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RAPPING: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF ORAL TRADITION IN BLACK URBAN COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

PIETER REMES

1. *Introduction*

'RAPPING' is part of the cultural heritage of Black ghetto life. According to Black semantics it not only denotes ordinary conversation but also defines specific ways of communication. In the 1960s, many linguists, sociologists and psychologists conducted thorough research on the behaviour and language-use of 'ghetto Blacks'. The old, pathological interpretations of Black behaviour were discarded. A Black culture concept was acknowledged. The Civil Rights movement changed the in-

This essay draws on research carried out during 1987 and 1988 for a 'licence' thesis and degree in African History and Linguistics at the University of Ghent, Belgium. In September 1986 and September 1987, I stayed in the Lower East Side of New York City, collecting material, talking to people and learning about the social and cultural context of rap performances. Most of the data was gathered through the transcription of recorded rap performances (totalling some 150 pages of transcription), which I then analysed using Dell Hymes's model (see Hymes 1972) as a starting-point. I also recorded several radio broadcasts in New York City that specialized in rap (notably DJ Red Alert's Saturday night show). In Belgium, I have benefited from the assistance of Pierre Dockx, a DJ and passionate record collector, who let me use his extensive collection and guided me through the stacks of 12" singles and albums that fill his apartment. Along with this intensive immersion in old and new rap performances, I have drawn on a variety of literature dealing with African and African-American folklore and music genres, trying to trace verbal and musical patterns that preceded the rapping of the 1970s and 1980s.

dividual and collective identity of Black Americans. In sociolinguistic studies of that period, rapping was described as fluent, lively speech, highly determined by personal style. It is especially linked with the streets, an important concept in the life of Black youth: 'the streets *is* any place 'cept home, church or school' (Folb 1980: 76). It is a special domain where young people act and move about without direct control by adults or the authorities. For many youths the streets is (often literally)[1] their home. The streets is a place where the largest parts of their lives are lived, where friends and enemies are made, where they prove themselves in personal interaction and where they learn the abilities and techniques to face life. Life in the streets provides a hard, practical education. One's image is determined by one's street behaviour.

2. *Origins*

Since the mid-1970s, 'rapping' has been associated with the hip-hop movement, which originated in the South Bronx, New York. Those rap performances can be defined as rhyming in a specific rhythm, in between speech and song, or as 'rapid-fire street talk, generally rhymed, spoken to minimal musical accompaniment of a percussive ostinato, punctuated by an occasional guitar or bass chord' (Shaw 1986: 384). DJs (disc jockeys) control the record-players and mixers; MCs (masters of ceremony) compose lyrics, picking up inspiration from ghetto life. Now, rap has spread across America. In the ghettos of Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, New York and so on, young people are busy creating new rhymes and rhythms.

In the late 1960s, the Civil Rights movement lost such popular and charismatic leaders as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The movement for equal rights was overshadowed by violent race riots across the country. Among the people in the ghettos there was discontent, rage and despair. In this political vacuum street gangs began to flourish, as is described in this rap of the Mystery Crew:

> in the late sixties the gangs came out
> people runnin' in the crib, they were scared to come out
> yeah, the rebel gangs that controlled the streets
> you either did what you're told or you were dead meat!

Initially, the goal of these gangs was the defence of territory against rival gangs. Afrika Bambaataa, one of the central figures in the development of the rap

1. Streetwork, an organization in New York City, tries to improve the condition of homeless youth, gives advice and offers washing facilities; in 1987 it came in contact with 5500 homeless youths.

movement, was at that time a member of the powerful Black Spades, the largest Black gang in New York. In the period between 1968 and 1973 the violence culminated. Internal destruction, pressure from the city authorities, drugs, and the reaction of Black women to male violence eventually led to the downfall of gangs—although later on new and more violent gangs erupted as a result of the growing drugs trade. Gang leaders tried to produce alternatives for the Black ghetto youth. Slowly, the hierarchical gang structures mutated into more peaceful groups. Bambaataa started the Zulu Nation, initially The Organisation. Activities shifted from street violence to street music and dance. Thus, hip-hop started as a collective and positive reaction against the spiral of violence of the street gangs.

The ghettos were and are neglected by the government; the future prospects of a Black boy or girl are severely hampered by the surrounding ghetto. Poor education and housing, social instability, high unemployment, drug and alcohol addiction, high crime-rates, along with the second-rank position of Blacks and growing racism, put a heavy load on the development of ghetto youth. People like Bambaataa brought rival gangs together in organizing dance competitions. These were held in schools, neighbourhood centres and parks. In the beginning (1972 to 1974-5) rapping was marginal. This does not mean that it had a small audience, but that it was not a mainstream movement. Rappers performed almost exclusively in parks, on the streets or at parties in the ghetto. DJs recorded their mixes on cassettes and played these on loud ghetto-blasters in the streets, while the rappers performed live, bringing their own compositions.

Rappers create a new role model; they show young people the instruments for making their own future in a positive manner. They offer self-respect and revive Black consciousness and Black pride. It is no longer the negative image of the Black hustler that attracts the youth. Because rappers, such as Bambaataa, Ice-T and Just Ice, were formerly gang members, they possess street credibility and know the problems young Blacks are facing. The adolescents can identify themselves with the rappers when they rap about the dangers of crack (a form of heroin), because they are their equals. The channel through which the message is given is a part of their world. Rapping is a means of communication that young people learn in the streets. Daily they are confronted with new compositions. It is a collective movement of dancers, DJs, MCs and graffiti artists, wherein a talented individual can develop his or her skill. It is not a privileged occupation, since the basic ingredients are readily available: the human voice, record-players, old records, a mixer and an audience. Anybody can become a star in the rap firmament:

> the things I do, make me a star
> an' you can be too, if you know who you are
> just put your mind to it, you go real far
> like the pedal to the metal when you're drivin' a car

Even without record-players, young Blacks produce rhythms. Some people use their vocal organs as an instrument to imitate the sounds of drums and bass

normally produced by an electronic rhythm-box. The implosive and explosive sounds of the 'human beat box' are called clicks. Unfortunately, the written word is unsuitable for describing this phenomenon—one has to hear and see it.

The first MCs supported their DJs; they stimulated the dancing audience with their rhyming verses and introduced the DJs. The MC made the link between the audience and the DJ with rhymes like these:

> throw your hands in the air
> an' wave 'em like you just don't care
> young lady in the white, she'll bite all night
> young lady in the yellow got a faggot for a fellow...

Rap crews started to develop; MCs took turns at the microphone and competed for the favours of the audience. There is a lot of boasting and bragging, like Big Daddy Kane in his rap, 'R.A.W.':

> here I am, R.A.W.
> a terrorist, here to break trouble to—
> —phony MCs, I move on the seas
> I just conquer an' stop another rapper with ease
> second to none, makin' MCs run
> so don't try to step to me coz' I ain't the one
> I delete rappers just like Tylenol
> an' they know it ...
> I bust a rhyme with authority, superiority
> an' captivate the whole crowd's majority
> the rhymes are used, definitely amused
> better than *Dynasty* or *Hill Street Blues*
> I'm short to score an' go for more
> without a flaw coz' I get raw ...

Rappers make fun of others, even insult them. They boast about their sexual capacities, invent stories. Serious themes like racism, violence and drugs are also incorporated. Rappers draw inspiration from their own lives and give advice about ghetto life to younger generations.

3. *Communal Recreation*

Blues is a musical style in which musicians and singers have used and still use a common heritage. It grew out of the same tradition as spirituals and work songs. Time produced a distinct, musical and textual blues corpus on which everyone was free to draw. A blues song is communal property, so to say. Lyrics are used and

re-used, slightly transformed to produce a personal rendition in the actual performance. Structures were preserved, content changed.

The music that DJs produce shows proof of communal recreation, although in a highly novel way. I have already mentioned that they use record-players, records and mixing panels. DJs do not manipulate these technical devices in a traditional way. At normal parties, a DJ sees to it that the crossover from one record to another goes smoothly, combining the two in a short mix. The musical accompaniment of rap requires technical expertise, an extensive record collection and ingenuity. First, a DJ searches for interesting instrumental and/or vocal fragments. Then, with two record-players, a mixing panel and two copies of the same record, he proceeds as follows: he plays the fragment on record 1, then switches with the mixing panel to record 2, where the same fragment starts; when record 2 is playing, he turns record 1 back to the beginning of the fragment; by constantly switching from record 1 to record 2 he repeats the same fragment in a loop, thus producing new music. This is a simple example to explain the basic form of rap music, which initially was called 'break-beats'. Beats are broken up and then put together again. With more record-players (three, four or more), the DJ can build up the accompaniment with more fragments. To incorporate these fragments, several techniques have been developed: (a) *punch-phasing* consists of the repetition of a small fragment, like a drumbeat, guitar chord, shout etc.; (b) *scratching* is self-explanatory; the DJ quickly turns the record back and forth with his fingers, while the needle is still in the grooves, thus producing scratching sounds; (c) with *cutting*, he omits the back and forth movement of scratching and lets the record continue normally; (d) *spinback* is playing a fragment backwards. The record is put on top of a small box or bowl, on the record-player, and the needle is turned upside down. The same backwards playing can be achieved by enlarging the hole in the record, then inserting a piece of cardboard; finally, the DJ manually turns the record backwards (which requires dexterity, precision and speed control); (e) by manipulating the volume-button, a DJ can create a stuttering sound, a technique which is called *transform.*

In the beginning, all these techniques were executed manually. DJs were masters of their craft, as their names convey: Grandwizard Theodore, Grandmixer DST, Cut Creator and so on. With the advent of music computers the produced sounds can be digitally stored on a sampler. Yet the real expertise is found amongst those DJs who continue to operate manually; they own record archives, have excellent memories and can identify visually musical fragments on a record. They use strange, obscure, unknown as well as known records of any type; the list of records is the secret of their success (record labels are removed, records renamed). Grandmaster Flash sums it all up: 'What I would do, is pick the most climactic part or the strongest part, the funkiest part of the record, an' just continuously repeat that part over an' over again...it took me hours to figure out the best part of the record, I'd master it, I'd make a program out of, like, 30 or 40 records an' I'm ready to go out there an' kill 'em.'

Ideally, one should listen to the music with a music and rap connoisseur; only then is one able to recognize the different fragments and to relate them to the original versions. Fragments may comprise no longer than one or two seconds. The DJ has to see to it that the musical pieces fit the basic rhythm, in accordance with the number of 'beats per minute' (BPM). David Toop (1984: 36) gives a sharp description of the effect of this music: 'Like watching transformation effects in modern horror movies like *The Thing* or *The Howling*, the endless high-speed collaging of musical fragments leaves you breathless, searching for reference points. The beauty of dismembering hits lies in displacing familiarity.'

Hip-hop DJs combine all musical genres to create a new, distinct musical style, whereby old, forgotten, popular, obscure and new records are put to a new use.

4. *Call-and-Response Patterns*

Rap performances are often a display of complex structures of communication. The principle of call-and-response has been used to describe church services, where the audience responds to the preacher: speakers are hearers, and vice versa. A response is a new call, which causes a new response, etc. In rap performances I distinguish two variants of this principle. I call the first type *internal call-and-response*, as it is situated within one performance. The simplest pattern consists of one rapper, performing a cappella before an audience. The rhymes he or she recites before the audience cause such reactions as shouting, laughing, whistling, handclapping etc. The crowd gives an evaluation of the rapper's performance. The rapper can incorporate the crowd into his rap by rapping to them directly, as in the popular shout: 'Put your hands in the air an' wave 'em like you just don't care', or 'Young ladies in the house say ou-ouw!' This pattern can easily be expanded with musical or vocal interludes by a DJ or human beat box. The rapper puts the musical contribution of the DJ in the foreground of the performance by stimulating him or letting him show his talents: 'Grandmaster, cut faster!' or 'And to expand my musical plan / Cut Creator, rock the beat with your hand!' The DJ then displays his expertise and offers a musical extravaganza.

The pattern gets more complex when more rappers participate in one performance. (The audience is still present as an evaluative, third (or fourth, fifth etc.) participant.) I begin with a simple pattern involving two rappers (A and B), who take turns at reciting, and a DJ (Mix Master T) who cuts the records:

A. I'm the D.O.N. of the microphone
the A.L.D. that's always known
got the dangerous D that's just a case
most definitely I put other rappers in their place
an' for all you knuckleheads who cannot spell
I'm Donald D an' I rock well

B. on the microphone, never left alone
got more juice than Al Capone
I am the brother B in the place
guaranteed to put a smile on your face
but I'm here tonight to let you know
my zodiac's sign's L.E.O.
so one for the treble, two for the bass
come on, Master T, let's rock this place

Rappers can also alternate much faster, rhyme after rhyme, in a rapid succession of A/B/A/B/...:

A. don't burst out in a sweat
we haven't even started yet

B. you talk about a phantasy
an' how a real man should be

The pattern gets more complex when rapper B intervenes within the recitation of A. By doing this, he strengthens the verse-rhythm and puts more stress on one specific word. The formula of the pattern is A-(B)-A-(B)/A-(B)-A-(B)/... (the words in italics are recited by rapper B):

A. I got a friend named *Dale!*, he's cool as *hell!*
got a face like a *booger!*, a nose like a *snail!*
my friend named *Dale!* is locked in a *cell!*
coz' he's always gettin' *pooped!*, now his name is *Gale!*

The intensification of the rhyme can also be produced by both rappers, as in the following example, where two rappers again take turns at reciting. The pattern is A-(*A&B*)-A-(*A&B*)-.../B-(*A&B*)-B-(*A&B*)-...:

A. I had this girl named *Avy* guess what she *gave me*
it burned so *bad*, the doctors couldn't *save me*
I was *chillin'* till I got some *penicillin*
when I saw *Avy*, I started *illin'*

B. I met this girl from *Queens*, the freak of my *dreams*
she's so *def*, she made me *scream*
but I still like *Shauny*, she's real *corny*
I really like to *have her* coz' she gets really *horny*

Patterns expand, as more rappers participate in the performance. Groups of rappers, crews like The Treacherous Three and The Fearless Four, were formed and competed with other crews to win the support of the neighbourhood youth.

On another level, there is *external call-and-response*, which takes place between performances. The whole performance thus becomes a call. The rap illustrations already given will have made clear how rappers often boast about their superiority over other rappers. Rivals are insulted, either ironically or seriously. A performance can concentrate on these insults and therefore cause a response by the offended. Through the evolution of hip-hop, one can identify strings of performances in a call-and-response pattern.

There is, for example, the controversy of the Roxannes. Several female rappers, all called Roxanne (in real life or on stage), claimed to be the original, the first Roxanne. The girls copied each other's style ('to bite' in slang), which obviously caused confusion. I believe there were three or four competitors for the title of 'The Real Roxanne'. Each rap performance was a call to the other three, a claim of originality, a cause and effect. A string of raps emerged: 'The Real Roxanne' (Roxanne 1.); 'Roxanne's Revenge' (Roxanne Shanté); 'Roxanne, You're Through' (Sparky D., who is in real life Roxanne 2); 'Bite This!' (Roxanne Shanté); 'The Battle' (Sparky D. vs. the Playgirls); 'Have a Nice Day!' (Roxanne Shanté) and so on. The verbal fight between the girls was not just play; each rap was a serious defence of the rapper's position in the rap world. I can illustrate the controversy with excerpts from these performances:

The Real Roxanne:

I'm Roxanne, the lady devastator
I make you feel hotter than it is in Grenada
the R.O.X.A.N.N.E., Roxanne is who I be
I got a little rhyme for you each
I seen you girls, they both need a leash
such bow-wow babies, I think they got rabies
you think you're touchin' me, boy, you must be crazy

Roxanne Shanté:

the rhymes you're about to hear me recite
are dedicated to all of those who bite
talk about how they're so devoted
take my rhymes, you swear they wrote it
the way I feel right now, you see
there ain't another MC in the world like me
coz' the rhymes I say, put me at the top
defy all you other MCs to stop

Sparky D:

see, it must be true what they say about you
they made you feel the talk of the town
but now, Roxanne, you're gonna look like a clown
you sound like you're fresh out of junior high school

if you think you're a rapper, you must be a fool
I'm better than ever, you can never be this clever
my rap is so strong, it's tougher than leather
don't ever forget, this is Sparky D's world
an' you're livin' in it!

The external call-and-response also occurs in a more general way. Rapping is then a communicative act between rappers and society. There have been periods in which raps were meaningless, consisting of idle boasts. Other rappers felt propelled to react against this. They accused others of neglecting their responsibility, which in their view is to inform the ghetto youth. They ridicule the macho image of male rappers who boast about their fancy cars and sexual capacities. Rap is to them a means of expression, of speaking up in a nation that ignores the situation of the ghetto. Rap is thus a response to a society that sees ghetto Blacks as second-rank citizens. Or as Doug E. Fresh says: 'the main message to our music is have something to believe in an' be yourself an' let people hear that we're not as stupid and as ignorant as they think we are.' These responses are not directed to specific persons. The rappers want to change certain trends in rap. It is a collective 'response' to a wide scope of 'calls', varying from egocentric boasts to negative attitudes among rappers to the social, political and economic issues of American society. The raps are directed to the Black community and/or mainstream society. It can also be an ideological response, as is the case with the many rappers who are Muslims.

5. *The Verbal Battle*

Boasting and bragging is omnipresent in rap music. Rivals are insulted, in a personal or general way, as in this rhyme of Big Daddy Kane: 'I put other rappers out of their misery/ kill 'em in a battle an' make the more history'. I consider the verbal contest or fight, in the context of hip-hop, as a way of speaking in which the speaker tries to prove his superiority by making the best, fastest, most interesting or original rap. The battle is also waged by the wizardry of DJs, but here I shall concentrate on the MCs.

There exists a long tradition of 'boasting and bragging' in combination with verbal insult or fighting. A person who boasts about his verbal, physical or sexual abilities, can expect that his audience will review his claims. Thomas Kochman has described the boasting and the reaction to it in his *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (1981). The verbal expertise that Blacks display in a competition (of rap-rhymes, story-telling etc.), results from the importance of 'orality' in Black culture. The Black community values and encourages verbal qualities, in the present and in the past. In the ghetto, the handling of words is a social skill, learned on the

streets in verbal duels; it is a preparation for later life. In the past, during slavery, oral expression was often the only means Blacks had of alleviating their condition. Literacy was denied to them, contributing to the development of 'oral expression', the importance of which is also reminiscent of the place that it had, and has, in many African cultures. The African tradition of fables was continued and transformed in America; a good story-teller was appreciated for the entertainment value and the social skills that were embedded in his or her stories. Through the animal fable, anger and frustrations were let out. The bluffing animal trickster displayed many verbal manipulative techniques that slaves could use in their everyday life.

In the twentieth century, long narrative poems, collectively known as *The Signifying Monkey*, were written down (see Gates 1988; Levine 1977). The theme was a traditional one: a weak animal, the monkey, uses his tricks to stir trouble between stronger animals; the monkey, free from danger, then enjoys the resulting conflict. The poems were mostly told by men and contain violence, insults and obscenities. For example:

> There hadn't been no shift for quite a bit
> so the Monkey thought he'd start some of his signifying shit.
> It was one bright summer day the Monkey told the Lion,
> 'There's a big bad burly motherfucker livin' down your way.'
> He said, 'You know your mother that you love so dear?
> Said anybody can have her for a ten-cent glass of beer.

Several speakers invented new couplets, reused older fragments of fables and competed with each other. Signifying developed into a technique of manipulation through indirection, later re-emerging in another verbal game, 'Playing the Dozens' or 'Sounding'. Verbal insults were already part of many stories, but in the ghetto the insults achieved a ritual nature in the verbal game. Beginning with stereotyped expressions, rhymes were created by young Blacks. For example:

> Ten pound iron, ten pound steel.
> Your mother's vagina is like a steering wheel.
> I hate to talk about your mother, she's a good old soul,
> she got a ten-ton pussy and a rubber asshole.

These verses can initiate a response like: 'At least my mother ain't no railroad track, laid all over the country.' Ritual insults are typical of young male teenagers. In the speech event, we find two participants and the audience. After an insult by speaker A, the audience gives its evaluation; then speaker B tries to top that insult. If one speaker's rhymes are exhausted, another competitor takes his place. The result is a long exchange of insults and evaluations (e): A1-e-B1-e-A2-e-B2-e-A3-e-C1-... These ritual insults do not have factual value; the claims do not require refutation. On the other hand, the ritual nature can disappear when the insults are highly personalized. The offended speaker might react with a denial, excuses or even violence.

In the 'Dozens', boys distance themselves from the mother-son relationship. The relationship with their peers comes first. Within the peer-group, they express their identity. At the same time, it confirms the separation between life on the streets and life at home. The insults are part of street socialization. The verbal insults are an ambivalent activity combining play with real life; in the ghetto the threat of violence is real, in the 'Dozens' it is hidden under the surface.

Insults are incorporated in many rap lyrics. The insults are speech acts in the larger speech event of the rap performance. Some rappers, like Hostyle, go further than the 'Dozens'; their raps contain highly explicit lyrics, directed not towards mothers, but girlfriends: 'every time my guys haul you, they give me a call / coz' your pussy's like rubber, one size fits all.' Sexual adventures in raps often have ironic or humorous intentions; young Blacks (male and female) test their limits and try out role models.

6. *Language Use in Raps*

The language use of ghetto youth in raps depends on multiple factors. Language competence is developed at home and on the streets, through education and the socialization process. The use of a special language, i.e. slang, is a means of separating oneself from others. In rap, we find a combination of Black English and slang terminology. For most young Blacks, the use of slang is connected with their peer group and life on the streets. Black English is linked with the home and the streets. Many of the grammatical structures of Black English, as described by such linguists as Baugh (1983) and Smitherman (1977), are found in rap lyrics. The following are some common examples:

Deletion of 'to be':	she real skinny who you lookin' at with a face like that
The invariable 'be':	you be on a mission females be out here I think it be cheaper
The progressive 'been':	they been goin' at it since time began they been had by a hustler
Switching alternation of 'was'/'were', single/plural:	we was with it me an' my girl was watchin' VHS you's got to chill while they all is gettin' together

The perfective 'done':	look what you done did I was done sneezin' an' coughin'
The past 'seen':	she stopped the car when she seen me lookin' I seen him eatin' dogfood out of a can
Double or multiple negation:	coz' ain't nothing but sweat inside my hands I don't do no crime it just ain't never gonna end our Chinese brothers don't cop no plea
Contraction of 'going' to 'gonna' to 'a':	I'm 'a make you dance I'm 'a kill that girl next time I see her
Possessive constructions:	who mouths keep yappin' an' flappin'
Switching 'it'/ 'there':	it's got to be a better way the only way that it's gonna be peace
Varia/hypercorrection:	I'm never say I'm sorry you shouldn't 've did that, brother that's the place where me an' he hang out

These grammatical structures represent only a part of the total grammar of Black English. Along with these structures, the Black youth use a number of slang words in their conversations.

7. *Functions and Themes*

7.1 Primary functions

The primary functions of rapping are external: I situate them outside the particular performance. These functions relate to the totality of performance. In the early days, the primary function of rapping was to change gang-related violence. Creativity took the place of destruction. Today rapping still conserves this function, although hip-hop now has a new adversary, the crack business. This drug trade is so profitable that many young people would choose a career in the production and distribution of the drug, if it were not for hip-hop. The development of rapping and mixing created another primary function: through music and

rhymes the youth could escape the ghetto enviroment. With the rise of small, Black record companies, opportunities have grown and talented young Blacks can work their way out of the ghetto. Evidently, one does not get rich instantly (only a happy few achieve this). But the combination of different activities (music, dance etc.) enables youths to improve their lives. With small record editions, stage shows and private parties, young Blacks earn considerably more than they would in, for example, a low-paid restaurant job.

A third primary function of rap is that Black youth now have their own communication medium. They can utter their grievances, warn their fellows or even entertain them in a proper style. Because they themselves created this medium, they can take a stronger position within the Black community. Rap used to be considered by older generations as trendy, something that would fade rather quickly. Now, after about thirteen years, hip-hop is still alive and kicking. The self-respect of Black youth has grown and a positive outlook has developed, despite the negative environment and new risks (such as crack) of the ghetto.

7.2 Secondary functions

The above functions result directly from the performances themselves. In the rap material I collected, different themes are elaborated. Every performance shares one secondary function, that is, an expressive one. The speaker gives a performance to bring forward his or her personality. He or she projects an identity, physical appearance and style in the performance, hoping to get a positive response from the audience. Style can be expressed through intonation, body movement, facial expression etc., in a live performance. It is also an internal part of the rap itself. The words one chooses, how one uses those words and builds a rhyme-pattern, in short, the way in which a male or female rapper composes the text, determines style.

Each rapper has his or her own personality, sometimes indicated by his or her name: Sweet Tee, Easy E, Schoolly D, LL Cool J, and so on. DJs take up titles like Grandmaster Flash, Grandmixer DST., Cut Creator, Chuck Chill-Out, Terminator X. Each name is like a 'tag', a marking like those graffiti-artists leave behind on walls, trucks and so on. LL Cool J elaborates on his name:

ladies' love, legend in leather
long an' lean, an' I don't wear platter
last of the red hot lovin' MCs
lookin' for little, that's my theoria
goes quick like lightnin', too excitin'
lover of ladies, don't allow bitin'
level-headed leader, toy-boy feeder
could love life an' I rhyme by the beater
ladies' love, long, hard an' mean
an' now you know what LL means

A second function of rap can be a directive one: rap is used as an instrument to move people to do certain things. With these raps, we observe two secondary functions (expressive and directive); the directive one is dominant. The raps contain an informative component that dominates the communicative interaction between rapper and audience. The directive function can be found in a rap of Kool Moe Dee, 'Go See The Doctor'. In it young people are made aware, in a humorous way, that sexual contacts can have less than pleasant consequences. The rapper gets a sexually transmitted disease and has to see a doctor about a cure:

an' now I know why her ex-boyfriend Dave
calls her Mrs Microwave
coz' she was hotter than an oven an' I had to learn
the hard way, stay in a microwave too long, you could burn.
three days later, go see the doctor
as I turned around to receive my injection
I said: next time I'll use some protection
if I see another girl an' I get an erection
I'm walkin' in the other direction
cos' I don't wanna do the sick sick thang
I'm keepin' my prick inside my pants
an' if I see another girl an' I know I can rock her
before I push up, I make her go see the doctor

The advice given in these raps often has more success than official, government-sponsored campaigns. The information is transmitted through a communication medium of the young people. The ghetto youth identify with the speaker, since he is one of them, he shares their experience, uses the same language and acts according to their norms.

Such information touches various fields: drugs, sex, education, religion, gangs and so on. The directive function is narrowed down by the informative component (theme) of the rap. Because of this close relation between function and theme, further classification will clarify the function of direction with an analysis of themes in raps.

7.3 The relation between function and theme

The following classification of raps should be considered as a guide to the vast amount of rap performances, not as a rigid framework of 'rap-ology'. Each rap contains several functions and themes. The classification is set up as follows: a rap in one category is dominated by the characteristics of that category.

7.3.1 Party or nonsense raps

This type of rap only has an expressive function. The rapper wants to entertain his audience by displaying his rhyming ability in word-games. During the first period of hip-hop, these raps were very commom. In 'Rappers Delight' (one of the first rap records to receive wide distribution) the rapper utters nonsensical, amusing rhymes:

I said a hip hop, the hibby, the hibby
do the hip hip hoppy
you don't stop rocking
until the bang bang boogie
say up jump the boogie
to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat

These word rhymes follow the DJ's rhythm. The rapper uses words, but has dropped their semantic value, so that the sound value prevails. 'Funky Rapping' from Rick & DJ Jimmie Jazz is another example. He combines nonsense with meaningful rhymes, in a fast flow of sounds:

you see, fly fly so fly, you wonder why
you try to write rhymes an' you never do it this way
you see see, it's me, your MC Ricky
an' when it comes to rapping, you know I don't play
I rock rock nonstop, rhyme till you drop
my beat beat so sweet, you must move your feet
my style is so funky, yeah, you must admit
that everytime you hear my rappin'
it's the best you can git

Nonsense words and sounds have been used to accompany the music for a long time, producing sounds that sometimes imitate tap dancing and rhythms from the dance-halls.

These 'party raps' provide us with excellent material to examine the different kinds of rhyme. Most rhymes use one or more types of rhyme. Any person who hears raps or reads a transcription of a rap, will immediatly notice the strong end-rhymes of the verses. The internal rhyme is also clearly represented. An illustration in which both rhymes are present, is the following rap of Run DMC:

coz' the things I *do*, makes me a *star*
an' you can be *too*, if you know who you *are*
just put your mind to it, you go real *far*
like the *pedal* to the *metal* when you're drivin' a *car*

In some raps, the rhyme is repeated in several verses:

> I get strong an' *titanic*, do work like a *mechanic*
> makin' MC's *panic*, they all get *frantic* an' *sceptic*
> like a girl on a *contraceptic*
> as I rock forth, hey, what *respect is*

Alliteration and initial rhyme are also used, but less frequently. I have already given LL Cool J's rap, with its constant 'l' alliteration. There are numerous other examples: 'come an' come again as I pick up the pen', 'a midranged migraine, cancered membrane' or 'that he can breathe, think, talk an' bleed'. Note the 'p', 'm/r' and 'b/t' alliterative rhymes.

The rhyme schema in most raps is AA/BB/CC/DD. Among the older raps we find the schema ABBA, but this is not so frequently found in more recent raps. The rhythm of the verse is very variable; in one verse the words are uttered in a fast recitation, while in the next verse words are spun out, sounds are extended. It is difficult to illustrate this in written form—the rhythm is a strong element in the oral performance; perhaps the following verse will clarify the alternation of rhythms:

> tantalizin' technical tilt but don't try
> you spell my name T.O.N.Y.

The alliterative 't' in verse one speeds up the rhythm, while in verse two the spelling of the name slows down the rhythm.

7.3.2 Boast/insult raps

This type combines self-appraisal and insults, since in most boast raps insults are included. A rapper boasts about his ability, comparing it with that of (inferior) rivals. I have already described the rap polemic about the 'real' Roxanne. This verbal battle also shows that the art of boasting and insulting is not just a prerogative of male rappers. The macho boasts and exaggerations were originally a male factor for reputation building in the ghetto, but now female rappers are just as good (or bad!).

Boast raps have a dominant expressive function. The rapper puts his personality on stage, hoping his audience will appreciate his competence and confirm his superiority. The boast element in raps is balanced between humorous exaggeration and genuine self-appraisal; the latter has to be validated in reality. It is often a combination of both. Many rappers claim to be the best around, and they try to prove it with original lyrics and highly personalized performances. The threatening insults in boast raps mostly originate from the verbal imagination of a rapper. A rapper tries to intimidate his rivals with words. Listeners do not expect that such threats as 'I'll kill them in a battle' will be carried out.

The raps of this category are defined by two components: insults and boasts. Sweet Tee's rap 'I Got this Feeling' is a good example of a boast rap:

> turn up the music, I'm a fanatic
> make it heard from basement to attic
> keepin' you hooked like an addiction
> Sweet Tee is fact not fiction
> on the records you hear me rhymin'
> on the charts you see me climbin'
> to the top of the deck an' I'm dealin'
> Sweet Tee's an effect an' I got the feeling

Rappers do not only boast about their verbal capacities; they boast about their sexual performance or glorify their neighbourhood. Many misunderstandings arise in the White community about Black bragging and boasting.

7.3.3 Fun raps

In this category I place narrative raps. A number of these long rap stories are dominated by humour. There is, for example, Cinderfella Dana Dane, a male rapper, who transformed the fairy-tale into a modern setting. Another rapper tells about his experiences one Saturday morning. He wakes up, late for work, rushes out to his car. The car started all right but the tyres were flat; the bus service is suspended; he steals a bicycle, is pursued by a police patrol, but gets distracted by a girl on the sidewalk; he doesn't notice the 'Men at Work' sign and tumbles into a pot-hole, at which point the police arrest him. He ends up in a prison cell, calls his boss to let him know that he won't be in for work. His boss is surprised; it's Saturday, he wasn't supposed to come to work. The telephone is the dominant theme in another story. The owner of the telephone can't handle it very well; he always gets confused with all the girls who call him. This leads to quarrels, fights and he is left by his girlfriend(s). The problem gets solved when he buys an answering machine. Some stories relate unfortunate love affairs.

The common element in all these raps is humour. Indirectly, they tear down the rough macho image that other rappers portray in their boasts. These are stories in which the underdog, the anti-hero is the main character. Such figures can give young people more self-confidence.

7.3.4 Message raps

Destructive gang violence led to the hip-hop movement. Rappers produced serious lyrics and closely examined ghetto life. These raps are called message raps. Their function is predominantly directive: the information, not the personality or the style of the rapper, causes the audience to react. The message/information deals with

a variety of subjects. The Communication Posse stimulates young people to continue their education; a rap commercial advertises for an employment programme:

> you said that gettin' paid is something you wanted too
> so let the Summer Youth Employment Program benefit you
> now you're young an' you're smart
> an' you wanna be a part
> just apply for the job before the summer start
> don't sit around tryin' to be real cool
> see, at S.Y.E.P. you get paid in full

The raps of Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five are sharp criticisms of the ghetto condition. They treat such negative aspects of ghetto life as addiction, meaningless violence, homelessness, economic recession, teenage mothers, irresponsible fathers, unemployment, petty crime, suicide etc. Only the strong can survive in such a world, according to The Furious Five. The children come into this world with a clear mind:

> remember a child is born with no state of mind
> he was blind to the ways of mankind
> got a smile in on you but he's frownin' too
> becoz' only god knows what you go through

These raps are at the same time a call to think positive, to stand up against oppression. They propose God as a spiritual force instead of the hustlers with their women, money and cars:

> 'bout to lose your mind becoz' life is hard
> yet you believe in everything but god
> those pretty women, lots of money, yeah, that's alright
> but don't you forget the man with the might

Other rappers carry Allah and Islam on their banner, like Public Enemy, Just Ice and Stetsasonic. With their radical raps, they try to change the conscience of the younger generations. Public Enemy is linked with the Nation of Islam, led by Minister Louis Farakhan. Through schooling and education, they try to boost the self-respect of the youth and plead on behalf of Islam. They try to recreate the Black consciousness that existed in the 1960s. American politics and the world-wide arms race are criticized. 'Reaganomics is in the air / Free me from this nightmare!', exclaimed a solitary rapper in Washington, DC. Shinehead, a New York-based rapper, uses reggae rhythms to express his views:

> military arms race an' worldwide famine
> political chess games, bureaucracy, red tape

world lie, genocide, all the things we hate
Lebanon, Israel, Iraq an' Iran, my man
they been goin' at it since time began
b-b-b-backdoor transaction, big time corruption
doin' anything possible to win an election
you smile for a while, distort the truth
try to fool the youth

Numerous raps deal with the dangers of cocaine and crack. MC Sham tells us a love story: he fell in love with a girl, who took all his money but gave little love in return. At the conclusion of the rap, it becomes clear that the girl is a symbol of cocaine. 'Master Crack' is a bitter, direct report on the effect of crack:

like *savoir-faire*, he's everywhere
he'll hook an innocent baby coz' he don't care
to girls he's a pimp coz' he turns them
into the whoreous materialistic nymphomaniacs
that'll do anything for master crack
give away her body, steal from her brother
fight her father or sell her mother
coz' when you're possessed by crack
god bless your soul, coz' he'll take the rest

Message raps do not only elaborate on the negative aspects of the ghetto. Rappers explain in their raps the evolution and history of hip-hop, they tell how a positive movement grew in the ghetto and how their neighbourhood is a community. Some rappers made raps in support of Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign.

To end this rapid overview of message raps, I will mention some raps that warn young people about sexual diseases. (I have already quoted Kool Moe Dee talking about how he got a venereal disease.) Boogie Down Productions advises the youth to use condoms in the era of AIDS:

here is a message to the superhose
just keep in mind when Jimmy grows an' grows
so let it, but keep in mind about the epidemic
when Jimmy releases, boy, it pleases
but what do you do about all these diseases
Jimmy is Jimmy, no matter what
so take care of Jimmy coz' you know what's up
coz' now in winter Aids attacks
so run out an' get your Jimmy hats
it costs so little for a pack of three
Jim Browski
good for a present, great for lovers
demonstrated by the jungle brothers

Jim Browski, 'the Black prince', is the personification of the penis. In several raps he emerges as a new hero, a symbol of Black masculinity. There is now, of course, a female counterpart, Jenifa.

7.3.5 Sexual raps

Other raps deal with sexuality. I distinguish two types: hard and soft sexual raps. Both have expressive functions. The soft raps are more romantic and usually deal with what happens when boy meets girl. An example of a typical soft rap is:

well, I call my girl up on the phone
to see if she was busy or all alone
just waitin' for a signal or a green light
an' to know if I could see her on that same night
an' she said, yo L, it's up to you
then I said okay, I'll be there in a few
when I got inside, she gave me a squeeze
I said, let's make love, she said, oh L please
I knew that I was doin' it well
coz' every two minutes, she screamed, Oh L!
I felt so good, I was doggin' her
it was like a Mobil station, just a pumpin' gas
better than Michael Jackson an' his white glove

Sexual adventures often have an ironical undertone. Young rappers test their limits and expand the rap themes. It is verbal play in which the youth try out sexual roles and show off to obtain female favours. The actions mirror (and often exaggerate) the sexual behaviour of young adolescents. Boys present themselves as tougher than they are in reality.

A number of raps treat sex in a more explicit way, as in 'X-Rated Lynn', or 'Hey, We Want Some Pussy!':

me an' my homeboys like to play this game
we call it ant track but some call it the train
we all would line up in a single file line
an' take all out turns at wackin' girls behind
but everytime it came to me, I would shit out o' luck
becoz' I kick my dick in an' it would get stuck

These rap performances usually consist of two versions. One normal version and another that is self-censored by the rappers. This is the radio version, suitable for broadcasts (though even this is often still considered unsuitable). Potential record

buyers are warned of the explicit nature of the lyrics by a label on the album cover.[2]

Conclusion

Rapping is a varied and rich activity. It has produced an abundance of material that needs to be examined further by researchers from such several disciplines as anthropology, sociology and linguistics. When one examines the phenomenon, one is fascinated by the immense output from Black communities in the United States (and though not dealt with here, in the United Kingdom). At the same time, we are confronted with the living conditions of the Black population, which have deteriorated since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Hip-hop is a successful, creative attempt to provide Black youth with a positive future. The young members of Black communities have developed their own independent, often loud and rebellious alternative to what society had in store for them.

2. This is in response to an initiative of Parents Resource Music Center, a group of conservatives, who consider this music a threat to the moral standards of American youth.

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