Rezolutionist Hip Hop

Translating Global Voices and Local Identities

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Abstract & Keywords

English:

Hip Hop outside the USA is the result of a complex interaction between a global form of music expressed through a global language, English, on the one hand and localization processes through which these global practices are reinterpreted and recreated within different social and cultural contexts, on the other. Drawing on Hip Hop linguistics and translation theory, this paper focuses on Hip Hop in Sudan, particularly on Dza Tha Dissenter, Hip Hop artist, political activist and blogger, to show how translation, both as a process inherent to globalization and a critical perspective, can contribute to an understanding of how English is appropriated by Sudanese Hip Hop musicians in the performance of their identity and how they exploit this common tool to negotiate their belonging to a global community based on local identities.

Keywords: hip hop, globalization, localization, translation, language agency, identity, narrative, blogging

1. Introduction

As H. Samy Alim et al. (2009) argue in their introduction to Global Linguistic Flows, when analyzing Hip Hop Culture(s) and the coexistence of globalization and localization processes, a whole series of phenomena and concerns come to the fore: transnationality, cultural flows, hybridity, politics of language, language policies and the way youth use linguistic resources throughout the world to create their multiple identities. Among all these factors that inevitably come into play when taking into account the overlapping trajectories described by Hip Hoppers throughout the world, language plays a key role. Given its focus on the language of Hip Hop, this paper positions itself in the field of Hip Hop Linguistics, “an interdisciplinary field of scholars committed to the study of language and language use in Hip Hop Communities” (Alim 2006: 10). More precisely, it aims to do so by bringing in a translation approach to provide us with new insights into the dynamics of globalization and localization processes. According to Michael Cronin, translation as the discipline focusing on mediation between languages and cultures, can help us understand globalization and “what it might mean to be a citizen of the world.” (2003: 6) Cosmopolitanism, “a way of thinking through the complexity of a polyidentity”, inevitably comes into play, as it constructs “multiple subjects” beyond national and cultural boundaries (Cronin 2006: 9). More precisely, among the various aspects and interpretations of cosmopolitanism that Cronin takes into account, David Held’s notion of “cultural cosmopolitanism” as “the ability to stand outside a singular location (the location of one’s birth, land, upbringing, conversion) and to mediate traditions” (quoted in Cronin 2006: 11) – and languages, of course - appears particularly relevant. – and languages, of course - appears particularly relevant. This notion of cosmopolitanism ties in with anthropological approaches to the relationship between language and identity putting forward a view that “language, as a fundamental resource for cultural production, is also a fundamental resource for identity production” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 382). Identity in this sense is the result of ongoing linguistic construction and linguistic agency, rather than being a static, fixed category predetermined by issues of culture, gender, or race, as well as other factors, such as class. Thus, common views on the relationship between language, culture and identity are turned upside down: language is not a direct consequence of a person’s culture and identity, it is a constitutive element in the formation of social subjectivities.
In his analysis of global Englishes and Hip Hop culture, Alastair Pennycook draws on transgressive theories, including transculturation, transmodality, transsexuality, as well as translation. Following on translation scholars, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) and George Steiner (1975), Pennycook focuses on translation as a key process inherent to all communication. As he puts it, “in the trans-cultural field of hip-hop flows and appropriations, translation is not so much a process of encoding and decoding across languages but of meaning making across and against codifications” (2007: 55). In other words, translation brings in a critical perspective to our understanding of the relationship between languages that goes beyond the identification of rigid and permanent boundaries between one code and another. Such a perspective is particularly relevant when examining Hip Hop since these distinctions and boundaries are constantly challenged through multilingual practices in which two or more codes coexist and interact.

This is why language practices adopted by Hip Hoppers in the performance of their identities can be better understood by taking into account non-traditional forms of translation, such as self-translation and polylingualism, typical of migrant writing. As Loredana Polezzi argues, when considering migrants as self-translators, traditional notions of translation become problematic, whereas “non-linear forms of translation”, in which the original and its translation cannot be separated, become the norm rather than an exception.

[Polylingualism and self-translation] underline the fluidity of language behaviour, its ability to incorporate multiple codes, at times juxtaposing them, in other cases mixing them to create original hybrid forms of expression, or even disguising their presence below a deceptively homogeneous surface. (Polezzi 2012: 91)

Similarly, the overlapping between Sudanese Arabic, classical Arabic and English in Sudanese Hip Hop can be apparent through juxtapositions or code switching, while in other cases translation is not explicitly revealed while being embedded in the spaces between different languages. This is what happens in songs that are entirely in Arabic or English, whose apparent monolingual nature disguises the coexistence of other languages underneath.

Given the theoretical premises illustrated so far, a series of questions come to the fore. What do multilingual practices adopted by Hip Hoppers in Sudan reveal about the role of language(s) - and translation - in the construction and performance of their identities? What specific meanings does their narrative of revolution acquire within the broader narrative of the Hip Hop community throughout the world? What political implications are at stake when these artists appropriate a global form of music and a global language and make them local while challenging dominant ideologies?

2. Narrating the local within the Global Hip Hop Nation

Several scholars have shown how Hip Hop artists negotiate the tension between global and local in a bidirectional movement through dynamics of appropriation and indigenization. Among them, Alastair Pennycook and Tony Mitchell (2009), in particular, reject the simplistic argument of a global spread of Hip Hop, whereby a world form of music with a specific and single origin simply becomes localized by adopting indigenous cultural and linguistic forms. They show how once Hip Hop is created in a local context, rather than being a global form that becomes local, it is a local form which connects to other parts of the world, as in the case of Australian Aboriginal Hip Hop, which is related to African oral traditions, as well as to Australian Aboriginal practices. They draw a parallel between the spread of English and Hip Hop: “Global Englishes are not what they are because English has spread and been adapted but because language users refashion themselves, their languages, their histories and their cultures” (Pennycook and Mitchell 2009: 40).

Michael Cronin’s view of “globalization as translation” contributes to such a critical understanding of globalization and localization practices. Following on Eisenstadt’s assumption that there is not one type of modernity, rather “multiple modernities” (2000: 38), in the sense that there is no such a thing as a single instance of globalization, Cronin rightly argues that different countries or communities translate the global economy according to their local contexts resulting into “differentiated experiences of globalization across the planet” (2003: 34). As he puts it, “translation is not simply a by-product of globalization but is a constituent, integral part of how the phenomenon both operates and makes sense of itself.”

Mona Baker’s narrative theory offers a valuable critical tool to examine the relationship between Hip Hop as a global form of art and its multiple local manifestation. Baker’s take on narrative theory is from a social and communication perspective and her notion of
narrative, although overlapping with Foucault’s notion of ‘discourse’ and Barthes’ ‘myths’, is much more concrete and in simple terms refers to the “everyday stories we live by” (2006: 3). As she claims,

> Narrative theory treats narratives – across all genres and modes - as diffuse, amorphous configurations rather than necessarily discrete, fully articulated local ‘stories’. It is simultaneously able to deal with the individual text and the broader set of narratives in which it is embedded, and it encourages us to look beyond the immediate local narrative as elaborated in a given text or utterance. (2006: 4)

What I am interested in is the narrative shared by Hip Hoppers, as it emerges from individual texts, that is to say lyrics and blogs, as well as the broader narratives in which these individual texts are embedded. Such narratives are marked by the coexistence and tension of global and local discourses whereby transnational alliances among people of various cultural and social origins are created to tell stories that call for political action locally while having at the same time a global resonance.

Hip Hop groups constantly negotiate their belonging to the metanarrative of Hip Hop Culture, which has been variously defined by rappers as much more than music, but rather as “a movement” and “a way of life”. Rashad from the Sudanese Hip Hop group, the Circle, believes that young people “embrace the culture of Hip Hop” (Rashad 2012, personal interview). Hip Hop culture(s) have been and continue to be analysed in ethnographic studies of what is identified as the Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN), “a multilingual, multiethnic nation”, with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present” (Alim 2009: 3). However, how Hip Hop artists “juggle” the tension between global and local is evident in terms of language choice and in terms of content. The Hip Hop artists from Sudan I have interviewed, as well as artists throughout the world as testified by several scholars (Perullo and Fenn 2003; Higgins 2009; Pennycook and Mitchell 2009), tend to localize their rapping through translanguaging, by combining English with local languages, as well as by combining Hip Hop with local musical traditions, and by focusing on local social and political issues. The complexity of localization phenomena in Hip Hop is also evident through what Pennycook has defined as the “global spread of authenticity” (2007: 98).

In this sense, the identity of Hip Hop artists cannot be separated from the way they appropriate English and adapt it to their own needs and ambitions. According to Harris Berger, musicians and their listeners, rather than simply reproducing existing ideologies, may use music “to actively think about, debate or resist” dominant ideologies (2003: XV). It has been argued that one of Hip Hoppers’ commitments are social change and political activism. When Hip Hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa launched the Muslim-influenced Zulu Nation in the US in the 1970s he was trying to create a community of people fighting for social, political and economic changes. Alim uses the term “weapons of mass culture” (2006: 48), following on from Palestinian Rapper Tamer who argues that “music can be a good weapon” and that Palestinian rappers fight against the manipulation and control of discourse. Similarly, Sujatha Fernandes, among others, argues that Hip Hop has provided young people with a political voice:

> The Hip Hop Nation as a transnational space of mutual learning and exchange might have not been a concrete reality. But the transient alliances that hip hoppers imagined across boundaries of class, race and nation gave them the resources and platform they needed to tell their stories and provided the ground for their locally based political actions. (2011: 4)

Having said that, as Tony Mitchell claims (2001), the fact that from the late 1990s mainstream Hip Hop in the USA, particularly gangsta rap with its rhetoric of violence, misogyny and homophobia, has become politically irrelevant, has been mainly ignored with few exceptions. Erik Nielson, for example, has recently shown how policing and surveillance is affecting the role of rap as a vehicle for political resistance and has argued “that traditional scholarly formulations of rap-as-resistance need rethinking, and that we must account for the aggressive strategies of social control that have been integral in shaping, and often circumscribing, the kinds of defiance that rap embraces” (Nielson 2011: 349). Without denying the validity of his analysis in relation to the US, on which it focuses, it must be noted that this observation cannot equally be applied to different political contexts, such as Sudan, as I intend to show below.
3. Hip Hop in Sudan

Before moving to a detailed analysis of language and narrative practices, it is worth focusing briefly on the spread of Hip Hop in Sudan. As Jacqueline Urla argues, Hip Hop is a good example of how in the global flows of people and music meanings are the result of interactions between “local actors, located in specific historical, social and political circumstances” and transnational processes (2001: 173). According to the Sudanese rapper Ahmad Mahmoud, aka Dza Tha Dissenter, Hip Hop in Sudan came about with the Internet boom, around 2004.

One of the promoters of Hip Hop in Sudan is Mustafa Khogali, founder of Studio 1 and Makaan Arts and Culture, a non-profit organization, which produces music and video material, as well as organizing a variety of workshops (such as drum playing, photography, etc.) addressed to young people. Most important of all, they organize so-called “MAC Open Mic. Nights of music, art and culture” and other cultural events, to promote these forms of art. During the Open Mic sessions artists, particularly rappers, poets, as well as visual artists, are invited to bring their art on stage. When I interviewed him, Mustafa Khogali explained that

Rap and Hip Hop is not officially considered as music. You have to be registered as a singer to sell your music, and to put in the market. Rappers and hip-hoppers cannot register and sell their music so they give their music for free, they put it online, on websites such as reverbnation, on radio. (Khogali 2012, personal interview)[1]

In his opinion, “there is a huge lack of knowledge about hip-hop and therefore resistance. We are trying to break this wall, we are trying to have it recognized as a form of art.” When I asked him whether this is a political issue, he replied that “it’s not a political issue, it’s all an administrative issue, if you don’t have a permit and organize an event, they come and shut it down.” (Khogali 2012, personal interview)

The fact that Hip Hop is not recognized as a form of art has an inevitable impact on its distribution and although in this sense the official status of Hip Hop is a bureaucratic question, it is first and foremost a political issue since it is a way for the government to maintain control over Sudanese artists and their work. This is emphasized by Dza Tha Dissenter,

We live in a fascist regime, we are not interested in being registered as a musician for political reasons, you can distribute your music for free, we are not interested in selling our music, poetry, this is the time that everyone can do it, they can express themselves. You cannot have a sellable art until there is democracy, to register as a musician you have to go by their rules. (Dza Tha Dissenter 2012, personal interview)

He also explained what happened when a well-known Sudanese rapper, Abbas Annour, who has now left Sudan, tried to register. He was examined by a committee and was told that his was not music and that his voice was not good enough. As Dza Tha Dissenter makes clear, “rap is about what you say, and how you say it, not the voice, he was talking about social issues, about Darfur” (Dza Tha Dissenter 2012, personal interview).

It cannot be denied that what the Sudanese government does is creating a strong form of censorship against Hip Hop. In this sense, Mustafa Khogali’s commitment to make Hip Hop known in Sudan and his support for rappers through his organization are an attempt to change things, which is why he encourages rappers to rap in Arabic:

I advise rappers to rap in Arabic for it to be accepted, to be understood, to allow rap to be accepted, to blend it with Sudanese singing, for the transition to happen, once they accept it you can do in any language, I advise to do in Arabic because it reflects your own culture, it brings out a more natural language. (Khogali 2012, personal interview)

He also emphasizes the local roots of Hip Hop:
Like Mustafa Khogali, several other African Hip Hoppers point to the connections between African oral practices and Hip Hop. As the artists from the Senegalese Hip Hop group Daara argue in their track entitled Boomerang, “Born in Africa, brought up in America, Hip Hop has come full circle” (quoted in Pennycook 2009: 34). According to Tope Omoniyi (2009), among others, it is time to revisit and challenge the claim that Hip Hop originated in the Bronx, which is why he uses the title of the track mentioned above to argue for “a boomerang hypothesis” and for a view of Hip Hop as a case of “reappropriation” (2009: 118), rather than an example of North American imperialism.

By the same token, Awad Ibrahim (2009: 232) takes from Édouard Glissant the concept of métrissage or “cultural, linguistic, and musical creolization”, referred to the combination between two or more different cultural components which results in a third culture, that is separate from them although rooted in those components. Ibrahim extends such notion by taking into account Homi Bhabha’s views about the origins of cultural forms. As Bhabha argues, there is no such a thing as a complete and finished “original” and the “originary” is always open to translation (1990: 210). From a translation perspective, there is no such a thing as an “original” Global Hip Hop Nation since the latter is always open to translation, both in the literal and metaphorical sense of the term.

Mustafa Khogali’s commitment to having Hip Hop officially recognized as a form of art on the one hand, and Dza Tha Dissenter’s experience of Hip Hop as a tool of political activism against the Sudanese government on the other (a point which I will come back to later) reveal the different forms through which Hip Hop is being re-appropriated in Sudan. Moreover, Hip Hop is also translated in Sudan as a vehicle through which Sudanese expatriate artists express their identity. This is the case for Mojo, a Sudanese who started his Hip Hop career in the United Arab Emirates, moved to the US and was co-founder of one of the first Sudanese hip hop groups, NasJota together with Ehab Basaeed, aka Zihab and Mohamed Mamoun, aka Big Moe. In 2006 Mojo left NasJota and moved back to Sudan. He became a member of another group, JamDeanz, which released an online album, Ma People, dedicated to the Sudanese youth. Since then he has been collaborating with Mustafa Khogali and through Studio One Productionz he produces cultural and radio programs. When I interviewed him, he explained what Hip Hop means for him and other Sudanese born Hip Hoppers: “Us, not born in Sudan, it’s an issue for us, we are outsiders compared to people who were born here. This is standing in the front line, this is who we are, we are Sudanese by blood” (Mojo 2012, personal interview).

Hip Hop is for expatriate artists a way to create their own identity. Since they are considered outsiders and therefore somehow deprived of their Sudanese identity, they re-negotiate their Sudanese origins by constructing a new identity through their music. It is worth pointing out that, although when discussing Hip Hop in relation to identity, issues of race, nation and ethnicity come into play, as Omoniyi rightly argues (2009), these are variables that might or might not be relevant depending on the context. Whereas issues of race were central in the early days of Hip Hop in the United States, this is not the case with Hip Hop in Africa, particularly in Sudan, where issues of ethnicity and nation, among others, are more relevant to both Sudanese expatriates who live outside Sudan and those who have moved back to Sudan, like Mojo.

4. Translation, identity and the narrative of revolution

Language agency, and the freedom to shape your own language, is a key component of Hip Hoppers’ identity:

The way we present the song, we try to avoid any language rules, it’s actually say that language sometimes limits your expression, language is sometimes a barrier, sometimes there is no expression for that thought, to communicate, that’s when we make up words, the structure makes sense somehow. (Mojo 2012, personal interview)

Mojo’s opinion about the open nature of Hip Hop English resonates with many rappers throughout the world. Among others, Jubwa of Soul Plantation argues that the standard English imposed in American schools is a “limited version” of English, as opposed to the
countless resources offered by Black American English (quoted in Alim 2006: 14). In terms of language creativity, the similarities between translation and Hip Hop are striking. In the same way as translators can enrich and give new life to a language and to a specific text, particularly by creating neologisms when a term to express a specific idea is missing, Hip Hoppers can appropriate language by ignoring rules and bringing down language barriers. Translation, intended as a creative and powerful act of communication, rather than a secondary and derive process, can provide an insight into Hip Hop and the ways in which language is rewritten in Hip Hop lyrics, as it happens in translation. In other words, both translation and Hip Hop contribute to subverting common views about language and empowerment.

The power of language in shaping identities emerges clearly from the words of Dza Tha Dissenter, the first Sudanese rapper that I have interviewed. When I asked what Hip Hop is for him, as an answer he quoted the rhythmical, rhyming lines from one of his lyrics: “I h i p to slip into a state of clarity, emancipate my mentality, hop to move with strategy to improve my reality.” As Alim shows in his study of the language of Hip Hop (2006), Hip Hop artists tend to use rhyme even in conversation. In actual fact, during our interview, Dza Tha Dissenter often reproduced lines taken from his lyrics.

Dza Tha Dissenter, as well as being a rapper of “a group of Revolutionist Resolute Zouls”, is also a blogger who identifies himself as Zoulcolm X. While his blog will be analyzed later in the article, it is worth focusing on the name of the group and his name as a blogger since they are the first two most obvious examples of how Ahmad Mahmoud appropriates English by combining it with Arabic to create his own identity as an artist and a political activist. As explained in the description of the group on reverbnation.com, “zoul” is the term used by Sudanese people to call each other regardless of their tribe/ethnicity, and also used to describe Sudanese citizens all over the Arab speaking countries. More precisely, “zoul” has multiple connotations in the sense that it is linguistically identified as a term belonging to a regional variety by other Arab speakers since only Sudanese use it, but it also means intelligent and open-minded, characteristics that Arabs recognize as typically Sudanese. As previously argued, translation, intended as the transfer of a text from one language to another, does not come into play here, however the meaning of the term “zoul” is explained in the same way as translators usually do in their notes to a translated text. Moreover, Ahmad’s identity as an Arabic speaker and a Sudanese citizen is intertwined with the name of the African American human rights activist, Malcolm X, in the same way as the rappers’ identities are linguistically and also visually foregrounded in the group’s name, ReZOUlution.

Zoulcolm X and ReZOUlution are fascinating examples of how English and Arabic are specifically combined to create translilingual terms which fashion local identities to the point where the two languages cannot be separated. They confirm what Elaine Richardson claims about Hip Hop discourses “constantly inventing, (dis)inventing, redefining and reconstructing language to meet their needs and goals, and thus constantly engaged in the discursive (dis)invention of identity and the (dis)invention of language” (2006: 21). Following on Steven Kellman’s notion of “translingual imagination” referred to authors writing in more than one language, Polezzi’s argument for a view of polylinguistic writing as self-translation underlines the fluidity and complex combination of languages in the construction of identities. In this case, for example, there is a specific choice to keep the Arabic word “zoul” in its English transliteration to signal Ahmad’s identity as a Sudanese rapper and blogger whose art is inherently marked by the juxtaposition of language codes and practices.

The overall description of the group shows how ReZOUlution brings forward a narrative of revolution:

A group of Revolutionist Resolute Zouls, bringing their messages in the form of Hip Hop. With Rhythm and Poetry inspired from the motherland Sudan, and the world. Represented by this group of artists under the name of ReZOUlution. "Zoul" being the term used by Sudanese people to call each another regardless of their tribe/ethnicity, and also used to describe Sudanese citizens all over the Arab speaking countries. Revolution being what their Art is all about, whether it's political revolution, ethical revolution, musical revolution, they Resolute to fight for it lyrically. They know that The pen is mightier than the sword, and their swords swing in three different languages [sic], Sudanese, Arabic, and English. (http://www.myspace.com/rezoulution)

Like them, Rashad argues that “Hip Hop is connected with revolution” (Rashad 2012, personal interview). In other words, Hip Hoppers from Sudan, or at least a number of them,
Like Hip Hoppers from different contexts, negotiate their belonging to the GHHN by identifying themselves as revolutionaries who try to make their own countries, and therefore, the world, a better place to live in. This is confirmed by Luke, a rapper from New York who has collaborated with the Circle on the campaign against racism “Ana sudani” (I am Sudanese):

> There are many types of hip-hop, many talk about true hip-hop, the history of hip-hop, in the Bronx, young people were embracing this music to comment on their harsh reality. [...] People outside the US are more interested in keeping integrity of hip-hop, while in the US hip-hop is more commercial (Luke 2012, personal interview)

In his opinion, Hip Hoppers outside the USA, tend to make a selective appropriation of the meta-narrative of Hip Hop – selective appropriation is another framing mechanism explored by Baker (2006) – and to maintain the revolutionary nature of Hip Hop, against commercial Hip Hop.

They do so, for example, by appropriating the word “revolution”, for it to acquire new meanings, while partaking of the metaphor of verbal power/violence, recurrent in Hip Hop. ReZOUlution blends several lexemes, together with both a phonemic overlap and a clipping of component words: revolution, ZOUL, resolution, and soul. The name of the group is closely linked with their art, defined as a form of revolution, and the term revolution, rather than being used in general, is explored through a variety of possible meanings on different levels: political, ethical, musical. It is also reinforced by the consonance with “resolve” and the well-known metaphor of lyrical power, “they know the pen is mightier than the sword”.

Rhythm, poetry and revolution are indissolubly linked through the power of words. Words in Hip Hop convey doubts on existing meanings while creating new ones, they are the main tools in the hands of revolutionaries fighting to make a change, therefore words are themselves revolutionary. The central role of words is often expressed through the metaphor of verbal violence:

> my enemy is your holy simplicity
> my complexity disassembles your fake religious mysteries
> and uncover your true history
> you’re as fake as that guy in phone booth is
> i’m verbal shootin’ you while gettin’ head from the muses
> so you know how inspiring my truth is
> hits u so hard leaves you with mental bruises

These lines set themselves within the metanarrative of the GHHN for a number of reasons. As Richardson argues (2006), following on Smitherman (1977/86: 2000), there are a number of African language practices adopted in rap lyrics, such as call-response, narrativizing, boasting, image-making, punning. Boasting, whereby a rapper emphasizes his/her poetic abilities, is predominant here. Dza Tha Dissenter starts by creating a contrast between two different narratives through opposites such as complexity/ simplicity, fake/true, while using some African American English (AAE) forms, such as the consonant cluster deletion in “shootin”, “gettin”, or the use of “z” to indicate plurals.

Another poetic device common in Hip Hop, image-making, which refers to the use of metaphoric language, is evident here in the metaphor of verbal violence, expressed through collocations such as “verbal shootin”, “mental bruises”. This metaphor is amplified through images of natural phenomena, such as “hurricane”, and through the rhyming pattern “brain”/“insane”/“drained”:

> I-slam your dome so hard literally open your brain
like Russian roulette, I'm lethally insane
with flow like acid rain, shit leaves you drained
I cause more damage than a hurricane
mass destruction, then I start buildin’ again
your world's bout to change

Dza Tha Dissenter also exploits the well-known collocation “mass destruction”, commonly referred to as weapons, which has been re-appropriated by Palestinian citizen journalists of Electronic Intifada (EI), defining their website as “Palestine's Weapon of Mass Instruction” (http://electronicintifada.net). Dza Tha Dissenter uses it metaphorically to refer to predominant narratives which will be replaced by the narratives he puts forward.[2]

These lyrics are a clear example of a constant invitation to a dialogue with the other and they are part of a so-called Hip Hop cypha, defined by Samy Alim as “an organic, highly charged, fluid circular arrangement of rhymers wherein participants exchange verses” (2009: 1). In this cypha, Dza Tha Dissenter addresses and challenges other MCs “spittin mad metaphors” and challenges MCs who are “deaf dumb and blind” by referring to the language of the Quran, while drawing on other recurrent themes of his lyrics, such as divine inspiration and prophecy. Furthermore, the written text creates a play on words by hyphenating I-slam with a visually evocative image of “literally” opening the brain, like in a Russian roulette, to reinforce both the notion of tabula rasa and the fight to change the world.

Metaphors about verbal violence and the power of words are recurrent. It is a violence expressing the power of Hip Hop to change the world, as becomes even more evident in the lines which, as already mentioned, Dza Tha Dissenter recited during our conversation:

I Hip to slip into a state of clarity
emancipate my mentality
Hop to move with a strategy
improve my reality
this is what Hip Hop is
Hip Hop is breakin chains, not wearin em and shit
it’s making change, not cash or bling bling

Freedom from literal and metaphorical chains, particularly freedom of expression, is a good case in point. Self-expression is another common element among rappers. However, expressing one's opinions acquires a new meaning in a country like Sudan, where there is no freedom of speech, as Dza Tha Dissenter argues:

You see people dying of hunger and if you don’t talk about these, you’re not an artist, I rap against the government but for the people, I am spreading specific thoughts, we need freedom, equality and justice, in Sudan they are mere phrases, there is not freedom in Sudan, I feel free when I write. (Dza Tha Dissenter 2012, personal interview)

Like revolution, freedom is an example of what Clifford defines as “translation terms” (1997), such as culture, art, that it to say concepts which do not necessarily express the same idea in different societies, and therefore reveal difference despite their apparent global application. Similarly, rap, Hip Hop, globalization are translation terms whose meaning cannot be assumed to be the same across languages and cultures, as Pennycook (2007) points out. Among these, freedom acquires specific connotations when applied to Sudan.
The hybridity of translation terms reveals how the apparent monolingual nature of English in Hip Hop disguises the coexistence of other languages underneath. More precisely, as Dza Tha Dissenter underlines:

It’s English but hard to understand even for English speakers unless they know the Sudanese references, I listen to rap music since 1990 and I guess that people follow me even if they don’t understand everything, they relate, it’s a chance to seek knowledge. (Dza Tha Dissenter 2012, personal interview)

His words seem to confirm Jannis Androutsopoulos’ view on Hip Hop cultural references which construct “a fragmented panorama of local knowledge that includes history and traditions, high art and mass culture, places and institutions” and above all index “a hybrid cultural horizon” (2009: 49). As Dza Tha Dissenter argues, one of the languages in which he writes is English, an international language performed according to local inflections and therefore hard to follow for those who do not have familiarity with Sudan, but he then refers to the fact that rap listeners relate to music, even though they might not understand everything, in the same way as he relates to the music he has been listening to since the 1990s. According to Negu Gorriak, a Basque Hip Hop group singing exclusively in Basque, it is common for people to listen to music in languages they do not understand (Urla 2001). However, Berger (2003) is right in claiming that the issue of comprehensibility in popular music is rather complex since it varies according to different cultural contexts.

Polylingual writers, as Polezzi argues, might force “the reader to perform further acts of translation – or at least prepared to accept some of the opacities of the text, with their necessary implications” (2012: 91). Similarly, Hip Hoppers negotiate the meaning of their lyrics with their global audiences through more or less explicit acts of translation, while being aware that the knowledge of certain cultural references might coexist with the non-understanding of others. Dza Tha Dissenter takes the issue of non-comprehensibility a step further by envisaging it as an opportunity to compensate for a lack of knowledge. In this sense, Dza Tha Dissenter’s view that “Hip is the knowledge and people ask the questions and find their answers” recalls another well-known metaphor about Hip Hop providing specific answers, related to local issues and events, to common questions shared by Hip Hoppers throughout the world. The postcolonial notion of local knowledge, intended as knowledge that is specifically related to a community and generated in a social context through social practice (Pennycook 2007), is particularly relevant to Dza Tha Dissenter’s music as well as his blogging activity.

5. Hip Hoppers as bloggers: Zoucolm X

More often than not Hip Hoppers are also bloggers, and computer-mediated communication through online magazines and personal websites play a key role in the interaction between artists and their audiences. Drawing upon Fiske’s concept of vertical intertextuality (1987), Androutsopoulos identifies Hip Hop as “a system of three interrelated ‘spheres’ of discourse” (2009: 44) which include artist expression, parallel to Fiske’s notion of primary discourse, media discourse (corresponding to secondary discourse), and discourse among Hip Hop fans and activists (corresponding to tertiary discourse). Zoucolm X’s commitment to Hip Hop and blogging shows how related the three spheres of Hip Hop are and how common language practices are adopted in creating Hip Hoppers’ identity.

As Baldry and O’Halloran argue

Attitudes and beliefs form the basis of today’s Internet exchanges, reflecting an emergent opinion-sharing society, whose means include the blogosphere and social networking tools in general and whose capital and touchstone values are cultural diversity, critical cultural comparisons, orientations to, and judgments about, others’ feelings and persuasions, and, of course, the expression and definition of one’s own identity (2010: 22-23).

Macro-meaning systems, defined as metafunctions (Halliday 1978), play a key role in these exchanges. These are the experiential metafunction, which is related to the way experiences are constructed on the basis of the relations between participants in a process and the surrounding circumstances, the logical metafunction focusing on how logical relations are constructed, the interpersonal metafunction which has to do with the social relations between participants as well as their attitudes towards each other; finally the textual/compositional
metafunction which is related to how the interpersonal, the experiential and logical are organized and expressed in a given text (Baldry and Thibault 2006). Zoulcolm X's blog goes in this direction since the interpersonal and textual metafunctions are key in constructing a bond with his readers and fans.

Zoulcolm X immediately negotiates his identity within the metanarrative of the GHHN by quoting one of his favourite Hip Hop artist, Immortal Technique, from his song, *the Prophecy*. Immortal Technique is a US rapper, known as the “Emcee of the voiceless” for his political commitment. Zoulcolm X shares Immortal Technique’s political commitment emerging from his lyrics, which index through rhyme and consonance the contradictory overlapping of “hypocrisy” and “democracy” in “the capitalist philosophy”. As he argues, “the lyrics to me resembles the urge to unite the struggle, this world is full of misery because of small groups exploiting the masses” (Dza Tha Dissenter e-mail communication, 2012). According to Androutsopoulos, English plays a key role in Hip Hop slang since it “gains its significance by originating from exclusive Hip Hop sources and is intertextually saturated” (2009: 57). Zoulcolm X here relies on his fans’ knowledge of Hip Hop, their familiarity with the intertextual nature of Hip Hop lyrics and the subsequent ability of his ideal readers to recognize them.

As he also does in his music, Zoulcolm X creates a direct dialogue with his blog’s readers through which a dynamic identity is constructed: “Who I be?” Here the “habitual be”, typical of Hip Hop lyrics, “indicates actions that are continuing or ongoing” (Alim 2006: 114). The use of the habitual be here underlines the dynamic nature of Zoulcolm X’s identity which, rather than being fixed, is constructed through a constant interaction with his readers and fans. A strong interpersonal metafunction is also conveyed by a photo posted on the blog, through the direct gaze establishing eye contact between Ahmad Dza and the viewer. Furthermore, he identifies himself as a “Sudanese blogging in the tongue of Al-Engleez.” As he does in rapping, Zoulcolm X appropriates English to the point of renaming it “Al-Engleez”, thus creating a new language, which is neither simply Arabic nor English.
This new language is inflected according to Zoulcolm X’s experience as a political activist, as shown by a commentary appearing on the right hand side of his blog. He was arrested on 3 February 2011 with seven people and detained for 12 days for participating in the 30 January demonstration. The police shaved his head and tortured him. The text on the blog reads as follows: “They shaved my afro for humiliation, but I’m still fuzzy wuzzy like Hadendawis resisting British occupation.” “Fuzzy wuzzy” is a reference to Rudyard Kipling’s poem focusing on Hadendoa warriors who fought the British army in Sudan. This term was used by British soldiers to describe Hadendoa warriors who were fighting in the Mahdist War. It recalls the Arabic word “ghazi”, warrior, and refers to the warriors’ curly hair. Zoulcolm X carries out a complex process of appropriation of the expression “fuzzy wuzzy” and its historical and literary connotations. As in previous cases, this term also acquires new meanings while at the same time contributing to reinforce Zoulcolm X’s multiple identity as a blogger, a rapper and a warrior. As he emphasized during our interview, he continues his battle despite the police’s attempt to humiliate him by shaving his hair.

6. Conclusions

In her analysis of Hip Hop in Tanzania, Christina Higgins argues that

the use of historically AAE forms among Tanzanians may be better understood as a form of appropriation in which local and global forces intermingle, producing hybrid forms of a new local (and global) order. [...] Youth making use of these codes are redefining their local environments in transcultural terms associated with the cultural capital of global Hip Hop, and at least some of the time, they are using mostly local resources to fashion themselves for this imagined yet locally salient context. (2009: 97-110)

The view of Hip Hop as hybrid cultural practices, which is clearly recurrent in scholarly analyses, seems to confirm the validity of a translation approach as an interpretative framework. While, on the one hand, hybridity is a peculiarity of translated texts, particularly as a consequence of the information economy of our globalized society, as argued by Cronin (2003), on the other hand it has also been shown that even non-translation texts produced at a transnational level have become hybrid since they result from the overlapping of different cultures and languages (Schaffner and Adab 1997, 2001; Pym 2001; Gambier 2006; Taviano 2010).

Similarly, Zoulcolm X/Dza Tha Dissenter and his group ReZOULutionists create hybrid texts based on a musically and rhythmically creative use of AAE and Arabic while redefining and reinventing language codes, their multiple identities and their own cultural and political context. The notions of fixity and fluidity, that John Connell and Chris Gibson adopt to examine the tensions inherent to music, are also useful in revealing the dynamic nature of languages and identities in Hip Hop: “fixity and fluidity operate at multiple levels, from the formal and institutional to the personal [...] music is dynamic and unpredictable, involving movements of sound and people, expressing mobility in certain periods, stability in others” (2003: 17). When negotiating his belonging to the metanarrative of the GHHN, Dza Tha Dissenter creates his complex identity as a Hip Hop artist, blogger and political activist by translating and reinterpreting Hip Hop poetic practices, in combination with local language codes, with specific political aims to carry out a ReZOULution in Sudan. Given that the “dynamics of the intricate interplay between dominance and resistance is difficult to capture”, as Baker puts it (2006:23), it remains to be seen whether his narrative of REZOULution will translate and rewrite practices of oppression in Sudan - and elsewhere.

References


Notes

[1] This and the following interviews quoted in this article have been transcribed without modifications.


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