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AFFILIATING WITH RAP MUSIC: POLITICAL RAP OR GANGSTA RAP?

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Abstract

Following the linguistic theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), for this paper, I will describe the interpersonal meanings expressed in the lyrics of political rap and gangsta rap. From SFL, I will apply Appraisal to a small corpus of 10 rap songs, comparing 5 political rap songs with 5 gangsta rap songs. Appraisal is a linguistic analytical framework designed to identify evaluation in language. Ultimately, I aim to apply Appraisal so as to describe the ways in which both political rap and gangsta rap actually 'promote' their respective themes, and in turn, hypothesise why it is that a white, suburban, middle-class youth audience seeks to affiliate with gangsta rap rather than political rap.

Keywords: Political rap, Gangsta rap, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Appraisal, Affiliation

Özet

Bu çalışmada dizgesel işlevsel dilbilimi (SFL) tanımladıktan sonra politik ve çete rap'inde anlatılan kişilerarası anlamları tanımlamaya çalışacağım. dizgesel işlevsel dilbilim'den Appraisal'ı, 10 kişiden oluşan bir gruba 5 tane politik rap türü ve 5 tane çete rap türü şarkıyı karşılaştırarak uygulayacağım. Appraisal, dilin değerlendirilmesi için tasarlanmış dilbilimsel analitik bir yapıdır. Son olarak Appraisal'ı, hem politik rap türünün hem de çete rap türünün kendine özgü temalarını yüceltme yollarını tanımlamada ve ardından beyaz, şehirli ve orta sınıftan oluşan bir genç seyirci kitlesinin politik rap türünden ziyade çete repiyle ilgilendiğine dair hipotezi açıklamada kullanma amacındayım.

Anahtar sözcükler: politik rap, gangster rap, dizgesel işlevsel dilbilim, değerlendirme, bağ

1. INTRODUCTION

As noted by Riley (2005), rap music and hip hop culture have been the object of much scholarly attention in recent years (e.g. Rose, 1994; Potter, 1995; Walser, 1995; Krims, 2000; Keyes, 2002; Pennycook, 2007). Scholars have drawn on a variety of disciplines to investigate rap music and the hip hop culture from which it derives. The texts cited above for example are from ethnomusicology, musicology, post-modern cultural studies and linguistics. One general observation about this body of research is that scholars are often divided in their opinion of rap music. Many see rap as a 'voice' for the socially marginalised; a means by which they can "articulate their place in the world" (e.g. Mitchell, 2006, p. 17). Others however, like Rose (1994) and Best and Kellner (1999), are highly critical of certain styles of rap music. Generally, positive reactions to rap music are associated with the style of rap known as *political* rap, whereas negative reactions are more likely to be associated with the style known as *gangsta* rap. According to Best and Kellner (1999):

At its best rap is a powerful indictment of racism, oppression, and violence that calls our attention to the crises of the inner cities and vividly describes the plight of African-Americans... At its worst, G-Rap is itself racist, sexist and glorifies violence, being little but a money-making vehicle that is part of the problem rather than the solution.

(A Contested Terrain section, para. 8 & 9)

According to the reference text *The All Music Guide to Rap and Hip-Hop* (2003), political rap and gangsta rap are defined as follows:

Looking to move on from the block-party atmosphere of old school rap and eager to vent their frustrations with the '80s version of the inner-city blues, a select few hip-hop groups merged deft rhymes with political philosophy to create a new style of rap... rappers have addressed a wide variety of social and political topics – everything from gang violence, AIDS, drug addiction, racism, domestic violence, and prostitution...

Gangsta Rap developed in the late '80s. Evolving out of hardcore rap, gangsta rap had an edgy, noisy sound. Lyrically, it was just as abrasive, as the rappers spun profane, gritty tales about urban crime...

gangsta rappers rhyme in the first person about the lives of thugs, felons, gang members, pimps and crack dealers. Gangsta rappers portray the thugs they're rapping about...

(pp. viii-ix, 563-564)

While these descriptions tell us what the lyrics are about, that is, the topics or themes they 'deal with', they tell us very little about how it is that language is used interpersonally. In other words, how is language used in these particular rap styles to enact relationships? Or in another way, how do the rappers value or 'promote' their respective themes, and what kind of audience or 'consumer' is intended to align with those values?

For this paper, I aim to address such questions by applying the linguistic theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (e.g. Halliday, 1978; Martin, 1992). In short, SFL seeks to explain language by reference to the social context in which it operates. SFL organises language and social context functionally. Halliday suggests that language has evolved functional resources to construe three orders of reality which he terms the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. Martin (1997) defines Halliday's original metafunctions of language as follows: "ideational linguistic resources are concerned with representation, interpersonal resources with interaction, and textual resources with information flow" (p. 4).

As mentioned, this paper will focus on the interpersonal metafunction of language. Appraisal (e.g. Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005), from SFL, offers an ideal analytical framework to systematically identify interpersonal meanings in language. Appraisal is essentially concerned with evaluation: "the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned" (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 22). For this paper, I will focus on the Appraisal system of Attitude. Attitude is concerned with the semantic resources used to express emotions, judgements and valuations, the polarity of those evaluations, as well as the target of those evaluations. Both the political and gangsta rap songs will be characterised according to their expressions of Attitude.

Those findings will then be used to investigate *why* a particular youth audience may be motivated to affiliate with or 'consume' these styles of rap music in terms of the values or 'Attitude' expressed. As noted by Riley (2005: 297):

"It has become increasingly evident, as hip hop culture and rap expand rapidly into new social spaces and as the theoretical sophistication of rap studies grow, that serious attention must be paid to the question of how specific youth audiences bring different reading formations to the culture and therefore find it meaningful in different ways."

There is of course no one single social network or 'hip hop community' that affiliates with rap music. Following Riley (2005), I have chosen to focus specifically on one highly influential segment of the hip hop community: the white, suburban, middle-class youth consumers (abbreviated as 'white' youth audiences/consumers). From cultural studies, Riley offers a neo-Derkeimian interpretation of the ways in which these particular youth audiences 'make sense' of gangsta rap. While Riley's (2005) reading of gangsta rap and 'white' consumers is provoking, I am not interested in the specifics of his thesis. I am however interested in his more general observations concerning the extent to which this particular youth audience affiliates with gangsta rap and political rap respectively.

Riley (2005) argues that white, suburban middle-class consumers have a strong affiliation with the gangsta rap style: "It is no secret that this audience of predominately white, suburban consumers exists, and that indeed the explosion in the 1990s of gangsta rap would have been impossible without it..." (p. 299). In contrast, Riley (2005) suggests that there is very little affiliation between a 'white' youth audience and political rap: "we are here dealing with an audience that to a significant degree simply is not socially located in such a way as to make such urban, black, political concerns likely or all that relevant to their own cultural worlds" (p. 305).

Again, this kind of observation relies exclusively on ideational meaning: what the political rap songs are about. From this position it is not too difficult to construct a hypothesis as to the reading formations of 'white' youth audiences. There are many obvious explanations as to why teenagers, particularly teenage boys, would consume music that comprises themes of sex, violence and drug use when compared with themes of government policy, social reform and Western consumerism. And, as Riley (2005) fairly points out, political rap becomes even less relevant when the political issues discussed have no immediate relevance to the well-being of the 'white' youth consumer. It is important to note however that I do not intend to take away from these interpretations. They are valid and clearly a worthwhile pursuit. What I want to propose however is an alternative way of characterising these rap songs linguistically, and perhaps from this, offer an

additional hypothesis as to why the white, suburban, middle-class youth audiences are drawn to gangsta rap more than political rap.

2. METHODS

2.1. Data Collection

The data has been sampled from the *All Music Guide to Hip-Hop: The Definitive Guide to Rap and Hip-Hop* (Bogdanov, Woodstra, Erlewine & Bush 2003) which is essentially an encyclopaedia of rap music. It provides reviews of all the noteworthy rap artists and recordings from the late-1970s to the early-2000s, as well as essays, biographies and genealogical maps that trace the history of rap music. The data set sampled for this paper has been extracted from *The All Music Guide's* list of 'Essential Songs' which is further classified according to various styles of rap music, such as: political rap, gangsta rap, hardcore rap, old-school rap and party rap.

In total, a small corpus of 10 rap songs by African-American artists was sampled. The set was further divided into 2 sub-sets according to the following styles: political rap and gangsta rap. Table 1 classifies the 10 rap songs according to style, artist and song title (see Discography for full details):

Table 1: Ten North American Rap Songs: Political and Gangsta

Song #	Artist	Title
1	Arrested Development	Everyday People
2	The Disposable Heroes...	Television, The Drug of the Nation
3	Grandmaster Flash...	The Message
4	Public Enemy (a)	911 is a Joke
5	Public Enemy (b)	Fight the Power
6	Ice Cube	Steady Mobbin'
7	Ice T	New Jack Hustler
8	The Notorious B.I.G.	Ready to Die
9	NWA	Gangsta Gangsta
10	Snoop Dogg	Gin and Juice

The rap lyrics were accessed from the *Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive* <www.ohhla.com>. Those transcriptions were reformatted, checked for errors and then transcribed to the level of the clause. The Appraisal system network of Attitude was applied to the data in line with a basic set of Appraisal conventions (see List of Appraisal Conventions).

2.2. Method of Analysis

Lead by Martin (e.g. Martin, 2000; Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005), Appraisal is an analytical framework designed to identify evaluation in language and comprises three main sub-systems: Attitude, Graduation and Engagement. The basic overview of the Appraisal system network is illustrated in Figure 1:

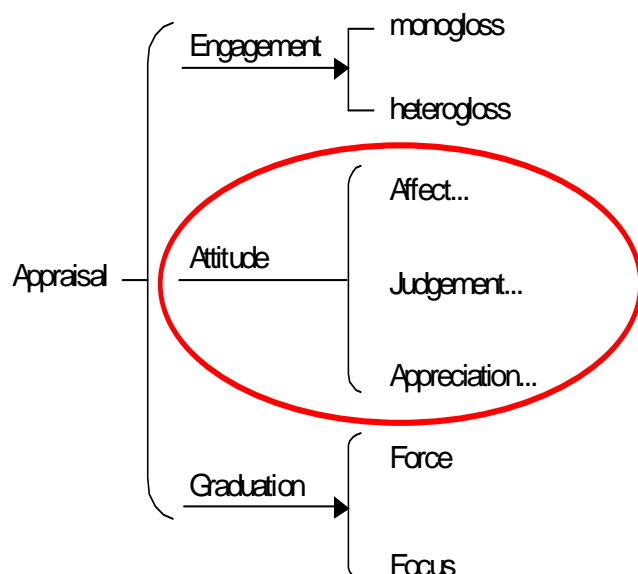


Figure 1: An overview of Appraisal resources (after Martin & White 2005, p. 38)

Appraisal is a superordinate term that deals with “the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgements and valuations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations” (Martin, 2000, p. 145). With respect to the Appraisal systems, Attitude concerns the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgements, and valuations while Graduation and Engagement concern the resources that amplify and engage with Attitude. This paper will focus exclusively on the system of Attitude (circled in Figure 1).

2.2.1. Attitude

The system of Attitude comprises three distinct systems which are selected simultaneously when a person expresses Attitude: the type of Attitude; the positive or negative value of the Attitude; and the implicit or explicit form of the Attitude. Attitude is reduced to three basic types: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. Martin and White (2005) summarise the three basic types of Attitude as follows: Affect concerns the semantic resources used to construe emotional responses; Judgement concerns resources deployed for construing moral evaluations of behaviour; and Appreciation construes the ‘aesthetic’ quality of a product or performance (and natural phenomena).

Affect, Judgement and Appreciation are simultaneously analysed according to positive or negative polarity or the ‘good-bad’ parameter (Thompson & Hunston 2000). In other words, does the Affect express a good feeling or a bad feeling; is the person’s character good or bad in relation to “norms about how people should or shouldn’t behave”; and are the products/performances good or bad in relation to “norms about how products and performances are valued”? (Martin & Rose, 2003, pp. 62-63). Martin and Rose (2003) provide analysts with a detailed corpus for each type of Attitude and their respective system networks. Some of that corpus is replicated below.

2.2.2. Affect

Affect is classified according to a number of variables. For this paper, Affect is analysed according to a type of emotion: dis/inclination, un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction. Affect can also be classified according to whether it is an emotional disposition or a behavioural surge and whether it is a mood state or feelings directed from one person to another. Table 2 illustrates the system of Affect with examples comprising positive and negative values. (See the appendix for the list of appraisal conventions)

Table 2: System of Affect (after Martin & Rose, 2003, pp. 60-61)

type of emotion	surge	disposition
disinclination	shudder	fearful
inclination	request	long for
unhappiness (mood)	cry	sad
unhappiness (directed)	abuse	hate
happiness	laugh	happy
	hug	loving
insecurity	twitching	anxious
	cry out	surprised
security	assert	confident
	commit	confident in
dissatisfaction	yawn	fed up
	scold	angry

satisfaction	busy	absorbed
	compliment	impressed

2.2.3. Judgement

Judgement is divided into two broad categories: social esteem and social sanction and then into five sub-types within these categories. Judgements of esteem have to do with normality (how unusual someone is), capacity (how capable they are), and tenacity (how resolute they are); Judgement by sanction has to do with veracity (how truthful someone is) and propriety (how ethical someone is). Table 3 illustrates the system of Judgement with examples comprising positive and negative values.

Table 3 Systems of Judgement (after Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 62)

social esteem	positive (admire)	negative (criticize)
normality	lucky, fortunate, charmed	unfortunate, pitiful, tragic
capacity	balanced, together, sane	flaky, neurotic, insane
tenacity	plucky, brave, heroic	rash, cowardly, despondent
social sanction	positive (praise)	negative (condemn)
veracity	truthful, honest, credible	dishonest, deceitful
propriety	good, moral, ethical	