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The appropriation of African American Vernacular English and Jamaican Patois by Nigerian hip hop artists

Abstract: The present paper deals with multilingual practices as they have emerged in Nigeria’s vibrant hip hop community. Apart from English, the most important strand in the multilingual fabric of Nigerian hip hop lyrics is Nigerian Pidgin. In addition, several more indigenous languages are used regularly. The focus of the present study, however, is on the use of two foreign varieties, namely African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Jamaican Creole or Patois (JC). Borrowing from AAVE and JC is a useful strategy for Nigerian artists to authenticate their performances by international standards. In principle, multilingual practices, including use of dialects and languages which are not natively spoken in a community, fits in well with the hip hop aesthetic. However, as will be shown, some AAVE and JC elements are borrowed without a full understanding of their linguistic and cultural context or transformed in an effort to adapt them to a new local context, which also runs the risk of undermining authenticity. Borrowing from AAVE and JC proves most problematical on the level of grammar.

1. Introduction

Rappers all over the world often display multilingual practices by engaging in language mixture. In most cases, English, being a global language, is mixed with local languages in ways which make it very difficult for the listeners and the fans to draw a neat line of demarcation between the languages that the artists use. When speaking of English in regard to hip hop, it is important to make one clarification: it is heterogeneous. One reason for this heterogeneity is that when English spreads to a new multilingual setting, it is influenced by the local linguistic and cultural context. For instance, in Nigerian English, semantic extensions such as godfather (‘a man, usually older, in position of authority who can assist another person’), new word-forms such as to disvirgin (‘to deflower a virgin’), or internationally unusual patterns of syntactic construction such as “He borrows me some money” are very common even among educated speakers. As a part of its heterogeneous nature, ‘English’ may thus be used as an umbrella term to cover Standard Englishes, which are often accorded overt prestige, and all varieties of non-standard Englishes, which do not have high prestige. This definition obviously covers African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and, for the practical purposes of the present