

Sociophonetic Variation in Hip Hop Language: Race, Region, and /R/lessness  
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Hip Hop music and culture have motivated a vibrant field of academic study upon reaching mainstream status in the US in the 1970s. The study of Hip Hop culture necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing various methodologies from disciplines such as cultural studies to education and literacy (Alim 2006). As rappers are known for projecting local speech practices onto a global stage (Rose 1994), this study focuses specifically on sociophonetic variation related to regional identity in Hip Hop music. I examine the variation of post-vocalic /ɹ/ in the Hip Hop speech performances of New York rapper Jay Z, a highly salient social marker in both African American English (Green 2002) and New York English (Labov 1972). This paper examines the complex intersections between race and place in Hip Hop in order to provide a greater understanding of the impact of Hip Hop language on sociolinguistic variation.

This study takes a quantitative approach to identifying social and linguistic factors contributing to /ɹ/-deletion in Jay Z's Hip Hop speech. Post-vocalic /ɹ/ is realized in three ways: fully realized /ɹ/ (ex: [fɔɹ]), fully deleted /r/ (ex: [fɔ]), and with schwa replacement (ex: [fɔə]). For the purposes of this project, both full deletion and schwa replacement were coded as deletion, creating a binary variable of either deleted or fully realized /ɹ/. 1,943 tokens of post-vocalic /ɹ/ were collected from five sources. This includes four recorded rap albums: *Magna Carta... Holy Grail* (2013) and *The Black Album* (2003) by Jay Z, *Yeezus* (2013) by Chicago rapper Kanye West, and *Watch the Throne*, a collaborative album between Jay Z and Kanye West. Additionally, one hour-long interview with Jay Z, released on his YouTube channel in 2013, was considered for this study.

Factors of interest for this study included both social and linguistic factors. In regards to social factors, I first examine the impact of time on Jay Z's intrapersonal variation of r-lessness. Secondly, I investigate the impact of speaker and regional identity on sociolinguistic variation by comparing rates of r-lessness in the Hip Hop speech performances of Kanye West (Chicago) versus Jay Z (New York). Lastly, I look at the variation between Jay Z's Hip Hop speech performances versus interview speech performances. Linguistic factors of interest included the immediate surrounding phonetic environment, Hip-Hop salient words, phrase position, and whether the word containing post-vocalic /ɹ/ is part of a rhyme.

Given its categorical nature, I analyze this variable using a logistic regression model. Significant predictors of r-lessness include year of release, speech style, Hip Hop-salient words, and region. Overall, these results demonstrate the impact of regional identity on sociophonetic variation within Hip Hop music. Additionally, these findings indicate that sociolinguistic variation can be motivated by linguistic features specific to Hip Hop, calling for greater focus on understanding this specific genre of performance speech. More broadly, this study also reaffirms the importance

of Schilling-Estes' (1998) assertion that performance speech requires more attention from sociolinguists in the future.