

Linguistic research on music has largely focused on hip-hop, especially language and identity construction (e.g., Cutler, 1999), with recent research also examining hip-hop lyrics as a corpus for analysis (e.g., Alim, 2002; Morgan, 2002). However, other musical genres and hip-hop-related forms outside the U.S. have not yet received much attention in the literature. This is an important area of research for better understanding (a) the linguistic construction of style and (b) popular culture as a vehicle for language change and contact, especially among urban areas. The goal of this paper is to illustrate linguistic dispersion and mixing through the medium of popular culture—that is, to show a multidirectional linguistic exchange via popular culture. We focus on the linguistic features of UK grime music and show that consumers of this music use their knowledge of grime to portray sophisticated, urban personas.

The data for the analysis are lyrics from grime artists such as Lady Sovereign, Dizzee Rascal, Wiley, and the Roll Deep Crew. Grime, originating in London within the past 10 years, is a hybrid of Jamaican reggae, U.S. hip-hop, and UK garage styles of music. As such, it draws on linguistic features from this music. We analyze grime style as a bricolaging of lexical, morphosyntactic, and phonological features from reggae ("gal" for "woman", /t/ rather than /th/ in words like "ting" ["thing"]), hip-hop ("jiggy", "gots to"), and garage music and British English ("tichy", "arse").

To investigate how the grime style is interpreted and used by different audiences, we interviewed audience members from a Dizzee Rascal concert in a Southern/Southwestern U.S. city and analyzed online grime discussions. The consumers of this music portrayed themselves as experts, culling slang from disparate sources (like the artists themselves) to describe categories of music and to discuss the authenticity of grime artists (e.g., Lady Sovereign, who is white, female, 19 years old, and did not participate in the prerequisite pirate-radio culture of 'true' grime artists). In these local contexts, the meaning of grime style is essentially 'urban-ness' but an urban-ness that is distinct in different communities. For instance, in the Southern/Southwestern city, knowledge of grime can be as essential as knowing the history of the local outlaw-country scene in constructing an urban, culturally sophisticated persona.

Our study shows that grime is a cultural artifact resulting from language contact through popular culture: It is a bricolaging of linguistic features from Jamaica, the U.S., and the UK; it often involves the wholesale quoting and referencing of other artists; and it has the potential to spread linguistic innovation (in the way that "shizzle" was popularized through the U.S. hip-hop artist Snoop Dogg). Grime performers and their audience use the layered, cultural and linguistic knowledge expressed in grime to construct personas that are global, urban, but distinctly tailored to local communities.

References

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