhythm, lexical choices that carry specific word imagery and culturally based structure, rap, which is socio-culturally bound, has bridged the social chasms and connected with a variety of audiences.

3.5 Rap Music: Its Sociolinguistic Significance

Rap music has become more important than its originators ever dreamed. From its inception, rap has continued to express itself from within the framework of a deeply rich oral tradition of a specific speech community. More currently, rap music's appeal to all levels of society has propelled it as an artistic form into the global community. Today, rap music is no longer simply speaking to the members of its own speech community; rap is now speaking to a larger segment of people outside its original speech community. As an art form, rap demonstrates that speech behavior is social behavior. Rap music clearly displays that language is a "very variable phenomenon and that this variability may have as much to do with society as with language" (Trudgill, 1974: 32).

How people use language in a particular society has always attracted the attention of linguists. In particular, the relationship between language use and society has attracted the attention of sociolinguists. Sociolinguistics is "concerned with the way in which language varies according to the social context in which it is used and according to the social group to which a user belongs" (Johnson and Johnson, 1998: 415). Furthermore, sociolinguistics studies language variation as a reflection of social structure. One main

thrust of sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language choice and its social function.

As pertains to rap music, specific language choices and performance are based on various factors such as the speaker's and listener's social status, gender, the speech context whether formal or informal and so forth. Sociolinguists are interested in speech as a social behavior. They study who says what, in what context, and for what purpose. Sociolinguists also look into how speech behavior is regulated by rules and social constructs. They examine how language choice is constrained by those rules and constructs. Hence, in order to understand why rappers make particular linguistic choices, sociolinguists have to understand rap music's relation to its intended social function. Therefore, because of its linguistic and social significance and its communicative intention, rap music represents a valid area for linguistic study.

For the most part, all speech behavior is constrained by social rules. These constraints motivate language choices and they also regulate speech behavior. Ultimately, however, people are the language users and determine which choices are made. Since all individual speakers are rational actors, making linguistic choices becomes a process of negotiation. For example, if a speaker desires to make a change in a relationship, he/she will negotiate the linguistic choices to arrive at the specific communicative intention. At this level many factors play an interactive role in determining what gets said and in what manner.

However, in the final analysis, the individual speaker has the ability to determine what he/she wants to express. Thus, speakers use language as the means to achieve their intended meaning.

Within rap there exists a definite correlation between language use and its communicative intention. Therefore, when examining rap music for its sociolinguistic significance, linguists must examine the forms that rappers use to determine the social explanation for the use of those forms. For instance, rap music originated within the African-American speech community. As a product of that community, rappers have chosen to use the lexicon of African-American vernacular English. They could have easily chosen to use the lexicon of Standard English because that is readily available to them. However, rappers have avoided using Standard English even though many rappers are very capable of *code switching*. Code switching is "a change by a speaker or writer from one language or language variety to another one" (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992: 58).

By choosing to use African-American vernacular English instead of Standard English, rappers are stating that they are members of a distinct speech community. They are identifying themselves with a specific socio-cultural community and stating their position within it. They, as negotiators of their language forms, are acting as perpetrators of their language. They are using their own "language as a resistance language and a linguistic bond of cultural and mental solidarity" (Smitherman, 1997: 4).

By employing the linguistic features and rules prevalent within the community, rappers are establishing their art form as a particular structure that alone is able to convey the realities that they are expressing. Rappers are intimating that the language is specifically theirs and so is the art form. They are proud of the in-group communication and the solidarity it engenders. Rappers are setting themselves apart as distinctive interpreters of their community and they are stating it in a language that is specifically

their own. As rapper Ice Cube says, "Rap is ours! The whites are saying, 'Oh, wait a minute, now. You can't talk among each other. See, one thing that white people don't understand is that in the 'hood, what's going on in white society is not important. That's over there. This is here. Black people are talking to each other through rap'" (Sager, 1990: 78).

Rappers use the medium of their sound patterns, lexical choices and syntactic rules to create the artful wordplay that expresses a representation of urban reality. The language is distinctly original and fast-changing just like life on the streets and speakers adjust their language choices to achieve specific intentions. Language has a specific effect on society and in particular rap music's language has had a dramatic effect on American society. (For further discussion regarding the cultural implications and the sociolinguistic significance of rap music see Chapter 7).

As sociolinguistics evaluates language choices and the consequences that they have on rational speakers, stylistics evaluates how meanings are realized by particular choices of linguistic forms.

CHAPTER 4

Rap Music and Its Sounds: Phonological Structure

4.0 Introduction

Since its inception in local parks and schoolyards, the sounds of rap music have reverberated throughout the global community. Its striking manipulation of sounds, both at the level of individual sound segments (phonetic features) and at the level of sound combinations and sound phrasing (phonological features) has earned rap music a high degree of exposure. Through a multiplicity of linguistic patterning, rap artists have organized language in highly structured phonetic and phonological forms to create a new genre. Rap artists use the medium of African-American sound patterns and combine them with other structural properties of language, to create artful wordplay, which culminates in the rap artists' depiction of urban reality.

Rap music lyrics are different from traditionally sung lyrics in that they are rhythmically spoken. The rhythmic talking is a vocal performance that organizes phonological forms in structured ways to produce unique sound patterns. These sound segments interact with the beat or pulse of the background rhythm (Yasin, 1997: 90). Together they form a collage of highly structured repetitive phonetic and phonological forms. They function as a rhythmic line within the aesthetics of the performance.

4.1 Phonetic Features

Rap music is spoken in the vernacular and filled with African-American idiom. A product of the street culture, rap uses sounds and words to create rhythmic compositions out of language. It is unlike ordinary speech in that there are no false starts, errors, or pauses. The lyrics are spoken in synchronization to the background beat,

syllable by syllable (Yasin, 1997: 102). Since each syllable is metrically related to the beat, the rate of speech must remain constant and somewhat quick-paced and staccato to maintain the rhythm and keep the sound coordinated with each beat (Yasin, 1997: 102). The sequence of sounds is strategically chosen to create a coordinated interaction. Sounds are positioned together within the metrical structure to form coherent words to facilitate the delivery of the message. This method of sound placement is similar to that which poetry employs. The rap artist must take all aspects of rhyme, rhythm and meaning into careful consideration. Everyday speech is not obligated to adhere to any specifically defined pattern of sound placement.

Although the voices of rap artists do not necessarily have to be melodious, vocalization plays an important part in rap. Since rap is speech rather than song, it does not have to have a range of expressed notes. The voice functions as a steady instrument that maintains timing. However, rap artists use rising or falling pitch (tonal semantics) to emphasize sounds and to distinguish words that they intend to focus upon for specific meanings via the vocalizations. This vocal expressiveness is characteristic of African-American speech patterns and distinguishes rap music as a socio-cultural artistic form.

In the following example, the repetition of the voiced velar consonant /g/ combined with the short lax vowel /ɪ/ in the opening section of "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy awakens listeners to the staccato rhythm by emphasizing and dramatizing the initial sounds of the word, *give*:

Give it... gi... gi... gi... give it
Fight the Power Public Enemy (Stanley, 1992: 258)

In the next example, the repetition of similar vowel sounds creates a pleasing quality of sound. Rhyme is used to heighten the verbal exchange:

*Step in the jam and slam
I'm not Superman, because anybody can
or should be able to rock off turntables.
I'm Still #1* (KRS-One, 1988)

Through the use of front vowels, the rap artist has rendered a melodious construction. The repeated phonemes [ae] and [eI] attract the listener through their rhyming effect. "Rock off turntables" refers to *scratching* and jamming to a good time. (Scratching is a procedure that African-American DJ's contrived where a record is played backwards on a turntable for sound effect. Since the African-American youth culture invented the technique of using turntables in this fashion, the message, *rock off turntables*, is clearly socio-culturally relevant.) In addition, a rap artist who is able to rock off turntables has to be a good verbal communicator. Rap artist, KRS is saying that any good rapper should be able to give his/her rap and motivate his audience. He/she does not have to be a *Superman*; he /she just has to be a good rapper. This rap artist could have chosen any number of ways to communicate his message but he chose to use melodic combinations of sounds to refer to cultural references indigenous to his community.

The next example again uses assonance to emphasize what a good rhyme should do:

*Cos a brother like me is known to get down
So get up from the rhyme and you'll find
It's designed to give sight to the blind and enlighten the mind
Droppin' Rhymes on Drums* (Def Jef feat and Etta James, 1989)

Similar vowel sounds with different consonant endings are found in the words: *rhyme, find, designed, sight, blind, enlighten, mind*. These draw attention to the expectations of a rap of a *brother*. *Brother* signifies the term an African-American male

uses to refer to himself in relation to fellow community members. This term creates a sense of solidarity since brothers belong to the same family of people.

The next example displays how the artist has taken the high front vowel sound of /I/ and the mid front vowel sound of /ε/ and combined them with the nasal consonant sound of /n/ and /m/ to create vowel nazalization:

Slappin' and selectin' em, checkin' em, disrespectin' em
Just deckin' em, deckin' em, deckin' em
MC's Act Like They Don't Know (KRS-One, 1995)

This use of the vowel nazalization assimilates one feature of sound on to the previous sound. These sets of segments in succession add to the playful use of sounds. The change of [N] to [n] to end the *-ing* form marks these words as part of African-American vernacular.

In the following example, the low back vowel /a/ is used in a series and then the high front vowel /I/ follows in swift succession. These vowels are followed by a combination of velar, alveolar, and bilabial stops. The repetitive switch from sonorous vowel to obstruent stop gives a staccato pulse to the verse. As a result of rap's manipulation of numerous sound segments, the spoken lyrics are distinguishable from other sung lyrics, which may also contain repetitive sounds, but not with such frequency.

When I rock and shock and hip hop it unlock your head, I knock it
It split quick from the lyric
Direct hit, perfect fit, you can't get with it
MC's Act Like They Don't Know (KRS-One, 1995)

The use of combinations of vowel sounds in rap music creates a unique quality of sound structure. The melodious quality of the repeated vowels attracts listeners and keeps them interested. Whether the sounds are musical, as in beats, or vocal, as in

speech, the multifaceted combinations that are used in rap music induce great emotion in the listeners.

A novel use of iconic representation occurs when the rap artist improvises with sounds to mimic the background beat. Using glottal fricatives [h] [h] in quick succession and mid central vowel sounds [ʌ] in groupings, ([ʌhʌ]), combined with the union of aspirated plosives [p] [p] and [t] and the voiceless palatal fricative [ç], ([t ç]), the rapper can simulate the “grooves and hooks” of the rhythmical beat. (a huh, a huh, a huh, ; p, p, tsh, p, p, tsh). This process is known as the beat box. The rap artist uses voiced and voiceless sounds to achieve this simulation merely by using his/her vocal cords. By using various manners of articulation, the rap artist has taken discrete linguistic segments and created a sound pattern meant to simulate the drums and background beat. These musical pioneers crafted these kinds of innovations through their experimentations with sounds during the infant stages of the genre.

Another creative use of language is seen in the example of consonantal repetition, also known as alliteration. Rap music makes use of alliteration and other phonetic repetition in order to stress, to reinforce, and to emphasize a point, as well as to form pleasant sound patterns. In this next example, the consonants [k], [r], and [s] display a clear and emphatic use of phonetic repetition. The repeated consonants accentuate the kinetic momentum of the genre and bring into focus the artistic use of sound.

*What do you think makes up a KRS?
Concise teaching, or very clear speaking?
Ridiculous bass, aggravating treble
Rebel, Renegade, must stay paid
not by financial aid, but a raid of hits
causing me to take long trips...
I'm Still #1* (KRS-One, 1988)

A closer look at this portion of lyrics shows that the artist has set up phonetic patterns, which parallel and reiterate the sounds of the initials, *KRS*. By using the same consonant sound of [k] in the words *concise* and *clear* to describe the first initial, K, in *KRS*, the rap artist reinforces the presence of his group. The artist then moves on to the next repeated phoneme [r] and lays down a list of lexical units in *ridiculous*, *rebel*, *renegade*, and *raid* to describe the next initial of his group *KRS*. In the final lines of this segment, the words *hits* and *trips* are articulated. It is here that the entire message is brought to culmination. The repeated use of the final [s] in *hits* and *trips* is important because it reflects the final [s] in *KRS*. The rap artist has created an image of *KRS* and expounded on the final product of what a good rapper can expect from his rap. In this section, the entire component is finally complete. *KRS* is the abbreviation that the rap artist Kris Parker uses to refer to himself. If said rapidly and not separated into individual consonants, the consonants, *KRS* will enunciate the name of the rap artist. He has repeatedly defined the essence of who he is as a rap artist through the verbal skills of alliteration and word play. African-American youth have stretched, expanded, and developed the expressiveness of sounds (phonemes) and sound effects, and have heightened them to new dimensions.

4.2 Phonological Features

Sound patterns are an essential element in all artistic language and rap music is replete with them. As a result, the phonological features in rap music take on special significance. One of the most prominent features of rap is its syllabic structure. Combinations of syllabic forms create a distinctive frame for the rhythmic structure.

Thus, the rhythmic structure is supported by the syllabic structure. Note how the syllabic form, in the example that follows, serves to enhance the rhythmic structure:

*Let it roll, get bold, I just can't hold
Back, or fold cos I'm a man with soul
Set It Off* (Big Daddy Kane, 1988)

The syllabic structure sets the beat of the rap as the use of the monosyllables emphasizes the rhythmic pattern. The repetitive sound of /ol / in the words *roll*, *bold*, *hold*, *fold*, and *soul* reinforces the sonorous quality and punctuates the rhythmic pattern of the rap. In this series of combinations, the rap artist uses a characteristic phonological variation of African-American vernacular English. In Standard English the final /d/ sound in the word *bold* would be pronounced but in African-American vernacular English the final /d/ is not pronounced (*bol'*) and this causes the words ending with /d/ to rhyme with *roll*. The purpose of retaining this phonological distinction is to identify the phonological structure as that which is used within African-American vernacular English.

Believing that meaningful sounds can move people to respond, the rapper capitalizes on the effective use of sound repetition (Smitherman, 1977: 142). Using the patterns of repetition of syllables, the rapper, in the following example, stimulates the audience and escalates the momentum of the performance. The aesthetic quality of the phonological features creates a rhythmical ensemble of sounds:

*I said a hip hop
The hippie the hippie
To the hip hip hop, a you don't stop the rock it
To the bang bang boogie, say up jump the boogie
To the rhythm of the boogie, the beat
Rapper's Delight* The Sugarhill Gang (Stanley, 1992: 318)

The rap artist has used open syllable endings in this structure. For example, both syllables in *hippie* and *boogie* end in vowels for a sonorous effect. Most importantly, the rapper has used reduplications of syllables to create a highly local rhyming pattern.

Rap artists use the syllabic structure to act as a blueprint for a myriad of linguistic maneuvers. These patterns parallel African-American discourse practices. Therefore, without the effective use of the interacting phonological features, rap music would lose its sonorous quality.

4.3 Metrical Features

Much of the aesthetic appeal of rap music is realized through its use of metrical features. Rap music uses multiple combinations of these features, which include stress, accent, and tone. These features are not isolated in their use, but rather are used as interwoven linguistic features. They set rap music apart from other musical forms as a particularly distinguishable language phenomenon.

For instance, rappers make specific syllables or words noticeable by using the prosodic features of stress to achieve a succession of alternating accented and unaccented beats. Stress is a type of “word accent in which certain syllables are made more prominent than others” by a higher pitch, loudness, or greater duration (Trask, 1996: 336). The pattern of the “alternation between accented and unaccented syllables sets up a wavelike recurrence of sound” (Perrine, 1988: 674). These patterns form a rhythmic flow and draw attention to the verbal texture of the linguistic properties that are used (Brogan, 1994: 161). The following is a prime example:

*I play by ear, I love to steer
the Alfa Romeo from here to there
I grab the beer, but not in the ride
cuz I'm not stupid, I don't drink and drive...
I'm Still #1* (KRS-One, 1988)

The rhythm is sustained by the “rise and fall of language” as the sounds of the content words are repeatedly accented to enhance the vocal pattern (Perrine, 1988: 674). The alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables--here in an iambic unstressed, stressed pattern--gives the rap its consistent beat.

It is worthwhile to compare rap’s versification to the iambic verse of Shakespeare in examples like:

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield
The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark Shakespeare (Parrot, 1953: 676)

Despite the metrical similarity, the rap beat has a very different effect. Why is this so? I suspect that while Shakespearean verse depends primarily on differences in syllable duration for rhythm (stressed syllables are longer), rap depends primarily on amplitude for rhythm (stressed syllables are louder).

Some of the rhythmic quality of rap is also derived from what is known as “tonal semantics” (Smitherman, 1977: 134). Tone, the rising and falling of sounds, produces melodious talk. “Even though the English language is not a tone language, African-Americans have retained the African tradition of tone in their speech patterns and have applied it in a number of ways”(Smitherman, 1977: 135). This means that speakers of African-American English rely on the tone with which they pronounce sounds, syllables, and words to convey specific meanings (Smitherman, 1977: 135). The key to understanding this African-American practice “is to recognize that the sound of what is being said is just as important as the sense”(Smitherman, 1977: 135). The members of this speech community are well aware that the meaning of words is manipulated through vocal inflection and these inflections project specific attitudes. The tones, as inflections

of voice, affect the emotional mood and establish the attitude that is being projected. In the following example the highlighted letters mark rising sounds and the remaining letters mark level or falling sounds. In addition, the dots between letters represent sounds that are held longer:

*We're the Furious Fi..ive plus Grandmaster Flash
Givin' you a blast and sho'nuff class
So to prove to ya all that we're second to none
We're gonna make fi..ive M.C's sound like one
Ya gotta dip and di..ive, so-so sociali..ize
Clean out your ears then open your ey..es
And then pay at the door as a donation
To hear the best sounds in creation
Superrappin' Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (Stanley, 1992: 145)*

The rhythmic flow is further enhanced by the means of rhyme. As seen above, rap artists use internal and end rhymes. Rhyming is achieved through the use of the repetition of phonetic nuclei plus coda structure. Rhyming results when a coordinated flow of similar sounds is strung together in a linguistic sequence. In order for a rap to be effective, the rap artist does not have to have a pleasing voice quality but s/he must be able to generate rhymes. A primary distinction among rap artists is the ability to be linguistically adept in the verbal skill of rhyming. The following is an example that depicts how the artful use of rhyme becomes part of the rhythmic force:

*Breaks on a plane, brakes on a train
Breaks to make you go insane
Breaks in love, breaks in war
But we got the breaks to get you on the floor
That's the Breaks Kurtis Blow (Stanley, 1992: 36)*

The linguistic strategy of the repetition of the phonological elements establishes and reinforces the metrical rhythm of the language. However, the combination of

carefully selected metrical features of repeated patterns of stress and tone accentuates the dynamics of rap and distinguishes it as a unique linguistic phenomenon.

CHAPTER 5

Rap Music and Its Lyrics: Lexical Structure

5.0 Introduction

Although phonological patterns play a significant role in rap music, they do not solely convey the rap artist's intended communicative meaning. Only specific lexical items can achieve this. Thus, lexical choice directs the course of the communicative intent and is fundamental to its process.

Since reality is to some extent linguistically constructed, rap artists capitalize upon their choice of lexical items to communicate their intended meaning in real time experience through the agent of the spoken word (Weber, 1996: 5). Moreover, since the lexicon is the means by which humans express their inward thoughts and desires, lexical choices and their structures assume a major role in the expression of the socio-cultural communicative intention of the rap lyrics. However, within rap, lexical choices must be strategically manipulated so that the properties of the lexicon coincide with the phonological patterns for rhythmical and metrical content. In other words, specific lexical items are chosen in favor of others based on their lexical meanings and sound quality. As the listener perceives the lyrical content, he/she derives meaning from the specific lexical choices in terms of their lexical features.

Rap artists have created a genre that selectively uses the structural properties of language and combines them into a performance. Throughout rap music's history, the format and intention of its music has remained the same; rap is still used as a medium to "express the feelings and struggle for survival" of the members of the African-American community (Smitherman, 1997: 23).

Rap artists focus their lexical choices specifically within two main lexical categories. These lexical choices distinguish rap as a genre that chooses its lexicon based on a direct and specific communicative intent. Even though the varieties of words that are used from one set of lyrics to another are different, nevertheless, the words that frequently appear have specific lexical features in common. Therefore, a closer analysis of verbs and nouns is important to the study of how rap artists achieve their intended meaning since they are painting their reality with these lexical choices.

5.1 Lexical Choices and Features

Rap artists understand that possessing an inventory of words enhances an individual's power to communicate (Leech and Short, 1981: 38). Consequently, rap artists use a socially constructed linguistic form germane to a specific language community to express their communicative intent. By using a variety of lexical choices and socially constructed idioms, rap artists depict their representation of the urban experience. In fact, many of rap music's lexical choices are socially constructed and coded language borrowed from African-American Vernacular English. Furthermore, the use of these colloquial expressions and lexical choices mirrors everyday speech and causes the rapper to appear as if he/she were addressing a group of friends.

Rap artists have chosen an alternate way of saying something to achieve their desired results (Leech and Short, 1981: 38). For example, in the following excerpt from "Dead Homiez" by Ice Cube, the lexical choices are selected for their kinetic energy and semantic power.

*"They killed a homie that I went to school with (damn)
I tell you, life ain't shit to fool with..."*
Dead Homiez Ice Cube (Stanley, 1992: 159)

The genre of rap music encompasses a powerfully rhythmical, artistically interactive performance structure. The lyrics and the performance combine to make an effective and vivid image. The rap artist serves as a master of innovative linguistic means using lexical features to magnify and dominate the performance. These lexical features create images and themes, which convey the rap artist's reality and facilitate his/her communicative intention.

Rap artists display their feelings and inner struggles openly. Narratives of events are vividly portrayed through intentional choices. Therefore, lexical choices are purposefully made to convey the emotionally charged psychological realities found in the urban ghetto.

5.1.1 Verbs

This research shows that rap artists specifically choose to express street reality through the frequency of two main categories of verbs; they are the *instantaneous* and *noninstantaneous* group (Kaplan, 1995: 177). The noninstantaneous group further subclassifies into two types of verbs: durative and stative. All of these groupings of verbs are distinct from one another based on their specific features.

Verbs in the instantaneous group can be identified as verbs of action. The semantic features of these verbs typically convey the meaning of activity that is transparent and concrete. These verbs can also be identified by the "way the internal time structure of a single event is represented" (Kaplan, 1995: 190). They imply an attitude of determination and resolve, which indicates that decisions must be made immediately

involving the action which is taking place. These verbs call for involvement and indicate motion. A predominant number of verbs fall mainly into the category of action verbs.

Pragmatically these verbs send direct commands to the listeners and call for immediate action. Bolded in the following are some typical examples of instantaneous verbs that are used:

*Wake up, **shake up**, hypocrite look alive*
House Niggas BDP (Stanley, 1992: 38)

*He **jumped** in the cab*
*And he **paid** his tab*
But guess who he saw
*When he **hit** the block*
*They **jumped** out quick*
*They **pulled** a gun...*
Illegal Business BDP (Stanley, 1992: 41)

***Twist** and **turn**, then you let your body slide*
*You got the body rock and pop, **bounce** and **pounce***
Planet Rock Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force (Stanley, 1992: 8)

*I **drop** lines and I'll straight up **wreck** the shop*
A Little Bit of Dane Tonight Dana Dane (Stanley, 1992: 63)

***Stomp** your feet and **clap** your hands*
'Cause you're listenin' to the sound of the Fatback band
King Tim III Fatback Band (Stanley, 1992: 122)

Instantaneous verbs are distinct in that they are inherently bounded (Kaplan, 1995: 177). Boundedness implies that the action is quick, immediate, occurs for the specific moment and then ceases. Thus, instantaneous verbs encode instantaneous events.

The class of noninstantaneous verbs is further classified into two subcategories: *durative* and *stative*. While instantaneous verbs are inherently bounded, noninstantaneous verbs are inherently unbounded. Durative verbs are continuous in time; these verbs do not have a time constraint. Therefore, durative verbs are unbounded.

Once an action is initiated, it is not bounded by a time frame. Durative verbs imply that an action was initiated and will continue but one cannot determine its time of continuance or if, and when, it will cease. These verbs indicate a continuous action and reflect certain predictable consequences. In some situations where durative verbs are used, the action may even continue without a definite ending. Some typical examples are:

*And while they **rode***
*They **ran** down the list of things he owed*
Illegal Business BDP (Stanley, 1992: 41)

*Standing on the front stoop, **hanging** out the window*
*Watching all the cars go by, **roaring** as the breezes blow*
*Crazy lady, **living** in a bag*
The Message Melle Mel and Duke Bootie (Stanley, 1992: 150)

*My finger **points** at the face of the human race*
House Niggas BDP (Stanley 1992: 38)

*'Cause when I **explained** ya can't **complain** for pain*
Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em Eric B and Rakim (Stanley, 1992: 116)

Pragmatically these verbs indicate that they are repeated during a period of time and proceed into the future. They can and perhaps will occur on a continuum. They indicate the occurrence of routine activities.

The last subclass, stative verbs, “denote nonvolitional states,” which do not change over time (Kaplan, 1995: 191). Stative verbs inherently express emotions, conditions, or a state of being. All stative verbs are unbounded. Five subgroups are included in this grouping. They are: verbs of the senses: (*see, hear*); verbs of mental states: (*think, understand*); verbs of emotion: (*love, want*); verbs of ownership: (*owe, belong*) and verbs of measurement: (*cost, equal*). Some examples are:

My album was raw because no one would ever
***think** like I **think** and do what I do.....*
I'm Still #1 (KRS-One, 1988)

Ladies love me, girls adore me...

It Takes Two Rob Base and DJ Eazy Rock (Stanley, 1992: 9)

They said you owe us some money

You owe us some product...

Illegal Business BDP (Stanley, 1992: 41)

Forty-eight of the most representative rap lyrics were analyzed for this study.

These rap lyrics represent an array of artists' works that range from "grim urban reportage to tough-guy anthems" to the stories of the perpetual lover (Stanley, 1992: i). They include well-known and prominent artists such as Ice Cube, KRS-One, Sugarhill Gang, NWA and Public Enemy as examples. The following chart illustrates that noninstantaneous verbs are used less frequently in rap lyrics. The frequency counts of all the groupings of verbs are also provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of verbs and their frequency count

Types of verbs	instantaneous	noninstantaneous		Total
		durative	stative	
Frequency count	1915	620	287	2822
Percentage	68%	22%	10%	100%

As seen in the table, the predominant verb subclass is instantaneous. Some additional lexical examples of instantaneous verbs that appear in rap lyrics are: *kick, rock, bust, swing, hit, bounce, run, kill, and jump*. These lexical choices are lively and energetic and with their implied features of action and motion, they are reflective of the rap artists' fast-paced lifestyle.

The use of instantaneous verbs assists in defining the force of the rap performance. For example, the rapper moves around the stage, speaking out these verbs and weaving them into the rhythmic structure to serve his/her purpose of communicating the powerfully dynamic force of the performance. The dance movements become a physical representation of the powerful verbal expressiveness of the instantaneous verbs. The kinetic movements of the rapper on stage would be rendered less effective if the lexical choices did not convey the dynamics of action and motion. Thus, the intensity of the verbal choices serves to heighten and emphasize the physical movements and vice versa as the force of the verbs shapes the kinetic dance. Through these specific linguistic choices, rap artists are saying that they are people of action and energy. Action is not passive; action means involvement. The audience is encouraged to move, get involved, and participate. In the next illustrations, the rap artists use this group of lexical choices to engage their audience:

*Well, **clap** ya hands then - **come** on,
Clap ya hands everybody
Clap ya hands , **come** on, **come** on
 Put ya hands together and **clap** 'em
 We Want Eazy Eazy E (Stanley, 1992: 102)*

*Just me, Fatback, and the crew
 We're doin' it all just for you
 We're strong as an ox and tall as a tree
 We can **rock** it so viciously
 We **throw** the highs in your eyes
 The bass in your face
 We're the funk machines that **rock** the human race
 Fatback Band King Tim III (Stanley 1992: 121)*

Rap music is a statement of a people who are moving through life and the lexicon reflects the activity of that movement. The verbs are vibrant, energetic, and strenuous.

These choices of instantaneous verbs make a statement and convey social meaning. The prolific use of instantaneous verbs reminds the listener that rap is a genre that is reflective of a community's incisive, fast-paced and vital life style. Rap music is making a statement that, as a genre, it is not going to take a passive role in life; rather it will be actively involved in the community by representing life's real issues.

5.1.2 Nouns

In addition to the categories and subclasses of verbs, nouns function as the other major lexical category that plays a significant role in rap lyrics. The types of nouns that are used are important for several reasons. Nouns, as lexical choices, convey relevant information because they are required for both argument structures and semantic-pragmatic functions.

Nouns fall into three subgroups: proper nouns, pronouns, and common nouns. Common nouns are further subclassified into concrete and abstract nouns.

Proper nouns

Proper nouns include a gamut of names as special markers of identity, events, or particular places. In rap lyrics, rap artists use proper nouns to identify and target problematic issues that the African-American community finds troublesome. For example, the proper noun "America" in the following excerpt is used as a linguistic tool to direct the audience's attention toward a sensitive issue that needs to be addressed to stimulate change:

*In America today
I have to regret to say
Somethin', somethin' is not right
And it deals with black and white
Black Is Black* Jungle Brothers (Stanley, 1992: 176)

The lexical item, *America*, is normally associated with individual freedom, social equality, and equal opportunity. However, in this example *America* is associated with something amiss. The lexical choice says something even greater than if the words United States were used. The lexical term *America* is identified as the term that refers to a set of ideals that have governed a people for over two centuries. It conjures up the concept of a country where freedom, equality, and inalienable rights are the standard. Here the rap artist uses the term to draw attention to the larger issue that he is addressing, as it relates to members of the African-American community.

In rap lyrics, proper nouns are also used to identify membership within the rap community. Rappers often name individual fellow performers to display a common bond, to claim in-group membership, and to foster a sense of solidarity. Chuck D of *Public Enemy* describes rap as "the CNN of young black Americans" (Bernard, 1992: 1). In the following example, proper nouns disclose an inner circle of specific individuals who are easily recognizable as members:

D.J. Doc you know he's down with us
D-Square he's down with us
Keyboard Money Mike is down with us
I.C.U. you know he's down with us
I'm Still #1 (KRS-One, 1988)

As much as the use of proper nouns reflects a sense of solidarity, they have also been used as a means to celebrate "self". "The question of identity" says James Bernard, "has been a troublesome one for blacks in the United States, where a lack of economic opportunity and positive images have stifled self-esteem. However, it appears that through the medium of rap music, blacks have found a haven for self expression" (1990:

1). In the following example, the rapper puts himself at the center of the narrative through the use of proper nouns and begins to brag about himself and his accomplishments. His communicative intent is to express how “*bad*” and “*def*” he is. He’s expressing his prowess:

*L.L. Cool J is your undertaker
Def hit-maker plus a bone breaker
Treble terminator, bass mutilator
You can drop your drawers, I'm a rapper castrator
Rock the Bells* L.L. Cool J. (Stanley, 1992: 192)

This rapper states that he is someone to be reckoned with. His individual identity is fixed within the community and secured by his “unique” rap. He has declares his identity and establishes his reputation through his verbal manipulation.

Personal pronouns

Rap artists use the personal pronoun “I” more often than any other pronoun, as

Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Percentages indicated by the use of specific pronouns

Type of pronoun	I	you sing/pl	he	she	it	we	they
F Count	721	185	79	30	101	84	91
Percent	56%	14%	6%	2%	8%	7%	7%

There are several reasons for the frequency of the first person in rap lyrics. These include the fact that “I” is used as the referent to the speaker. Also, the rap artist uses the first person pronoun to achieve his/her communicative intent as a “voice” or speaker for the

community. Within African-American communicative practices, whether in political or social spheres, being a verbally skilled “voice” is a hallmark of leadership. Thus, the speaker becomes the “voice” that represents him/herself as well as the community. He/She reinforces the fact that he/she as the performer, and as a leader, is someone to heed and emulate. As Tricia Rose states, “A given rap text is the personal and emotive voice of the rapper” (Rose, 1994: 88). For example, the following lyrics illustrate this rapper’s position of leadership as he speaks his “voice” against injustices:

*P-dog commin' up, I'm straight low
Pro-black and it ain't no joke
Commim straight from the mob that broke shit last time
Now I'm back with a brand new sick rhyme....
The Devil Made Me Do It Paris (Stanley, 1992: 246)*

In the next illustration, the rapper uses “I” as a marker of self-identification. He relates who he is and tells what he is doing. He states that through his own inner motivation he will be successful.

*I'm Sha-Rock and I can't be stopped
For all the fly guys, I will hit the top...
That's the Joint Funky Four and One More (Stanley, 1992: 130)*

This next example is an illustration of the speaker's self-evaluation. He professes his estimation of himself. By using the first person pronoun, **I**, the speaker communicates that he is someone who is full of action and he will not take a second rate status as a rap “voice”:

*I go with the flow and grow to let you know
I'll damage ya, I'm not an amateur
But a professional, unquestionable, without doubt superb
So full of action, my name should be a verb...
R.A.W. Big Daddy Kane (Stanley, 1992: 20)*

This next example communicates the speaker’s portrayal of a leader who,

through his rhymes, can influence the listener's mind:

*Now correct me if I'm wrong, I'm like moonshine
Take a sip of my rhyme and I take over your mind
'Cause I don't think like the average thinker
Livin' Like Hustlers Above The Law (Stanley, 1992: 1)*

Rap artists use the first person pronoun as a means of self-revelation. By interjecting the personal element into the lyrics, the lyrics become an expression of the artist's identity.

In addition to the first person pronoun, the second person singular/plural pronoun, *you*, is also used in rap lyrics. Even though the pronoun *you* is used less frequently in lyrics, when it is used it conveys its intention of interpersonal interaction with the speaker. The next excerpt from the rap artist, Run D.M.C. is a clear example of this:

*You should have gone to school
You could have learned a trade
But you laid in bed
Where the bums have laid
Now all the time you're crying that you're underpaid
It's Like That Run D. M. C. (Stanley, 1992: 271)*

The use of the second person singular/plural pronoun elevates the rap to a personal interactive level where the message can be more easily received. The interjection of the personal element makes the rap lyrics more real and believable. They establish and reinforce a social interactive function with the listener.

Common nouns

The common nouns used in rap lyrics represent the largest number of nouns. This group is subclassified into two categories: concrete and abstract nouns. The following table shows the frequency in which the subclasses of nouns appear in rap music lyrics. It clearly illustrates that concrete nouns are used far more than any other class of nouns.

Table 3: Types of nouns and their frequency count

Types of nouns	proper nouns pronouns	common		Total
		concrete	abstract	
Frequency count	480	2287	1327	4094
Percentage	12%	56%	32%	100%

The number of concrete nouns is almost double the number of abstract nouns. There are several distinct reasons why concrete nouns dominate the total number. Rap artists deal with real physical existence. As a result, they use lexical items that convey the physical material world in concrete and tangible terms. The artists present a picture of the real physical world to their audience using concrete nouns, which easily identify tangible realities for the members of the community. In essence, the lexicon must be direct and natural to present a real world picture to the audience.

Some examples of concrete nouns include: *coffee, cake, woman, man, girls, children, pocketbook, money, cash, bill, trigger, cops, body, clothes, shirt, school, and car*. Concrete nouns represent the physical existence of everyday reality. Rap artists use concrete nouns to establish and control their material world. They use lexical items that convey the material world in tangible terms. The examples that follow are illustrations of concrete nouns:

Stomp your feet and clap your hands
Cause You're listenin' to the sound of the Fatback band...
I'm hotter than tea, I'm sweeter than honey

*I'm not doin' it for the **money**
 I'm sugar-coated, double dunked
 I'm sweeter than the Almond Joy
 And grandma's sweet old **jam**
 Fatback Band King Tim III (Stanley, 1992: 121)*

*Talented **brothers** with a bouncin' **beat**
 And we learned out music from New York **streets**
 The Greatest Entertainer Doug E Fresh (Stanley, 1992: 97)*

In addition, since rap artists deal with real issues that face the African-American community, their rap lyrics often speak of their physical existence and life in the material world. The lexical choices reveal the struggles of the inner city community. The following excerpt is an example:

*Thinking of a master **plan**
 This ain't nothing but **sweat** inside my **hand**
 So I dig deeper - still comin up with **lint**
 Thinking how I'm gonna get some dead **Presidents**
 I need **money**, I used to be a stick up **kid**
 So I think of all the devious **things** I did
 I used to roll up, "this is a **hold up**- ain't nuttin funny
 Stop smilin ain't still don't nothin move but the **money**
 Paid in Full Eric B and Rakim (Rose, 1994: 94)*

In dealing with life's daily events and human needs, each respective speaker assumes the voice of a realist. Rap music is about the real issues of urban reality on the streets. The graphic subject content of some rap lyrics deals with partying, pimping, and police aggression. To portray those realities, the lexical choices have to relate to and describe them. Stanley states that "rap interprets and shapes the experience of American life" (1992: xxviii). These nouns reflect the realism of life for the urban African-American. Since speech behavior is social behavior, the rap artist's use of concrete nouns expresses his/her known physical existence (Labov, 1972). Without relating to physical

reality, rap artists would have a difficult time expressing the validity of their social reality.

Abstract nouns

The other subclass of common nouns that appears in rap lyrics is abstract nouns. The abstract nouns that appear give expression to ideas and embody psychological interpretations. They deal with imagination as well as concepts. The rap artist uses his/her lexical choices to fix those concepts within reality and lend credibility to them. The following examples are illustrations of how abstract nouns enable rap artists to bring concepts of the psyche into the reality of everyday life:

*I can take a phrase that's rarely heard
Flip it, now it's a daily word
Follow the Leader* Eric B and Rakim (Stanley, 1992: 113)

*As the rhythm's designed to bounce
What counts is that the rhyme's
Designed to fill your mind
Now that you've realized the pride's arrived
We got to pump the stuff to make us tough
From the heart
It's a start, a work of art
To revolutionize, make a change, nothin strange...
Fight the Power* Public Enemy (Stanley, 1992: 258)

The genre of rap music with its particular lexical choices has become the “principal medium for Black youth to express their views of the world and to create a sense of order” (Smitherman, 1997: 2). Through the deliberately selected lexical choices, rap music has developed into a form of urban linguistic journalism. Using rap as the medium, artists record the dreams, aspirations, and stark reality of life on the streets. The following example reports on how an imaginary kingdom would be if NAS were ruling:

imagine smokin' weed in the streets

*without cops harassin'
imagine going to court without no trial
lifestyles cruisin' blue behind my waters
no welfare supporters
more conscious of the way we raise our
daughters
If I Ruled the World* (NAS, 1996)

Reflected in this piece are the expressions of shared universal experiences. Most individuals fantasize about a place where they can obtain ultimate satisfaction or where they can control the circumstances of life. In this piece, the rap artist uses the lexical choices of abstract nouns to touch a sympathetic chord in the listener's mind and draw the listeners into a mutually shared emotional experience. Rap lyrics evoke feelings that are shared by people of all communities. Through carefully selected lexical choices rap artists have established rap as a linguistic performance that unites global sentiments.

5.2 Lexical Repetition

An essential element in all rap music language is repetition. Rap music is a genre that mixes the dynamics of repetition in language in various ways. Although repetition functions in multiple capacities in rap, this section focuses only on lexical repetition. Repetition involves recurrent patterns. Barbara Johnstone states that repetition hinges on how easily the audience can perceive that they have heard "another one of those" (1994: 3). Lexical repetition in rap lyrics includes repetition on the phonological and semantic levels. The internal networking of the syllables, phrases, and larger chunks of discourse is reworked and repeated to impact the audience with a pleasing melody of language.

For example, as we saw in Chapter 4, rap uses reduplication both at the level of the word and at the level of the phrase:

I said a hip hop

I said a hip hop
The hippie the hippie
To the hip hip hop, a you don't stop the rock it
To the bang bang boogie, say up jump the boogie
To the rhythm of the boogie, the beat
Rapper's Delight Sugarhill Gang (Stanley, 1992: 318)

Reduplication of syllables and phrases create a rhythmical orchestration of language.

“First order reduplication simply doubles a syllable as in *boo-boo* or *bye-bye*. Second order changes the initial consonant sound as in *bow-wow* and *mumbo-jumbo*. Third order reduplication changes the vowel sound as in *flip-flop*, *tip-top*, and in this case *hip-hop* (Safire, 1992: 19). For many years, *hippity-hop* has been a reduplication describing the motion of a rabbit. A rabbit hops along or sometimes bops along rhythmically, often jerkily (Safire, 1992: 19). The reduplication describing this movement is reminiscent of the audience’s bodily movements generated by the repeated words *hip hop the hippie, the hippie, to the hip hip hop a you don’t stop* as it flows with a staccato pulsation from the rap artist (Safire, 1992: 19).

Within rap lyrics, the patterns of lexical items are used as a linguistic strategy to create involvement with the audience. Deborah Tannen says that involvement is an “observable active participation” in the language that is produced (1989:11). The “state of being in coordinated interaction, as distinguished from mere co-presence” elicits an internal emotional connection “with listening being an active enterprise requiring interpretation” (Tannen 1989: 11,12). In the next illustration, lexical repetition is used to specifically involve and motivate the audience:

We want Eazy!”
Well, clap ya hands then - come on,
Clap ya hands everybody”
Clap ya hands, come on , come on

Put ya hands together and clap 'em
Now can y'all say Eazy
Come on, say it
We Want Eazy Eazy-E (Stanley, 1992: 102)

The audience repeatedly hears the lexical unit, *clap ya hands*. Through the repeated use of the lexical unit, the rap artist engages the audience. He calls them to respond and participate in the request that he is initiating. The repetition of the lexical items creates involvement and interaction. The involvement creates an aesthetic response (Tannen, 1989; 12). Thus, the repetitive lexical patterns foster an emotional response by creating an aesthetic appeal that results in connectedness.

Whether in spoken or written form, all language use has a communicative purpose. Similarly, when rap artists perform, their desire is to convey a specific intention through language. Lexical repetition facilitates the emphasis placed on ideas and strengthens each intended message. In the following example, the emphasis is on the repeated lexical unit *brake/break*. Even though the lexical units have two different meanings, the repetition of the units reinforces their similar sounds. Through repetition, the rap artist emphasizes and focuses on the significance of the similar sounding lexical units:

Brakes on a bus, brakes on a car
Breaks to make you a superstar
Breaks to win and breaks to loose
But these here breaks will rock your shoes
And these are the breaks
Break it up, break it up, break it up!
That's the Breaks Kurtis Blow (Stanley, 1992: 36)

In this genre an important part of the music is the *break*. The *break* is the part of the tune in which the drums take over. It is during the *breaks* that the audience

vehemently dances to the drumbeat. The lexical repetition of *break/brake* calls for the audience's involvement in the participation of the music via dance.

Lexical repetition is used far more commonly in conversational language than in written language. When used in speaking, repetition tells us that what is being repeated needs to be emphasized and what is being heard is important enough to be heard repeatedly (Tannen, 1989). Since rap music is a form of talk, repetition in this genre is used as a linguistic strategy to initiate a message, to convey information, to relate it to other information, and to reinforce statements.

Rap music's rhythmic talking makes use of a casual and informal style of language reflective of the street culture of the urban community. The use of repeated, short, casual, lexical items accommodates the phonological and rhythmical structure of everyday common language better than more formal lexical items. The use of informal lexical items supports the premise that the genre is used as a vehicle to portray the everyday realities of street culture. Formal words are not usually the norm of inner city street language. Therefore, the repetition of the casual lexical items is more closely related to the reality of everyday speech patterns.

Since casual speech consists of informal lexical items, repetition of these items indicates that the message that is being repeated is noteworthy. The listener knows that the repetition is repeated for a specific purpose and attention must be given to it.

In the following excerpted segment, the repeated lexical items, *down with us*, appears six times. This example, using the casual lexical terms, *down with us*, illustrates the force of repetition in conveying to the listener that the named individuals have a

common bond and that they are members of the rapper's inner circle. Repetition reinforces the importance of the lexical item and punctuates its meaning.

*D.J. Doc you know **he's down with us***
*D-Square **he's down with us***
*Keyboard Money Mike is **down with us***
*I.C.U. you know **he's down with us***
*D-Nice and Mc Boo, they're **down with us***
*Ms Melodie, she's **down with us...***
I'm Still #1 (KRS-One, 1988)

The lexical repetition of *down with us* plays a significant role in the determination of group membership. The rapper's repeated use of *us* implies that the audience is now included in the identification with the rapper and other artists, and this inclusion engenders solidarity within the group as a whole. The rap artist achieves his communicative intent of unifying the group. Interaction has been made and the audience has been acknowledged and identified as being one *with us*. A mutuality of group membership has been established. The rap artist has used lexical repetition to perform his communicative function of engaging the audience by identifying them with himself.

This next example uses repetition to call the audience to focus on the rapper's message. The repeated lexical item is stressed to make a point. Through the use of the repeated word *get* the rapper is making an appeal that the audience has to *get* or rather get involved:

*So **get up, 'a get, get, get down***
911 is a joke in yo' town
Get up, 'a get, get, get down
Late 911 wears the late crown
Get up, 'a get, get, get down
911 is a joke in yo' town
Get up, 'a get, get, get down
Late 911 wears the late crown
911 Is a Joke Public Enemy (Stanley, 1992: 260)

Lexical repetition is powerfully effective as a key feature in rap music that causes the listeners to experience the involvement with what is being said without being consciously aware of the strategy producing it (Johnstone, 1994: 3). The repeated lexical patterns of sounds and rhythms of speech create cohesion as they thrust the lexical choices at the audience. They engage the audience in a dynamic exchange and prove to be a most “salient feature of all verbal art” (Johnstone, 1994: xii).

5.3 Lexical Structure and Metrical Patterns

Using the recurring major lexical categories of nouns and verbs, rap artists choose their lexical items to sustain the metrical patterns, which they have devised for an entire set of lyrics. The verbs that are chosen emphasize a state of motion that is both energetic and fluid. The nouns with references to people, events, and places form the basis of interpersonal exchanges within every day life in the African-American community.

Without carefully selected stress patterns, plus phonological elements and repetitions of those elements, rap music would not be rap music at all. Therefore rap artists must consider both the sound of each morpheme, word or syllable and the meaning of each lexical choice. Thus the lexical choices are fundamental to the metrical pattern in rap lyrics. From the repertoire of lexical choices, rap artists select specific words that not only project their intended message but also meet the requirements of the particular metrical pattern of the rap. Since the choice of the words must explain and unfold the theme of the intended message, the words themselves must be carefully evaluated for their linguistic features. The lexical choices must coordinate with the particular metrical pattern of the background beat that the rap artist has selected. The rap artist must

accommodate the lexical choice with its intrinsic phonological features plus its semantic characteristics and coordinate it into the rap so that it cooperates with the metrical pattern. The following example illustrates how the rap artist uses the linguistic features and brings them into syncopation and cooperation with the metrical pattern:

*My title is the king of the FM mold
 See, my **volume** expands to **consume**
 And my structures emote a lyrical **heirloom**
 Vocally **pulsating**, I initiate **gyrating**
 Ya must respond to my bells, there's no **waiting**
 For the **duration**, there's no **articulation**
 Receiving **ovation** for the bell **association**
 The **vocalization** techniques I **employ**
 The voice of my shadow could take a **toy boy**
 The **injection** of bells into this **beat**
 The result-**enough energy** to amputate your **feet**
Creater insulator microphone **dominator**
 My name is Cool J, **manipulator innovator**
 Rock the Bells LL Cool J (Stanley, 1992: 192)*

Within the rap, internal and end rhyme are joined with multi-syllabic rhyme. In line eight every syllable of “the vocalization techniques I employ” corresponds with every syllable in line nine, “The voice of my shadow could take a toy boy”. (There are eleven syllables in each line.) The rap artist also makes use of other corresponding sound units such as: /um/ in *consume* and *heirloom*; [ŋ] in *pulsating*, *gyrating* and *waiting*; [s'en] in *duration*, *articulation*, *ovation*, *association*, *vocalization*, *injection*; [oj] in *employ*, *toy boy*, [it] in *beat*, *feet*; and [tor] in *creator*, *dominator*, *manipulator* and *innovator*. The artist also uses these phonological repetitions to carry the internal and end rhyme as well as the rhythm. He also makes use of alliteration in *bells*, *beat*, *energy*, and *enough*.

Thus, the choice of words is carefully selected based on the semantic content plus the phonological elements of the lexical choice to satisfy the rap artist's intention. Additionally, as seen in the example, each word the artist chooses must fit within a particular linguistic slot to achieve the intended message and satisfy the sustained metrical pattern. Moreover, with each lexical choice, the rap artist must be totally conscious of the background beat. He/she must coordinate the lexical choice with the number of beats per measure. Since each word is spoken to a specific beat, only carefully chosen lexical items can accommodate the intended framework. The beat of the meter has to be maintained and the lexical choices must synchronize with the background beat as the phonological elements of the lexical unit sustain and embellish the metrical pattern. As Dr. John Yasin states "each word chosen for the lyrics interacts with a beat or pulse" (1997: 90). In the following example, the lexical structure serves the metrical pattern. The rap artist has chosen verbs and nouns that correlate with the poetic and metrical structure to produce a sound that is musical and able to convey the rap artist's intended message:

*I'm everlastin'
 I can go on for days and days
 With rhyme displays that engrave deep as X-rays
 I can take a phrase that's rarely heard
 Flip it, now it's a daily word
 I can get iller than all my killin' barb
 But no alarm, Rakim'll remain calm
 Self-esteem makes me super superb
 The supreme before a microphone, still I find
 This was a tape I wasn't supposed to break
 I wasn't supposed to wait, but let's motivate
 Follow the Leader* Eric B & Rakim (Stanley, 1992: 113)

CHAPTER 6

Rap Music and Its Sentence Patterns: Syntactic Structure

6.0 Introduction

Even though rap music is formatted on a poetic foundation, it employs sentence structures that are similar to those in spoken language but with several interesting variations. Since rap music is a depiction of African-American inner city reality, its colloquial forms are based on everyday naturally- occurring language that is frequently heard in inner city communities. Its use of "street language" has set rap music apart as indecent and revealing, and has labeled it as both censurable and inflammatory.

However, it is not just the controversial lexicon with its powerfully imagistic implications that is the sole driving force of rap music. The syntactic patterning of the lexical items also plays a functional role in achieving the meaning and intention of the lyrics. Thus, the syntax is closely tied and related to the morphological and semantic structure. As pointed out by Labov (1972) and Mufwene and Rickford (1998), African-American performance practices may at times alter the English language phrase structure rules. It is these variations that this chapter will discuss.

Most observers of rap would think that syntax is merely a structural element of the lyrics and that it does not carry much communicative weight. However, this stylistic study shows that certain meanings become prominent in their communicative intent when they are selectively used in strategically placed syntactic patterns.

Rap artists use the features of syntactic constructions as tools to make a specific point, to accentuate meaning, and to gain the audience's full attention. Specific syntactic patterns are chosen to convey the passion and intensity of socio-cultural meanings that rap artists communicate to their audiences. The strength of the communicative intent might be rendered less powerful if the syntactic structures were arranged differently.

6.1 Syntactic Patterns and Features

Without carefully and purposefully selected syntactic structures, individual words might be understood but the intended meaning of an utterance would be rendered less powerful. Syntax is the skeletal structure that holds words together and enables their meaning to be conveyed with impetus. It is partially conveyed through word order. The standard pattern of English word order is Subject-Verb-Object ("I'm living large").

Rap artists manipulate the syntactical structure of this word order in their lyrics. Some of the significant syntactic patterns that routinely appear in rap lyrics are inverted word order, (Large is how I'm living"), which is reflected through recurrent foregrounding, and the imperative construction ("Clap ya hands"), which distinctly conveys a direct, clear message. Rap artists use these syntactic patterns to achieve various effects. While using these patterns, rap artists must continue to accommodate the metrical structure as they simultaneously highlight important information, capture the audience's attention, and motivate the audience into action.

6.1.1 Inverted Word Order

When writers compose, certain implied messages are expressed through different grammatical structures. When examining the syntactic features and patterns in rap music, the pattern of inverted word order appears as a particular structure of interest. Inverted word order is often used to give more emphasis to the message and to encode a particular constituent with importance. In syntax only an entire grammatical constituent can be inverted. The concept of constituent can be explained as a phrasal category; it can either be a subject, predicate, object, or prepositional phrase. All the elements of the entire phrase must be moved. Rap artists often move the most prominent idea to the front of the

sentence by inverting the word order. They use this structural pattern to give the constituent more importance in the sentence and to highlight it as a focal point.

Normal patterns of spoken language rarely use inverted word order unless some linguistic element is specifically being emphasized. In the following example, the rap artist uses this syntactic pattern to stress his intention.

To the front I walked, yeah, still unnoticed
Up on the stage all the eyes would be focused
A Little Bit of Dane Tonight Dana Dane (Stanley, 1992: 63)

Common grammatical construction might arrange the words as “I walked to the front, yeah, still unnoticed ... All the eyes would be focused up on the stage”. From a stylistic perspective, the rap artist has arranged the words so that the focal point of each phrase is foregrounded. The foregrounding of the constituent *to the front* immediately signifies that the *front* is the idea in focus and emphasizes that this individual (Dane) is no longer in the background. This individual has moved from a position of being behind to a forced position in front. *Up on the stage* signifies that he is above others in prestige. Individual do not get on stage without talent, hard work, and perseverance. This rapper is stating that he has taken a prominent position and all eyes are now focused on him. This order of syntactic arrangement heightens the poetic effect and forces a focus on the artist’s idea.

In the next example, the rap artist makes use of inverted word order to accentuate an event and emphasize the circumstance at hand. The phrase *to get his beeper number* is moved to the front to indicate an approach that a female fan has used to forge a relationship with the rapper:

Now she stops frontin' an' wants to speak

*And be comin' to all the shows
Every single weekend
To get his beeper number, she'd be beggin' please
Vapors Biz Markie (Stanley, 1992: 28)*

The constituent, *to get his beeper number* implies that the female fan wants to become more intimate with this male rapper. Her goal, after participating in multiple shows, is to become relationally involved. Therefore, the constituent is foregrounded to shift the emphasis to the important item.

In the next example, the phrase is once again foregrounded as a focal point. The constituent is placed in the front position to cooperate with the rhyme and metrical rhythm. The inverted syntax is used to maintain the metrical pattern of twelve beats while the phrase cooperates with the end rhyme of the words *date* and *wait*:

*Have you ever met a girl that you tried to date
But a year to make love she wanted you to wait
Just a Friend Biz Markie (Stanley, 1992: 23)*

In the following example, the rap artist inverts the word order to stress the importance of *having a few dollars more*. The rap artist uses repetition as a tool to accentuate the line. The repetition and fronting of the phrase *a few dollars more* is used as a communicative tool to catch the audience's attention and stress the fact that *a few dollars more* is a goal for most people and especially for those who live in urban decay:

*And all Stan wanted to make was a few dollars more
A few dollars more is what he started to make
Now he's drivin' around a Saab, with a house upstate
A Few Dollars More D Nice (Stanley, 1992: 62)*

In the next example, the phrase *what grownups would tell him* is placed in front for special significance regarding a characteristic of the hero of the rap:

I remember when he used to fight every day
What grownups would tell him he would never obey
Vapors Biz Markie (Stanley, 1992: 29)

This phrase is foregrounded to stress that at one point in the individual's life, members of the community held a particular opinion of him. It also implies that now there is a contrasting view pertaining to the manner in which members of the community view that same individual.

The recurrent syntactical pattern of inverted word order foregrounds information to assist in amplifying its meaning. In examining the next example, the rap artist places *for a meaning in life* in the initial position. It relates a sentiment, which many young people have to deal with:

When you feel your failure, sometimes it hurts
For a meaning in life is why you search
It's Like That Run D.M.C. (Stanley, 1992: 271)

6.1.2 Imperative

The imperative structure is a common syntactic pattern used in rap lyrics. By using verbs of command, rap artists motivate their audiences to perform their requests. The verb form that is used is either a verb of action in the instantaneous time frame or a durative verb, which conveys a state of continual motion. The verbs are direct and call others to respond through physical involvement. Rap uses the imperative structure to involve, command, and direct the audience to action. The imperative pattern reflects the action implicit in the mood, attitude, and tone of rap music.

These verbs are used in the initial position. The subject slot position remains open and is not explicitly expressed although the subject is universally known. Through this syntactic pattern, rap music is relating its message and ordering its listeners to join in

the action. Rap as a musical form is not static; it reflects real life which is constantly engaging and changing. The imperative form exemplifies the quick strong action and directives needed to survive life on the streets. Featured below are a few examples:

*So **kick** back and listen.*

Livin' Like Hustlers Above the Law (Stanley, 1992: 3)

***Deliver** Colonel Sanders down to Davey Jones's locker*

Rhyming and Stealin' Beastie Boys (Stanley, 1992: 13)

***Put** your hands in the air, **put** your hands in the air*

Playground Another Bad Creation (Stanley, 1992: 5)

***Twist and turn**, then you let your body glide*

Planet Rock Afrika Bambaataa and Soul Sonic Force (Stanley, 1992: 9)

The following imperative structures, while issuing forth commands, are also expressing rap music's ability to engage and involve its audience. Rap music is about action. Rap orders its audience to get involved:

*All right, **stop** what you're doin'*

'Cause I'm about to ruin

The Humpty Dance Digital Underground (Stanley, 1992: 82)

***Get** on it*

Don't stop

***Work** it all around the clock*

It Takes Two Rob Base and D.J. Ez Rock (Stanley, 1992: 9)

***Throw** your hands up in the sky*

*And **wave** 'em 'round from side to side*

The Breaks Kurtis Blow (Stanley, 1992: 36)

***Clap** ya hands then—**come** on*

***Clap** ya hands everybody*

***Clap** ya hands, **come** on, **come** on*

Put** ya hands together and **clap

We Want Eazy Eazy E (Stanley, 1992: 104)

***Clean** out your ears then **open** your eyes*

*And then **pay** at the door as a donation*

Superrappin' Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (Stanley, 1992: 145)

Each of the above examples is a call to action. Rap music pulsates as it uses the imperative structure to initiate momentum. These examples represent the direct “*in yo face*” attitude of rap. As rap artists use the forcefulness of the imperative structure, they are commanding the audience’s involvement.

6.2 Syntactic Patterns and Lexical Structure

The manner in which rap music is delivered determines the impact, power, and effectiveness of rap’s communicative intention. Rap is spoken in forceful words with a style of delivery that is unique and reflective of a community of people who view themselves as distinct and filled with ethnic pride. Its words are the outer expression of a speech community’s youth. Therefore, within the essence of rap lyrics, the lexicon drives the syntactic structures. The words that are used shape the syntax. For example, the use of instantaneous and durative verbs as major lexical items influences the dynamic forcefulness of how the syntactic structures must be fashioned. Since instantaneous verbs are used to convey the immediacy of the moment, they are often found in the initial position in sentences used in the imperative form. In the lyrics listed below several examples are highlighted:

Rock rock to the Planet Rock, don’t stop
Rock rock to the Planet Rock, don’t stop
*Just **hit** me*
*Just **taste** the funk and **hit** me*
*Just get down and **hit** me*
*Bambaataa’s jus’ getting’ so funky now, **hit** me*
Planet Rock Aafrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force (Stanley, 1992: 7)

Straight up B-boy, word to Miz
***Kickin’** and **flippin’** the rhymes for the kids*
Playground Another Bad Creation (Stanley, 1992: 5)

Since these words imply action and movement, they suggest the reality of present time. They signify that rap is moving and focusing on present realities. What is being spoken about is happening now.

In the next two examples, the inverted word order accentuates the meaning of the entire phrase. In the first illustration, in order to emphasize the lexical meaning of the word, *negative*, the rap artist places the item in the initial position. The syntactical structure forces the audience's attention onto the lexical choice. By presenting the word first in the sentence, the rap artist is focusing on the unhealthy atmosphere in the inner city. The artist uses foregrounding to draw attention to the most important information:

*Now life in this world can be such a bitch
and dreams are often torn and shattered and hard to stitch
Negative the attitude that runs the show
When the stage is the g-h-e-t-t-o
Ghetto Thang De La Soul (Stanley, 1992: 65)*

*Infested are the halls, also the brain
Daddy's broken down from ghetto pains
Ghetto Thang De La Soul (Stanley, 1992: 65)*

The final example is another illustration projecting a similar effect. The syntactic arrangement of fronting the lexical item, *large*, foregrounds the concept of the impressive lifestyle the rapper is experiencing and thus communicates the entire semantic content of the verse.

*Cold rockin' on the microphone
At home playin' little Capone
Large is how I'm livin', home
Playground Another Bad Creation (Stanley, 1992: 4)*

The messages could have been realized in regular SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) patterning but the effectiveness of the intended messages is projected more vividly

through the syntactical rearrangements. Thus the rap artist makes particular choices for his intended message because he/she knows that particular grammatical structures will prove more effective for his/her intended purpose. The listener can decipher the motivation of the speaker by examining the structure and thus discerning that the structure itself reflects the intended message.

6.3 Syntactic Structure and Metrical Patterns

The metrical patterns of any language are very significant in achieving lexical emphasis, sonorous quality, and intelligibility. Maintaining the metrical pattern is a major factor in the structural foundation of rap lyrics. The rhythm, stress, and intonation assist in accentuating meaning and signaling word importance. Often, rap artists subordinate the normal syntactic patterns to achieve the metrical patterns. These patterns are necessary to facilitate the internal and/or rhymed endings and in turn enhance the rhythmic flow. Because the metrical pattern must be preserved to maintain the rhythmic beat, a normal Subject-Verb-Object syntactical pattern is often manipulated to achieve and accommodate the desired metrical pattern. The syntactic pattern has to revolve around and adapt to the metrical structure to accommodate the rhythm of that structure. In turn, the metrical patterns are enhanced by the syntactic patterns that are coordinated within it.

In the following examples, the syntactic structure accommodates metrical patterns to safeguard phonological arrangements. The word order is different from normal speech patterns. Subject slots are suppressed, and phrasal categories behave like complete sentences.

Livin' large on the mike, doin' damage for the city

Livin' Like Hustlers Above the Law (Stanley, 1992: 1)

Housin' all girls from city to city
One for all and all for one
Taking out MC's with a big shotgun
Rhymin' and Stealin' Beastie Boys (Stanley, 1992: 13)

Kickin' and flippin' the rhymes for the kids
Playground Another Bad creation (Stanley, 1992: 4)

Nervous for a second then the record starts spinnin'
The Formula The Doc (Stanley, 1992: 92)

My Hooptie rollin'
Tail pipe draggin'
Heat don't work
And my girl keeps naggin'
My Hooptie Sir Mix a Lot (Stanley, 1992: 289)

With my brim cold bent to the side
I bump and slide
Go mack in the back, 187 to the side
Street Pilgrims pioneering the land
Above the law status with a gat in my hand
Livin' Like Hustlers Above the Law (Stanley, 1992: 1)

The syntactic structure preserves the phonological arrangements to enhance the flow of sounds. For its desired intention, rap music violates common syntactic rule structures and emphatically shows its uniqueness as a musically linguistic genre.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

7.0 Introduction

Rap music has sustained its position as a linguistic aesthetic in the forefront of the youth culture for nearly three decades. Rap artists creatively correlate linguistic features to achieve their intended communicative purposes and set rap apart as a distinctive African-American verbal expression. Rap artists employ a unique combination of phonological patterns, lexical choices and syntactic patterns as their medium of communication.

The manner in which rap artists choose to make their statements is socio-culturally bound and as a result, rap music has been called the “oral tradition of the Black cultural movement” (Smitherman, 1997: 1).

7.1 Linguistic Features of Rap Music: A Summary

Embodied within the very core of rap music are the linguistic features that make rap a powerfully communicative art form. Whether rap music is espousing themes on enjoying time with friends, male/female love games, the consequences of gang violence, or the injustices encountered in life, its unique use of linguistic features distinguishes rap from any other musical genre. The prominent use of distinctive linguistic features (included are its phonological, lexical, and syntactic patterns) characterizes rap music as a dynamic linguistic genre, which continues to remain unique in its linguistic expression.

Rap music is unprecedented in its use of phonological patterns to punctuate its syllabic structure. The staccato rhythm of phonological patterns pulsates and coordinates with the rhythmic background beat to create a sonorous medley of sounds that pointedly

emphasize and stress the rap artist's message. Numerous repetitions of phonological patterns, as exemplified in alliteration and assonance, create a dramatic statement as both vowels and consonants are reiterated for poetic effect. The phonological arrangements set in multi-patterned repetitions engage the listener in a coordinated interaction. Moreover, the careful choice of phonological structures and combinations facilitates and intensifies the metrical patterns to gain the listener's attention. These phonological manipulations add interest and depth to the sound quality of the rap as they augment, accentuate, and correlate the rhythmic structure. The use of phonology in this manner is original, appealing, and captivating. Through its forcefully dynamic and rhythmically moving phonological patterns, rap music states its purpose, which is to get its audience's attention and declare its voice.

Not only is the specific communicative intention of rap music being realized through its phonological features, but it is also being communicated through its lexical choices. As the phonological patterning displays African-American inventive characteristics, some lexical items are chosen for their prominence within the African-American vernacular of colloquial forms (e.g. *homie* / *friend*). Others are chosen for their unique inversion of meaning, which is coded as an ethnic expression (e.g. *def* / *exceptional*). In addition, rap artists choose certain lexical items because they deliberately fall outside of the socially acceptable word choices. One example would be the deliberate use of profane or taboo words, which have appeared characteristically within rap lyrics. While each lexical item must coordinate semantically within the context it must also work within the metrical framework to express the rap artists' intended message.

Since rap artists act as representatives for their community, their lexical choices must reflect social realities. Therefore, as evidenced in the frequency counts in chapter five, rap artists utilize two strikingly dominant lexical categories to convey social realities. They are verbs and nouns. The category of verbs subcategorizes into instantaneous verbs and non-instantaneous verbs. The non-instantaneous verbs further subcategorize into durative and stative verbs. The nouns subcategorize as well, with concrete nouns holding the major number of occurrences. Abstract nouns and proper names as categories trail behind. Combinations of these predominant categories are the lexical choices that carry the content of rap music's information.

The greatest number of verbs that are chosen fall into the instantaneous category. These verbs represent some display of physical movement or involvement. They are bounded by a time restriction and demand immediate action. Their implementation requires a quick resolution. This choice of verbs is representative of the fast-paced engaging lifestyle it takes to survive on the streets. In addition, since rap music is so verbally dynamic, the use of these verbs serves to punctuate the kinetic momentum of the rap as the rap artist energetically performs on stage. Rap music implies through instantaneous verbs that it is not passive but quick to command action. Thus, the occurrence of instantaneous verbs correlates with rap music's portrayal of being a kinetically powerful verbal expression.

The non-instantaneous verbs that rap artists choose are further subcategorized into durative and stative verbs. Durative verbs also emphasize movement. However, this movement represents the type that is perpetual. These verbs speak of the routine daily continuance of events. Both instantaneous and durative verbs indicate that actions are a

function of life and symbolically reflect the perpetual movement through life as a part of life's reality. To communicate specific messages to rap audiences, rap artists use each verb type. It is significant to note that only a small percentage of the total verbs chosen represent stative verbs. This dramatic decrease in the choice of this type of verb is due in part to the image that rap music presents as being a characteristically energetic linguistic performance that commands active responses rather than passive reception.

The significance of the choice of nouns in rap music also stands in agreement with rap music's communicative intention. Concrete nouns refer to the physical world and tangible items. Rappers use concrete nouns to deal with real things that can be seen, touched and recognized through the senses. These nouns reflect a real physical material world where rap artists and their audiences have to deal with basic issues of reality. They relate their struggles in concrete lexical terms to deal with the realities of life in the city.

When rap artists use abstract nouns they are representing ideas and intangible conceptual interpretations. These nouns refer to human impressions that relate to the psychological representations that might inspire and usher in motivation for change. However, whether rap artists choose concrete or abstract nouns, their choices are identifying areas of interaction with life's challenges.

As rap artists perform their genre, they specifically use syntactic structures that further punctuate their message. They choose sentence patterns based on the lexical structure since lexical items determine which structures can be used. On numerous occasions, they must violate the standard Subject-Verb-Object syntax. The syntactic patterns must be structurally constrained to guard and protect the metrical patterns, and to coincide with the phonological and lexical patterns that need to be blended together. The

sentential elements must be arranged to accommodate the metrical pattern to maintain the continuity of the rhythmic expression.

7.2 Socio-cultural Implications and Communicative Functions of Rap Music

Linguists such as Labov (1972), Milroy (1982) and others have recognized that language use and linguistic features are identifiable expressions of social identities and realities. They posit that the manner in which individuals use language in society is a manifestation of their distinct social identity. In addition, within the scope of language use, speech behavior is determined by social rules. These rules motivate language choices and constrain speech behavior. Since language functions as a means of reflecting social realities and identities, any study of rap language should result in a discovery of its significant socio-cultural and communicative implications.

Rap music is derived from an African-American heritage with its own social identity. When rap music first emerged in the African-American community, it was intended as a means of self-expression within its particular community. Therefore, in its early stages of development, rap music was not made public outside of the African-American speech community. It was viewed as a means of verbal expression for members of that particular speech community only (Yasin, 1998). From its inception, it contained significant linguistic features within its phonology, lexicon, and syntax that distinguished it as being socio-culturally bound. When it was thrust into the mainstream culture, members of the African-American community viewed the exposure of rap as an invasion of a cultural aesthetic.

As a product of the inner city street vernacular, rap music is a declaration of self-expression and cultural creativity for young African-Americans. As James Bernard says,

“Rap music is an expression of African-American pride and identity; it speaks its own language to the young African-American” (1990: 11). Through rap music young African-Americans have found an avenue where they can express their inner thoughts and feelings. For displaying his/her use of linguistic ingenuity, the rap artist receives recognition within the African-American community. Hence, the language the rappers use is the means by which they establish their social identity and ethnic pride. Rap artists also use their ingenuity with language to influence, establish, and solidify their role with their audiences and create a bond with the community. By speaking to and for the community, rap music has become a means of establishing and maintaining a sense of community (Rose, 1994: 5).

Rap music is a sensational linguistic phenomenon because it has a unique way of relaying its communicative intention. Saturated with African-American Vernacular English, rap music as a linguistic statement is saying that it defies the norm. The way in which rap artists play with language through deliberate linguistic choices and through the exercise of verbal skills and strategies determines the manner in which they effectively communicate with their audience. Rap artists employ particular features to foster an emotional response with their audience and drive home the message of inner city realities in their own particular rhetorical style. The linguistic features that cause rap music to stand out as an expressive communicative form are used in multiple ways and with colorful dynamic style. Rap music uses the captivating linguistic features of lexical choices, which coincide with phonological and syntactic patterns to create a dynamic expression, which more closely resembles poetry than standard lines of lyrics. Through

their ingenious use of lexical choices, rap artists are able to powerfully change ordinary expressions into dynamic word images to depict the realities of urban street life.

Rap music has dominated the nation's airwaves over the last several decades. Its verbally expressive linguistic nature and essence have had a tremendous influence on the youth culture. Manifestations of the rap genre can be witnessed in particular linguistic expressions, styles of clothing and modes of dress and dance. Rap music has emerged as a voice of the young African-American generation, who in the midst of entertaining themselves, are manifesting pride in their identity and are reflecting openly and honestly on social issues. What began as a purely African-American oriented sociolinguistic aesthetic has now become an international phenomenon reverberating within the global community.

In summary, rap music is filled with linguistic expressions that are specific to the African-American urban speech community and it is socio-culturally bound as a music phenomenon. It represents a display of ethnic creativity and cultural values, which has given expression to a speech community's voice. Rap music speaks to the youth generation as an energetic musical form of entertainment, communal cohesiveness and sense of African-American identity.

7.3 Future Work

As a communicative system, rap music stands out as a unique display of verbal dexterity. Its linguistic features represent an embellishment on and novel use of an enduring African-American oral tradition. The unique delivery and manner of presentation are so artistically intermingled with the linguistic presentation that its expression is a performance within itself. Borrowing from the African-American oral

tradition, rap artists, performing as rational actors, choose their own phonological, lexical, and syntactic features to achieve their communicative intention. This "literary stylistic" analysis has identified linguistic features on three levels that distinguish rap music and assist in accomplishing its communicative intention. The three levels of recurrent linguistic features shown forth as data demonstrate that linguistic choices are vital to meaning. Rap artists' selection of lexical items, which semantically and pragmatically fit the phonological scheme, are joined with an imaginative use of syntactic structures to give rap its verbal expressiveness. These linguistic features when combined together create an auditory dragnet that captivates the listener's attention.

Almost daily, new rap music is released. Because rap music is constantly being created, it is difficult to keep pace with the vast number of data to review. Within the scope of this study it would be impossible to assume that all aspects of linguistic features have been exhaustively examined. Therefore, in order to generalize the most frequently appearing linguistic features and patterns, a particular variety of rap lyrics might be investigated. For instance, the linguistic features of a specific theme or wave of rap music such as gangster rap or social resistance rap might be analyzed to determine if the same features appear repetitively and are shared among the lyrics. In addition, to remain more objective in interpreting the research findings, more extensive data could be collected and subjected to statistical analysis. Furthermore, the relationship between linguistic forms and communicative functions, and the relationship between linguistic forms and the speaker's choices, need further exploration. This can be done based on natural language data in relation to the speaker's or the writer's motivations for particular linguistic choices.

To conclude, this research represents only a single effort in the study of rap music as a linguistic phenomenon. Further research will provide new insights into the unique expressiveness of rap music. A language phenomenon that is widely celebrated and greatly embraced by the youth culture needs to be given additional serious linguistic attention.

References

- Adler, Jerry. (1990). "The Rap Attitude." *Newsweek*. March 19: 56.
- Akmajian, Adrian, Richard Demers, and Robert Harnish (1984).
Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication. Ed.2.
 Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Bakhtin, Michael. (1986). *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Caryl Emerson
 and Michael Holquist, (eds.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Baugh, John. (1983). *Black Street Speech: Its History, Structure and Survival*.
 Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bernard, James. (1990). "Rap is Testimonial to Black Pride: Arrandel Out of
 Touch with the Street." *Billboard*. November 24: 11.
- _____. (1992). "Pop Music: A Newcomer Abroad, Rap Speaks Up."
New York Times. August 23: sec. 2: 1.
- Blair, Elizabeth. (1993). "Commercialization of the Rap Music Youth
 Subculture." *Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol.2: 21- 32.
- Brogan, Terry V.F. (ed.). (1994). *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*.
 Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Burling, Robbins. (1973). *English in Black and White*. New York, NY: Holt,
 Rhinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Burns, Khephra. (1991). "Word from the Motherland." *Essence*. June: 44.
- Def Jef feat, and Etta James. (1989). "Droppin' Rhymes on Drums." *Just a Poet
 with Soul*. New York, NY: Delicious Vinyl BMG.
- Fee, Debi. (1988). "Rap Producers: Taking in the Challenge of Creating a Sense of
 Longevity Amid Change." *Billboard*. December: 8: 21.
- Fromkin, Victoria, and Robert Rodman. (1993). *An Introduction to Language*. Ed.5
 New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
- Hitchcock, H. Wiley, and Stanley Sadie. (eds.). (1986). *The New Grove
 Dictionary of American Music*. Vol. 4. New York, NY: Macmillan Press
 Limited.

- Holman, C. Hugh, and William Harmon. (1992). *A Handbook to Literature*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Johnstone, Barbara. (1994). *Repetitions in Discourse: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Vol.1. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Company.
- Johnson, Keith, and Helen Johnson. (1988). *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics. A Handbook for Linguistic Teaching*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Kane, Big Daddy. (1988). "Set It Off," *Long Live the Kane*. New York, NY: Cold Chillin' Music Publishing.
- Kaplan, Jeffrey P. (1995). *English Grammar: Principles and Facts*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc.
- Keyes, Cheryl L. (1996). "At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus." *Ethnomusicology*, Spring-Summer Vol.40. n 2: 223-26.
- _____. (1984). "Verbal Art Performance in Rap Music: The Conversation of the 80's." *Folklore Forum* 17. Vol. 2: 143-52.
- _____. (1991). "Rappin to the Beat: Rap Music as Street Culture Among African Americans." Diss., Department of Folklore, Indiana University.
- Kochman, Thomas. (1972). "Toward an Ethnography of Black American Speech Behavior" Thomas Kochman (ed.). *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America*. Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press.
- KRS One. (1995). "MC's Act Like They Don't Know," *KRS-One, KRS-One*. New York NY: Boogie Down Productions, Jive, RCA.
- _____. (1988) "I'm Still #1." *By All Means Necessary*. New York, NY: Boogie Down Productions, Jive, RCA.
- _____. (1989). "Who Protects Us from You," *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop*. New York, NY: Boogie Down Productions, Jive, RCA.
- Labov, William. (1972). *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Leech, Geoffrey, and Michael Short. (1981). *Style in Fiction. A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. NY: Longman Inc.
- Light, Alan. (1992). "L.A. Rappers Speak Out." *Rolling Stone*. May 15: 2.

- Major, Clarence. (1970). *Juba to Jive Dictionary of Afro-American Slang*. New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Marriot, Michael. (1990). "Hip Hop's Hectic Takeover." *New York Times*. September 26: C 9.
- Milroy, Leslie. (1982). "Language and Group Identity." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* Vol. 3. n 3: 207-16.
- Morgan, Marcyliena. (1992). "Language and the Hip Hop Nation: Redefining African American English." Unpublished manuscript. Department of Anthropology, University of California at Los Angeles.
- Mufwene, Salikoko, and John Rickford. (1998). *African-American English Structure History and Use*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- NAS. (1996). "if I ruled the world (imagine that)" *It Was Written*. New York, NY: Zomba Enterprises, Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.
- Nelson, George. (1986). "The Rhythm and the Blues." *Billboard*. February 1: 53.
- Palmer, Robert. (1985). "Street-smart Rapping Is Innovative Art Form." *The New York Times*. February 2: sec.C 13.
- Parrot, Thomas Marc. (ed.) (1953). *Shakespeare: Twenty-three Plays and the Sonnets*. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Perrine, Laurence. (1988). *Literature Structure Sound and Sense*. Ed.5. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.
- Richards, Jack C., John Platt and Heidi Platt. (1992). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. Singapore: Longman Singapore Publishers Pte. Ltd.
- Rose, Tricia. (1994). *Black Noise*. NH: University Press of New England.
- Rule, Sheila. (1994). "Generation Rap." *New York Times Magazine*. April 6: sec. 6: 42.
- Safire, William. (1992). "On Language: The Rap on Hip Hop." *New York Times Magazine*. Nov. 8: 19 (2).

- Sager, Mike. (1990). "The World According to America's Most-Wanted Rapper." *Rolling Stone*: October 13: 78 (8).
- Salaam, Mtume ya. (1995). "The Aesthetics of Rap." *African-American Review. Journal of Black Studies*. Summer: Vol. 29. n 2: 303 (13).
- Smitherman, Geneva. (1977). *'Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- _____. (1994). *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- _____. (1997). "The Chain Remain the Same." *Journal of Black Studies*. September: Vol. 29. n 1- 3 (23).
- Spencer, Jon. (1990). *Protest & Praise Sacred Music of Black Religion*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.
- Stanley, Lawrence A. (1992). *Rap the Lyrics*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Stephens, Robert and Christopher White. (1996). "Rapping: Sound, Meaning, and Diversity in African-American Popular Music." Unpublished manuscript.
- Tannen, Deborah. (1989). *Talking Voices*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Toop, David. (1984). *Rap Attack : African Jive to New York Hip Hop*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- _____. (1991). *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop*. London: Pluto Press.
- Trask, Robert L. (1996). *A Dictionary of Phonetics and Phonology*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Trudgill, Peter. (1974). *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Turner, George W. (1987). *Stylistics*. New York, NY: Viking Penguin Inc.
- Wales, Katie. (1989). *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. New York, NY: Longman Inc.
- Weber, Jean Jacques. (1996). *The Stylistic Reader: from Roman Jakobson to the Present*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Yasin, John A. (1997). "In Yo Face: Rappin' Beats Comin' at Ya."

Diss., Department of English, Columbia University Teachers College.

_____. (1998). June 4, Personal Interview.