

Álvarez Mosquera, Pedro 2012: *Identidad y Language Crossing. El uso de inglés afroamericano por raperos blancos*. Bern: Peter Lang. 164 pp. ISBN: 978-3-0343-1220-2.

CRISTINA SUÁREZ GÓMEZ

Universitat de les Illes Balears

cristina.suarez@uib.es

Language crossing has been the object of recent interest in the field of sociolinguistics, especially following the pioneering work of Rampton (1995a, 1995b),¹ who coined the term in his study of adolescents' friendship groups in England to refer to "the use of language varieties associated with social or ethnic groups that the speaker does not normally 'belong' to" (1995a: 14). Studies of a similar nature had already appeared, looking at how language is affected in multiethnic contexts (Hewitt 1986; Gilroy 1987) and at the interaction between language and identity, also a recurrent and productive issue in the field of sociolinguistics (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985; Zentella 1990; Butcholz 1999; Smitherman 2000; Morgan 2002; Fought 2006, to mention just a few). Prior to Álvarez-Mosquera's monograph, studies on language crossing had focused principally on the crossing of adolescents and were mostly of a qualitative nature (Rampton 1995a; Cutler 1999; Vermeij 2004). In this respect the current work is pioneering in that it constitutes a study of language crossing within the context of rap music between 1980 and 2000, and assumes both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Using sociolinguistic parameters, among which ethnicity, language variety and chronology are of utmost relevance, the author investigates how white rappers in the USA make use of linguistic devices traditionally associated with African-American Vernacular English (henceforth AAVE), and thus belong to the domain of black rappers.² This makes the study most innovative, and fills a gap in this burgeoning field of research.

The study is contextualized on solid theoretical, descriptive and methodological grounds (Chapters 2-4). First, the author describes the phenomenon of language crossing itself, distinguishing it from other phenomena with which it might overlap, such as code-switching and 'passing'. He concludes succinctly yet precisely that the primary difference between these two phenomena and language crossing is that, only in the latter, do crossers have no ethnic relation with the group with which they cross and no intention of belonging to the group whose features they imitate. Language crossing is therefore a

¹ For support with this study, my gratitude goes to the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and European Regional Development Fund (Grant Nr. FFI2011-26693-CO2-02).

² Both the author and I are aware of the different terms available to denote this linguistic variety; here I will use the terms employed by the author in his monograph.

conscious act and the only motivation crossers have to justify the act of appropriation is related to notions of power and prestige. Chapter 3 then offers a comprehensive account of AAVE, given that the case study to follow will present crossing towards this variety. The description of AAVE is diachronic in nature, beginning with its origins in 1619 when the first slaves arrived in the USA, and ending at the present-day, including theories on its origins (English-based tradition and African-based tradition). This chapter also includes a section that describes the presence of AAVE in American society, with a particular emphasis on urban contexts, notably Los Angeles and New York; the latter will also receive a more exhaustive treatment in §5.2.3, since it is the geographic location of the informants in the study. Finally, Chapter 3 closes with a catalogue of the most typical linguistic features associated with AAVE (vocabulary, semantics, pronunciation, and grammar), based on Rickford and Rickford (2000). From the outset, the study presents AAVE as the reference to which the other variety is compared, namely to what the author refers to throughout the book as ‘Standard American English’ or *inglés estándar* and justifies the suitability of these labels because of their broader meaning. However, in my opinion, ‘Standard American English’ is not an adequate term for this type of study. Not only is the word ‘standard’ a politically-loaded term, but also, and more importantly, it seems contradictory as a term referring to the variety of language used in songs from which a selection of non-standard linguistic variables will be analyzed. In this context the label ‘standard’ is unfortunate and misleading, and other terms such as ‘Mainstream U.S. English’, used only once in a footnote, might have been more appropriate. In Chapter 4, the author justifies the use of rap for a study of this nature. Rap music constitutes an innovative subject for linguistic research, one which has become very popular following work by Alim (2006). There are two main reasons for this. First, using rap music makes possible a comparative analysis of rappers belonging to both ethnic groups (white and black). Second, given that rap music is a genre with strongly rooted origins in the African and African-American tradition,³ language crossing from non-African-American ethnic groups is favored in this context.

Chapters 5-8 constitute the main body of the monograph, presenting results from the quantitative and qualitative analyses. From a technical point of view, the author’s rigor in the compilation and processing of data, included in these chapters, must be praised. The analysis has been conducted meticulously, with the appropriate method of analysis used in each case: SPSS for the database compilation and the quantitative analysis, *Praat* and *Wavesurfer* for the phonological variables and *WordSmith Tools* for the qualitative part.

Chapter 5 offers a thorough description of the corpus used for the analysis. Its compilation follows sociolinguistic criteria, taking ethnic group and chronology as the main factors for data collection. The resulting corpus comprises 36 songs per ethnic group, with a chronologically balanced distribution. All songs were performed by rappers from New York, in order to avoid potential biases from dialectal variation. A single album of songs (mean number of 12 songs) was used for each of six singers, one black and one white from each of three decades (1980s, 1990s and 2000s). An issue which might arise immediately in the reader’s mind is whether one informant per decade from an ethnic

³ A rapper is described as “a post-modern African griot, the verbally gifted storyteller and cultural historian in the traditional African society” (Smitherman 2000: 269).

group is representative enough in order to extrapolate results for the whole group. Drawing conclusions about a decade of language use from a single informant (e.g., use of *ain't* by white rappers in the 1990s) seems to me to be potentially dangerous, in that we cannot know for sure whether data reflect common trends at the time or simply an idiolectal feature of one performer (see footnote 5 for an example illustrating such differences). Consequently, the validity of the analysis should ideally be confirmed by controlling for idiolectal idiosyncrasies through the use of further informants from each of the decades selected or indeed by using more than one informant from the outset.⁴ Despite detailed information on the corpus compilation, the number of words in each sample is not mentioned in the book, and judging from the list of most frequent words provided in Chapter 7, it seems very likely that there may be significance differences here;⁵ in the quantitative analysis (Chapter 6) normalized —rather than absolute frequencies— should have been included, in order to avoid any possible skewing in the findings.

For the quantitative analysis (Chapter 6), the author selects the following linguistic variables: invariable negative marker *ain't*, copula deletion, invariant present tense forms in the 3rd person singular and the alveolar pronunciation of *-ing* (/ɪŋ/>/ɪn/). Following Rickford and Rickford (2000), the author considers that these variables are specific to AAVE. Undoubtedly this reference constitutes an excellent source on AAVE, but it might have been complemented with more updated sources (Green 2002; Edwards 2004; Wolfram 2004) in order to account for potential innovative linguistic traces, bearing in mind the speed with which non-standard varieties of English evolve. The recently launched *Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English* (Kortmann and Lunkenheimer 2011) illustrates that the use of copula deletion is in fact a recurrent phenomenon in different Englishes, but has not been attested in Colloquial American English. As to the invariant present tense forms, although it is a very widespread phenomenon among different varieties of English, with an attestation rate of 66.2% and indeed is pervasive in AAVE (Kortmann and Lunkenheimer 2011), this feature has not been recognized for Colloquial American English either. Hence, both these variables constitute good examples to test language crossing in this context. By contrast, in Kortmann and Lunkenheimer (2011), the use of invariable negative marker *ain't* is a feature catalogued as pervasive in AAVE and not excessively rare in Colloquial American English; thus, its use here, where the variable might indeed exist in the crossers' own variety, is less suitable as a means of judging language crossing and the question arises as to what extent the results from this variable should be considered cases of crossing at all,⁶ based on its AAVE origin, or rather as instances of a global, American-based youth

⁴ The author uses the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* to corroborate his results, but as he acknowledges, this material does not provide any information on ethnic origin, so another source of data which fits with the author's sociolinguistic study would have been more useful here.

⁵ This conclusion can be inferred from footnote 36 ("el corpus de Everlast está formado por 4.354 palabras, mientras que el corpus de 2Pac contiene 6.458"), 96.

⁶ In fact, in this variable, the 90.5% use of *ain't* by Everlast, a white rapper, is highly surprising, being by far the highest here, which perhaps leads us to think that it might be an idiolectal feature, rather than a linguistic feature of white rappers in the 1990s. The same argument can be used with respect to the case of the omission of the 3rd person singular: "observamos que los raperos de etnia blanca tan sólo presentan un único caso de este tipo (*she don't*, por Cage)" (85). In this sense I disagree entirely with the author when he says that "el hecho de sólo centrarnos en dos de los raperos [black and white from the 1990s] radica en que si los resultados son lo suficientemente contundentes

culture. The same argument can be made for the phonological variable used concerning the alveolar (/ɪn/), rather than velar (/ɪŋ/) realization of *-ing*, a recurrent phenomenon in many varieties besides AAVE. In fact, the author himself acknowledges that this variable is not exclusive to AAVE (86), which seems a clear enough indication of its inappropriateness as a variable in a study of language crossing.

As to the qualitative analysis (Chapter 7), the author provides a very complete analysis of high-frequently used words and of a selected number of lexical words belonging to a determined set of semantic fields. Very interesting information is drawn from the analysis on the issue of how women are referred to as well as the use of terms belonging to the semantic field of violence. Less clear, however, is the examination of the word *nigga*, not surprisingly confined to black rappers; here an interesting comparison would be to search for an alternative term among white rappers to mark ethnicity and in-group membership, as similar studies on rap music in different contexts have done (Mitchell 2001: 1-2). In fact, according to Clarke and Hiscock, “[t]he use of the term *nigger* is unusual since this racially and politically charged term is generally avoided by white rappers” (2009: fn. 12).

Chapters 8 and 9 present evaluations of the sociolinguistic analysis (Chapter 8) and of the motivations for language crossing (Chapter 9). The information in both cases is of the utmost interest, with the summarized findings confirming previous studies on language crossing (e.g., Cutler 1999). Although linguistically the presence of language crossing is clear, it cannot be concluded from the results that it affects all levels, in particular cases such as the replication of certain cultural values inherent to the black tradition, such as concepts of the ‘hood’, resistance or authenticity, for instance. The phenomenon of ‘hybridity’ (Clarke and Hiscock 2009: 245) may in fact account for what appears to be ‘superficial language crossing’. This coexistence of convergence and divergence in language crossing has been found in a number of studies cited by the author (such as Bennett 1999), but also in other relevant studies not included (Wermuth 2001; Androutopoulos and Scholz 2003; Hess 2005; Pennycook 2003, 2007, to mention a few studies of rap music worldwide) which would have served to strengthen and further contextualize some very original findings here.

Conclusions to the study are given in Chapter 10. Álvarez Mosquera’s research convincingly shows how the analysis of rap music can be used as a means of describing the language crossing of white singers in their appropriation of some AAVE linguistic features. However, he demonstrates that language crossing is not achieved in the conceptualization of cultural values related to the black experience. The analysis reveals the author’s broad knowledge of the subject, and his exploration and review of a very comprehensive list of bibliographical sources is employed effectively throughout the book in support of his own views. On the whole, and despite some methodological shortcomings, this

para mostrar una correlación o desajuste entre los datos cualitativos y cuantitativos, éstos responderían a pautas etnoculturales que pueden ser extrapolables al conjunto global de los datos” (96).

monograph constitutes a pioneering piece of research. It will serve to fill a gap in the field of sociolinguistics and, at the same time, is innovative in its use of rap music to study language crossing, a phenomenon which up until now has only been analyzed through the spoken component of the language. All this makes the current work an attractive and accessible one for any scholar interested in the field of sociolinguistics, either from a didactic or research perspective, as well as for young researchers who may feel inspired by this vibrant and somewhat trendy line of research.

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Cristina Suárez-Gómez is Lecturer of English at the University of the Balearic Island, and the principal investigator of the project "Morphosyntactic Variation in New Englishes". Her main areas of specialization are historical syntax, and dialectal variation in English, both in a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. Her most relevant publications are about relativization in early English, dialectal variation in early English and grammatical variation in World Englishes.

Address: University of the Balearic Islands. Edifici Ramón Llull. Ctra de Valldemossa, km 7,5. 07122 Palma (Balearic Islands), Spain. Tel.: +34 971 259765. Fax: +34 971 173474.