

The Discursive Construction of Identity in an Internet Hip-Hop Community

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the Internet message board forum is proposed as an example of a community of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992) in which contributors exhibit common linguistic conventions and forms of participation. The emergence of individual identities in interaction is examined in the genre-specific context of hip-hop Internet message boards. A corpus analysis of message board postings clearly shows that contributors systematically exploit the spoken and written qualities of the language of message boards, the “third medium” (Crystal, 2001) to identify themselves linguistically. Linguistic conventions or practices reveal a tendency among contributors to discursively construction their identities via a “social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) as experts or non-experts in the hip-hop community. Contributors’ identities as experts or simply in-group members are further corroborated or established by the codification not only of non-standard pronunciations and grammar characteristic of speech, but also of non-standard orthography, which demands a written forum to be appreciated, as it is neutralized and unremarkable in speech. Because of the written and spoken qualities of message board discourse, both the content and the form of postings can be manipulated to showcase familiarity with hip-hop discursive practices. Internet message boards therefore represent the ideal forum for discursively constructing a hip-hop identity.

1. Introduction

The discursive construction of identity is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we each have the possibility to present, control and claim our own identities through linguistic means. But the successful construction of identity is actually a collaborative procedure, as it is largely a function of interlocutor recognition and acknowledgment. Any individual speaker is not, then, completely autonomous in terms of his or her own discursive construction of identity; identities are rather co-constructed, negotiated, and even imposed through interaction. This perspective on identity as achieved through interaction assumes the concept of identity as emergent rather than pre-existent and waiting to be expressed linguistically. In their sociocultural linguistic approach to identity and interaction, Bucholtz and Hall (2005:585) propose an analytical framework based on five principles of identity, each in accordance with their definition of identity as the “social positioning of self and other”. Their ‘emergence principle’ holds that identity “is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore as fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon” (p. 588). Deppermann (forthcoming) also adopts an approach to identity as emergent from interaction, arguing that such an approach focuses on “how participants in an interaction identify themselves and others in their talk, which means [the focus is] on interactional and linguistic organization they use for this and on which occasions and for which ends identity becomes an issue for speakers”. Because interaction assumes an addresser and at least one addressee, the identity of self emerges as a function of the other, through implicit or explicit negotiation and agreement.

That identities emerge in the context of interaction presupposes the use of language as a communicative tool. Indeed, language as the means of discursively constructing an identity is the focal point of identity in interaction. The discursive construction of identity presupposes a social context for interaction, and social contexts in turn imply particular linguistic conventions. Associated with the concept of linguistic conventions according to social context is the theoretical construct of communities of practice. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992:464) define a community of practice as “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor”. Eckert (2000:35) furthermore claims that “particular kinds of knowledge, expertise, and forms of participation become part of individuals’ identities and places in the community”.

2. Message boards as communities of practice

Internet message boards (also called bulletin boards) represent a forum for people with one or more common interests to interact, and thus a community of practice approach to their interaction should be applicable, based on this “mutual engagement in an endeavor”. The

question is whether message boards can, in fact, be considered communities and, if so, whether they can furthermore be identified as sources of practices.

The term 'community' concerns things held in common. They may be tangible, like the common property of a family or the common pasture lands held by a tribe. Or they may be intangible: common ideas, beliefs, and values; common customs and norms; and common or joint action of a group as a whole. Furthermore, when we speak of a community we ordinarily mean a set of people who have not just one element in common, but many (Coleman, 1976: 559).

According to this definition, message boards qualify as communities simply by virtue of their status as loci for people who have at least one interest in common and who take part in the joint action of using message boards. Whether visiting or actively contributing, using message boards requires using language, often in specific ways. Thus in terms of language usage, message boards are associated with customs or norms, further supporting their status as communities. In her study of chat rooms, Balfour (2004) concludes that the concept of Internet community is indeed based on a particular communication system, a specific linguistic behavior. Dingwell (2004) agrees, citing conventionalized language use as an indicator of an Internet chat community. As sources of common linguistic behavior, Internet message boards can then be considered communities of practice.

Internet message boards allow for asynchronous interaction between a potentially large amount of participants. Posting or even gaining access to Internet message boards requires a computer, and the linguistic interaction thereby enabled is often referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC). Focussing on its social, interactional aspects, CMC can be defined as "not just a tool; it is at once technology, medium, and engine of social relations. It not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space" (Jones, 1995:11.) As a tool for social interaction, CMC therefore includes message board postings, chats and e-mails. The language particular to such forms of interaction has been called the "third medium" (Crystal, 2001:48; cf. Ong, 1982), denoting a variety of language that constitutes a new genre of discourse, arguably similar to spoken language, but in written form. Takahashi (2003) uses the term 'Net-En' to refer specifically to computer-mediated communication in English, denoting a variety distinct from written or spoken forms of English. Message board postings can be considered an example of the third medium (or possibly even Net-En), as they reflect a tendency among contributors to write as they speak and can therefore be considered a variant of spoken language, but written by the 'speakers' themselves as they choose to represent their 'speech.' Throughout the remainder of this paper, the terms 'to post' (to write and submit a message on a message board), 'posting' (an individual message on a message board), and 'contributor' (the submitter of a message) are used both to acknowledge the distinct variety of language found on Internet message boards, and to avoid unintentional alignment with written or spoken varieties of English.

The Internet message board forum is proposed as an example of a community of practice where contributors exhibit common linguistic conventions and forms of participation. In this

paper, the emergence of individual and group identities through discourse in a community of practice is examined in the genre-specific context of hip-hop Internet message boards. Message board postings reveal an exploitation of both the written and spoken qualities of Internet discourse, establishing the medium as the ideal forum for members of the hip-hop community to interact. Contributors take advantage of this unique platform to exhibit their knowledge of conventionalized hip-hop practices, allowing their own hip-hop identities to emerge through interaction with others who possess or value the same expertise. Individual hip-hop identities are discursively constructed within message board postings via three distinct strategies of discourse: positioning of self, positioning of other, and performing identity through verbal art.

3. Methodology

Focussing on a hip-hop community of practice for an investigation of Internet discourse and the construction of identity in message board interaction is enabled by the quantity and quality of data available. Not only is there an abundance of websites dedicated to hip-hop culture, many with free access to message boards, but, most importantly, the message board postings themselves represent unique, raw data produced by the members of a socio-cultural community to which linguist-observers and/or out-group members might not have access (cf. *Observer's Paradox*, Labov, 1972). The postings furthermore capture the language of a specific medium as its users would have it represented. There are no questions of editing, nor is there, in contrast to speech, any need for transcription, which eliminates mediation and guesswork.

The reliable identification of linguistic conventions within the hip-hop message board community of practice requires both a quantitative and qualitative approach to the data. Determining the extent of linguistic systematicity within the community demands a large amount of data, while an examination of variations within the identified system rather requires a micro-analysis. In order to recognize potential patterns warranting careful investigation, a corpus of hip-hop message board postings was composed from five different Internet message boards.¹ After dates and e-mail/web addresses were edited out, the corpus totalled 102,343 words (tokens) with 10,124 distinct types. WordSmith4 was used to analyze the corpus in terms of keywords, word frequency, and sorted lists. The results of the analysis reveal that the referential content of hip-hop message board postings reveal strategies of the positioning of self and other, while their form represents performance strategies, each contributing to discursive constructions of hip-hop identities.

4. The discourse of hip-hop message boards

The anonymity associated with the medium of Internet message boards does not allow for reliable identification or recognition of contributors, or even corroboration of their claimed

identities. It is primarily through linguistic means that contributors can identify themselves and each other, and as Wallace (1999:51) has noticed in terms of Internet anonymity, “it is so easy to lie and get away with it”. In the hip-hop message board community of practice, however, lying about identity requires considerable effort, making getting away with it unlikely. The discursive construction of a hip-hop identity is as much a function of what is posted as how it is composed. The content and the form of hip-hop message board postings reflect a sociolect, used by individuals to collectively represent community practices. Hip-hop generally refers to a style of music, but the cultural history also includes “dance, painting, fashion, video, crime and commerce [...]” (George, 1999: viii.) Postings that do not concern a topic relevant to hip-hop culture risk being ignored or mocked, requiring a familiarity with cultural practices, events and issues:

- (1) The question is what is rap going to turn into wildness and no realness? Where is the realness? Its all about clubs and partyin and fuckin and bling bling etc. everydamn thing is the same. Nothing creative, just the same ass thing. . . . It pisses me off. Fuck everyone for their opinions on rap when they don't even know what rap is! What hip hop is! The meaning of hip hop! And what it has revoultionized into! This Is SHIT!

The statistical data of the corpus suggest that the content of the message board postings is quite limited in scope. While the type-token ratio suggests a rather diverse vocabulary, the total number of types is somewhat misleading. Many types are actually variants of one word, for example, ‘please’, ‘pleez’ and ‘plizz’, and thus when conflated, the total decreases. The total number of types could therefore be understood as much lower, suggesting a low lexical density for this corpus, which in turn indicates that “very few types occur very often”.² In fact, a content analysis of the postings of the hip-hop message board corpus reveals that one main focus is listening to or performing hip-hop music or texts, as illustrated in the following posting:

- (2)³ is it me, or are niggas on RB writing verses when they battle? =/... cause when im thinking of spittin, im thinking you actualy sayign the shit out loud, mathcing syllables, having a flow to it.. not sitting there writing a diss essay lol.. maybe its just me and i need to change my style, but when i spit i spit so have people head movin wit mine na mean? i should prolly stick to cyphers haha.

The content of this particular posting furthermore features a number of lexical items worth close examination. First, the terms ‘battle’, ‘spit’ and ‘flow’ are examples of hip-hop slang, the use of which functions as an in-group marker. Second, ‘nigga’ and ‘shit’ number among a group of taboo words used particularly frequently in hip-hop discourse. Finally, the repeated use of first-person pronouns is characteristic of a discursive construction of identity by positioning the self. Each of these lexical items are keywords in the hip-hop corpus. Keywords in corpora are those words “whose frequency is unusually high in comparison with some norm” and therefore “characterize the text”⁴ under investigation. The ‘norm’ used for the comparison is known as a reference corpus; for this study, the reference corpus

used was Text G from the FROWN files.⁵ A keyword list compiled for the hip-hop corpus identified a total of 477 keywords, corresponding to approximately 5% of the total types in the corpus.⁶ Thus, a relatively high number of words in the corpus are key in that they occur unusually frequently when compared to the reference corpus. Since keywords may not be among the most frequent words in the corpus, a keyword list makes them salient in ways that a frequency list might not.

5. Slang

The words 'battle', 'spit' and 'flow' together with their inflected variants each constitute under 1% of the corpus, but as slang, and thus words with specific hip-hop semantics, their frequency is high enough (or low enough in the reference corpus) to render them keywords. The use of 'battle' (a freestyle lyrical challenge with another contributor), 'spit' (to rap), and 'flow' (lyrical rhythm) in hip-hop discourse is illustrated in the following postings:

- (3) yeah i might start soon cuz ive been busy accually MAKING this site and now that its finally settling down and its pretty active i can now relax and maybe **battle**
 yeh g u shud ive never seen any of ur **battles** i look 4ward to seein ur **battles** n maybe if im feelin lucky i myt battle u.
 Yo fo real ? dat wud be kool G tu see u **battlin** u know een one or two of ure drops wen I first started on this site and it was real good so du ure thang G and show ery1 who runs thangs lol
- (4) after reading through some of the nonsense posted on this site i had to join to try to bring common sense to the discussion. what rhyme has anyone ever heard 50 **spit** on that was hotter than most of the nigg@a he beefin with worst track. nas, jada, j, game and everyone else he beefin with are by far way superior lyricist. all 50 can **spit** is shoot this, 9 rounds that, and bonin groupies. ne one who says he is anywhere near the best probably gay and jsut want to be in his next candyshop video.
- (5) and i think game is the best rapper in the usa he is as hot as a motherfucker. i went and seen him live in glasgow and he was outstanding. i have seen 50 3 times live in glasgow and he was no were as good as game his **flow** is the best.

Other keywords with specific hip-hop semantics include 'ill', 'tight', and 'sick' (positive, valued); 'peace' and 'safe' (salutation or farewell); and 'holla' (recognize, acknowledge, communicate with):

- (6) i need a **ill** name or a name that fits me. i love graffiti.seeing my nigga who writes nerds influenced me. also many other graff heads i no like "coma.iw", "win.cas" and my nigga "nerds.NB". I try and try to get **ill**, but i don't know what the deal is. i think its because i cant find a name that fits me.
- (7) I'm not a huge snoop fan, he's kind of whack, but nate and warren g are **tight**.
- (8) Mic Club has a few weak beats on it (C Section, Drama A/T), but for the most part, Bis comes through with some absolutely **sick** rhymes over some equally **sick** beats (Master Thesis,

- Curriculum 101, Behind Enemy Rhymes, Allied Meta Forces...G Rap rips shit!!!!).
- (9) **Peace**, This is Mecca, a chicago based MC. [...] I'm sending off information right away and also my pictures and some written lyrics. Help I'm a dope MC on the loose.
Peace, Mecca
- (10) **SAFE**
U Peeps need to listen to 1xtra and then make ur judgments and trus me on this 1!
- (11) somebody tell me how to find that song and album **holla** at yo boy tru miami soulja fan.

The use of slang in the message board postings reflects a familiarity with both linguistic and non-linguistic hip-hop practices, helping to identify each contributor as an in-group or community member.

6. Taboo terms

The word 'nigga' can be considered slang as well, since its usage and meaning is context-based and specific to hip-hop culture. Its high frequency of occurrence, however, establishes it as a keyword that more reliably and saliently characterizes hip-hop discourse. Along with 'shit', 'fuck', 'ass' and 'bitch', 'nigga' ranks among the most frequent lexical (as opposed to functional) keywords in the hip-hop corpus. Unlike the slang terms above, these taboo words function to marginalize hip-hop culture and the hip-hop community of practice with recognizable as opposed to encrypted meanings. Nevertheless, the usage of both slang and taboo terms carries covert prestige (Trudgill, 1972) and fulfils the same in-group member marking function, as the following examples illustrate:

- (12) **Nigga** please, u hoes are talking about laurin hill and jay z what next? stevie wonder?!!! britney spears?!!! lol haha u guys are jokes fam u cant really be serious.
- (13) all u **niggaz** lost yall mind sayin tha black album is wack. if ya think tha black is wack den ya aint really listen to it. dat **shit** is da hottest album of tha year. yall need to sit back and listen to dat **shit** cuz dat **shit** is hot.
- (14) N umm jus about every **fuckin** MC around talks about shootin or fightin, or dont **fuck** wit em, or how bad they are. No matter where there from, They jus say it in different ways.
- (15) now its just a bunch of ignant cats playin into the stereo types of hiphop adn the black race but i wont comment anymore cause its not my place too comment on black issues. But if i was black **fuck** id have enough **shit** too say about what these stupid **ass** crunk rappers are sayin
- (16) i just dont like it when i see a white kid or any race actin all hard and **shit** cuz their wearing fubu and rocawear and BX and shit that when i think its time to give an **ass** beatin to any race....actin all hard..**BITCH PLEASE!!!**

As alternatives to mainstream language, hip-hop slang terms have an almost anti-language function (Halliday, 1960). The above taboo terms, on the other hand, serve to discursively represent the hip-hop individual, and subsequently the community as well, by virtue of their mainstream recognizability as taboo terms.

7. Positioning of self

Along with slang and taboo terms, the content of hip-hop message board postings is characterized by the frequent use of first-person pronouns. The word 'I' ranks as the most frequent keyword of the hip-hop corpus and the second most frequent word overall (see Table 1, below). There is a clear tendency among contributors to use first-person pronouns in their postings in order to assert their identities, express opinions and state self-serving purposes. The frequent use of first-person pronouns calls attention primarily to the contributor's identity, which is solely a product of linguistic presentation. In the anonymous environment of the message board forum, it therefore behooves the contributors to exploit the content and/or form of their postings to discursively construct their hip-hop identity. In example (17), the contributor's hip-hop in-group status is expressed mainly through the content of the posting, an explicit assertion of hip-hop identity:

- (17) Peace, first **I** would like to say this has to be one of the most educating sites on Hip Hop, as a culture and as a lifestyle. As a hip hop person, **I** like to always educate **myself** on facts and to learn the history of something in **my** interest, and this website is doing that. Thanks

In contrast, the hip-hop identity of the contributor of example (18) is reflected more by the form of the posting, whereas the focus of the content is on expressing an opinion. The posting begins with the contributor first establishing him/herself as an in-group member and, as such, ratified to opine:

- (18) i am white and porto rican but yu cant tell i look striat up with but i act hood not black not fuckn wiggash i at hood cuz that is where i am from if you go to **my** soundclick page you see i talk bout real shit not wigga shit word that is hood once agian that kid deserved to get his ass wooped cuz he aint hood word ok

In example (19), both content and form are exploited equally to express self-serving goals:

- (19) ey foo.....show **meeh** sum pic of yall nikka's breakin iight homie.....do dat fo ur boii b joe from Under Rated Breakaz

The contributor of (19) focuses on his wants ('show meeh sum pic') and twice names himself: first, in relation to the reader ('ur boi') and again as an independent entity ('i be joe from Under Rated Breakaz'). The form of the message, however, dominates the content. To the uninitiated or out-group members, this posting (and many others) presents quite a challenge to comprehend. Even when the content of the message is decoded (a not too divergent gloss would be: 'Hey fool. Show me some pictures of you niggers break dancing, alright, homie? Do that for your boy. I am Joe from Under Rated Breakers') it is nevertheless the form which impresses as an expression of the contributor's hip-hop identity.

The positioning of self reflects a focus on the identity, opinions and goals of the addresser, or in the message board context, the contributor. Contributors post to message

boards for a communicative purpose. However; ultimately, they are trying to negotiate and claim their own hip-hop identities through interaction with other community members. The positioning of self in message board discourse entails an implicit acknowledgment of the 'other' in that one reason to assert one's 'self' is precisely because there is an 'other'. The contributors want to identify themselves as individuals but also want to be recognized as in-group members. Thus, while positioning oneself within the hip-hop community, contributors also seek to position the other.

8. Positioning the other

The corpus includes many postings in which contributors seek to make contact with other members of the community, discuss opinions or ask to be acknowledged; examples (3), (10), (11), (12), (13), (18) and (19) above are particularly illustrative of this interactive discourse. A noticeable characteristic of the content of these and other postings is the explicit acknowledgement of interaction with others via the use of second-person pronouns. While the overall high frequency of first-person pronouns in the hip-hop message board corpus corresponds to a positioning of self, a similarly frequent use of second-person pronouns reflects a positioning of other. The pronoun 'you' ranks as the second most frequent keyword of the corpus and sixth overall. A frequency analysis of the hip-hop corpus reveals that the most frequent words overall are similar to the most frequent words of many other corpora, including the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus (LOB; 1,000,000 words; British English) Brown Corpus (1,000,000 words; American English) and the British National Corpus (BNC; 100,000,000 words; British English). Table 1 shows the ten most frequent words across each corpus.

	Hip-hop	LOB ⁷	Brown ⁸	BNC ⁹
1.	the	the	the	the
2.	i/I	of	of	of
3.	and	and	and	and
4.	to	to	to	a
5.	a	a	a	in
6.	you	in	in	to
7.	is	that	that	it
8.	of	is	is	is
9.	that	was	was	to
10.	in	it	he	was

Table 1. Ten most frequent words by corpus.

It is clear that even in the genre- and register-specific hip-hop corpus, function words occur most frequently. Where the hip-hop corpus diverges is in the frequency of the first- and second-person pronouns 'I' and 'you'. The difference should be considered in terms of a low

frequency of these pronouns in the comparison corpora versus a high frequency in the hip-hop corpus; 90% of the BNC and the entire LOB and Brown corpora are composed of written texts, where first- and second-person terms of address are less frequent (Biber, 1988).

A keyword link analysis of the corpus reveals 'you' to be the most frequently linked word, with 444 links to other keywords. In other words, 'you' is the keyword which most often occurs in clusters or collocations with other keywords. When different forms of 'you' are accounted for, the number of keyword clusters increases. Although 'you' occurs 1,411 times in the corpus, corresponding to a frequency of 1.38%, when other forms such as 'ya', 'y'all', 'your', 'you're', 'u', and 'ur' are included in a frequency count, the total jumps to 3,715, or 3.67%, making the super-ordinate second-person pronoun the most frequent corpus-wide type. In other words, there is a clear tendency among contributors to explicitly acknowledge and appeal to interlocutors through the use of the second-person pronoun.

This positioning of other can be further investigated by a keyword cluster analysis of the corpus. Similar to links, clusters are groups of keywords, normally pairs, that frequently occur near each other. In the hip-hop corpus, the most frequent cluster is, not surprisingly, 'hip hop', occurring 274 times. The second most frequent cluster, however, is 'if you', with 190 occurrences. This cluster is particularly illustrative of the positioning of other, as it usually occurs in contexts where the contributor is seeking contact in order to appeal for assistance, as in the following examples:

- (20) also my friend told me that it's better to just buy a couple of break dancing tapes instead of going off to a school to learn. I'd like to know **if you** agree or **if you** have another opinion.
- (21) yo wus supp i just wanted to know **if you** know where i can get a headspin hat. Cuz im too lazy to make it mahhself.
- (22) Whats killing me is some of these wack as south rappers. Ryhming like niggas were ryhmin in the eighties back in the bronx, And slingin that shit like they just created a new style. Holla **if you** here me.

These postings, in particular the 'if you' clusters, seem to position the contributors at one end of a knowledge/expertise scale in relation to the other, represented by 'you'. The 'if you' clusters suggest that the contributors are lacking and/or seeking knowledge or support of an opinion which they believe the other can provide. In the following examples, however, the 'if you' clusters position the contributors on the opposite end of the expert-scale in relation to the other:

- (23) reality check fuck boi, most ppl are underground because they dont appeal to everyone. Givin tha chance 75% would go mainstream. U internet MC's are whats wrong wit hip hop. Ur talkin to me like i dont know about underground shit. N u got tha nerve to bring up saigon? He aint nuttin but another wannabe. He talk about tha same killin, how hard he is bullshit. Fuck u n ur garbage thoughts. U TALKIN OUT YA ASS ROOKIE. Outkast aint hiphop? **If u** dont respect what Trick N Outkast have done for hiphop, u aint hiphop. U should be slapped.

- (24) Word up! Nigga from New York claim there hoods are the hardest same thing with cali niggaz. Dog, theses are all huge cities where you can move somewhere else in the same city and be straight. What the hell do y'all know bout them little muder towns like Gary, Indiana Flint, Michian Little Rock, amonst others. Don't praise the dirt that goes on in the hood. **If u** have another opinion we can discuss it in a civil manner.
- (25) **YOU'RE FUCKED UP ON ECSTACY. U MUST BE DRUGGIN' IF U FUCKIN' THINK U CAN MESS WITH ME.**

These postings are considerably more aggressive than postings (20)-(22), partly due to the 'if you' clusters functioning as challenges to the other. Much like threats, such challenges imply that the contributor has the ability, social power or social status to question the beliefs or practices of the other. By asserting this power and thereby positioning the self as expert, the contributor also positions the other as non-expert. Part of hip-hop culture is the practice of asserting your identity in terms of knowledge of hip-hop or talent in battling or rapping. Just as it is a lack of knowledge which motivated the postings in examples (20) - (22), it is an assertion of knowledge which characterizes examples (23)-(25).

Particularly noticeable in these postings –and in comparison conspicuously absent in postings (20)-(22)– is the use of the alternative form 'u' for 'you'. As an example of verbal art, the alternative form further helps the contributor to perform a hip-hop identity, positioning the self as knowledgable within the hip-hop community. The hip-hop message board corpus reveals postings to be characterized not only by their content in terms of first- and second person pronouns as well as keywords, but also by their form, in particular the use of non-standard orthography. Thus, in addition to the content-based strategies of positioning self and other, hip-hop identities are discursively constructed through the form-based strategy of performance via verbal art.

9. Performance of identity

The formal discourse of hip-hop message boards is characterized by many of the conventions of conversation, including openings and closings, adjacency pairs, turn-taking and discourse markers. Nevertheless, as the postings are both written and subsequently read, they are similar to texts which, unlike spontaneous speech, do not require immediate processing in either direction of interaction. The message board medium affords interlocutors the time to produce and process language, and thus awards them the opportunity to exploit fully their linguistic resources. Consequently, the hip-hop message board postings reveal a deliberate exploitation of the written and spoken language qualities of this medium. The defining characteristics of hip-hop message board postings include a codification of non-standard pronunciation and grammar characteristic of informal, spoken language, and the use of non-standard orthography (Sebba, 2003), which demands a written forum to be appreciated, as it is neutralized and thus unremarkable in speech.

In her discussion of verbal art and performance, Johnstone (2002:220) addresses the aesthetic aspects of discourse, claiming that “humans attend to how discourse sounds and

looks as well as to what it refers to and what it is meant to accomplish". The positioning of self and other has been shown to be accomplished through the use of keywords such as first- and second-person pronouns. Throughout the corpus and in many of the above examples, however, content is dominated by form, drawing attention from what the posting is about to how the posting looks. The juxtaposition of extracts from examples (17), (18), and (19) illustrates an increasing saliency of form over content:

- (17) As a hip hop person, I like to always educate myself on facts and to learn the history of something in my interest, and this website is doing that.
- (18) i am white and porto rican but yu cant tell i look striat up with but i act hood not black not fuckn wiggaiish i at hood cuz that is where i am from
- (19) ey foo.....show meeh sum pic of yall nikka's breakin iight homie.....do dat fo ur boii b joe frum Under Rated Breakaz

A positioning of self as a member of the hip-hop community characterizes the content of each posting, but the forms of (18) and, to a greater extent, (19) corroborate the content by showing a familiarity with the verbal art practices of hip-hop. Much like 'as a hip hop person', the use of 'I am Joe from Under Rated Breakers' would not identify the contributor as a member of the hip-hop community (despite the claimed affiliation with a breakdancing group) nearly as much as 'i am joe frum Under Rated Breakaz' does. The corpus data further suggest that such verbal art is frequent and, to a great extent, conventionalized. It is argued that only through familiarity with and use of such conventionalized verbal art can one discursively construct and recognize a valid hip-hop identity. In the following sections, the most common discursive conventions of verbal art are presented.

10. Non-standard orthography

The example postings thus far included give an indication of the extent of linguistic manipulation involved in performing a hip-hop identity. In example (19) for instance, almost every word of the posting is either specific to the hip-hop genre (e.g., 'nikkas breakin iight') or written in an alternative manner (e.g., 'do dat fo ur boi'). The corpus data further suggest that the verbal art of hip-hop discourse is reflected mainly through a community-wide and systematic use of alternative, non-standard varieties of orthography which permeate nearly all word types. Of the ten most frequent words listed in Table 1, alternative spellings for seven of them were found in the corpus. Both sets of words, along with the corresponding frequency percentages, are presented in Table 2.

	Standard	% of corpus	Alternative	% of corpus
1.	the	3.36	da	0.13
2.	i/I	2.53	---	--
3.	and	2.28	n	0.29
4.	to	2.04	2	0.17

5.	a	2.02	---	--
6.	you	1.38	u	1.33
7.	is	1.36	iz	0.02
8.	of	1.34	a	0.05
9.	that	1.14	dat	0.07
10.	in	1.11	---	--

Table 2. Alternative forms for the ten most frequent words.

The alternative forms ‘da’, ‘n’, ‘a’, and ‘dat’ are orthographic representations of the standard forms as they would be phonetically realized in speech. In word-initial position, the dental [ð], represented orthographically as ‘th’, is phonetically realized as the plosive [d]; this is even a feature of AAVE, which is associated with hip-hop culture (Feldman, 2002; Rickford, 1999; Rickford, 2004). ‘And’ and ‘of’ are often reduced in informal speech such that ‘and’ becomes a syllabified [n] and ‘of’ becomes the lax vowel [ʊ].

In contrast to these four forms, the other three alternative forms ‘2’, ‘u’ and ‘iz’ do not represent non-standard pronunciations. They do, however, further illustrate verbal art in hip-hop discourse since each alternative spelling calls attention to the form of the message. The frequency percentages clearly indicate that the standard forms are more common, but considering the corpus size, the frequency of the alternative forms is remarkable, particularly when one also considers that the use of each alternative entails a deliberate effort to avoid writing the standard form. Herring (1996) points out the economical use of special characters and acronyms in computer-mediated communication. It is true that each alternative form is shorter than the standard, but one could also argue that their use is potentially more time-consuming due to the effort involved. Admittedly, this evaluation reflects an out-group member bias. For a community member or a seasoned contributor to hip-hop message boards, saying, thinking and even typing ‘dat’ instead of ‘that’ may be effortless; after all, this form is a feature of one’s hip-hop identity. The earlier discussion of the ‘if you’ cluster supports precisely this argument, as the alternative ‘if u’ clusters are shown to occur primarily in postings by contributors asserting their hip-hop identities based on their knowledge and expertise in –and thus familiarity with – hip-hop culture.

11. Use of numbers

Frequency lists compiled by WordSmith recognize numbers by default and treat them as similar tokens, for example, if a corpus included the numbers ‘10’ and ‘582’, both would be counted separately, but subsequently represented in the frequency list as two occurrences of ‘#’. This number symbol is conspicuous within a list of words. Although the hip-hop corpus had been edited to remove dates and websites, the first frequency list compiled revealed a suspiciously high frequency of numbers. A manual, qualitative investigation of the corpus revealed the frequent use of numbers as alternatives to letters, phonological strings, and morphemes in the hip-hop message board postings. Because of the type-written

form of message board postings, the physical similarity of some keyboard numbers and letters can be exploited, as in the following examples of substitution:

- '9' for 'g', especially in 'ni99a'
- (26) this cat wasn't even a street **ni99a's** he just new street **ni99a's** and told they stories, wich is cool but dont front like that's yo live.
- (27) **Ni99a's** i had to be on the block I much rather be in the board room Bitches, word!
- (28) Now back to my **Ni99a** B.I.G he lived it but as soon as he got on in the rap game "he went from ashy to classy"! word.
- '0' for 'o'
- (29) Ill stick him on a hook, and feed him to the fish, guess im 'Castin A **shad0w**'// a **shad0w** is all you'll ever be 'compared to me'//
- (30) i love the page so **pr0ps** to u.
- (31) **w0rd** i went 2 dat concert wit reina & some othuh homegirlz she did do ill, but she still a beast lol.
- (32) it's a piece of led in ur teeth/ i'm fed up wit you geeks, i'm ahead of ur scripts/ ahead of ur speech/ "fuck the world" the tragedy is **bl00d**-shed in the streets
- '5' for 's', '4' for 'a'
- (33) **54F£**
Well done ma nigga, holla.
Seen... **P£4C£!**

Unlike the alternative orthography of several of the most frequent words, these number substitutions do not represent non-standard pronunciations. Furthermore, as the numbers only replace single letters, the alternative forms are legible and quite easily comprehensible. In the following examples, however, numbers are used to replace phonological strings and entire morphemes, which encourages and sometimes requires pronunciation, as the standard form is not always immediately recognizable from the altered, type-written form.

- '1' for 'one'
- (34) i was readin a boys source magazine n da black ppl wer sayin stuf like 'how can we call eminem a racist wen we disrespect ourselves by calin each other niggas'. iaint even 2 sure bout dis so if **ne1** can xplain.
- (35) i got **some1** makin our sig its gonna have female gangstaz in front den in da background its gonna have 50 cent chingy and other people iight tell me wat yall think.
- (36) and its less of a crime to call **sum1** a 'honky' than to call **sum1** a nigga if u no wot i mean cos half of u probably dont even no y its so taboo.
- (37) i think that sooner or later it will die out coz the stuff they rap will get old n **no1** will buy it.
- '2' for 'to-', 'to' or 'too'
- (38) i fink its deep wen a white guys racist **2wards** a black guy but it should be the same way vice verser.
- (39) i run da streets **2DAY**- get on ur knees **2** pray- u tryin' **2** be hard, but it doesn't increase da rage.
- (40) u aint no rapper plz all your lyrics is kept in a guitar-case

fakest thinker huh? **2bad** the world is mine sorry scar-face

'4' for free morpheme 'for' or phonological string [f ?r]

- (41) u should at least listen to the albums **b4** u jump to conclusions that they dont have skill.
- (42) yeh g u shud ive never seen any of ur battles i look **4ward** to seein ur battles n maybe if im feelin lucky i myt battle u.
- (43) just u wait kuz the **U4iK** is gonna tackle his bitch ass.
'8' for phonological string [eIt]
- (44) get yah daym facts **str8** noob before you correct me again! i know my sheit.
- (45) soul tld u y blks **h8** whites, racism dnt change and neva will, its still out dere no matter how da government trys 2 hide it.

12. Word-final '-a'

In many of the above postings, further examples of non-standard orthography can be identified. The ability to determine the extent of usage and systematicity of alternative forms is a distinct advantage of a corpus study. A frequency list, for example, has revealed the most common words of the hip-hop corpus, as well as the systematic usage of numbers to replace letters, phonological strings and morphemes. Using WordSmith, it is also possible to view a corpus as alphabetical or reverse-sort lists. Each list facilitates further identification of recurrent, systematic uses of non-standard orthography in that similar forms (as opposed to frequent types) are grouped together, for example, 'u', 'u'll', and 'ur'. The reverse-sort revealed a curiously large amount of words ending in the letters 'a' and 'z', encouraging further investigation and revealing a systematic usage of non-standard orthography for specific (morpho-)phonology.

Excluding proper names and other words that end in -a in standard orthography, the total number of a-final tokens (not including plurals) in the hip-hop corpus is 1307, distributed over 139 types, corresponding to 1.28% and 1.37% of the total tokens and types, respectively, in the corpus. The non-standard orthography featuring final -a can be categorized according to the word it substitutes for (examples 45-47) or sound string it is meant to represent in speech (examples 48-49). In general, final -a reflects (morpho-)phonemic reduction:

-a for 'have'.

- (46) he **shoulda** neva gotten control of TS cuz now all thats left is armageddon and tony sunshine
-a for 'of'
- (47) i kno a **buncha** y'all faggots, ur so hungry, "u act BIGGA"
-a for 'to'
- (48) if u **wanna** speak yo raise ya hand
cuz u dont **wanna** see the buckin if u disrupt the man
-a for [o]
- (49) LOL..NOW **FELLAS**, children tend to have wild imaginations. maybe he doesnt get enough positive attention at home..!
-a for [aI] in 'my'

(50) i write to improve **ma** skillz

In the discussion of the most frequent words of the corpus, 'u' was identified as an alternative form of 'you'. Furthermore, in postings (3), (10), (19), (23), (32), (39) and (42), an example of a 'your/you're/ur' alternation can also be seen. The reverse-sort list reveals another non-standard variant used by the message board contributors, namely 'ya':

(51) Ill never stop spitin, till **ya** run outa the shit that was prewritten

(52) stab u in **ya** bladder, and drown u in Piss Puddles

The use of both the 'u' and 'ya' forms in example (52) is particularly illustrative of the different phonetics they are each intended to represent. The overall phonology of both postings (51) and (52) is particularly important to the contributor, since these postings are actually part of rap lyrics posted on the message board as part of a battle.

Many of the a-final tokens are the forms 'da' and 'tha', an alternative spelling for 'the'. Unlike 'da', there is no obvious correspondance in pronunciation of the non-standard spelling of 'tha'. However, example (53) suggests that this variant may, in fact, be phonologically motivated:

(53) i aint from **tha** D but i live here, in grosse point, where **da** rich mufuckas at, lol

This posting shows that the contributor indeed has both variants in his/her repertoire. The use of 'tha D' may be to avoid the alliteration which would result from 'da D' (Detroit), but still achieve poetic discourse with non-standard orthography. There is a switch to 'da' later in the posting, which further suggests that the earlier use of 'tha' is due to its phonological environment.

Additional final-a tokens include three different examples of elision, 'hella', 'ima' and 'ma', where syllables or, in the case of multi-word expressions, entire words are omitted: 'hella' for 'hell of a':

(54) Yeah he seems **hella** hungry on that joint.

In posting (54) it can be seen that, through conversion, the form 'hella' functions as an intensifying adverb, much like 'really' or 'very'.

'Ima' for 'I am going to':

(55) Thinkin u a thug, why dont u bust slugs and Humor Me

Cuz **ima** think u a poser till bullets rip thru my Computer screen

Many examples of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can be found in the language of hip-hop (Feldman, 2002; Rickford, 1999; Rickford, 2004). Rickford (2004) identifies 'ama' as a feature of AAVE; the corpus includes the variants 'im'a', 'imma', and 'i'mma'.

'ma' for 'mother' or 'motherfucker':

- (56) stick to the music **ma** fuckas
 (57) yeh ure journal u got sum deep stuff up in that **ma** ya know

It has been claimed that the word 'motherfucker' (or 'mother fucker') is most frequently used by African Americans, especially males (Berger, 1970; Hughes, 1998). Although there is evidence of a wider social distribution of its use (Beers Fägersten, 2000), the association with African Americans entails an association with AAVE, which is, in turn, associated with hip-hop. Nevertheless, the variants of 'motherfucker' are relatively infrequent and the anonymous nature of message boards makes it difficult to ascertain if its use is associated with a particular race or gender.

The balance of the a-final tokens reveal a systematic use of non-standard orthography to represent the sound [er]. In the majority of cases, the final -a is a direct substitution for the letters '-er', corresponding to a nominal marker as in posting (58), a verbal marker as in posting (59), the comparative adjectival marker, as in posting (60), or miscellaneous adjectives or adverbs, as in posting (61):

- (58) i thought it wuz hilarious dat a **rappa** would write about sum gawd dayum no tooth bitchez...
 (59) n another thing, black dudes dont wanna **holla** at white girls when black girls are around, but as soon as the black girls leave, they try hollerin.
 (60) listen to his shit, all of his shit... then listen to er'one else's shit and tell me whos **betta**...
 (61) I waz **neva** really feelin Obie lyrically but if itz anythin like got some teeth itz cool to thro on when you goin out n shit

Other examples of final -a do not constitute a direct substitution for final -er, but rather for the word final phones [er] or [ʔr]:

- 'fire'
 (62) king of the spit pit, i spit the **fiya** shit
 'for'
 (63) oh i cant wait **fa** someone to hear this or see it. Ya get a hype feelin and from there ya feel at ya peak and just hold on to it
 'sure'
 (64) 4**sha**!!!! peace to B.I.G

13. Word-final '-z'

The final -a tokens effect a non-standard orthography intended to reflect pronunciation, encouraging readers to receive and process the text as if it were spoken. In contrast, final -z does not seem to elicit an alternative pronunciation. Like the morpheme /s/, -z is used to mark plurals, third person singular inflections, and possessives. The data suggest that final -z is used as a non-standard orthographic feature to reflect standard phonology, that is, when

the phonological environment of the morpheme /s/ results in voicing, yielding word-final [z].

Plural:

(65) i got two kids. I want them to go to private school and have CPU **skillz**, and to talk proper english.

Third person singular:

(66) scarface **iz** real .. one of the realest & most respected.. he **sayz** 50 snitched i take hiz word fo it

Possessive:

(67) i ain't feelin **obie'z** shyt.....his songz waz whack n i wasn't feelin **hiz** cd...dat nicca iz jus an "AD"...jus gettin **ppl'z** attention 4 a sec.

The following examples illustrate that final -z is also used to substitute for the inflectional morpheme /s/, even when the phonological environment would not cause voicing:

Plural:

(68) I love Pac and Dear Mama is on his greatest **hitz** cuz it waz one of his greatest **hitz** ..Classic

Third person singular:

(69) if you think **pac'z** overrated **thatz** your opinion

Final -z also appears in words ending in [z] or -s, regardless of the phonology:

'cuz', 'coz', 'kuz', 'becuz', 'becoz' for 'because'

(70) **Cuz** he has a few slower beat songs which manz can kick back to.

'plz', 'plizz', 'pliz' for 'please'

(71) u aint no rapper **plz** all your lyrics is kept in a guitar-case

'asz', 'azz' for 'ass'

(72) I can still "Pop" my **azz** off at this age... I was Known as "Mr.Tic" becuz I could strobe my whole body like 3-D.

The use of final -z has been furthermore extended to words with no motivating phonology, indicating a trend towards word-final usage:

(73) Crooked I is heavy but know 1 wants to know, Ras Kass is on another level. If they all move in unison! the west can be what it can be "GFunkedcrazymuthafuckers"

ANYWAYZ

LATERZ

14. Use of special characters

In posting (33), examples of the use of numbers to substitute for letters is illustrated. Also present in this particular posting is the use of the words 'safe' and 'peace', rendered '54F£'

and 'P£4C£', respectively, both common to openings and closings of postings. The use of the British monetary symbol '£' for capital 'E' suggests that the postings can be attributed to predominantly British contributors, and indeed the fuller contexts of postings such as (33) corroborate this conclusion. Regardless of the origin, such postings also illustrate how contributors exploit the interface of computer-mediated communication, the keyboard, to accomplish yet another kind of non-standard orthography by substituting symbols or special characters for letters. In nearly all other examples, however, the substitution occurs in words that are potentially offensive, suggesting self-censorship, possibly to avoid filtering (Crystal, 2001; Dingwell, 1996) which could result in non-publication of the posting:

- (74) COME BACK AND TELL ABOUT THE HOOD N!99A WORD UP!
- (75) i don't know about that. u put too many dumb n!gg@s in a room and some dumb n!gg@ shit is going to happen. somebody is about to get shot over this shit soon.
- (76) gotta give her sum credit, i mean she writez all her sh!t, not alot of rnb b!tchz do that
- (77) IF YOU PULL OUT YO WALLET YOU'LL GET SHOT UP AND F#CK IN THE A\$\$ WITH A PLUNGER BY THE PIGS

Other examples of non-standard orthography specific to the keyboard interface include the usage of capital letters. The conspicuous use of capital letters for some or all parts of chats, e-mails or other forms of computer-mediated communication has been conventionalized to be considered as shouting (Danet et al, 1997), and is thus cautioned against as an inflammatory practice (Crystal, 2001). However, a number of postings in the hip-hop message board corpus are written entirely in capital letters, as are postings (74) and (77). Such postings may not be intended as or, more importantly, even considered shouting, since the persistent use of capitalization throughout an entire posting neutralizes the shouting effect:

- (78) I AGREE, 50 IS HOT BUT NAS AND JADKISS ARE BETTER. NAS GAVE JAY-Z A HELL. SOME PEOPLE THINK HE WON. WHATS MAKES 50 THINK THAT HE WANTS SOME OF NAS.AND JADKISS IS WAITING FOR SOMEONE TO SAY HIS NAME ON A TRACK. JADKISS CAN DEFINTY GET WITH HIM. FAT JOE IS A SESON VETERN. 50 NEEDS TO MAKE FRIENDS AND NOT EMEMYS BEFORE SOMEONE ENDS HIS LIFE OR HIS CAREER.

Only when the use of lower-case letters is established as the norm can intermittent capitalization be attributed paralinguistic meaning:

- (79) Read what i said you DUMB OLD FUCK, i was pointing out how stupid you are.

Another variety of non-standard orthography in the hip-hop message board postings involves the use of alternating lower-case and upper-case letters. The data suggest that this practice is not indicative of any vernacular pronunciation or paralinguistic effect, but rather fulfils a purely poetic function:

(80) YO...THIS IS A DOPE SITE....CAN U HELP ME OUT ON HOW TO MAKE ONE OF MY OWN??

AbSoLuTeBbOy

15. Discussion

In this paper, I have analyzed a corpus composed of hip-hop Internet message board postings to investigate identity as discursively constructed and emergent in interaction. I have claimed hip-hop message boards to be communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992), where the concept of community is based on the convergence of people to interact towards a common goal, while the concept of practice is based on conventions of language use. The corpus approach has enabled the identification of such linguistic conventions of hip-hop message board discourse in terms of content and form.

In the Internet message board forum, it is solely through linguistic means that contributors can identify themselves; the anonymity otherwise associated with the medium does not allow for extra-linguistic corroboration. Identity is primarily negotiated and asserted, and thus emergent in interaction, via the positioning of self and other (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), reflected by a frequent use of first- and second-person pronouns. First-person pronouns characterize postings of contributors asserting their membership in the hip-hop community, stating an opinion or expressing their wants. The use of second-person pronouns, particularly in the frequent 'if you' cluster, indicates a positioning of other, the interlocutor(s), by an implicit placement on a scale of expertise. Contributor requests for information, help or support of an opinion position the self as non-expert and the other as expert. Challenges to the status of the other as a member of the hip-hop community based on his/her beliefs, practices or opinions implicitly position the self as expert by explicitly positioning the other as non-expert.

Keyword and word frequency analyses of the hip-hop corpus further revealed the discursive construction of identity to be a function of the lexical content of postings. Slang terms were identified as keywords used by contributors to mark their in-group membership, and to marginalize the hip-hop community as a counter-culture. Each status is further established by the frequent use of taboo words, which, because of the general, society-wide recognizability of such terms as informal, non-standard and potentially offensive (Beers Fägersten, 2000), marginalizes the community through less encrypted means.

Keyword and word frequency analyses also indicated a systematic use of alternative forms, further identified by alphabetical and reverse-sort lists. The corpus was revealed to include alternative forms for many of the most frequent types and keywords, characterized by non-standard orthography including the use of numbers and special keyboard characters. Contributors exploit the language of the message board forum, the 'third medium', which has properties of both speech and writing, to identify themselves as members of the hip-hop community of practice. The discursive construction of a hip-hop identity includes the codification of non-standard pronunciations and grammar characteristic of speech, through

the use of non-standard orthography, which demands a written forum to be appreciated, as it is neutralized and unremarkable in speech. Hip-hop identities emerge in interaction which allows contributors to showcase their linguistic talents, rhythmic abilities, and familiarity with the practices of both hip-hop and computer-mediated communication. Members of the hip-hop community have adapted to the Internet medium, indeed embracing it and taking full advantage of the interface both systematically and dynamically to construct and assert their individual identities, and to establish community practices. In light of the oral and artistic traditions of hip-hop culture (George, 1999), Internet message boards represent the ideal forum for members of the hip-hop community to discursively construct their identities in interaction.

Notes

1. <http://p081.ezboard.com>; <http://www.hiphopsite.com>; www.jam2dis.com/hiphopboard; <http://www.thugz-network-board.tk>; <http://www.underworldhiphop.com>.
2. <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~vdbeek/perl/lecture2.html>.
3. Numbering of examples is for organization and reference only within this paper and does not indicate any order or chronology to the corpus postings.
4. <http://www.lexically.net/downloads/version4/html/>
5. <http://khnt.hit.uib.no/icame/manuals/frown/>
6. Keywords are types as well, so this figure is inflated in the same way that the number of total types is.
7. <http://alt-usage-english.org/excerpts/fxcommon.html>.
8. <http://www.edict.com.hk/lexiconindex/frequencylists/words2000.htm>.
9. <ftp://ftp.itri.bton.ac.uk/bnc/all.num.o5>.

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