Constructions of Local and Non-Local Identity in Canadian Hip Hop Lyrics

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Although a growing body of research on linguistic variation in Hip Hop has emerged in recent years (Alim 2004, 2006; Cutler 1999, 2007; Morgan 2001; O’Hanlon 2006; Omoniyi 2006; Smitherman 1997), relatively little sociolinguistic research focuses on Canadian Hip Hop. This paper examines phonetic variation in Canadian Hip Hop artists’ lyrics in order to better understand how artists construct and project local or non-local identities. Drawing on the methodology used by Alim (2006) and O’Hanlon (2006), I examine two variables, one considered indexical of Canadian English, and one that is generally considered indexical of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Labov 1971). Indexing a Canadian identity is diphthong raising (“Canadian Raising” or CR, Chambers 2006):

Struck by lightning brand new exciting dance/writing grants we mighta had a fighting chance

[ɛksaɪm] [lætɪn] [ʃɪm] [mæjɪŋ] [fɜrɪŋ]

(Terfry 2005)

On the other hand, r-lessness, extremely rare in Canadian English, is heard often in Canadian Hip Hop, regardless of the artist’s ethnicity:

See me on the bill better follow me there/I solemnly swear I’ll make it back to Oliver Square

[bərə] [ðə] [swə] [əlˈva skweə]

(Pemberton 2006)

My corpus of lyrics from four songs by each of 12 artists provides 3070 tokens of these variables. Using GoldVarb (Sankoff, Tagliamonte and Smith 2005), I analyze their frequency, as well as possible effects of age, ethnicity and region. Findings suggest that younger Canadian artists are more likely to sound Canadian by raising more diphthongs, that ethnicity has little effect on this variable, and that artists from Western Canada raise more diphthongs. In addition, artists show a rate of r-lessness approaching 45%, suggesting that Canadian artists are perhaps consciously and strategically constructing a specifically Canadian identity, as well as an African American identity through their use of these variables.