

Sez Who?
Hip Hop Nation

A Scholar's View

Sociolinguists are intensely interested in the language of Hip Hop Nation, a highly fluid, creative and constantly changing dialect. **H. Sammy Alim** explains how devotees “devise innovative ways to slice the system with the syntax.”

Read Summary.

This chapter is a good example of how rapidly American English can change, for it deals with a phenomenon that had scarcely begun when the first edition of *Language in the USA* was published in 1980. “Rapper’s Delight,” the first hip hop song, was recorded in 1979. Between then and now, rapping (“the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats”) and other elements of hip hop have come to dominate popular music and youth culture, not only in the USA but all over the world, including Africa, Europe, and Asia. Among the five other hip hop elements identified in this chapter are DJ’ing (record spinning) and breakdancing (streetdancing). Like rappin, all had their roots in the streets, party and concert halls and other performance venues of African America. Although African Americans still predominate on the American hip hop scene, performers now come from other ethnic groups too (e.g., Eminem, who is white).

Pointing to the frequency with which it comes up in song and album titles and in his own interviews with writers and hip hop artists, H. Sammy Alim argues that language—especially Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL)—is central to the Hip Hop Nation (the “borderless” composite of hip hop communities world-wide). He identifies ten tenets of HHNL, including its rootedness in African American language and discursive practices, its regional variability, its synergistic combination of speech, music, and literature, and its links with surrounding sociopolitical circumstances, like police brutality and the disproportionate incarceration of the African American hip hop generation.

Much of the distinctiveness of HHNL comes from its inventiveness

Much of the distinctiveness of HHNL comes from its inventiveness with vocabulary, and Alim provides several rich examples of this, from “Puffy” Combs popularizing of *benjamins* for ‘\$100 bills’ to E-40’s coinage of new slang terms like *What’s crackulatin* for ‘What’s happenin.’ But although Alim agrees with previous researchers that the grammar of HHNL is

essentially that of African American Language (AAL), the correspondence is not complete. For instance, hip hop lyrics provide examples of invariant *be* before noun phrases (e.g., “Dr. Dre be the name”)—an environment in which most conversation-based AAVE studies did not note it—and there is some question about whether its meaning is “habitual” in the usual sense. Hip hop artists sometimes exploit regional pronunciation features to mark their distinctiveness. Finally, HHNL richly exploits other discourse and discursive features of AAL, such as call and response, Multilayered Totalizing Expression, and Signifyin.

The Black Language is constructed of—alright let me take it all the way

playing drums because we was talkin through the drums. "What the hell did my slaves do? Oh, no, cut that! Take them drums!" you feel me? So through the music, that's kinda like going on now with the rap thang. It's *ghetto* music. People talkin about they issues and crime and, you feel me? "Don't push me cuz I'm close to the eeedge!" [Rappin Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message"] You feel me? He talkin about, "Man, I'm so fed up with you people in this society, man." So this is the voice of the ghetto. The rap come from the voice of the ghetto... Hip hop and the streets damn near is one, you might as well say that... Straight from the streets. [Interview with rapper JT the Bigga Figga, cited partially in Alim 2000]

Hip Hop Culture and its Investigation in the Street

Hip Hop culture is sometimes defined as having four major elements

Hip hop culture is sometimes defined as having four major elements: MC'ing (rappin), DJ'ing (spinnin), breakdancing (streetdancing), and graffiti art (writing). To these, KRS-One adds knowledge as a fifth element, and Afrika Bambaata, a founder of the Hip Hop Cultural Movement, adds overstanding. Even with six elements, this definition of a culture is quite limited in

scope, and it is useful to distinguish between the terms hip hop and rap. Rappin, one aspect of hip hop culture, consists of the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats, and it is this element that has predominated hip hop cultural activity in recent years. Thus, language is perhaps the most useful means with which to read the various cultural activities of the Hip Hop Nation (HHN). This chapter provides a sociolinguistic profile of language use within the HHN in the sociocultural context of the streets. The chapter also examines the varied and rich hip hop cultural modes of discourse.

Sociolinguists have always been interested in analyzing language and language use within varying contexts. Given a healthy respect for vernacular languages among sociolinguists, and given the richly varied and diverse speech acts and communicative practices of the HHN, it is surprising that until the late 1990s no American sociolinguist had written about hip hop culture in any major academic journal. It was a Belgian student of African history and linguistics at the University of Ghent who first collected data about hip hop culture in the Lower East Side of New York City in 1986-87. In his quest to learn about the social and cultural context of rap performances, Remes (1991) produced one of the earliest sociolinguistic studies of rappin in a hip hop community (the borderless HHN comprises numerous hip hop communities around the world). His pioneering study provided a brief account of the origin of rap, identified several "Black English" linguistic features found in rap, and highlighted the communicative practices of call-and-response and verbal battling. Only in 1997 did sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman publish her pioneering analysis of the communicative practices of the HHN (Smitherman 1997, presented before an audience in South Africa in 1995).

Since then sociolinguists have presented papers at professional conferences and published in academic journals. In 2001 at the 30th anniversary meeting of NAWAV, the major gathering of sociolinguists, several scholars participated in a panel called "The

Language use within the HHN is intricately linked to language use within other African American institutions

To be fair, at least since 1964, there has been considerable scholarship on language use within what are now called hip hop

communities. It started with investigations “deep down in the jungle” in the streets of South Philly (it’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from goin under¹) that recorded “black talkin in the streets” of America (Abrahams 1964, 1970, 1976) and the analysis of “language behavior” of Blacks in Oakland (Kernan 1971) to the analysis of the narrative syntax and ritual insults of Harlem teenagers “in the inner city” (Labov 1972) to the critical examination of “the power of the rap” in the “Black Idiom” of the Black Arts Movement rappers and poets (Smitherman 1973, 1977) and an elucidation of the “language and culture of black teenagers” who skillfully “ran down some lines” in South Central Los Angeles (Folb 1980). In myriad ways, then, scholars had prepared the field for the extraordinary linguistic phenomenon that was about to leave an indelible mark on the language of parts of the English-speaking world. This linguistic phenomenon is, of course, hip hop culture. Most of the works cited above (with the exception of Folb 1980) were published before the advent of the first hip hop recording in 1979, the Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight.” By describing the linguistic patterns and practices of African Americans in the “inner cities,” these scholars were studying the linguistic forebears of the HHN. Some of the remaining sections of this paper will show that language use within the HHN is intricately linked to language use within other African American institutions, such as churches and mosques, as well as to the everyday linguistic practices of Black folk in their communities from the hood to the amen corner.

The work of these pioneering scholars and others demonstrated the creativity, ingenuity, and verbal virtuosity of Africans in America by examining language use at the very loci of linguistic-cultural activity. What is the locus of the linguistic-cultural activity known as hip hop? “The street is hardcore and it is the rhythmic locus of the Hip Hop world” (Spady 1991: 406, 407). Foregrounding the streets as the site, sound, and soul of hip hopological activity allows one to gain a more thorough understanding of the origins and sociocultural context of hip hop culture, which is critical to understanding language use within this Nation. Rapper Busta Rhymes, often introduced on stage as being “straight from the street,” defends the introduction with his characteristic tenacity:

What do you mean what it mean?! It's straight and plain, plain and simple. Hip hop is street music! It ain't come from nobody's house! You know what I'm saying? It's something that we all gathered in the street to do. As far as the founders of the hip hop thing, you know what I'm saying, the hip hop way of life, it was established in the street. It wasn't established in people's houses, in people's homes, you know what I'm saying? People came from their homes to celebrate the culture of hip hop in the parks, in the streets, on the street corners, you know what I'm saying? (Spady et al. 1999: 183)

The streets continue to be a driving force in hip hop culture

and Baby Madison extend the notion that the streets are the center of hip hop cultural activity because for many young Black hip hop artists the streets are the locus of life itself. And as if to make certain of no misunderstanding, the L.O.X. proudly proclaim *We Are the Streets*—equating self and street (2000).

Answering calls for Black linguists to set the standards for linguistic research on the language of Black Americans (Labov 1972, Hymes 1981), Baugh (1983:36) went straight “to the people” in a variety of social contexts where “black street speech breathes.” He writes: “It is one thing to recognize the need to gather data from representative consultants, but it is another matter altogether to get the job done.” The “code of the streets” (Anderson 1999) does not look fondly upon someone carrying a tape recorder and asking too many questions, particularly in a cultural environment where people avoid “puttin their business out in the street” at all costs.

The hip hop-saturated streets of America today are quite different from the streets of yesteryear. The changing nature of the city streets in the last decade of the 20th century has been captured by Spady (1991:407): “Changing. Those streets of yesteryear are no more. Now it is crack-filled and gang-banged. Loose and cracked. Yet most of our people walk straight through these streets night and day. Risking lives. But this is a risqué world... The street is hardcore and it is the locus of the Hip Hop world.” What do we mean by hip hop-saturated streets? In urban areas across the nation, it is clear that young hip hop heads exist in a state of hiphopness—their experience is saturated with the sights, sounds, smells, and stares of what it means to be a hip hop being. It is the “dynamic and constant sense of being alive in a hip hop, rap conscious, reality based world,” Spady (1993:95-96) explains. He writes:

Hip hop is preeminently a cultural free space. It's transformatory and emancipatory powers are evident each time you see a young blood locked to the music being transmitted through the earphone. They exist in a community of expressive rebellion, in states of **always always**, altering what has traditionally been the culture of the ruling class.

The streets are saturated on multiple levels. An illuminating study of the “New Black Poetry” of the 1960s and 1970s uses the term “saturation” to mean both “the communication of Blackness in a given situation” and “a sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black Experience” (Henderson 1973: 62). In the hip hop-saturated streets of America, we are speaking of the communication of the hip hop mode of being (Spady & Alim 1999) and the sense of fidelity to the absolute truth of existing in a state of hiphopness. A close examination of the hip hop-saturated streets of America reveals that the street is not just a physical space—it is a site of creativity, culture, cognition, and consciousness. When Jigga (Jay-Z) said “the streets is watchin,” and Beans (Beanie Sigel) turned it into “the streets is not only watchin, but they talkin now,” they extended the notion of the streets into a living, breathing organism, with ears to hear, eyes to see, and a mouth to speak. Examination of hip hop culture and language must begin in the streets.

Hip Hop Nation Language [HHNL]

Rap Language” (Traacherous Three 1980), “Wordplay” (Bahamadia 1996), “Gangsta Vocabulary” (DJ Pooh 1997), “Project Talk” (Bobby Digital 1998), “Slang Editorial” (Cappadonna 1998), *Real Talk 2000* (Three-X-Krazy 2000), “Ebonics” (Big L 2000), *Country Grammar* (Nelly 2000), and *Project English* (Juvenile 2001). In numerous ethnographic interviews, I have found that language is a favorite topic of discussion in the HHN, and its members are willing to discuss it with great fervor—and to defend its use.

What do we mean by “Nation Language?”

What do we mean by “Nation Language?” In exploring the development of nation language in Anglophone Caribbean poetry, Caribbean historian, poet, and literary and music critic Kamau Brathwaite (1984:13) writes: “Nation language is the language which is

influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English.”

Concerned with the literature of the Caribbean and the sociopolitical matrix within which it is created, Brathwaite used the term “nation language” in contrast to “dialect.” Familiar with the pejorative meanings of the term “dialect” in the folk linguistics of the people, he writes that while nation language can be considered both English and African at the same time, it is an English which is like a “howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave.” Then he likened it to the blues. Surely, nation language is like hip hop (as rapper Raekwon spits his “machine-gun-rap” (1999)). HHNL is, like Brathwaite’s description, new in one sense and ancient in another. It comprises elements of orality, total expression, and conversational modes (Brathwaite 1984).

Rapper Mystikal, known for having a unique, highly energetic rhyming style highlighted with lyrical sound explosions, provides a perfect example of Nation Language when he raps: “You know what time it is, . . . , and you know who the fuck this is/ DAANNN-JAH!!! [Danger] DAANNN-JAH!!! [Danger]/Get on the FLO’ [floor]! The . . .right, yeaahHHH!”² (2000). Mystikal starts out speaking to his listener in a low, threatening growl, asserting his individuality (“you know who the . . . this is”), and then explodes as if sounding an alarm, letting everyone know that they have entered a dangerous verbal zone! “Get on the FLO’!” has a dual function—simultaneously warning listeners to lie down before the upcoming lyrical “DAANNN-JAH!” and directing them to get on the dance floor. When rapper Ludacris (2001) commands his listeners to “ROOOLLLL OUT!” and raps: “Oink, Oink, PIG! PIG! Do away with the POORRK-uh/ Only silverwuurr [silverware] I need’s a steak knife and FOORRK-uh!” he stresses his words emphatically, compelling one to do as he says. In that brief example, he is in conversation with African American Muslim and Christian communities currently dialoguing about the eating of swine flesh (which Muslims consider unholy).

When we speak of “language,” we are defining the term in a sense that is congruent with the HHN’s “linguistic culture” (Schiffman 1996), and HHNL can be situated in the broader context of African American speech:

There is no single register of African American speech. And it’s not words and intonations, it’s a whole attitude about speech that has historical rootina. It’s not a phenomenon that you can isolate and reduce to

encounter. What's fascinating to me about African American speech is its spontaneity, the requirement that you not only have a repertoire of vocabulary or syntactical devices/constructions, but you come prepared to do something in an attempt to meet the person on a level that both uses the language, mocks the language, and recreates the language. (Wideman 1976: 34)

On her single recording "Spontaneity" (1996), Philadelphia rapper Bahamadia validates Wideman's assertion. She raps about her "verbal expansion" in a stream of consciousness style: "Rip here be dizz like everybody's on it cause eternal verbal expansion keeps enhancin brain child's ability to like surpass a swarm of booty-...-no-grass-roots-havin... MC's." The verbal architect constructs her rhymes by consciously stretching the limitations of the "standard" language. In describing her lyrical influences, she cites rappers Kool Keith of the Ultramagnetic MCs, De La Soul, and Organized Konfusion as "masters at what they do in that they explore the English language and they try to push the boundaries and go against the grains of it, you know what I mean?" (Spady & Alim 1999: xviii).

"It's a very active exchange," says Wideman (1976:34). "But at the same time as I say that, the silences and the refusal to speak is just as much a part, in another way, of African American speech." Rapper Fearless of the group Nemesis exemplifies the point: Envisioning rappers, including himself, among the great orators and leaders in the Black community, he says:

I always looked up to great orators like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X. Anybody who could ever stand up and persuade a group of young men or a nation... Just the way they were able to articulate. The way they emphasized their words. And the way they would use pauses. They would actually use *silence* powerfully... Just the way they made words cause feelings in you, you know what I'm saying? Just perpetuate thought within people, you know. (Spady & Alim 1999: xviii).

So, "language" in HHNL obviously refers not only to the syntactic constructions of the language but also to the many discursive and communicative practices, the attitudes toward language, understanding the role of language in both binding/bonding community and seizing/smothering linguistic opponents, and language as concept (meaning clothes, facial expressions, body movements, and overall communication).

In addition to the above, HHNL can be characterized by ten tenets.

1. HHNL is rooted in African American Language (AAL) and communicative practices (Spady 1991, Smitherman 1997, Yasin 1999). Linguistically, it is "the newest chapter in the African American book of folklore" (Rickford & Rickford 2000). It is a vehicle driven by the culture creators of hip hop, themselves organic members of the broader African American community. Thus HHNL both reflects and expands the African American Oral Tradition.
2. HHNL is just one of the many language varieties used by African Americans.
3. HHNL is widely spoken across the country, and used/borrowed and adapted/transformed by various ethnic groups inside and outside of the United States.

- literature. Yancy (1991) speaks of rap as “*musical literature* (or rhythmic-praxis discourse).” Henderson (1973) asserts that the Black poetry of the 1960s and 1970s is most distinctly Black when it derives its form from Black speech and Black music. HHNL is simultaneously the spoken, poetic, lyrical, and musical expression of the HHN.
6. HHNL includes attitudes about language and language use (see Pharcyde dialogue below).
 7. HHNL is central to the identity and the act of envisioning an entity known as the HHN.
 8. HHNL exhibits regional variation (Morgan, 2001a). For example, most members of the HHN recognize Master P's signature phrase, *Ya heeeaaard may?* ('You heard me?') as characteristic of a southern variety of HHNL. Even within regions, HHNL exhibits individual variation based on life experiences. For example, because California rapper Xzibit grew up in the hip hop-saturated streets of Detroit, New Mexico and California, his HHNL is a syncretization of all these Hip Hop Nation Language varieties.
 9. The fundamental aspect of HHNL—and, to some, perhaps the most astonishing aspect—is that it is central to the lifeworlds of the members of the HHN and suitable and functional for all of their communicative needs.
 10. HHNL is inextricably linked with the sociopolitical circumstances that engulf the HHN. How does excessive police presence and brutality shift the discourse of the HHN? How do disproportionate incarceration rates and urban gentrification impact this community's language? As Spady (1993) writes: “Hip Hop culture [and language] mediates the corrosive discourse of the dominating society while at the same time it functions as a subterranean subversion... Volume is turned up to tune out the decadence of the dominant culture.”

Rappers are insightful examiners of the sociopolitical matrix within which HHNL operates. Discussing the role of HHNL in hip hop lyrics, Houston's Scarface concludes that HHNL functions as a communal “code of communication” for the HHN:

It's a code of communication, too... Because we can understand each other when we're rapping. You know, if I'm saying, [in a nasal, mocking voice] 'Well, my friend, I saw this guy who shot this other guy and...' I break that shit down for you and you say, '... man! Them ... is going crazy out where this dude's from.' You know what I'm saying? It's just totally different. It's just a code of communication to me. I'm letting my partner know what's going on. And anything White America can't control they call 'gangsters.' ...! I get real. Politicians is gangsters, The presidents is the gangsters because they have the power to change everything. That's a gangster to me. That's my definition of gangster. (Spady et al. 1999: 301)

Members of Tha Pharcyde actively debated the concept of HHNL:

Booty Brown: There's more than just one definition for words! We talk in slang. We always talk basically in slang. We don't use the English dictionary for every sentence and every phrase that we talk!

brother. Me and your blood aren't the same, but I'm your brother because we're brothas. That's slang... We make up our *own* words. I mean, it depends whose definition you glorify, okay? That's what I'm saying. Whose definition are you glorifying? Because if you go by my definition of "Black", then I can say "a Black person." But if you go by the *Webster Dictionary's*... You have your own definition. It's your definition. (Spady et al. 1999: xix)

Sociolinguistically, so much is happening in the exchange above. The HHN continues to "flip the script" (reverse the power of the dominant culture). Scarface is reacting to the media's labeling of reality-based rap lyrics as "gangster." By redefining gangster, he effectively turns the tables on what he believes is an oppressive state. If the presidents have the power to change everything, why ain't a ... thing changed?

In Tha Pharcyde conversation, when the *brotha* says the way he is talking is not the English language, he is talking about much more than slang. He asks pointedly, "Whose definition are you glorifying?" By making up your own words, he attests, you are freeing yourself from linguistic colonization (Wa Thiongo 1992). In an effort to combat the capitalistic commodification of hip hop culture, and to "unite and establish the common identity of the HHN," KRS-One refined the definition of hip hop terms and produced a document known as "The Refinitions" (2000)—putting the power of redefinition to action. KRS defines the language of hip hop culture as "street language" and proposes that "Hiphoppas" speak an Advanced Street Language, which includes "the correct pronunciation of one's native and national language as it pertains to life in the inner-city." KRS is reversing "standard" notions of correctness and appropriateness, realizing that the HHN has distinct values and aesthetics that differ from the majority culture. Clearly, members of the HHN would agree that the use of AAL stems "from a somewhat disseminated rejection of the life-styles, social patterns, and thinking in general of the Euro-American sensibility," as the writer of the first AAL dictionary outside of the Gullah area put it (Major 1970: 10).

The Relationship Between HHNL and AAL: Lexicon, Syntax and Phonology

"Dangerous dialect/ Dangerous dialect/ I elect... to impress America."
That's it, that's what it was about... Dangerous dialect, dangerous wording, you know what I mean? "I elect," that I pick, you know. "To impress America." That's what I pick to impress America, that dangerous dialect, you know. (San Quinn, 2000, Alim & Spady, unpublished interview)

Hip Hop creators most often communicate with each other by using AAL

The relationship between HHNL and AAL is a familial one. Since hip hop's culture creators are members of the broader African American community, the language that they use most often when communicating with each other is AAL. HHNL can be seen as the *submerged area* (Brathwaite 1984: 13) of AAL that is used within the HHN, particularly during hip hop-centered cultural activities, but also during other playful, creative, artistic, and intimate settings. This conception of HHNL is broad enough to include the language of rap lyrics, album interludes, hip hop stage performances, and hip hop conversational

(meaning 'money' and referring to American notes with images of dead presidents) has been in use in the African American community since the 1930s. In the late 1990s, hip hop group dead prez both shortened the term and made explicit its multivariate meanings (within the revolutionary context of their rhymes and philosophy, they are surely hinting at assassination—a form of verbal subversion). The “benjamins” is a term from the late 1990s popularized by rapper Sean “Puffy” Combs (P. Diddy).

While several scholars and writers have produced work on the lexicon of AAL (Turner 1949, Major 1970, 1994, Smitherman 1994, 2000, Dillard 1977, Anderson 1994, Stavsky, Mozeson & Mozeson 1995, Holloway & Vass 1997), it is important to note that hip hop artists, as street linguists and lexicographers, have published several dictionaries of their own. Old school legend Fab Five Freddy (Braithwaite 1992, 1995) documented the “fresh fly flavor” of the words and phrases of the hip hop generation (in English and German). Atlanta’s Goodie Mob and several other artists have published glossaries on the inside flaps of their album covers. Of course, as lexicographers hip hop artists are only continuing the tradition of Black musicians, for many jazz and bebop artists compiled their own glossaries, most notable among them Cab Calloway (1944), Babs Gonzales, and Dan Burley.

Vallejo rapper E-40 discusses the genesis of *E-40's Dictionary Book of Slang, Vol. 1* (forthcoming):

I feel that I *am* the ghetto. The majority of street slang... 'It's all good.' 'Feel me.' 'Fo' shiiiiiziie,' all that ... come from 40. 'What's up, folks?' As a matter of fact, I'm writing my own dictionary book of slang right now... It's a street demand [for it]. Everywhere I go people be like, 'Dude, you need to put out a dictionary. Let them know where all that ... come from,' you know what I mean? (Spady et al. 1999: 290)

E-40 is credited with developing a highly individualized repertoire of slang words and phrases. If he were to say something like, “What’s crackulatin, ...? I was choppin it up wit my playa-potna last night on my communicator – then we got to marinatin, you underdig – and I come to find out that the homie had so much fed that he was tycoonin, I mean, pimpin on some real boss-status, you smell me?” not very many people would understand him. (“crackulatin” = happening, an extended form of “crackin”; “pimpin” is sometimes used as a noun to refer to a person, like, “homie”; “choppin it up” = making conversation; “playa-potna” = partner, friend; “communicator” = cell phone; “marinatin” = a conversation where participants are reasoning on a subject; “underdig” = understand; “fed” = money; “tycoonin” = being a successful entrepreneur; “pimpin” = being financially wealthy; “boss-status” = managing things like a CEO; “you smell me?” = you feel me? Or you understand me?)

HHN originators take pride in being the creators of terms consumed by large numbers of speakers

Given the fluidity of HHNL, speakers take a lot of pride in being the originators and innovators of terms that are consumed by large numbers of speakers. Rappers, as members of distinct communities, also take pride in regional lexicon. For instance, the term “jawn” emerged in the Philadelphia hip hop community.

that new Beanie “jawn”; for “song,” when the song is played on the radio, and so on. Recently, Philadelphia’s Roots have handed out T-shirts with “JAWN” written on the front, advocating the use of the distinctive Philly hip hop term. Placed in a broader context, the meaning of the distinct lexicon of HHNL can be nicely summed up: “Slick lexicon is hip-hop’s Magna Carta, establishing the rights of its disciples to speak loudly but privately, to tell America about herself in a language that leaves her puzzled” (Rickford & Rickford 2000: 86).

Several scholars have written that the syntax of HHNL is essentially the same as that of AAL (Remes 1991, Smitherman 1997, 2000, A. Morgan 1999, Spady & Alim 1999, Yasin 1999, Rickford & Rickford 2000, M. Morgan 2001b). This is true. We must also examine the syntax of HHNL closely enough to elucidate how the language users are behaving both within and beyond the boundaries of AAL syntax. What is happening syntactically when Method Man gets on the air and proclaims, “Broadcasting live from the Apocalypse, it be I, John Blazzazzziinnnyyyy!” (KMEL 2001)? What is happening when Jubwa of Soul Plantation writes in his autobiography: “Jubwa be the dope mc, freestylin’ to the beat deep cover” (cited in Alim 2001). An important question is, How does HHNL confirm our knowledge of AAL syntax—and how does it challenge that knowledge?

Probably the most oft-studied feature of AAL is *habitual* or *invariant be*

Probably the most oft-studied feature of AAL is *habitual* or *invariant be* (see Green, this volume). Early studies of AAL syntax (Labov 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972) noted the uniqueness of this feature and were in agreement that it was used for recurring actions (*We be clubbin on Saturdays*) and could not be used in finite contexts (*She be the teacher*). Building

upon this research, we see that HHNL provides numerous examples of what I call *be3* or the “equative copula” in AAL (Alim 2001b). Some examples of this construction (Noun Phrase # *be* # Noun Phrase) follow:

I be the truth. -- Philadelphia’s Beanie Sigel

Dr. Dre be the name. -- Compton’s Dr. Dre

This beat be the beat for the street. -- New York’s Busta Rhymes

Brooklyn be the place where I served them thangs. -- New York’s Jay-Z

I be that insane ... from the psycho ward. -- Staten Island’s Method Man

These are but a few of countless examples in the corpus of hip hop lyrics, but this equative copula construction can also be found in everyday conversation, as in these examples:

We be them Bay boys. (Bay Area’s Mac Mall in a conversation with James G. Spady)

It [marijuana] be that good stuff. (Caller on the local Bay Area radio station)

You know we be some baaad brothas. (Philadelphia speaker in

Sorcerers. We also find the form being cited in one linguistic study of Black street speech (*They be the real troublemakers; Leo be the one to tell it like it is*) (Baugh 1983). It is possible that members of the HHN, with their extraordinary linguistic consciousness and their emphasis on stretching the limits of language, have made this form much more acceptable by using it frequently (Alim 2004).

The HHN's linguistic consciousness refers to HHNL speakers' conscious use of language to construct identity. Addressing the divergence of AAL from standard English, Smitherman and Baugh (In press: 20) write:

Graffiti writers of Hip Hop Culture were probably the coiners of the term "phat" (meaning excellent, great, superb)... although "phat" is spelled in obvious contrast to "fat," the former confirms that those who use it know that "ph" is pronounced like "f." In other words, those who first wrote "phat" diverged from standard English as a direct result of their awareness of standard English: the divergence was not by chance linguistic error. There is no singular explanation to account for linguistic divergence, but Hip Hop Culture suggests that matters of personal identity play a significant role.

"This conscious linguistic behavior deals with matters of spelling and phonemic awareness. (See Morgan 2001a and Olivo 2001 on "spelling ideology.") One case-one of the more controversial uses of language in hip hop culture is the "n-word". The HHN realized that this word had various positive in-group meanings and pejorative out-group meanings, and thus felt the need to reflect the culturally-specific meanings with a new spelling (ending the word with an "a" rather than an "er"). The "n-word" then becomes your main man, or one of your close companions, your homie.

Recently the term has been generalized to refer to any male (One may even hear something like, "No, I was talkin about Johnny, you know, the white n- with the hair") though it usually refers to a Black male.

Demonstrating hip hop's affinity for acronyms, Tupac Shakur transformed the racial slur into the ultimate positive ideal for young Black males-*Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished*."

As with the highlighting of regional vocabulary, HHNL speakers intentionally highlight regional differences in pronunciation by processes such as vowel lengthening and syllabic stress (Morgan 2001b). When Bay Area rappers JT the Bigga Figga and Mac Mall announced the resurgence of the Bay Area to the national hip hop scene with "Game Recognize Game" (1993), they did so using a distinctive feature of Bay Area pronunciation. The Bay Area anthem's chorus repeated this line three times: "Game recognize game in the Bay, man (mane)." "Man" was pronounced "mane" to accentuate this Bay Area pronunciation feature. Also, as fellow Bay Area rapper B-Legit rhymes about slang, he does so using the same feature to stress his Bay Area linguistic origins: "You can tell from my slang I'm from the Bay, mane." (2000).

When Nelly and the St. Lunatics "busted" onto the hip hop scene, they were among the first rappers to represent St. Louis, Missouri on a national scale. Language was an essential part of establishing their identity in a fiercely competitive world of hip hop culture. For example, in a single by the St. Lunatics featuring Nelly they emphasize

HHNL speakers vary
their grammar
consciously

Nelly and the St.
Lunatics are
conscious not only
of their
pronunciation, but
also of their syntax.

On his platinum single “Country Grammar” (2000), Nelly proclaims, “My gramma bees Ebonics.” Clearly, HHNL speakers vary their grammar consciously. An analysis of copula variation in the speech and the lyrics of hip hop artists concluded that higher levels of copula absence in the artists' lyrics represented the construction of a street conscious identity—where the speaker makes a linguistic-cultural connection to the streets, the locus of the hip hop world (Alim 2002). John Rickford has suggested (in a conference comment made in 2001) that the use of creole syntactic and phonological features by many rappers supports the ability of HHNL speakers to manipulate their grammar consciously. Like San Quinn (see opening quote in this section) HHNL speakers elect dialects to demonstrate their high degree of linguistic consciousness and in order to construct a street-conscious identity.

Hip Hop Cultural Modes of Discourse and Discursive Practices

Keyes (1984: 145) applied Smitherman's (1977) Black modes of discourse to HHNL. Working in hip hop's gestation period, she wrote that “Smitherman schematized four broad categories of black discourse: narrative sequencing, call-response, signification/dozens, and tonal semantics. All of these categories are strategically used in rap music.” We know that rappin in and of itself is not entirely new—rather, it is the most modern/postmodern instantiation of the linguistic-cultural practices of Africans in America. Rappers are, after all, “postmodern African griots” (a class of musicians-entertainers who preserved African history through oral narratives) (Smitherman 1997). This section will demonstrate how the strategic use of the Black modes of discourse is manifested in HHNL and how the new ways in which these modes are practiced generate correspondingly new modes of discourse. This section is based on various forms of HHNL data—rap lyrics, hip hop performances and hip hop conversational discourse.

Call and Response

Here is perhaps the most lucid definition of call and response:

As a communicative strategy this call and response is the manifestation of the cultural dynamic which finds audience and listener or leader and background to be a unified whole. Shot through with action and interaction, Black communicative performance is concentric in quality—the 'audience' becoming both observers and participants in the speech event. As Black American culture stresses commonality and group experientiality, the audience's linguistic and paralinguistic responses are necessary to co-sign the power of the speaker's rap or call. (Daniel & Smitherman 1976, cited in Spady 2000: 59)

The quintessential example of the HHN's use of call and response grows out of the funk performances and is still heard at nearly every hip hop performance today. [Rapper] “Say

scene where lead MC Black Thought senses that there is a communicative schism developing between him and his Swiss audience (Jackson et al. 2001: 25). The rapper says, "Hold it, hold it, hold it!" and stops the music abruptly. What follows is an "impromptu instruction" in the call and response mode of Black discourse: "Y'all can't get the second part no matter what the ... I say, right... I wonder if it's what I'm saying... A-yo! We gonna try this ... one more time because I like this part of the show." Providing more explicit instruction, Thought slows it down a bit: "Aight, Aight this is how I'm gonna break it down. I'm gonna be like "ahh," then everybody gonna be like "ahhh." Then—I don't know what I'm gonna say second but y'all gotta listen close cause then y'all gotta repeat that ...t -- that's the fun of the game!" Thought is not only providing instruction but he is also administering a challenge to his European audience: either *gitsicwiddit* [get sick with it] *orgithitwiddit* [get hit with it]! (in this context meaning, 'Become active participants in this activity or get caught off guard looking culturally ignorant!')

Call and response mechanisms are so pervasive in HHNL that talented MC's (rappers, Masters of Ceremonies) have taken this mode to new heights. Mos Def describes one of the elements that made Slick Rick a legendary rapper:

Slick Rick is one of the greatest MC's ever born because he has so many different facilities that he would use. Style. Vocal texture. The way he would even record. Like, he was doing call and response with himself! He would leave four bars open, and then do another character, you understand what I'm saying? (Alim 2000, unpublished interview).

The individualized uses of call and response in the hip hop cultural mode of discourse deserve more attention. Also, as is evident from Mos Def's comments, HHNL speakers can be cognizant of the fact that they are operating within and expanding upon the African American Oral Tradition. The linguistic and communicative consciousness of the HHN also needs to be explored.

Multilayered Totalizing Expression

Beyond the explicit instruction, one can witness the multilayered nature of the call and response mode at hip hop performances where both performer and audience are fully conversant with hip hop cultural modes of discourse. At the first Spitkicker Tour (2000) in San Francisco's Maritime Hall, I observed this multilayered, multitextual mode. Here's an excerpt from my fieldnotes:

Maaan, all performers are on stage at once -- [DJ] Hi-Tek, Talib [Kweli], Common, Biz [Markie], De La [Soul], Pharoahe [Monch] -- and they just kickin it in a fun-loving communal-type hip hop atmosphere! Common and Biz are exchanging lines from his classic hit... The DJ from De La starts cuttin up the music and before you know it, Common is center stage freestylin. The DJ switches the pace of the music, forcing Common to switch up the pace of his freestyle [improvisational rap], and the crowd's lovin it! 'Oooooohhhhh!'... Hi-Tek and Maseo are circling each other on stage giving a series of hi-fives timed to the beat, smilin and laughin all along, as the crowd laughs on with them. Common, seizing the energy of the moment, says, 'This is hip hop music, y'all!' Then he shouts, 'It ain't nuthin like hip hop music!' and holds the microphone out to the crowd. 'It

expression that completes the cipher (the process of constantly making things whole). We witness a call and response on the oral/aural, physical (body), and spiritual/metaphysical level. My final note (“Gotta love this hip hop music”) captures a moment of realization that meaning resides in what I've just witnessed—in the creation of a continuum beyond audience and performer. We hear varied calls made by the DJ and responded to by a freestylin MC; by the two MC's exchanging lines and by their impromptu leading of the audience in celebration of hip hop; by the physical reaction of performers to each other and the audience (who were also slappin hands with the performers); and by the spirited and spiritual response created during the climax of the performance. Like Common say, “Find heaven in this music and God/ Find heaven in this music and God/ Find heaven in this music and God” (cited in Jackson et al. 2001).

Signifyin and Bustin (Bussin)

Scholars have studied signification or signifyin—or, in more contemporary, semantically similar Black terms, *bustin*, *crackin*, and *dissin* (Abrahams 1964, Kochman 1969, Kernan 1971, 1972, Smitherman 1973, 1977). Signifyin has been described as a means to encode messages or meanings in natural conversations, usually involving an element of indirection (Mitchell-Kernan 1972). Ironically noting the difficulty in pin-pointing a dictionary definition for the speech act, Rickford and Rickford (2000: 82) cite Mitchell-Kernan's (1972:82) attempt:

The black concept of *signifying* incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not in another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. Superficially, self-abasing remarks are frequently self-praise.

In Scarface's comments and Tha Pharcyde dialogue given earlier, we see evidence of this folk notion that “standard” dictionaries are insufficient to interpret Black language and life. But looking more closely at Tha Pharcyde dialogue, we witness an extremely sly (skillful and indirect) signification in hip hop conversational discourse. In the dialogue, Booty Brown is advocating the Black folk notion described by Kernan above. He implies that his partner is glorifying a Eurocentric meaning-making system over a meaning-making system that is African-derived. This does not become clear until Brown chooses his examples—carefully and cleverly. “Just like they use any other word as a slang, *my brotha!*” He emphasizes the “slang phrase” *my brotha*, as it is usually used as a sign of cultural unity and familial bond between African American males (females will use *my sista* in a similar way).

Then he proceeds to ask the direct question, “Whose definition are you glorifying?” which is, in fact, a statement. Finally, as if to *really* lay it on thick (add insult to injury), he chooses to use the word “Black” to show that *Webster's Dictionary* is inadequate. The heat is diffused when “P” says, “I'm sayin, I'm sayin, that's what I'M sayin!” and they—and others around them—break into laughter. This dialogue is an example of how language is used to remind, scold, shame, or otherwise bring the other into a commonly shared ethic through signification.

You lose flavor. You lose the slang. You lose the basic everyday kickin it, you know, knowing what's going on at all times, you know what I'm saying? Knowing the new names for '5-0s'. They ain't even 5-0s no more. They call them 'po-pos'. That means everything changes. And they call them 'one-time', you know what I'm saying? But you got to be in there to know that the police might know these words already. So they got to change up their dialect so that way it sounds like Pig Latin to the police. (Spady et al. 1999: 308).

Bushwick's comment refers us directly to tenet (10) above. He is describing the changing nature of the various terms for "police" in the streets - from "5-0s" to "po-pos" to "one time." At one time, blacks referred to the "one-time" as "black and whites" (Folb 1980). The sociopolitical contexts of many depressed and oppressed Black neighborhoods necessitate these speedy lexical transformations.

Even though the police are not present in the dialogue above, Bushwick signifies on them with a clever one-liner that *also* serves to buttress his point. After running down all of the various terms (which have gone out of vogue as quickly as the police comprehended them), he concludes, "So they got to change up their dialect so that way it sounds like Pig Latin to the police." "Pig Latin" is chosen here, rather than Greek, Chinese, Swahili, or other unfamiliar languages, to echo the fact that at one time police officers were called "pigs." Bushwick is not only signifying on the police, but he is also demonstrating yet another term for police that has gone out of fashion! In addition, he is referencing an old form of Afroamericanized Pig Latin that employs innuendo, wordplay, letter and syllabic shifting, rhyming and coded language designed to communicate with those in the know.

Like call and response, signifying is ubiquitous in hip hop lyrics. In an example of male-female urban verbal play, in "Minute Man" (2001) with Missy Elliot and Ludacris, Jay-Z signifies on female R&B group Destiny's Child. Some insider knowledge is required to fully understand this speech act. Earlier that year, Destiny's Child had released "Independent Women," in which they asked a series of questions of men who dogged ('treated poorly') females. For example, they introduced each question with the word *question* and then proceeded, "How you like them diamonds that I bought?" (to demonstrate to such men that they had their own income). Being that one of Jay-Z's many personas is the "playa..."-type, he rhymes to the listeners (including Destiny's Child): "I'm not tryin to give you love and affection/ I'm tryin to give you 60 seconds of affection/ I'm tryin to give you cash, fare and directions/ Get your independent.... outta here, Question!" The signification doesn't become clear until the last line, or really, the last word, when Jay-Z borrows the word *question* from their song (saying it in such a way as to completely match their rate of speech, tone and pronunciation). The only thing left to do is say, "Oooohhhhhh!"

We also witnessed signification in the call and response section of the Black Thought performance described above. As Jackson (2001) notes, Thought appears to be signifying on the audience by highlighting their lack of familiarity with Black cultural modes of discourse: "I wonder if it's what I'm saying... A-yo!" The Roots have been known to signify on audiences that are not as culturally responsive as they would like them to be. During a recent concert at Stanford University, they stopped the music and began singing theme songs from 1980s television shows like "Diff'rent Strokes" and "Facts of

bust on the unresponsive audience.

Linguistic scholars are needed to uncover the complexity and creativity of HHNL

The examples above make clear that HHNL speakers readily incorporate *signifyin* and *bustin* into their repertoire. Whether hip hop heads are performing, writing rhymes, or just “conversatin,” these strategies are skillfully employed. Other hip hop cultural modes of discourse and discursive practices, which fall out of the purview of this chapter, are tonal semantics and poetics, narrative sequencing and flow, battling and entering the cipher. Linguistic scholars of the hip hop generations (we are now more than one) are needed to uncover the complexity and creativity of HHNL speakers. In order to *represent*—reflect any semblance of hip hop cultural reality—these scholars will need to be in direct conversation with the culture creators of a very widely misunderstood Nation.

Notes

1. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released “The Message” in 1982 and it became one of the first major hip hop records to document street life and street consciousness. The line, “It’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from goin under” is perhaps one of the most frequently quoted hip hop choruses to this day. In the epigraph to this chapter, we see JT the Bigga Figga rappin another part of the chorus, “Don’t push me cuz I’m close to the eeedge!”
2. The transcription of HHNL into print often leaves a lot to be desired. I have attempted to reconstruct the verbal agility of these hip hop artists on the printed page, but, as Brathwaite (1984) admits, it is best for the reader to listen along to the music whenever possible (see discography).

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Suggestions for further reading and exploration

For a thorough understanding of the philosophies and aesthetic values of hip hop’s culture creators, the *Umum Hip Hop Trilogy* is an excellent source. Its three volumes (Spady & Eure 1991, Spady et al. 1995, Spady et al. 1999) offer extensive hip hop conversational discourse with such members of the HHN as Ice Cube, Busta Rhymes, Chuck D, Kuruft, Common, Eve, Bahamadia, Grandmaster Flash, and others. These volumes also provide primary source material for scholars of language use within the HHN. For early works on hip hop culture, see Hager (1984), Nelson & Gonzales (1991), Toop (1984, 1994, 1999), Rose (1994), and Potter (1995).

For updates on what’s happening in the HHN, the most informative website is Davey D’s

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