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## Youth multilingualism in South Africa's hip-hop culture: A metapragmatic analysis

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### Abstract

This paper describes the practice of youth multilingualism in South Africa's hip-hop culture, in an online social media space and an advertising space. Based on a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork study of youth multilingual practices, comprising of the following data sets – multilingual interviews, observations, multilingual interactions and performances, documents and online social networking interactions – the paper reports on how young multilingual speakers active in the hip-hop culture of the country talk and write about the intermixing of racial and ethnic speech forms, as well as use registers in the practice of gendered identities. The argument I put forth in the paper is that the examples of youth multilingualism suggest a complex picture of youth multilingual contact in postcolonial South Africa, and one that require a sociocultural linguistic response that accounts for the cultural influence of youth multilingualisms in local hip-hop culture. To such an end, I suggest that multilingual policy planning in the country should be readjusted to the complex sociocultural changes we see emerge with youth multilingual practices.

### 1 Introduction

South Africa is a highly mobile society where young multilingual speakers differ across contexts in the way they combine the forms and functions of multilingualism, whether as individuals or as groups. Over the last 20 years, local sociolinguists in the country have recognized and described how the processes of a sociolinguistics of globalization are reconfiguring situations of language contact but also the practice and status of multilingualism as not only a heteroglossic linguistic phenomenon but one that now gives shape to the very idea that not only is there multilingualism but multilingualisms (Williams and Stroud, 2010). In particular, new forms of technology, the internet, computer-mediated communication forms and popular culture has had a profound impact on the practice and performance of multilingual identities, writing practices and speech styles.

Taking for instance the manner in which hip-hop has developed over the internet, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists alike have observed how the advent of new technologies, the internet and forms of computer-mediated communication have influenced not only the way young multilingual speaker use language to communicate and establish meanings, but have had an equally important impact on hip-hop culture generally and hip-hop language and identity performances specifically. Terkourafi



























As a female emcee, Kimmie Kool is presented as an anomaly in her workplace. She defies the boredom of her work's institutional culture by bringing in the coolness factor of local hip-hop culture. Her playful presentation of her manifold rap identities, in contradistinction to the office identity she needs to conform to, is a strong feature of Kimmie Kool, which she unpacks for her imagined interlocutor and viewing audience. As the camera cuts to her seated at her chair, she tells her imagined interlocutor that she is:

### **Extract 3. Seated, describing identities**

Kimmmie in the cut,  
Creamy cream puff.

Tiny Kimmmie  
Cause I'm not big  
I'm little.

#### Klein Kimmmie

Kimmmie cool.

It's betta to be cool than ice cold.

Around here they call me Kimberley.

In the above exchange with her interlocutor, we find that Kimmie Kool defines her negotiable rap identity in opposition to her imposed identity (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004) (compare Kiessling and Mouss, 2004:313, on resistant identity). She describes her negotiated identity as directly related to her rap moniker Kimmie and that her office colleagues could call her 'Tiny Kimmmie' or Kimmie Kool but they prefer to call her by her real name, 'Kimberley' (line 15). In effect, she demarcates her project identity in the making (following Kiessling and Mouss, 2004:314). Working through her rap persona, Kimmie critiques the institutional culture and language of her workplace. Kimberly, the officer worker, is required by her boss to work and not be or become Kimmie Kool, which her boss suggests is a distraction. For example, she complains to her imagined interviewer that she is not allowed to wear her pendant because 'Boss man says it disrupts, because it is an optical here in the office'.

It is clear from the advertisement that Kimmie Kool argues against her 'white manager' – Boss man – who is 'like a bald-eagle, always watching' (line 19) her. She draws on hip-hop culture's transgressive ideology to challenge the uncool factor caused by the cubicle workspaces in the office and the authoritative stance of her boss. For instance, she argues that it is better for her to be called by various names as she is able to negotiate many identities and because 'It's betta to be cool than ice cold' (line 14 above); that is to say, it is better to have a cool name than to have a boring one. And apart from the multiple identities tied to her rap name, Kimmie is also 'a bit of a gangsta /gɒŋstə/' (line 38) because she has 'street flair/flɔɪr/' (40); an interesting description used to describe herself, and one that is usually reserved for and uttered by male hip-hop artists who perform tough masculinities (see Williams, 2015). This is a further reflection on her transgressive rap persona.

The way in which Kimmie utters gangsta and flair in lines 38 and 40 is further phonological evidence of her Cape Flats English usage. It is also indicative of how she as a female

rapper employs youth multilingual practices and is able to move across culturally and discursively distinct linguistic markets. For example, in line 38 on the one hand, as she pronounces the word gangsta as /gɔŋŋsta/, she puts a bit of pressure on the release of the plosive /g/ (cf. Finn, 2008:212 for more evidence; see also Hastings, 1979, quoted in Wood, 1987:111), raises the front vowel /ɔ/ and lengthens the voiced velar nasal consonant /ŋ/ as typically enunciated by a stereotypical Cape Flats English speaker (see evidence by Wood, 1987:133). On the other hand, she pronounces /flair/ in line 40 as /flɔɪr/ by raising the back vowel, an open mid back rounded vowel /ɔ/, before a labiodental fricative (pronounced with the lower lip in front of the teeth rather than below the top teeth), followed by a near-close near-front unrounded vowel /ɪ/ and finally a voiced alveolar flap /r/. Both words pronounced by Kimmie provide evidence that she shares (or is sharing) in the linguistic norms of Cape Town's hip-hop speech community and the 'language community' of Cape Flats English speakers (following Silverstein, 1998:408; cited by Kiessling and Mouss, 2004:314).

It is clear that Kimmie Kool draws on the phonological features of Cape Flats English – the sound patterns – to project not only her rap identity but also to put on display that she has rap authenticity. Her stylization of Cape Flats English goes against the hegemonic masculinity register that we have typically come to associate with male hip-hop artists' language use (see Williams, 2015). In fact, actually stylizing her English in such a manner and linking her speech to her rap identity provides evidence that there are attempts to gender neutralize the local practice of hip-hop culture that has since its inception been male-dominated. She thus tries to redefine the terms of hip-hop culture by recasting the link between Cape Flats English, misogyny and the stereotypical understanding and approach to gender identities.

Further into the advertisement, she states that she is also a socialist (line 25), she likes to rap about social ills and is 'interested in social issues' (line 24), 'money' (line 26) and the trafficking of rhino horn (line 28). The performance of rap is for her an activity she defines her life with. She wakes up and her first words are raps (line 20). She raps in the shower, in the office, and she believes that if she 'bust(s) a rhyme right here' (line 23) in the office, her co-workers would be happy. Throughout the advertisement we see her perform mainly transgressive forms of rap, targeting the 'uncool' institutional strictures of the workplace she is subjected to. For example, she performs:

#### **Extract 4. Sits, performing rap**

Boss man  
boogie man  
big mouth like a pelican  
did I even finish my report?  
Ag, who gives a damn.

In the above, we see Kimmie go a step further in her transgressive character by commenting on her manager's body. Here she inserts into the workplace space the genre of rap battling where the objective is to attack the character, flow (or cool factor), authenticity and identity of one's opponent. Her strategy here is to dismiss her boss' authoritative

character and denigrate his white body. After this scene, the camera cuts to the corridor of the office space where Kimmie walks and further performs the following rap:

### **Extract 5. Stands, performing rap**

Who gives a hoot  
about that bossy boots.  
I'm knocking off at five only time I feel alive.

At the end of the advertisement, Kimmie Kool ends her interaction with the imagined interlocutor, forecasting her fame and fortune. She states that she sees her 'name in lights' (line 50) and in 'da stars' (line 51). Her interlocutor informs her that 'there is a rap audition down the road' (line 52). And she subsequently puts a Halls mint lozenge in her mouth, takes a deep breath, and the camera cuts to the Halls lozenge pack graphics.

To summarize, this example of Kimmie Kool illustrates the manner in which local hip-hop culture, hip-hop language and identities have been appropriated to revalue the use-value and exchange-value of 'things' (products) which often more than not results in 'new language needs and practices' (Duchêne and Heller, 2012:369). The advertisement re-associates the Halls product with hip-hop, that is to say, it recontextualizes the message of Halls to influence old customers and attract new younger ones. Hip-hop culture becomes the unofficial brand ambassador through the rap personae of Kimmie Kool, her rap lifestyle and language practice. Youth multilingualism in this instance has been set up to be structured in a particular way in a marketplace where languages, dialects and other forms of speech tied to hip-hop culture circulate freely and are up for appropriation by many. By appropriating youth multilingual communication from within the hip-hop culture, the Halls Company reinvents itself as cool for the youth marketplace – a unique 'niche market' that is redefining the role and status of multilingualism, identities and practices within the globalized new economy (Heller, 2011) of South Africa.

## **4 Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate the linguistic practices of young multilingual speakers active in the South African hip-hop culture on a Facebook wall post and in the advertising industry. The analysis of the two data sets demonstrates how young multilingual speakers talk about and do multilingualism, how stereotypical and often racialized personae are talked about in the intermixing of racial and ethnic speech forms, and how the use of register in the practice of gendered identities are all a significant features of the lived reality of young multilingual speakers in South Africa. Firstly, the data analysis of the Facebook wall post and comments reveals that linguistically young multilingual speakers are not only aware of everyday multilingual practices but remix various languages, language varieties and texting writing forms. Secondly, in the Halls advertisement the female rap personae has a particular target style, namely Cape Flats English, and as we saw in her performance and talk about her identities, when hip-hop become commercialized so too does youth multilingualism.

Considering the analysis, then, there is a need to depart from modernist lines of thinking and planning of language policy that insists on the monitoring and policing of multilingual populations, particularly the practices of young people. Instead we should



strive to develop language policies that are socioculturally adjustable to the fragmentary, hybridized and fluctuating identities of young multilingual speakers in postcolonial settings by recognizing that language policies are initially designed from the bottom-up and situated in reality. As such we should move towards not only recognizing but actually seriously considering that young multilingual speakers in a country like South Africa, and other postcolonial countries, move over boundaries now more than ever and because of such mobility stereotypical talk and ideologies of identities and practices are easily eroded as they emerge.

### **Notes**

3. See: <http://theundergroundangle.blogspot.no/2009/04/if-youve-ever-heard-driemanskap-join.html> (accessed 2 September 2013).
4. Freestyle rap battles are rap performance genres where an emcee produces clever lyrics and rhymes against an opponent, and performs in front of an audience, with the goal to score a win.
5. Coloureds are a mixed race people racially classified under apartheid South Africa.
6. All translations and IPA symbols are given in square brackets.
7. Metro FM is a popular radio station in South Africa, broadcasting from Johannesburg.
8. I first encountered this writing form in a rap performance by a young emcee who one night during the Suburban Menace hip-hop show told audience members that if they understood 'smengels' they would be able to understand his form of multilingual rap performing (see Williams and Stroud, 2010: 47). There the meaning the emcee conveyed to the audience is that youth multilingualism is indexical of combining a number of linguistic and semiotic resources in order for them, as emcees, to be understood.
9. Kimmie Kool Advertisement. Retrieved on 18 May 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RITxrVKgJfU>.

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