Yorkville Crossing: a case study of the influence of Hip Hop culture on the speech of a white middle class adolescent in New York City

Cecilia A. Cutler.
Yorkville Crossing: a case study of the influence of Hip Hop culture on the speech of a white middle class adolescent in New York City
Yorkville Crossing: a Case Study of the Influence of Hip Hop Culture on the Speech of a White Middle Class Adolescent in New York City

Cecilia A. Cutler

1. Introduction

This paper revisits Hatala's (1976) study on Carla, a 13 year old white girl who was thought to speak African American vernacular English. Labov (1980) argues that Carla is not an authentic speaker of AAVE because she only acquired a subset of phonological and prosodic features. In this work I look at the speech of a white 16 year-old boy who, like Carla, demonstrates the use of many phonological and lexical features but lacks the tense and aspect system of AAVE. However there are some important social differences between Mike and Carla: Carla grew up in a overwhelmingly African American neighborhood and school environment in Camden, New Jersey, whereas Mike lives in a luxury condominium on Park Avenue in New York City and attends an exclusive private high school. Carla's friends were mainly African American. Most of Mike's friends are white. While Carla's adoption of AAVE features may have reflected an effort to adapt to her environment, Mike's linguistic behavior begs another explanation. As Tricia Rose writes, whites are "fascinated by [black culture's] differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of black culture... as a forbidden narrative, [and] a symbol of rebellion" (1994:5). Thus the conscious adoption of African American speech markers is an attempt by young middle class whites such as my informant to take part in the prestige of African American youth culture. In the following pages I shall discuss the role of hip hop culture in the motivations of young whites like Mike to adopt AAVE features in their speech, present linguistic evidence that his target is indeed AAVE, and discuss some of the possible explanations for why now — at the age of 16 — his use of AAVE features has begun to decrease. The analysis draws heavily on Roger Hewitt's work on white creole use in Britain (Hewitt 1986), as well as Rampton's "language crossing" model (Rampton 1995).

2. Background

Mike is the son of a close friend of mine. I have watched him grow up from the age of six. He is a tall, blond, sociable young man. Like many of his peers he has suffered through the divorce of his parents and this has probably contributed to some of the social problems he has had in recent years. I have been passively observing his language practices since 1992 when he was about 12 and began collecting data in late 1995 when Mike was 15 years old. At around age 12, Mike began to identify with "hip hop" culture. He wore baggy jeans, a reverse baseball cap, shaved head, designer sneakers, and developed a taste for rap and hip hop music — a wigga or white nigga by Smitherman's definition (1994:168). At around the same time he began to change the way he spoke. This was commented on and often ridiculed by family members who said he "sounded like a street kid or hoodlum." One incident in particular marks his early attempt at imitating AAVE. During a phone call with his best friend, Mike demonstrated a quick conversational repair to a typical AAVE form.

1) (age 13) Observed by Cutler, Mike's mother and older brother as Mike spoke to a friend on the phone:
Mike: I gotta ask, I mean AKS my mom.

In his description of young people in South London, Hewitt (1986) shows that some white adolescents in primarily white neighborhoods pass through a phase "in which they display their cultural allegiance with blacks" (1986:159). In Mike's case this manifested itself among other ways in vocal criticism of groups he considered anti-African American. He accused his mother of racism when she affectionately referred to one of his African American friends as "el negrito." (His mother is from Madrid, Spain). He was ashamed to live on Park Avenue and pretended to

---

1 Smitherman describes a wigger or white nigger as 'an emerging positive term for white youth who identify with hip hop, rap and other aspects of African American Cultures.' She goes on to say that 'throughout U.S. history, there have always been wiggas, and particularly in the twentieth century. In the 1950s, white writer Norman Mailer dubbed them “white Negroes.” Their numbers are significantly larger today than in previous generations because of the exposure to African American Culture made possible by television' (1994:168).
live in Brooklyn by giving out his older brother's Brooklyn phone number.

Mike's perception of "hip hop" and consequently the way he expressed his identity in his early teenage years were closely bound up with gang culture. He often went "tagging" [scrawling graffiti] with his friends, began experimenting with drugs, and had run-ins with the police. At the end of his freshman year in high school, a friend pushed Mike through a glass door, cutting through several tendons and a nerve in each wrist. After surgery and five weeks of recovery in bed, he went out to Central Park against the doctor's orders where a group of rivals (perhaps gang members) held him down and broke his arms with baseball bats. It is well to mention here that most of the kids involved in these incidents were white. Mike's mother desperately hoped that these experiences would scare him into a more passive lifestyle but this was not played out immediately. He continued to see the same friends and was ejected from the French school he had attended since kindergarten at the end of his freshman year.

Now at age 16, Mike has modified his behavior somewhat. He is happier at his new school, gets passing grades and is thinking about SATs and college. He is much more likely to use standard English forms in formal settings, but continues to use characteristically AAVE phonological and lexical features around many of his friends. Hewitt (1986) found that creole use by whites in South London is restricted to adolescents and that most white teenagers eventually cease using creole at about the age of sixteen (1986:193). In light of Mike's recent attitudinal changes it will be interesting to see how long he continues to employ AAVE speech markers in the years to come.

3. Data Collection

The data consists of individual interviews, group sessions and participant observation. In November, 1995 when he was 15, I asked Mike if he would like to be part of my study on teenage attitudes and behavior. He had recently seen the film "Kids" and imagining I was doing a similar project, was eager to take part. I initially recorded some one-on-one interviews. Several weeks later, I was able to tape some group sessions with several of Mike's friends who were incidentally all white. Most recently I loaned Mike the tape recorder upon his suggestion so he could record some sessions with his friends. These sessions are characterized by some self-conscious addressing of the microphone interspersed with animated, unconscious interactions among Mike and his friends against a backdrop of "hip hop" and "techmo" music. I base my analysis on approximately six hours of recorded material.

4. Linguistic Observations

Table 1 below outlines many of the linguistic features identified by Wolfram & Fasold 1974 and Labov 1972a as characteristic of AAVE. Labov 1972a, Labov 1980; Labov & Harris 1986; Ash & Myhill 1986 have all commented on the relative ease with which outsiders can acquire superficial phonological and lexical features of another dialect versus the difficulty of acquiring the grammar — a situation which is born out in Mike's speech as well. As we can see in Table 1 most of the elements in Mike's speech which compare to AAVE are phonological. Of these the most common features are stop pronunciation of word-initial dental fricatives, post-vocalic, pre-consonantal r-lessness, voiced dental stops before nasals, absence of final dental stops, and off-glide absence. Many other vernaculars in New York City possess some of the same phonological variations so we must also take into consideration the presence of lexical and grammatical features in Mike's speech before determining what his target actually is. Hewitt 1986 in his study on young people in South London observes the predominance of Creole features in the local youth vernacular. A similar phenomenon may be at work in the U.S., allowing adolescents of diverse ethnic backgrounds access to black linguistic forms without the risks inherent in outright appropriation.

Mike uses none of the grammatical features of AAVE with any regularity as shown in Table 1 though some do appear occasionally in his speech. The most notable examples are his occasional use of the past perfect in narrative style, concord with forms of "be", negative concord, question inversion, left dislocation, and demonstrative alternation. In line with the studies mentioned above on dialect acquisition, Mike has not acquired any of the salient features of the AAVE grammatical system such as third singular -s absence, invariant "be," or regular copula deletion. In Figure 1 below, three phonological variables observed in Mike's speech are compared to data gathered on African American and white speakers for the same variables. The data on Mike comes from random samples of his speech in which I counted tokens of each variable for the duration of one side of the tape.
Table 1

Presence of AAVE Features in Mike's speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAVE Features</th>
<th>Frequency of Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonoological Features</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cons. cluster simplification of voc.</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stop pron. of -vol dental fricatives</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stop pron. of +vol dental fricatives</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-vocalic r-lessness</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-consonantal r-lessness</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-vocalic r-lessness</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voiced dental stop before nasals</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absence of final dental stops</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical Features</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>irregular past-tense forms</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past-perfect tense in narrative style</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completive aspect with done</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the remote time aspect with been</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absence of third person singular -s</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concord with forms of be</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invariant be</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use of ain't for SE didn't</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use of ain't for SE am not, isn't, etc.</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative concord</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative auxiliary preposing</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question inversion</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>left dislocation</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absence of possessive -s</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demonstrative alternation</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auxiliary deletion (have)</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auxiliary deletion (will)</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>copula deletion</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1

Comparison of Three Phonological Variables

(approximately 15 minutes for each variable). As we can see in the graph, Mike's speech follows that of northern African Americans more closely than northern whites across these particular variables. Each of the variables as well as the data and other phonological features are discussed below.

4.1. Phonological Features

4.1.1. Schwa Pronunciation of 'the' Preceding a Vowel

The data for whites and blacks on the schwa pronunciation of 'the' comes from Sharon Ash and John Myhill (1983) "Linguistic Correlates of Inter-Ethnic Contact," from the Twelfth Annual Conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation in Sankoff (ed.) 1986. Ash and Myhill compared the speech of 24 blacks and 5 whites (who had extensive contact with blacks) across three
Yorkville Crossing phonological and four grammatical variables. In standard English the pronunciation of the word “the” varies according to the first letter of the following word. “The” is pronounced [ðe] if a consonant follows and [bɪ] if a vowel follows. Many AAVE speakers use the schwa pronunciation everywhere (Wolfram & Fasold 1974:146). Mike uses the schwa pronunciation in approximately 70% of the pre-vocalic instances in one sample as compared to 30% among the whites studied by Ash & Myhill (1983). Extract 2 is an example of this.

2) Schwa Pronunciation of ‘the’: 7/10 70%
Mike: Dass the other side that fucks it up.
[ðeε θeɪ θaid dæt fuks it εp]

4.1.2. R-lessness: (r ## V; VrC)

The data on inter-vocalic and post-vocalic, pre-consonantal r-lessness for blacks and whites comes from Labov 1972a:39 where the social and stylistic stratification of average (r) indices for BEV and WNS groups are compared. The six white adolescents in the Labov study were all from Inwood, a working class neighborhood in upper Manhattan. These white working class speakers showed very similar pronunciation of (r) to blacks except in the r##V environment. Labov comments that the “Inwood group shows very little vocalization of word-final (r) when the next word begins with a vowel, but for all of the black groups the vocalization rule operates here at least 50% of the time” (1972a:40). Labov notes that even white r-less New Yorkers pronounce an (r) when followed by a vowel as in four o’clock, but that for many in the AA speech community, “(r) becomes a glide or disappears in this position” (1972a:13). Mike demonstrates a generally high rate of post-vocalic (r-0) in spite of the fact that he was not r-less before about the age of 13 and neither are any of his family members. Most impressive is his rate word final (r-0) when followed by a vowel at a word boundary. In a sample of Mike’s speech, 11 out of 18 tokens were (r-0) in this environment, (61%), which comes closer to Labov’s Black Working Class speakers who average 60-80% (r-0) than to white New York City vernacular speakers at only 5-10% in the same environment (Labov 1972a:39). Extracts 3 and 4 are examples of the two (r-0) environments discussed above.

3) Vocalization of word-final /r/ preceding a vowel: 11/18 tokens = 61%
Mike: Yo, she still looks her age.
[jo jɪ strɪ luks hɛ oʊ]

4) Post-vocalic, pre-consonantal /r/: 20/27 tokens = 74%
Mike: Yo man I’m pumped up for this party tonight!
[jʊ mæn eɪm pemp ep fo bɪs pɔmp tənɪt]

4.1.3. Stop Pronunciation of Dental Fricatives

I observed two types of stop pronunciation of dental fricatives in Mike’s speech: voiced dental fricatives in articles and demonstratives such as ‘the’, ‘this’, ‘those’ etc., and of voiceless dental fricatives as in the word ‘with’. In one sample the stop pronunciation of voiced dental fricatives in word initial position reached 36%. Approximately 50% of the word final voiceless dental fricatives in the word ‘with’ were voiceless stops. Extract 5 below is one such example.

5) (age 15; 1995)
Mike: nuh...yeah, but I had to verify DUH SHIT WIT YOU.
[ne je bɛt ai hɛd tʊ vɛrɪfai dʌ jɪt wɪt ju]

4.2. Grammatical Features

Research by Labov 1972a;1980, Labov & Harris 1986 and Ash & Myhill 1986 on the grammar of AAVE shows that it possesses some unique and predictable grammatical rules which set it apart from other English dialects. Labov’s work on non-African American speakers who appear to have acquired the AAVE dialect suggests that they rarely acquire many of these grammatical features. The discussion of “Carla” typifies this pattern by suggesting that she was mainly able to ‘sound black’ through effective use of stress, pitch, tempo, and certain syntactic, lexical and prosodic features while displaying infrequent use of the AAVE tense and aspect system (Labov 1980). This is not to say that a
Yorkville Crossing

non-African American are not able to learn AAVE grammar. Indeed the white informant "Ron" discussed by Jacobs-Huey’s (1996) demonstrates a higher rate of copular deletion than either of the African American informants in the study.

My informant, like Carla, has a limited range of AAVE grammar features, the most common of which is the use of the past-perfect in place of the simple past, e.g. I had done that where SE would demand the simple past form I did that. His use of ain’t conforms to the type most commonly used by non-African Americans, i.e., in place of ain’t is not or have/has not instead of did not as in Extract 6.

6)  (age 15; 1995) Conversation between Mike and friend.
Mike: ((CLICK)) YO, don’t worry about NUTIN’ BRO. IT AIN’T SHIT.

I even found a few cases of copula deletion but it would be hard to make any claims about Mike’s knowledge of this feature from so few tokens. Extract 8 is arguably an idiomatic expression which many non-AA teens have incorporated into their vocabularies.

7)  (age 16; 1996) Group session: Mike and friends are playing strip poker:
Mike: What up? What up?

“For Northern urban Vernacular Black English, the rule that restricts ‘is’ to third-person singular subjects seems to be variable” (Wolfram & Fasold 1974:157). Mike occasionally demonstrates this non-standard feature as shown in the example below although it is not a part of his everyday speech.

8)  (age 16; 1996) Group session: Mike and friends are playing strip poker:
Mike: These niggas IZ got shoes on!

Overall the relative dearth of grammatical features in Mike’s speech seems to confirm the findings of Labov 1972a, Labov 1980; Labov & Harris 1986; Ash & Myhill 1986 regarding the difficulty of acquiring AAVE grammatical features for non-native speakers. The examples listed above (no.s 6-8) suggest that Mike is at least aware of certain features of AAVE grammar whether or not he produces them on a regular basis.

4.3. Lexical Features

Although the use AAVE terminology alone does not serve to define someone as an authentic speaker, the adoption of AAVE lexical items by whites is an intriguing phenomenon. In spite of the stigma attached to AAVE in white society, “the language of black youth culture is in fact a ‘prestige’ variety amongst many young people” (Hewitt 1986:102). Mitchell-Kernan (1972) and Fasold (1980) have documented the existence of generational languages and dialects among young African Americans. According to Fasold, expressions from these generational dialects “...generally follow a fairly rapid cyclical pattern in which they arise in the AA community, are adopted by ‘hip’ young whites, then by establishment liberals, and finally pass on into fairly general use” (1972:3).

Table 2
A Sampling of Hip Hop Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ayite</th>
<th>‘all right’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b; bee</td>
<td>‘friend’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beef</td>
<td>‘problem’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bitch</td>
<td>‘woman’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>booty</td>
<td>‘buttocks’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bro’</td>
<td>‘brother, friend’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buggin’</td>
<td>‘going crazy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chill</td>
<td>‘calm down’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crib</td>
<td>‘house’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dat shit</td>
<td>‘that shit’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dope</td>
<td>‘good, great’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>down</td>
<td>‘in agreement’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fine</td>
<td>‘sexy, hot’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fly</td>
<td>‘good, great’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frontin’</td>
<td>‘showing off’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g; gee</td>
<td>‘friend’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hell yeah</td>
<td>‘yes indeed’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herb</td>
<td>‘nerd, loser, geek’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homey</td>
<td>‘friend’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hoochie</td>
<td>‘woman’ (pej.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ill</td>
<td>‘wierd, obnoxious’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i’mo</td>
<td>‘I’m going to’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ma</td>
<td>‘mother’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mad</td>
<td>‘very’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mo’</td>
<td>‘more’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nah</td>
<td>‘no’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nigga</td>
<td>‘fellow black brother’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phat</td>
<td>‘good, great’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>‘sister, black woman’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>steppin’</td>
<td>to ‘aggressively approach’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whassup?</td>
<td>‘what’s up?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what up?</td>
<td>‘what’s up?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word up</td>
<td>‘for real; in fact’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y’all</td>
<td>‘you all’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yo</td>
<td>‘hey you’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you know?</td>
<td>‘Do you understand?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whack</td>
<td>‘great, excellent’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word</td>
<td>‘really; for real’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Limited use of AAVE forms among white youth is very wide-spread but the appropriation of AAVE lexical items into the everyday vocabulary of whites thereby rendering these forms unmarked with regard to ethnicity must be distinguished from the use of marked forms where social or ethnic information is associated with a particular speech item (Hewitt 1986:127). Clearly what is regarded as marked or unmarked with regard to ethnicity may differ from group to group or from one locality to another. Some of the most common lexical items and expressions from mid-1990s African American youth culture as reported by "The Laughing Pit Home Page Rap Dictionary Vol. 1" on the WWW are listed in Table 2 below. I would argue that most of these items are recognized as ethnically and socially marked as part of the African American rap/hip hop music scene but that many are becoming less so. Mike was able to accurately define but not explain the origins of most of the items on the list and most were observed in his casual speech.

As Hewitt (1986) aptly points out, any "quantitative analysis of lexical evidence is notoriously difficult and probably inappropriate, due to the relative infrequency with which most words are used" (1986:130). What can be noted is the frequency that certain items appear in relation to others. In the excerpts below we see a few of the items which appear frequently in Mike’s vocabulary. The lexical items in question appear in upper case letters.

9) (age 16; 1996)
Mike: You ever hear of Frank Frazetta? Dis is some PHAT SHTT YO. YO, when the dude dies, dis book will probably be worth like a thousand dollars. Yo, tell me THAT SHIT is not PHAT!

10) (age 16; 1996)
Mike: Dis is gonna sound MAD weird YO. Don’t worry, don’t worry. I’ll put THE SHIT off!!! Don’t touch it. CHILL, don’t touch it!!! I got this over here!

11) (age 16; 1996)
Mike: Look at this, NIGGA! What the fuck is this?!...Put yuh pants down! NIGGA, look at these NIGGAS. CHILL! CHILL! CHILL! Shut the fuck up! Look at these NIGGAS over here. These NIGGAS iz got shoes on. This NIGGA’S got shorts on. He’s got a hat on. Yo, y’all NIGGAS have like ten times more clothes than me on.

12) (age 15; 1995)
Mike: ...YO, he better know some BOMB BITCHES down there!!

13) (age 16; 1996)
Mike: ((singing with a Jamaican accent)) ...let me tell ya ‘bout Maxi, ya gonna say I don’t know what I know, but murder she wrote, murder she wrote, murder she wrote, murder she wrote...yup, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, huh, what cha gonna do, what cha gonna do....AYITE, AYITE!!

Of all the marked terms appearing above the most interesting is probably the Mike’s use of nigga [rage] to refer to a white friend. Smitherman (1994) lists several alternative definitions ranging from an “African American” in general to a generic term for a “Black man”, to a “rebellious, IN-YA-FACE Black man” but nowhere can it refer to a white person (1994:167). White use of has according to Smitherman “created a linguistic dilemma in the crossover world and in the African American community” (1994:168). She refers to the on-going controversy about “whether or not whites can have license to use the ‘N-word’ with the many different meanings that Blacks give to it” (1994:168). The fact that the term nigga is still marked is reflected in the fact that most whites are still very sensitive about using it. Mike denies using the term and never uses it around his mother or older brothers. Yet white teens, including Mike as well as young people from a range of different ethnic backgrounds, use this term routinely to refer to their friends in informal settings. Clearly this issue raises questions about the motivations of young whites to appropriate such loaded language, and the extent to which African Americans are aware and accept whites using the term nigga to refer to their white friends. The subject is certainly worthy of more attention than can be given here.

5. AAVE Acquisition by White Teenagers

Young people in New York City have the opportunity to observe first hand a variety of linguistic forms in subways, on street corners, in parks, night clubs etc. Mike spends a great deal of time outside ‘hanging out’ with his friends where he comes into contact with kids from ‘uptown’ (Harlem and the Bronx), ‘downtown’ (lower east side), and Brooklyn. Some of his favorite social activities, tagging, playing pool, drinking beer on the street with
friends and going out to clubs on the weekends bring him into contact and conflict with kids from other neighborhoods and ethnic or social groups. One white friend in particular who lives in a lower east side project has been something of a social and linguistic role model for Mike. This young man attended French school with Mike when they both were children but was suspended a few years before Mike for poor academic performance and disciplinary problems. His speech patterns are closer to that of New York City African American and Hispanic teenagers than to local white vernacular and standard English speakers. Hewitt (1986) points out the “Janus-like” role of such whites whose contacts with African American culture make them a beacon for its promotion “amongst white youth” (1986:144). In this way words and expressions spread to white adolescents who have little direct contact with African Americans.

The other significant source of Mike’s AAVE acquisition has been I believe rap music. Ever since “Yo! MTV Raps” went on the air in 1989 sales figures for rap music among middle class white teenagers have sky-rocketed (Rose 1994). “Rap music videos have animated hip hop cultural style and aesthetics and have facilitated a cross-neighborhood, cross-country (transnational?) dialogue in a social environment that is highly segregated by class and race” (Rose 1994:9). The inclusion of lyric sheets in CD cases allows the listener to read and then learn the latest expressions coming out of New York City, Oakland, and Los Angeles. These words and expressions have become incorporated to some extent in the speech of teenagers across the entire country. Mike’s has been an avid rap fan since he was 12. His favorite groups include Ice-T, LL Cool J, Two Live Crew, Public Enemy, and Snoop Doggie Dog to name a few. He now listens to a combination of rap and “techno” music — a style which grew out of the DJ dance-hall scene and has a lot of cross-over appeal for rap fans.

Music is traditionally been one of the main pathways by which AAVE expressions pass into white culture. Today’s teenagers appear to acquire AAVE vocabulary largely by watching music videos, buying rap music, and studying lyric sheets. Many white musicians who experiment with the rap and hip hop genres presumably acquire the style and format for their songs in the same way. Rage Against the Machine, The Beastie Boys, Beck and 3-11 are popular white groups at the moment which have employed rap music sounds and vocabulary in their music.

There is an historical precedent for the role that music has played in bringing blacks and whites together linguistically. The Harlem Renaissance brought together jazz legends such as Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong. MacNeil (1986) describes how whites traveled to Harlem to see these performers and were fascinated with black music. Much of Cab Calloway’s “Jive talk” or the language of the jazz players which he repeated in his songs has passed into standard use. Expressions such as “groovy,” “have a ball,” “hip,” “jam,” and “riff” are just a few from Calloway’s list (MacNeil 1986:224). White audiences and jazz reporters began employing these words and phrases to “show how smart and up to date they were” and little by little the general public followed suit (MacNeil 1986:224).

In the absence of the sort of social contact that is a prerequisite for language contact the question of how whites actually acquire AAVE is crucial and would appear to be explainable mainly in terms of the sort of musical crossover appeal discussed above. Music has certainly played a significant role in my informant’s acquisition of AAVE as it does for other white, middle class suburban adolescents who have for less direct contact with African Americans than Mike. In recent years we have seen an increase in the number of ‘black’ sitcoms on television with large white audiences. In today’s television dominated home this is perhaps just as much a transmitter of linguistic information as music. It will be interesting to see whether these programs will have any effect on the speech of white suburban dwellers in years to come.

Finally, recent films on black inner-city life have played a role in the transmission of AAVE to whites like Mike. He has seen all the recent so-called “Hood Films” — several times in some cases — which have emerged in recent years including “Straight out of Brooklyn” (1991), “Boyz’n the Hood” (1991), “Hangin’ with the Homeboys” (1991), “House Party” (1990), “Straight out of Brooklyn” (1991), “Menace to Society” (1993), and “New Jack City” (1991). He also says he has seen Spike Lee’s “Do the Right Thing” (1989) at least three or four times. These films have served to transmit views of inner-city ghetto life, in some cases a glamorized version, which white teenagers can selectively choose from to construct stereotypes about African Americans and hip hop culture. It would be impossible to objectively measure the effects each of these sources has had on Mike’s acquisition of AAVE.
Suffice it to say that each has undoubtedly played some role in this process.

6. Ethnic Identity and Crossing

I will now turn to the questions of what AAVE crossing reveals about speakers' ethnic identity. It seems plausible that a white person could construct a black identity for him/herself or vice versa through a combination of language use, dress, friends etc. The issue of skin color would of course make it more difficult but perhaps not impossible for others to accept this identity. Given that such extreme cases of whites trying to pass themselves off as blacks are probably quite rare, it may be assumed that most teenagers who employ elements of black youth language are not trying to construct black identities for themselves. Rather they are trying to associate themselves with the qualities black youth language conveys. Labov 1972 observed that "if a certain group of speakers uses a particular variant then the social values attributed to that group will be transferred to that linguistic variant" (1972:25). In the same vein Hewitt (1986) assesses the connection between creole and street culture as the reason for its appeal among white adolescents.

The economic conditions in which black people have been historically placed in post-slavery societies, and particularly in urban contexts, have contributed to the emergence of a strand of—usually male—survival strategies and ideologies, traceable in many urban black cultures, encompassing a combination of toughness and quick wits potentially employed in the service of individual survival. The association of this street code with lower-class life and language has led to the establishment of the lower-class forms of black language as a resource for suggesting those very qualities and the 'role' associated with them... the use of creole has exactly this reference for many young blacks, who

---

3 "Language Crossing"—a term coined by Ben Rampton (1995)—refers broadly to a range of sociolinguistic practices including the dominant outgroup use of prestigious minority codes, pejorative secondary foreigner talk and the notion of "marking" as a way of differentiating oneself from those being imitated as well as the white use of AAVE as a way of asserting an alternative identity (Rampton 1995).

Similar observations of the associations between black English and street culture in the United States have been made by Abrahams (1963), Kochman (1972), and Folb (1980). For many white teenage boys and some girls, employing elements of AAVE in their speech can create an aura of toughness that may help ensure their status in the school pecking order. In an inner-city setting this may actually be an environmental adaptation strategy as in Carla's case.

New York Magazine recently carried a lead article entitled "Teenage Gangland" [December 16, 1996] which describes how the sons and daughters of New York's elite join gangs or "crews", deal drugs, and steal to amuse themselves. Some of the city's finest private schools have witnessed the growing presence of so-called "prep school gangsters." Mike admitted knowing many of the young people interviewed in the article although he claims never to have been part of a gang or crew. The crews discussed in the article are made up of wealthy upper east side teens along side economically deprived youths from Harlem and the Bronx. Mike's involvement with these sorts of young people represented more than just a flirtation with gang culture as the severe physical scars he bears attest to. In most cases however it would be fair to say that the average middle class hip hop fan only plays with the idea of belonging to a crew or gang to be fashionable. The same could probably be said for the way AAVE crossing functions for most white teens — as a way to imbue themselves with the aura of a tough, urban stylish black teenager.

Rampton proposes three distinct levels of crossing employed by the young people in his study of adolescents in the South Midlands: minimal crossing characterized by the marking of "occurrences that deviated from the ordinary" through the use of "a small set of fixed terms and formulae"; more extensive but jocular crossing characterized by more random and innovative application of outgroup phonology and prosody; and extensive, serious crossing involving the use of weakly ritualized forms (Rampton 1995: 208-210; 218). Granted Rampton is describing adolescent creole use in the U.K. which is arguably different in many ways from white AAVE use in the U.S., however the idea that crossing
has many levels which index different sorts of motivations can I believe encompass what is happening in Mike's case as well. The motivations of most white crossers might best be summed up as "the desire to participate in the 'prestige' attach[ed] to black youth" rather than a desire to "be black" as Hewitt states (Hewitt 1986:94). These young people according to Rampton's model, would be described as minimal or jocular crossers. Thinking of crossing in terms of levels also provides a way to understand the how Mike employs and has employed AAVE in different situations and over time. Mike's use of AAVE generally varies depending on who he is addressing and in other cases what he is talking about. He employs significantly more AAVE phonology and lexicon with some friends than he does with others and much more so among friends than with family members or other adults in positions of authority. As mentioned earlier Mike does not ally himself with African Americans as strongly as he did a few years back which parallels the decrease in frequency with which he employs AAVE speech features. Nevertheless, he hangs onto some linguistic and lexical elements of AAVE/black youth language because of the high status it continues to hold among his peers. To use Rampton's model, Mike's formerly extensive crossing behavior would now be more accurately described as less extensive or jocular crossing.

7. Racism and Crossing

The fact that hip hop culture is a creation of African American young people makes some non-African American teenagers feel the need to claim it as a broad, multi-cultural style instead of a symbol of 'blackness.' As one presumably white youth wrote in to the WWW Hip Hop Style Page.4 "Hey hey hey wut is goin' down with this shit???? Not all of us here are blacc[sic], alright." Many young whites feel they have the right to appropriate the hip hop look and language and that black adolescents who oppose them are racists. Smitherman writes about "wiggas" or "white niggas" who strongly identify with African American and especially hip hop culture. In Hewitt's words such young people may "fail to perceive the social and political aspects of the culture or fail to be sensitive to the issue of group boundaries" and may come across strong pressures from whites and blacks to stick to their own culture (Hewitt 1986:48).

Hewitt found that, at least in South London, white adolescents in predominantly white neighborhoods who identify strongly with black youth culture in their early teenage years often "encountered hostility from both sides [and] tend gradually to abandon the more overt signs of allegiance to blacks and settle down into their friendships..." (Hewitt 1986:49). At about age 16, and perhaps for some of the same reasons as his counterparts in South London, Mike began complaining about what he perceived as the racial exclusivity and anti-white attitudes of his African American classmates and of African Americans in general. He made these sorts of complaints in conversations with me as well as in the company of friends. In one interview he and his friends complained in particular about "anti-white skits" and overt demonstrations of black pride on black television programs such as "Def Comedy Jam."

14a) (Age 16: 1996): Mike and friends (Funny, Joey, and Nikki) are discussing black racism against whites:

Funny: And I also think that there's a lot of racism from blacks to whites.

Mike: YEAH, HELL YEAH, LIKE A LOT.

Funny: Like if you watch "Def Comedy Jam" or anything there always making cracks about whites but if a white guy gets up on the stage says a little joke I mean you're gonna have Reggie Jackson knocking at his door or Jesse Jackson you know... with the whole rainbow coalition, you know, I'm not racist, but I, I think there's a lot of...

Mike: And like I hate the way, I hate the way they they completely separate themselves. When you have that, like ...I'm glad you brought that up. "Def Comedy Jam", I hate that show. Like you see a freekin' like that's what I call a jigaboo, a person...(loud laughter)) no, no, no that's what I call a person, when they when they seclude themselves they're they're just as bad, that's that's what I call BOOM, a bastard, because they go up there and they have a "Black as Hell" white shirt, white sweat shirt and they're up there "YO, MAN, YOU KNOW I WAS WALKIN' DOWN THE STREET THE OTHER DAY AND I WAS WITH MY GIRL JUANITA ...

Funny: —WTT MY FUCKIN' BITCH!!!
Mike: —YOU KNOW AND WIT JUANITA YOU KNOW I WUZ JUS CHILLIN' YOU KNOW, MY BLACK GIRL, MY BLACK PRINCESS, MY BLACK...—

Funny: —MY BITCH!!
Mike: —AND I EMPHASIZE TWENTY MORE TIMES THAT SHE'S BLACK ((laughter)) TO MAKE SURE EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT SHE'S BLACK ((laughter)) BECAUSE I DON'T WANT ANYONE TO THINK I HAD TO DO WITH WHITE."

Funny: Yeah, yeah!!
Mike: YOU KNOW, that's exactly how they are. The exchange is marked by exaggerated imitation of AAVE by both boys. They resent what they perceive as boundary maintenance on the part of African Americans they feel is targeted especially at them. The tone of the conversation is mocking and bitter. Funny in particular makes a point of inserting the derisive term "bitch" to mean "girlfriend" in his marked imitation of an imaginary African American speaker. Mike's stressed repetition of the word "BLACK" parodies what he perceives as the show's racial exclusivity. Teenagers like Mike and his friends have bought into African American and particularly hip hop culture in many ways and feel particularly resentful when they are "told" they are not wanted. Later on in the conversation, the boys complain about being victims of black on white racism.

14b)

Mike: Yeah, I mean ((click)) I have a lot of friends that are of other races and I don't care but once I hear somebody say you know "OH, WORD-UP, BLACK PRIDE" then they like become another thing for me. Then I see 'em then I see 'em different, then I see 'em much different.

Funny: Or "white boy", I hate that shit, when they say "white boy" to me, there's like if I walk around and like um you know in a nice outfit "hey white boy" just cause I'm in a nice or or because I'm in a private school, this is my favorite thing, or I, I've gotten into arguments like you know, it's come close you know? You, you remember "oh white boy" you know "from a private school" you know...

The indignation the boys felt about what they perceive as black racism was also directed towards whites who "want to be black." During the same group session Mike and his friends made mention of a "Yorkville crew" in response to a question about "wannabes."

14c)

Funny: You see, NAH, I'm sayin' you see a lot of kids who live down here [Yorkville] who wished they lived there [Harlem]...you see a lo: of kids running around here who look like they want to be up from up there you know...like you see like all these like...

Joey: They go around like these these these rich, white kids go around robbin' kids. I mean it's like so stupid...and they only rob kids when they have like 15 or 20 kids in a gang.

Mike: They like they like have like their own 'crew' n shit and like every, and then every night like every other night they all hang out like all 200 of 'em by of the Metropolitan Museum at night time.

Funny mentioned that friends of his who really come from the Bronx know of this Yorkville "crew" and are particularly critical of its members.

14d)

Funny: ...they [Yorkville Crew kids] wouldn't step foot over like, you know they wouldn't they're like set foot into Harlem but they try to act like their from Harlem you know, I, I mean last year he got a go round and like "YO DIS YOKVILLE, DIS DIS YOKVILLE."

Joey: Yeah, they're like "GET OUT OF YORKVILLE MUTHAFUCKA."

Funny: [continuing the imitation] "WEST SIDE, EAST SIDE WE AT WOH (war), WE AT WOH."

Funny and Joey both parody the Yorkville kids' speech by trying to affect AAVE pronunciation. (The "Yorkville crew" kids are predominantly white.) Funny employs phonological markers such as the stop pronunciation of voiced 'th' as in 'this', post-vocalic r-lessness in 'Yorkville' and 'war', and even copula deletion in the...

5 Yorkville encompasses the upper east side of Manhattan from Central Park to East End Avenue from roughly 60th Street up to 86th Street; demographically it is predominantly white and upper class.
very last phrase: ‘WE [. ] AT WOH.’ This is particularly noticeable since neither Funny nor Joey employs many AAVE features in his own speech aside from a few lexical items. Bucholtz (1996) cites similar examples in which white teens “mark black” in order to parody the speech of other whites who routinely employ AAVE speech patterns. Mike on the other hand does employ quite a bit of AAVE phonology and lexicon in his everyday speech. His imitation of the Yorkville crew is quite different from that of his friends as will be seen below. Mike claims “[the Yorkville Crew kids] don’t like black kids actually.” Funny agreed saying, “this special group around Yorkville doesn’t even like black kids.” When asked whether these kids talk in a special way, Funny replied:

14e)

Funny: Well they have the homeboy handbook so. I guess they just follow...

Mike: Awright, awright [with a heavily affected white accent]
WHEN I’M STEPPING TO SOMEBODY...

Funny: You know they like practice in front of the mirror, pull their pants down to their knees, I don’t know.

Mike’s comments in this exchange are particularly interesting. When imitating the Yorkville crew kids’ speech he goes out of his way to use very exaggerated ‘white’ pronunciation. In this way he effectively sets himself apart from the ‘wannabe’ types by situating their language in a white context. His use of the expression “stepping to somebody” (to act aggressively in a way that would lead to a fist fight) alludes to its markedness as a ‘black’ term and he implies that for a white peer to use this word is somewhat ridiculous.

It is also interesting to note Mike’s behavior during this discussion. His use of hip hop expressions and AAVE phonology is notably lower than in sessions with other groups of friends. He was hesitant to provide direct information about the “Yorkville crew” and seemed somewhat uncomfortable that the subject had come up at all. When I asked whether any of the boys knew the specific names of “crews” in Yorkville, all eyes went toward Mike who said “why y’all lookin’ at me for?” Later he gave some absurd, fictitious names such as the “first avenue mob” and “heavy fat losers” to the great amusement of his friends. His behavior during the interview suggests he was somewhat ashamed that these particular friends would associate him with one of these groups or think he had been involved with the Yorkville Crew at one time. What all this points to is that Mike appears to have undergone an ideological shift away from identifying with African Americans but also that he makes efforts to adapt his ideas and beliefs to the group he is with. In sessions with other groups of friends he uses markedly more hip hop vocabulary and AAVE phonology and experiments with a ‘Spanish’ identity through code-switching as discussed in the following section.

8. Code-Switching into Spanish

Rampton’s (1995) discussion of Punjabi crossing shows that whereas in-group use of Punjabi constitutes a normal code-switching situation, out-group use is generally “restricted to swear words, terms of deprecation, perhaps a few numbers, a very small selection of stock formulae and one or two nonsensical pseudo-Punjabi inventions...” (Rampton 1995:43). For many non-Asians who used Punjabi, “swearing was a valued part of the local multiracial inheritance and figured in a range of the entertaining activities in which they had been participating with bilingual friends for a number of years...” (Rampton 1995:192). As a discourse strategy it symbolized “inter-ethnic unity” between Asians and non-Asian peers (Rampton 1995:192).

Mike is a bilingual English-Spanish speaker although his mother complains about his accent and grammar. He was born in New York City where he has lived his entire life but at times he plays up his ‘Spanish’ identity around certain friends. The work of Gilroy (1987:190;217) and Jones (1988:139;218) describes hip hop’s frame of reference as primarily black but more open to Hispanic and white participation. Mike is able to cash in on the non-specific New York City use of the term “Spanish” to designate any person who speaks Spanish, (usually a Puerto Rican or Dominican) or anything pertaining to Hispanic culture rather than someone or something specifically from Spain.

Although his cultural allegiance to Africans Americans appears to have waned, Mike still enjoys a certain status among his peers through his association with ‘Spanishness.’ In one of the group sessions there are several examples of code-switching into Spanish among Mike and his friends. All the young people present in the session were white — with perhaps the exception of one of the girls, “Mary,” who is half Italian half Peruvian and speaks
Spanish fluently — and middle class. At one point Mike is carrying on a conversation with Mary in Spanish but most of the other instances of Spanish use involve emblematic code-switching such as the insertion of tags and expletives. One of the boys, “Gus” employs “diablo” from time to time as an expletive and we hear Mike exclaim, “Ay, coño!” several times throughout the game. Further along into the card game, Gus says, “Give me DOS cartas.” The other kids follow suit, requesting cards in Spanish for the next several minutes. “Give me tres cartas, yo” says another non-Spanish speaking girl.

A closer examination of the lexicon of hip hop shows the influence of urban language contact between blacks and Hispanics. Some terms such as “liña” for a “line” of cocaine, and “stilo,” a truncation of the Spanish “estilo” (style) have entered the hip hop vocabulary in part because of the influence of Hispanic rappers like La Raza and others. According to the “Internet’s Totally Unofficial Rap Dictionary,” the expression “vato” was introduced by Kid Frost and means “homeboy” (nielsj@sci.kun.nl; April 1996). Although it would be premature to make such a conclusion on the basis of this study, Spanish may well have some of the same symbolic resonance as AAVE for many young people in urban areas. Both are associated to a degree with the tough, oppositional street culture so alluring to white middle class teenagers although AAVE clearly has much higher status and exposure.

9. Divergence/Convergence Debate

The convergence/divergence panel at NWAVE XIV (1985) addressed the question “Are black and white vernaculars diverging?” Contrary to what one would expect after decades of affirmative action and efforts at desegregation, evidence was presented at the conference suggesting that blacks as well as whites in Philadelphia are striking off in different directions linguistically. For African Americans in particular, this divergence is due in part to increasing social segregation. In Labov’s words, “there is no doubt that the divergence that we have witnessed on the linguistic front is symptomatic of a split between the black and white portions of our society” (NWAVE XIV Panel Discussion:10). As to the social significance of this reported divergence Labov and Harris (1986) state that sound changes may stand for “symbolic claims to local rights and privileges,” such as jobs and housing which blacks and other minorities are often shut out from (1986:18). If there is truth to the claim that divergence is a widespread phenomenon then the practice of AAVE crossing among adolescents raises some interesting questions. AAVE crossing may represent a trend towards convergence of the speech of young people from various ethnic backgrounds — an exception to the reported pattern of divergence between black and white vernaculars in the population at large. To the extent that the use of hip hop language is becoming more and more common in the speech of young people across the country, this convergence may be quite wide-spread. There is also a possible parallel to Rampton’s (and Hewitt’s) “youth code,” accessible by young people of many ethnic and social backgrounds which, although heavily influenced by Creole, is not perceived as an appropriation of black youth language. The same may be happening in the U.S. although there appears to be more sensitivity surrounding the issue of appropriation.

10. Conclusion

The phenomenon of whites crossing into AAVE is hardly new. The covert prestige attached to the language, the music and fashions of black youth culture have long provided and continue to provide a constant source of inspiration for teenagers in this country and all over the world. The term “crossing” however is new and provides a useful distinction for this sort of out-group linguistic practice. Although much more limited than Rampton’s or Hewitt’s exhaustive studies of out-group language use in Britain, this paper attempts to build on the idea of crossing — this time in an urban, North American setting — in an attempt to understand the mechanisms and motivations for this sort of linguistic behavior. It is impossible to make sweeping generalizations from one case, but it is my belief that AAVE crossing among young people in the United States is very widespread. Paradoxically this is going on against the backdrop of raging battles in the media and educational establishment about whether or not AAVE or “Ebonics” is a legitimate rule-governed dialect or simply “slang” and “broken English.” The fact that black youth language enjoys so much prestige among teenagers might be interpreted as a trend towards legitimization of AAVE in mainstream white society. Unfortunately this does not appear to be happening. Young whites most often embrace features of AAVE in order to participate in the prestige of hip hop and black youth culture or in other cases to emphasize their own ethnic
distinctiveness rather than as a conscious effort to ally themselves with African Americans.

References


NWAVE XIV Panel Discussion “Are black and white vernaculars diverging?”, 24 October 1985, at Georgetown University.


World Wide Web Sites:
http://www.sci.kun.nl:80/thalialrapdict/dict_en.html (Galaxy);

New York University
Linguistics Department
719 Broadway, 5th floor
New York, NY 10003
cqc9928@is4.nyu.edu

The *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics (PWPL)* is an occasional series produced by the Penn Linguistics Club, the graduate student organization of the Linguistics Department of the University of Pennsylvania.

Publication in this volume does not preclude submission of papers elsewhere; all copyright is retained by the authors of the individual papers.

Volumes of the Working Papers are available for $12, prepaid. Please see our web page for additional information.

The PWPL Series Editors
Alexis Dimitriadis
Laura Siegel
Clarissa Surek-Clark
Alexander Williams

Editors for this Volume
Charles Boberg
Miriam Meyerhoff
Stephanie Strassel
and the PWPL series editors

How to reach the PWPL
U. Penn Working Papers in Linguistics
Department of Linguistics
619 Williams Hall
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305
working-papers@ling.upenn.edu
http://www.ling.upenn.edu/papers/pwpl.html