Abstract

Towards the turn of the 20th century, a new wave of hip hop music emerged in Nigeria whose sense of popularity activated, and was activated by, the employment of complex linguistic strategies. Indirection, ambiguity, circumlocution, language mixing, pun, double meaning, and inclusive pronominals, among others, are not only used by artists in performing the glocal orientations of their music but also become for them valuable resources in the fashioning of multiple identities. In this paper, I interrogate some of these linguistic markers, using four broad paradigms: “Signifying,” “slangifying,” “double meaning,” and “pronominals and ghetto naming.” Under each of these areas, I show how Nigerian hip hop music is creating—through the mediation of language—sub-identities and a new subculture for a generation of urban youth.

Keywords: Nigerian hip hop music; Signifying; Slangifying; Language mixing; Double meaning; Urban youth subculture.

1. Introduction

Despite the international expansion that Nigerian hip hop music (NHHM) has seen in recent years, it has unfortunately not been a subject of much scholarly attention. To the disadvantage of this relatively new, but most popular, music genre, scholarly interests have continued to fixate on exploring the so-called “classical” African musical genres—Highlife, Juju, and Afrobeat. Two major reasons may be adduced for this negative disposition to NHHM: One is the belief that this music is irretrievably meaningless (see Abati 2009; Christopher 2012; Anibeze et. al. 2014) and the other is the sentiment that the music is a mere subaltern copy of American hip hop music (Adelakun 2013; Shonekan 2013). However, it goes without saying that there have been a number of insightful linguistic studies on this music genre.

Perhaps the most influential study on the language of NHHM is Tope Omoniyi’s “Hip-hop through the world Englishes lens: A response to globalization” which examines the linguistic strategies by which Nigerian hip hop artists perform what he calls their “glocal selves rather than ‘other’” (2006: 204). Omoniyi makes a very interesting case for Nigerian, and by extension African, hip hop music. Rather than
suggesting that hip hop is a sudden stroke of American cultural genius as have been argued by such scholars as Charry (2012), Omoniyi (2006: 205) (re)locates the roots of hip hop in pre-Slavery African cosmic space. In this “Boomerang Hypothesis,” he argues that hip hop in Africa can only be read as a re-appropriation, not appropriation or imitation (see also Omoniyi 2005, 2009). Apart from Omoniyi (2005, 2006, 2009), other works that have engaged with the language of NHHM include Agbo (2009); Babalola and Taiwo (2009); Liadi (2012); and Akande (2013).

While these studies have been insightful in their identification of code alternation as a well-received linguistic strategy in Nigerian hip hop, the limited scope of their enquiries (code-alternation in the main) has necessarily forced on them a certain level of focus that does not allow for a fairly wholesome appraisal of language in the music. In this paper, therefore, I build on these earlier studies by expanding the discourse to include hitherto unexplored areas such as “signifying,” “slangifying,” “double meaning,” and “pronominals and ghetto naming.”

2. Language situation in Nigeria

Nigeria has a linguistic situation that can best be described as complex. With over four hundred languages (Bamgbose 2000: 68; Garuba 2001: 11; Aito 2005: 18), the country’s attempts at formulating a coherent national policy on language have remained a subject of controversies. More significantly, Nigeria’s constitutional recognition of Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba as languages of legislative affairs (see sections 51 and 91 of the 1979 Constitution and sections 55 and 97 of the 1999 Constitution) and of “national culture and integration” (Orekan 2010: 22) has been seen as reductive and problematic. The same can be said of its adoption of English as official language, often criticized for excluding majority of Nigerians who do not have access to English and for endorsing, directly or indirectly, neo-colonialism (see Osundare 1982; Bamgbose 1999, 2000, 2014).

In contrast to English and the three languages mentioned above, Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) is seen as the quintessential Nigerian language. This belief is hinged mainly on its perceived neutrality, both with regard to geographical spread, ethnicity, and class (see Egbohahare 2003; Akande 2013; Olusegun-Joseph 2014), and the huge population of its speakers. Today, NPE is considered the first or second language of some thirty million people (Ethnologue). Ihemere (2006: 297) puts the number far above this. While he estimates the population of second language users of the language as seventy-five million, he estimates the number of first language users to be between three to five million (see also Siegel 2010: 236). Taken together, these estimates confirm that NPE has not only creolized but has also become the “language with the highest population of users in Nigeria” (Igboanusi 2008: 68).

It is no wonder then that over the years, NPE has emerged to become Nigeria’s lingua franca (Agheyisi 1988; Dagmar Deuber and Lars Hinrichs 2007) and according to Egbohahare (2003: 37), the lingua franca on some Nigerian universities’ campuses. Especially in the Niger Delta and metropolitan centres like Lagos, Port-Harcourt, Calabar, Onitsha, Kano, and Abuja where a vast array of linguistically and ethnically diverse Nigerians are in contact for various reasons, ranging from trade to religion, the language has become the default language for all manner of transactions.
Indeed, the status of NPE as the “everyday language of communication” (Lambert 2011: 284) also straightforwardly makes it the more suitable for popular art projects such as stand-up comedy, film, and hip hop music (see Adetunji 2013). Though the “language lacks [overt] prestige because it is often perceived as a bad form of English” (Igboanusi 2008: 68), it has the most covert prestige among Nigerians because, as noted above, it is a demotic language that cuts across all social classes and settings. It is this popularity of the language, I will argue, that Nigerian hip hop artists tap into for their own populist project. Accordingly, while the Nigerian state continues to ignore the various suggestions to constitutionally recognize NPE or promote it to the status of a national or official language (Ndolo 1989; Deuber 2005; Igboanusi 2008), NHHM adopts the language as its first, national, and official language.1

3. Nigerian Hip Hop music: Mimesis, multilingualism, and dispersal

Locally known as “naija hip hop,” “Gbedu” or simply “Naija” (Falola and Genova 2009: 152; Agbo 2009: 35-36), Nigerian hip hop music (NHHM) has come of age as the primary index of youth identities in Nigeria. If Waka, Apala, Fuji, and Afro-Juju are popular genres more closely associated with the Yoruba, Highlife and Akuko n’egwu associated with the Igbo, and Goje linked with the Hausa (Forchu 2009: 114), NHHM represents a new tranethnic, transnational popular music that renders the idea of specific ethnic ascriptions pointless and indeed impossible. One direct result of this fluid, borderless transaction is a hip hop scene that is now arguably the biggest in the whole of Africa (Adelakun 2013: 34; see also Künzler 2011).

There are four major periods that can be isolated in the historical development of NHHM. The first involves what I call the Phase of Mimesis. This began in the early 1980s with the crossing of Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” from The Bronx, New York, United States, to Nigeria. Generally considered the first commercial breakthrough in rap music, “Rapper’s Delight” gained popularity in Nigeria at about the time when hip hop started recording both commercial and media successes in the United States (Keyes 2004: 2; Charry 2012: 2).2 This may have encouraged the Lagos DJ Ron “Ronnie” Ekundayo to try his hand on rap in 1981 with the recording of “The Way I feel” which eventually became the “first rap record in Nigeria (and, very possibly, in Africa)” (Ikonne 2009; see also Amos 2012). In this song, Ronnie directly samples Sugarhill’s “Rapper’s Delight” while also styling himself in an American accent that parallels the group’s. Calling to his audience to “rock the rock to the beat,” to “Enny Meeny Miny Moe to the beat on the floor,”3 and boasting to “hypnotize, mesmerize,

---

1 Next to NPE which is the most frequently used language in NHHM is Yoruba language, whose popular adoption by artists of all ethnic divides is a direct result of the centrality of Lagos (a Yoruba-dominated space) to the birth and continuous formation of NHHM and youth culture in Nigeria. Yoruba is a Niger-Congo language spoken by over twenty million people in Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo as well as diaspora communities in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, and Oyotunji African Village in South Carolina.

2 As Charry (2012: 2) notes, “the first major newspaper to take it seriously did not come until 1981 when hip hop had already gone commercial.”

3 “Enny Meeny Miny Moe” is a direct intertextual reference to Luv’’s (a Dutch pop group of three girls) pop song of the same title that was also popular at the time. It appears then that although Ronnie relied on Sugar Hill for form, he appropriated his lyrical content from eclectic sources within the pop culture of the time.
purify, and sanctify … energize and funkitize,” Ronnie describes a beautiful “six-foot”
girl he recently fell in love with, thus at once inaugurating a thematic focus that would

The second phase in the historical development of NHMM involves Domestication and began in 1991 with the recording of “Which One You Dey” by the group Emphasis (comprising the trio of Terry, Mouth MC and Junior). Unlike what obtained in the Phase of Mimesis, the Phase of Domestication saw a radical shift from the use of Americanisms towards the privileging of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE). Alex Amos (2012) lends credence to this position:

> Unlike most of their predecessors who were “American rappers wanna-be”, Emphasis gave birth to the genre “Nigerian Hip Hop” by choosing to deliver their lyrics in pidgin which is the true language of the streets in Nigeria. They delivered their lyrics in a lay back flow and with elements of drama. (Online)

This indigenization of hip hop in Nigeria continued in 1992 with the release of Junior and Pretty’s “Bolanle,” which relates the story of a Pastor’s daughter that Junior intends to court but without the approval of her family. Rapping in codes that alternate between NPE and Jamaican Patois, with refrains that switch between Yoruba and Standard English, it is to Pretty and Junior’s credit that they helped configure a multilingual framework that would come to define the other two phases of NHMM.

In the third phase, the Phase of Local Dispersal, which began at the turn of the twentieth century, NHMM became a subject of mainstream media discussion and attention (Charry 2012: 18), but within a national purview. There were two dominant groups whose appearances on the hip hop scene in this phase overlapped: The Remedies (comprising Eedris Abdulkareem, Tony Tetuila, and Eddy Remedy) with the release of their debut album Peace Nigeria (1999) and Trybesmen (comprising Eldee, Kaboom, and Freestyle), also with the release of their debut album L.A.G Style (1999). Such songs as “Sakomo,” “Judile,” and “Sade” from The Remedies’ Peace Nigeria particularly spread throughout the country, signalling a moment of national dispersal in the history of NHMM. This is perhaps why Oikelome (2013: 34-35) notes that “The Remedies’ first Album, Peace Nigeria, initiated what is now known as afro-hip hop culture in Nigeria.” It is also for the same reason that Adedeji (2010: 108) remarks that it was the “career of Remedies [that] created a defining moment in Nigeria’s hip hop in 1998 with the song ‘Sakomo’ (1998).” In addition to Trybesmen and The Remedies, another group that defined this era was the Plantashunz Boiz (comprising Tu Face, Faze, and Black Faze) with the release of Body and Soul (2000). Again, in all these efforts, multilingualism continued to be, not only a feature but also a marker of

---

4 Ronnie’s “six-foot” description of the girl also appears to be a direct adaptation of Big Bank Hank’s (of Sugarhill Gang) description of himself as being “six-foot-one” in “Rapper’s Delight.”

5 While the analyses given here are mine, the chronology referenced for this phase belongs to Ikonne (2009).
authenticity. In Trybesmen’s “Shake Bodi,” for instance, the artists lay claim to representing “Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo” on the strength of their switch between Standard English and NPE. The same is true of the multiethinic, even multinational, appeal that The Remedies make by using Yoruba, Hausa, NPE, and Standard English in “Sakomo.”

The fourth phase involves Global Dispersal. In this phase, NHHM became one of the world’s hip hops to enter what Pennycook and Mitchell (2009: 28; see also Pennycook 2007) refer to as the “different circuits of flow through which Hip Hop circulates globally.” Channel O, a South-African music channel, was at the vanguard of this global dissemination of the music, just as it was for many other African hip hops in the early 2000s. In 2005, MTV Base Africa was launched and with this came a wider range of international crossings for the music. Apart from Channel O and MTV, other mediums of global dispersal for NHHM include the US-based “BET Best International Act: Africa” award which Nigerian artists have continued to win since its inception in 2011.7

Besides broadcasts and awards, another interesting thing in the Global Dispersal Phase is the hitherto unattested use to which Nigeria’s indigenous languages are put (Adedeji 2011: 8). Artists in this phase do not only mix a myriad of native languages such as Tiv, Igbo, Izon, Ibibio, Ikwere, Yoruba, Itsekiri, Hausa, and Urhobo but also draw on the discursive styles that derive from these languages. This linguistic marker that activates the Nigerianness of the music is, in fact, why such insistence as Adelakun’s (2013: 48) that NHHM remains “a child of the impact of US culture on Nigeria” grossly misrepresents the facts. Thus, even if we put aside the point that hip hop in Nigeria (as in the rest of Africa) is more of a “re-appropriation” (Omoniyi 2005, 2006, 2009), the complex linguistic manipulations in NHHM make it impossible to reduce the relationship between it and American hip hop music to that of parent and offspring (see Shonekan 2012: 148). This is perhaps why Pennycook and Mitchel (2009: 27) opine that hip hop scholarship needs to “get beyond common images whereby localization is merely the appropriation of the preexisting global.” I shall follow Pennycook and Mitchel’s approach in this paper. Below, I read NHHM not as an offspring or imitation of American hip hop music but as a complex aesthetic project whose language both converges to and diverges from American hip hop music.

4. Data base

All data used in this paper were transcribed by me, using Morgan (2009) transcript conventions cited in the appendix. The same applies to the translations, whose closest approximations to the source bear comparable annotations. To ensure accuracy, I compared all transcripts to the lyrics available on the following websites: www.lyricsty.com, www.burbler.com, www.niglyrics.com, and www.elyrics.net, 6 The trajectory of NHHM is very similar to that of Nollywood. Much like in Nollywood where “directors resorted to using the cheaper medium of the video cassette” (Okome 2007: 2) during the economic downturn of the mid-1980s in Nigeria, NHHM spiralled in an unprecedented manner in the Local Dispersal Phase because the period “witnessed the development of computer-aided music production and its incursion into Nigeria made it easy and cheap to make music” (Adedeji 2013: 2).

7 Previous winners include: 2Face and D’banj (joint-winners, 2011), Wizkid (joint-winner with Ghanaian Sarkodie 2012), Ice Prince (2013), and Davido (2014).
making changes where necessary. Mainly, I have focused on six songs that span exactly a ten-year period (2002-2012) that best mirrors the contemporary state of Nigerian hip hop. As a keen follower of the hip hop scene, I selected for this study artists whose rise to fame within the Nigerian hip hop nation is inseparable from the features identified and discussed below. While it is true that the same features actually recur in many of the artists’ other songs, I have narrowed the range of selection to those that I consider hit-songs (either released as hit-singles or included in the artists’ debut albums) that helped launch the career and reputation of these artists. Furthermore, all artists chosen are major award-winning artists who have been on tour in Africa and Europe. D’banj, for instance, has previously won the prestigious MTV (both Europe and Africa) and BET music awards and was the recent recipient of the best-selling African artist award at the 2014 World Music Awards. A comparable level of visibility (at least nationally) is true of the other artists’ careers.

5. Findings: Linguistic features in NHHM

5.1. Signifying and slangifying

The African rhetorical strategy that is popularly known as signifying in the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993) continues to be a recurring feature of speech in Africa. From casual conversations on the streets to religious exhortations in ritual spaces, signifying finds plural expressions in the lived experiences of Africans. Among the Yoruba, for instance, this rhetorical strategy straightforwardly finds correlations in what is called ẹdà ọrọ [ẹda ọrọ], (roughly translated into English as “covert speech”). In ẹdà ọrọ, a pregnant woman can be signified on as “an overfed woman,” thus indirectly referencing the protruding state of her belly. Alternatively, she may be described as having become two-bodied (referencing her body and the unborn baby inside her). In the same manner, to foreshadow part of the discussion below, the phallus may be signified on by being figured in the metaphors of a black police baton, log or pestle (see Osundare 1993: 12).

Beyond using covert speech, a physical mask may in fact be employed like words to convey covertness, as in the case of ritualized masquerades found across many Nigerian cultures. A contemporary example of this is demonstrated in the masked face adopted by the popular Nigerian musician, Lagbaja. As Omoniyi, Scheld & Oni (2009: 5-6; see also Olaniyi 2004: 184-86) observe, Lagbaja (a generic Yoruba word used to avoid actually mentioning a person’s name) uses the protection offered him by the anonymity and indirectness of the mask and his name to directly signify on the corrupt Nigerian political class. Liberally, then, signifying can be defined as a rhetorical strategy of saying what is socially or culturally marked through the linguistically marked, which often involves a “linguistic mode of circumnavigation” (Gates 1988: 76). As observed by Smitherman (1977: 119; see also Morgan 2003: 53), “[i]t is a culturally approved method of talking about somebody—usually through verbal indirectness.”

---

8 As noted in footnote 1, Yoruba is one of the major languages, which feature prominently in NHHM.
What I propose here as slangifying is very similar to signifying. Like signifying which operates as a code of indirection within black communities or in-groups, slangifying operates as an urban lingo that is produced and consumed within the Nigerian hip hop nation and urban youth subculture. And much like signifying in which meanings and intent can be ambiguous and consequently misread (Mitchel-Kernan 1972/2001; Kochman 1981; Morgan 2002), slangifying is located within the realms of ambiguity and semantic indeterminacy. Thus, in the same way it may be difficult for members outside black communities to understand signifying acts, slangifying produces a youth-focused language whose potential meanings are hard to determine by members who do not share in the hip hop culture. This directly explains why whereas audience members of Nigerian hip hop are likely to contextually understand what slangifying acts mean or connote, members of older generations more or less ascribe meaninglessness, noise, and senselessness to them, like they treat this music in general (see Okeilome 2013b: 78-81; Abati 2009).

Slangifying, however, departs from signifying in a number of ways. Firstly, unlike signifying that is more of a stylistic marker (Gates 1988), slangifying relies on “what” is said rather than “how” it is said for its strength. This means that slangifying is more of a lexical strategy that relies entirely on context for its potential meanings. Secondly, unlike signifying that makes use of familiar words within black communities, several words in slangifying are of new origin. Even while making use of familiar, already-existing words, slangifying often deconstructs and transforms these words into opaque forms via pun and language mixing (cf. Morgan 2009: 75-80). Thus, slangifying partly reflects the bi-/multilingual identity of youth who are using language mixing to translocate themselves beyond fixed ethnic or national boundaries.

Thirdly, whereas “some topics are more likely to make the overall act of signifying more appreciated . . . . [and] [s]ex is one such topic” (Mitchel-Kernan 1972/2001: 159), sex, in my view, is the central motif in slangifying. This makes sense when we consider that the indeterminate focus of slangifying makes it possible for artists to ironically say culturally sensitive things without any offence. And fourthly, unlike signifying which relays, for the most part, on Black/African semantics whose “vocabulary” straddles “generational and class lines and is grounded in black people’s common linguistic and cultural history” (Smitherman 1977: 43), the vocabulary of slangifying primarily privileges a new generation of youth who are developing a language that is self-created and group-centred. In other words, slangifying acts are not products of conventions that define the ordinary human language and neither are they mere slangs whose meanings rely on a “high degree of shared knowledge and interests” (de Klerk 1990: 593) within a particular in-group. On the contrary, they are individual artists’ acts of linguistic ingenuity whose meanings are constantly being (re)performed—rather than being expressed—by the artists and their fans.

To take one recent example: Asked by a journalist what “Dorobucci” means, the award-winning

---

9 These transformations are only opaque to outsiders (older generations), not insiders, i.e., urban youth hip hop adherents who are bi/multilingual.

10 It is exactly because slangifying performs, more than expresses, that I have chosen to distinguish it from slangs. While it is true that slangifying acts compare with slangs in terms of helping to sustain in-group communication, they are different from slangs because their meanings are mobile, adaptable, and susceptible to whatever the speaker (either artists or their fans) intends to use them for. In essence, slangifying acts are words that do things in contexts.
Michael Tosin Gbogóm

The artist, Dr Sid, said, “Any word that qualifies greatness, that’s Dorobucci. ‘Bucci’ means anything that is amazing, fun. Doro makes Bucci a person, Doro personifies Bucci so you’re Doro, and I’m Doro. This table is Doro, anything is Doro.”

This indeterminacy, enigma, flexibility, and language mixing generally characterize the emergence of slangifying in NHHM and may be responsible for why this act is gradually becoming more and more a signature strategy of Nigerian hip hop artists (cf. Bosire 2012: 84).

In what follows, I illustrate how signifying and slangifying co-create the Nigerian hip hop nation language and how the two features both converge and diverge. I turn first to the bridge and chorus of Da Grin’s “Kondo”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract 1 (Rendered in Yoruba):</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bridge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mummy mi ti lo s’ọja—</td>
<td>My mum has gone to the market—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daddy mi travel lo Lokoja=</td>
<td>My dad has travelled to Lokoja=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emi nikan mo wa n::le</td>
<td>I am the only one at ho::me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S’oma wa ba mi se::re</td>
<td>Will you come to pl::ay with me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori be::di abi lori ro::gi</td>
<td>On the be::d or on the ru::g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chorus</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mummy mi o si nile::</td>
<td>My mum is not at home::</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daddy mi o si nile::</td>
<td>My dad is not at home::</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbon mi o si nile::=</td>
<td>My older sibling is not at home::=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emi nikan mo wa ((some other voices)) [NLE]</td>
<td>I am the only one at ((some other voices)) [HOME]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA GBA KONDO::] kondo:: kondo::</td>
<td>COME AND TAKE BATON::]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wa wo Commando:: mando:: mando::</td>
<td>baton:: baton:::</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mando::</td>
<td>Come and watch Commando:: mando::</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relying on Smitherman’s eight features of signifying (1977: 121), the bridge and the chorus of Da Grin’s “Kondo” presented in the above satisfy circumlocution, metaphor, humour, rhythmic fluency, and pun. Among these features, pun is by far the most dominant. For instance, the title (“Kondo”) of this song puns in a number of ways. This makes clearer sense once placed in the general context of the song. The song-persona sings of his mother, father, and older sibling gone away from home. He invites a naïve girl to come watch an American film *Commando* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. But he does not only invite her; he baits this invitation with the offer of a film—something which the naïve girl wants to see but cannot see in her home because her parents are not able afford the luxury of a TV. Soon the girl accepts the offer, goes in, and rape occurs. Read from this lens, and having in mind the multilingual heritages of the artist (i.e. Yoruba, NPE, and English), *kondo* in the above figures not as “baton” but as a metaphor for phallic, in the same way that *Commando/mando* is a pun suggesting multiple meanings. *Commando* for instance could be stretched to mean “come and do,” a secondary lingo in NPE for sexual solicitation. When further put into bits and focusing more curiously on the final CV syllable of the reduplicated word, the

---

11 “Dorobucci” is a standard slangifying act that was introduced into the Nigerian hip hop scene in 2014 by the Don Jazzy-led Mavin Crew.
do in both Commando/kondo may as well dovetail into a pun on dó (the Yoruba verb for sex). Working with this interpretation, it becomes impossible, therefore, to conceive of the words as innocently referring to either the film Commando or Yoruba kondo that literally means baton. This is the complex linguistic level of signifying that I concede slangifying participates in. Slangifying, however, departs from signifying, as I have remarked earlier, in certain ways. D’banj’s “Tongolo” excerpted below further illustrates this difference:

**Extract 2 (Rendered in NPE):**

As I dey waka on the road
I see one baby o::
Her name na no be small:::
Why **BECAUSE** she **FINE** no be small
And her front no be small and her backside no be small:::
I YAN AM the truth and I yan am the fact and I yan am no be small:::
SHE **NO WON GREE** my own o
Until I yan am the koko:::

**Translation**

As I was walking on the road
I saw a girl
Her name was not-a-small-one:::
**BECAUSE** she was extremely **BEAUTIFUL**
And was extremely busty and extremely curvy
I TOLD HER the truth and I told her the fact and I told her exactly:::
SHE DIDN’T WANT to be mine
Until I told her the koko:::

In the above, koko functions as a self-created lexical item introducing “sex yarns.” Originally meaning “crux” (of a story or happening), “lump” or “tree knot” in Yoruba, koko is semantically shifted in this song to stand, vaguely, for the act of “asking a lady out.” But this way of asking for a date is of the audacious type. The singer-persona in this song is particularly asking the lady whose story is being narrated to come have sex with him—that is the real koko. More importantly, while with the aid of such cues as backside and front (representing female butt and bosoms, respectively), the sexual innuendoes encoded in koko can be teased out by members of the Nigerian urban youth subculture, the word’s original meaning (as journalists often ask) remains with the artist—the self-proclaimed “Koko Master.” Unlike signifying, therefore, whose stylistic features are always anonymously constructed, always communally owned, the lexical manipulations we find in slangifying can always be traced to an individual or an individual who has popularized them. One thing that this points to is the general instability of meaning in slangifying. That is, in the absence of a semantic centre, slangifying is more like what Lévi-Strauss (cited in Mehlman 1972: 23) calls the “floating signifier” which “in itself void of meaning … [is] thus apt to receive any meaning.” In the specific case of D’banj, the meaning of koko has shifted many times—from indirectly suggesting phallus (koko), beautiful girl (kokolet), phallic drug for sexual healing (kokomaicine), food brand (koko gaari), to representing the name of a show (koko concert). The same is true of a similar act—akpako—created by Terry G, the self-styled “Akpako Master.” Similar to koko, akpako has shifted from obliquely
representing phallus, a female waist or butt, to representing a style of dance. Indeed, this mobility of usage applies to other slangifying acts such as M.I.’s “Anoti,” Olamide’s “Ilefo Illuminati,” and “-sneh,” Durella’s “Yapayaski,” Davido’s “Skelewu,” Kcee’s “Limpopo,” Tiwa Savage’s “Eminado,” Phyno’s “Alobam,” Oritse Femi’s “Sukus,” and Olu Maintain’s “Kamakaze” whose meanings have continued to evolve within the Nigerian youth subculture.

Another way in which koko illustrates the difference between signifying and slangifying is with regard to its hybrid forms. Such forms as kokolet (Yoruba: koko and English –let) and kokomaicine (Yoruba: koko and English: medicine) foreground the hybrid character of Nigerian hip hop. The same is also true of many of the acts listed above: dorobucci (Yoruba: doro (little monkey/well-bucket pulley) and English slang: bucci), ilefo illuminati (Yoruba: ilefo (floating) and Latin/English: illuminati), kamakaze (Japanese: Kamikaze), and yapayaski (Yoruba: yapa (plenty), ya (deviant), and Slavic suffix: -ski), all of which collapse the boundaries between languages. Of importance, the mixing noticeable in these words lends credence to Alim’s (2009: 113) observation that hip hop language is best described “as a mobile matrix” that can both be rooted in, and routed out of, predetermined cultural realities. It also supports Pennycook’s (2009: 336) claim that “hip hop is a language itself … a form of communication that transcends assumed divisions between languages.” Hence, unlike the pre-Fela era when Nigerian popular music took its discursive materials mainly from the nation’s collective linguistic pool and gave little or nothing back in return, NHHM today is reshaping the language of its community of interlocutors by using hip hop’s “heteroglot language practices [as] important technologies in the fashioning of their local/global identities” (Alim 2009: 7). But more, slangifying contributes to our understanding of NHHM in four other significant ways.

Firstly, slangifying reinforces the interaction of stability and instability of meanings that defines hip hop nation as a global, aerial “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991). As Morgan (emphasis added, 2009: 65) notes, “It is [the] interplay of certainty and uncertainty about meaning and intention that brings play and seriousness into hiphop. The interplay that comes from indirectness is an integral part of this system.” This assertion is true of slangifying in which artists use indirection and semantic indeterminacy to heighten and suppress, at the same time, the seriousness of their sexual innuendoes. Secondly, by making it possible for the artists not to “[commit] themselves unequivocally to determinate or actionable meaning state” (Kochman 1986: 164), slangifying, like signifying, absolves the artists of any responsibility for whatever may be the social or legal repercussions of their sexual discourse. Thirdly, slangifying imbues the artists with epistemic authority and primacy that allows them to produce linguistic knowledge—one of hip hop’s goals—for their audience (Heritage and Raymond 2005). In other words, by creating a “cool” and “legitimate” sort of language, which diffuses outwards from the nation’s urban centres and circulates on university campuses, the artists harness the symbolic power of language (Bourdieu 1991) to index themselves as the epistemic centre of youth culture in Nigeria. Finally, slangifying affords the artists the opportunity to inscribe their distinctive individual

12 In line with Heritage and Raymond’s (2005: 16) observation that “conversationalists treat one another as possessing privileged access to their own experiences and as having specific rights to narrate them,” I suggest that hip hop fans conceive of artists as having the “privileged access” to the coolest language of youth communication.
selves—as opposed to others—in a highly competitive battleground such as hip hop nation. Thus, by wilfully withholding specific meanings of their linguistic inventions, they ensure the retention of ownership of their linguistic creations, which often become a unique brand identity for them (as in Koko Master and Apkako Master, above). Of course, whether seen from the point of the view of the audience or that of the artists, these views corroborate the point that, much like everywhere else, hip hop in Nigeria “functions as a purveyor of a new [youth] identity” (Shonekan 2013: 184).

5.2. Double meaning

“Pèlé” láko, ó lábo
(“Hello” can be both masculine and feminine)
—Yoruba proverb

Just as the above proverb indicates, meaning in the African linguistic worldview is multilayered. A simple greeting such as “hello” may connote several semantic ambiguities, which can be determinate or indeterminate, negative or positive, and face-building or face-threatening. This is the same way in which a single pointing gesture (either through eye movement, head movement, or lip-pursing) may convey multiple layers of meaning (see Orie 2009). At the centre of this linguistic worldview is the question of “communicative competence” which highlights “the required sense of relation [of language] to contextual features” (Hymes 1972: 285). That is, ambiguities in African languages stress the inextricable link between language and its contexts of use.

A good example of how ambiguities, circumlocution, and indirection function in Africa comes from Yankah’s (1995; see also Saah 1986) study of the surrogate system of “speaking for the chief” among the Akan people of Ghana. Describing how a special type of diplomatic spokesperson called ȯkyeame helps relay the Chief’s words to his subjects, Yankah observes, among other things, how this surrogate speaker embroiders the Chief’s words. He also notes how the ȯkyeame generally employs euphemisms, apologies, and indirection (metaphors, innuendos, and proverbs) in dealing with taboo subjects. These strategies, however, are not employed for their sake; they function in certain ways. For instance, while the use of ȯkyeame helps the Chief deflect potential threats due to his (Chief’s) face to his spokesperson, the use of “ambiguity of indirection” by the ȯkyeame “prevents the assignment of malicious motives to [him]” (Yankah 1995: 51). Similar practices are, of course, common throughout West Africa.

Among the Maseko Ngoni women of Malawi, for example, Mvula (1991) reports hedges that are close to the Akan Chief’s above. Among the Ngoni, a woman may choose to resolve a dispute by asking a third party to render on her behalf “pounding songs” (while pounding maize) that narrate her ordeals or conflicts with another person. In addition to the third-party mediation, the songs are infused with metaphorical expressions through which ambiguities are produced, deniability of intent ensured, and responsibility of interpretation foisted on the hearers rather than on the

---

13 I have borrowed this term from African American blues studies. I have extended and broadened its usage to explain some of the linguistic realities of Nigerian hip hop music.
speakers. In a related manner, the Eue people of Togo avoid graphic references to sex by employing a figurative language (nafa) which, as Afokpa (1994: 84) observes, helps remove the speaker “from the embarrassing situation of having to speak publicly and overtly of sex and/or related experiences.”

NHHM exemplifies this African linguistic ideology of using indirection to mitigate potential repercussions of speech. Because like most African societies, Nigerian cultures (see Hunter 1982: 392; Dare 2005: 89), as well as government, place heavy censorship on public discussions of sex, hip hop artists navigate the murky waters of vulgarity by employing double meaning as a back-handed linguistic strategy of reaching their audience. This directly lends credence to Morgan’s (2010: 285) view that “[i]ndirectness may work as a typical and predictable strategy in making meaning in conversations about topics that may be avoided and considered taboo in some speech communities.” I turn to D’banj’s “Fall in love” to illustrate this point. The first four lines of the first and second verse of the song are reproduced below:

**Extract 3 (Rendered in NPE):**

**Verse 1**
- My sweet potato::
- I wanna tell you my mind=
- Wanna tell you my mind o::
- I no understand o::
- Cause I dey see well well but dem say love is blind o::

**Verse 2**
- My sugar banana::
- As I don get you e be say make I HAMMER::
- Me, I no fit wait o::
- Make you come follow me=
- Make we go SEE MY MAMA

**Translation**

**Verse 1**
- My sweet potato::
- I want to tell you my mind=
- Want to tell you my mind
- I don’t understand
- Because I see very well but they say love is blind

**Verse 2**
- My sugar banana::
- Now that I have won you it is as if I should MAKE big money
- I can’t wait to TAKE YOU TO MY MOTHER

In the above, “sweet potato” and “sugar banana” indirectly figure for “girl.” While the singer-persona expresses his desire to ask the lady out in the first verse, in the second, he expresses his desire to formally introduce her to his mother. For people outside this youth culture, the semantic decoding may stop here. However, encoded in these references—“sweet potato” and “sugar banana”—is a sort of desire that appeals to the audience’s sense of taste. This sense of taste is, oddly enough, more connected to the sexual appetite of the singer-persona. In other words, as he expresses his desire to
ask the lady out and marry her, he is also performing his desire to sexually objectify her through his allusions to “potato” and “banana.” In no sense, therefore, do these two words refer to crop; their meanings here go beyond the literal. A similar idea is also expressed in D’Prince’s “Goody Bag” excerpted below:

Extract 4 (Mixture of Standard English and NPE):

They want my goody bag] ((voices respond)) [ay::]
They want my goody bag] ((voices respond)) [ay::]
I get the goody bag] ((voices respond)) [ay::]
I know you want my goody bag] ((voices respond)) [ay::]
What’s your selling point] ((voices respond)) [ay::]
Do you know your selling point] ((voices respond)) [ay::]
You’ve got to know your selling point] ((voices respond)) [ay::]
Oya identify your selling point ay:::
(Translation: Now identify your selling point ay::)
In the goody bag!
Kudi dey for the goody bag!
(Translation: Money is in the goody bag!)
Money dey for the goody bag!
(Translation: Money is in the goody bag!)
And banana dey for the goody bag] ((voices respond)) [ay::]
(Translation: And babana is in the goody bag] ((voices respond)) [ay::])

In the above lyrics, D’Prince employs double entendre in reaching his audience. Focusing more closely on the references to “goody bag,” “selling point,” and “banana,” we see that what may appear as universal meanings are indeed being semantically re-centred in this song. Hence, in the above, “goody bag” figures for a man’s pants while “banana” stands for phallus. Read this way, it also becomes obvious that the singer-persona’s call to ladies to “identify their selling point” is indeed an indirect reference to their private parts. But his reference to ladies’ “selling point” is particularly curious because it suggests that the female body is an object or a commodity that could be bought and discarded at will. While this mode of representation clearly highlights “the misogynistic ideologies expressed in Nigeria’s Hip-hop and rap” (Okeilome 2013a: 84), I would argue that it more crucially directs our attention to a shared linguistic register in the global hip hop nation where reiterated performances of heterosexual, heteronormative masculinity constitute and sustain agency and power for male artists (Lane 2011). Similarly, they remind us that as Rose (1994: 16) observes, hip hop’s “sexist lyrics are also part of a rampant and viciously normalized sexism that dominates the corporate culture of the music business.” In this regard, double meaning in NHHM recapitulates a sexist language that has always been part of Nigerian popular music, in the same way that sex-related double meaning in American hip hop mirrors similar strategies in blues (see Johnson 1927).

---

14 By “reiterated performances,” I allude to Butler’s (1990: 33; see also Butler 1997) idea that gender is constituted through a sort of repeatability that “congeals over time.”
15 Adeleye-Fayemi (1994) has extensively discussed this. Of importance, this work shows the direct and indirect (i.e. double meaning of the nature discussed here) ways through which Nigerian popular music sub-genres (e.g. Highlife, Afro-Juju etc.), preceding hip hop, referenced female private parts.
But more important for the discussion here is the crucial way that double meaning helps Nigerian hip hop artists navigate being “held socially responsible or liable” (Kochman 1986: 163) for any offensive implication of their words. Just as we have in signifying and slangifying already discussed, therefore, the indirectness and ambiguity in double meaning are exploited by artists in deflecting the responsibility of interpretation to their audience members. What this strategy ensures is that “unintended audiences who do not understand that the music has a mediating function cannot hold musical performers responsible for any inappropriate interpretation of the meanings of the lyrics” (Morgan 2002: 47). Of course, this rhetorical game is by no means limited to Nigerian/African and American hip hops; they are, to be sure, now a general marker of meaning in the global hip hop nation.

5.3. Pronominals, ghetto naming, and the construction of political selves

In “Disturbing the Trope of ‘Rapper as Modern Griot’,” Sajnani (2013) offers a critique of the popular suggestion that hip hop artists are modern versions of the traditional West African griots (see Toop 1984; Smitherman 1997). Much like Tang’s (2012) view on the same problem, Sajnani argues that while there are, admittedly, obvious similarities between the griot and the modern rapper, one major break between the two is found in the way they respond to the prevailing socio-political issues of their times and societies. He maintains, in particular, that “the griot’s position is subservience to, and advocacy for, the powerful in exchange for patronage; by contrast, HipHop’s stance is understood as defiance and advocacy for ‘the people,’ avowedly rejecting any overture to ‘sellout’” (ibid.: 161). This view overlooks the plural manifestations of the griot tradition, which extend far beyond Senegal that is the author’s focus. For one thing, Sajnani’s argument that griots were servile to the noble is even hardly true when we consider Hale’s (1994: 81) important observation:

On one level, the griottes [as well as griots] may be seeking rewards from … [a] leader. But in a broader sense they are reminding the noble of his responsibility to society. A prince who does not fulfill his duties to his people, who does not measure up to the ideal of his people and their needs as articulated by the griottes, appears by implication not to be a prince.

Indeed, as Hale suggests in the above, rather being helpless praise-singers in the service of their masters, griots “might combine appreciation of a rich employer with gossip and satire or turn their vocal expertise into an attack on the politically powerful or the financially stingy” (Toop 1984: 32). Beyond this, Sajnani’s study also misses the important point that rather than being a fixed notion with only one model of interpretation, the griot metaphor, as applied to hip hop artists, is a mobile, extended one that subsumes a variety of poetic practices in traditional West Africa. This is, perhaps, why Wise (2006: 21) maintains that griots cannot be discussed outside “of their membership in this social group [that includes blacksmiths, hunters, tanners, basket weavers, and Islamic praise-singers].” Taken this way, the griot metaphor becomes a generalized way of locating African influences in hip hop language and practices. I follow this logic in this section of the paper. Far from being “a romanticized and historically static idea of the griot” (Tang 2012: 81), what I propose here is the
notion of a “postmodern African griot” (Smitherman 1997: 4) whose articulation of the political arises from both a synchronic socio-political milieu as well as a diachronic matrix of “intersecting, crisscrossing impulses in productive transit” (Baker 1986/2000: 229). In particular, I examine how Nigerian hip hop artists draw on the “already local” (Pennycook 2009: 27; see also Finnegan 1970/2012: 265) idea of political songs in the articulation of postcolonial realities.

Because most of these “rappers [or artists] are from the ghetto and are uneducated” (Shonekan 2012: 151), they have inevitably come to personify the hip hop ideal of keepin’ it real. In many respects, their music carries the urgency of change that is needed in a nation like Nigeria that is both struggling with decades of colonial dislocation and post-independence political crises, a significant part of which is rising youth unemployment. As Okuyade (emphasis added, 2011: 82) puts it, “[i]f there is any cultural production in Nigeria today that constantly expresses the ineffectuality of government and the people’s disenchantment with independence and self-governance, it is, without doubt, hip-hop music.” Indeed, support for this assertion can be found in the ever-growing number of politically conscious Nigerian hip hop songs. Artists such as Junior and Pretty, Eedris Abdukareem, Tu Face, Oritse Femi, Timaya, Olamide, and 9ice, among many others, have not only satirized Nigeria’s political elite but have also gained large following through this. Below, I analyse what I consider the two most linguistically active strategies through which Nigerian hip hop artists foreground political issues that affect them and majority of their fans, namely: Ghetto-naming and the complex use of pronominals. Let us consider first African China’s “Crisis” excerpted below:

**Extract 5 (Rendered in NPE):**

Your worst enemy oh
Go be your best friend
[EVERY NIGHT AND DAY
WE DEY THINK OUR DAILY BREAD]
You never can tell
Who go be your best friend
You never can tell
[WHEN THE WORLD E GO END]

**Translation**

Your worst enemy
Will be your best friend
[EVERY NIGHT AND DAY
WE THINK OF OUR DAILY BREAD]
You never can tell
Who will be your best friend
You never can tell
[WHEN THE WORLD (IT) WILL END]

In the above, China constructs his plausible political self by appealing to what Duranti (2006: 479-486) calls “narrative of belonging,” which stresses his filiations with the existential struggles against evil, envy, jealousy, and poverty of the people he sings for. He does this through a multiplex network of pronouns. While “you” and “your” construct him as an artist who is concerned about his audience—his interlocutors as Alim (2002: 298) would conceive it—“we” and “our” construct him as being part of the sociocultural and political milieux that he privileges in his music. In switching to “we” and “our,” too, China subtly weakens the exclusive potential of “you” and “your.” The result is that the boundary between “you” and “your,” on the one hand, and “we” and “our” on the other hand, collapses.

What we have displayed in this song, therefore, is a conscious awareness of how micro-linguistic details such as pronouns can help configure belonging. That is, it can
be argued that in briefly shifting to “we” and “our,” the artist performs his understanding that “ingroup pronouns (e.g., we) are evaluated more favourably than outgroup (e.g., they) or group-irrelevant (e.g., you) pronouns” (Housley, Claypool, Garcia-Marques & Mackie 2010: 114; see also Sendén, Lindholm & Sikström 2014). This is the same understanding that is reflected in the emphasis that he places, in the same song, on constructing a ghetto identity that is linked with the foremost Lagos slum, “Ajegunle.” Directly referring to Nigerian politicians as “idiots” and noting how they orchestrate violence and extra-judicial killings in their inordinate quest for power, China uses Ajegunle as a metaphor for larger political killings. He sings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract 6 (Rendered in NPE)</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I say dem burn man</td>
<td>I say they burnt men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((Voices respond)) [Dem kill man o :: ((Voices respond)) [They killed men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For inside Ajegunle</td>
<td>Inside Ajegunle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say dem burn house</td>
<td>I say they burnt houses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((Voices respond)) [Dem steal land o :: ((Voices respond)) [They stole land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For inside Ajegunle</td>
<td>Inside Ajegunle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say dem burn man</td>
<td>I say they burnt men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((Voices respond)) [Dem kill man o: ((Voices respond)) They killed men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For inside Ajegunle</td>
<td>Inside Ajegunle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say dem burn house</td>
<td>I say they burnt houses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((Voices respond)) [Dem steal land o ((Voices respond)) [They stole land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For inside Ajegunle</td>
<td>Inside Ajegunle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say dem burn man</td>
<td>I say they burnt men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((Voices respond)) [Dem kill man o: ((Voices respond)) They killed men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For inside Ajegunle</td>
<td>Inside Ajegunle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| In the above, the artist again sets up a “we-us” (i.e. the masses) frame that is diametrically opposed to that of “they-them” (i.e. politicians, traditional rulers, and the upper class in general). He heightens this by recounting the killings, arson, and stealing that came with a political crisis in Ajegunle. But he does not merely recount these events; he does so from an “I” point of view. Indeed, by narrating the crisis from a first-person point of view, China places himself in the middle of the crisis. At once, he is the same as the people and place whose ordeals he narrates. This is even more so since Ajegunle is a place he strongly identifies with in song after song. Significantly, encoded in this identification is a familiar strategy of configuring realness in hip hop through indexing oneself as a poor hustler who by dint of luck escaped the sheer purgatorial experiences of the hood. As Hess (2007: 13) observes, “[e]ven the wealthiest hip hop artists have established credibility through rags-to-riches stories of the socioeconomic disadvantage they experienced during their rise to fame.”

This same strategy of creating street credibility through “pronominals” and “ghetto-naming” is also what we find in Madmelon and Mountain Black’s debut album—Danfo Driver. Often rickety, unclean, and overcrowded, Danfo is a quintessential “ghetto bus” that typifies suffering in Lagos. Its conductors and drivers do not only insult passengers but passengers themselves also insult one another. Yet, this bus is a mini-forum where the masses converge and discuss the failures of the government in responding to their plights. In choosing a title that is built around this bus, the artists are exploiting this instrumentality of the bus as a symbol of mass suffering. But more, by indexing themselves as Danfo drivers, they are equally projecting themselves as the representatives of the lower class. Using pronominals and ghetto naming, they particularly bring into sharper focus this construction of a lower-
class identity in their title song (used as a sound track in the American comedy film *Phat Girlz*) excerpted below:

**Extract 7 (Rendered in NPE):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[I am a danfo driver—SUO]</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sebi you be danfo driver?</td>
<td>Are you not a danfo driver?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suo, ha na danfo driver, suo</td>
<td>Sure, I am a danfo driver, sure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**In the ghetto where we dey:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I was born in the ghetto:</th>
<th>I was born in the ghetto</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My brother, in the ghetto where we dey:</td>
<td>My brother, in the ghetto where we were</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HUH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I school in the ghetto</th>
<th>I schooled in the ghetto</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I tell you in the ghetto where we dey</td>
<td>I tell you in the ghetto where we were</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| We grow up in the ghetto | We grew up in the ghetto |

---

The group’s use of first and second-person pronouns in the above shifts in a rapid succession, thus revealing “[d]ifferent versions of the I [that] disappear and reappear through the on-going processes of becoming of the self” (Harding 53). Starting out with a personal admission of their low-status job as “danfo drivers” (inaugurated in the use of “I”), the artists use call-and-response to extend the picture to their fellows on the streets (inaugurated in the use of “you”). Responding to the call, the “you” eventually agree that they are danfo drivers by invoking, like the artists, a typical Lagos-street substitution of [s] for [ʃ], [u] for [ʊ], and /ɒ/ for /ə/ as inaugurated in [sun].

In addition to the above, the artists also employ ghetto naming in singing of the political neglect that they suffered. In this regard, they repetitively reference “ghetto” as the place of their birth, schooling, and coming of age. They consolidate this by naming specific poor neighbourhoods and inner cities (such as Alaba, Mile 2, Ojota, Àjejunle, Maroko, Oju-Elegba, and Mushin-Olosa) where the vast majority of Lagos residents live and do businesses, thereby situating themselves in a larger discourse of urban poverty. Significantly, underscored in this toponomastic strategy is Potter’s (1995: 71) remark that hip hop is “not a matter of the scales, beats, or words one is singing” but of their relevance to the everyday realities of the people for which the music is made. Thus, in calling out street names, neighbourhoods, and ghettos, the same way Danfo drivers do, the artists put voice to the yearnings and suffering of millions of Lagos residents who do not have any hope of being heard by those they have elected into offices.

On the whole, the linguistic strategies briefly discussed above help the artists to plausibly perform their political selves, in-groupness, and “street-conscious identity” (Alim 2002: 288). Ultimately, they assist them in building an “imagined community” that contests—through recurring motifs of political neglect, suffering, and empathy—their nation’s narrative of inclusion and homogeneity (see Anderson 1983). That is, by

---

16 Equally important in these sound substitutions is the relative loudness of [sun], which becomes at once a “contextualization cue” (Gumperz 1982) that highlights the deliberate rendering of this pronunciation.
locating streets, hoods, and ghettos, on the one hand, and setting up a “we-us-our” paradigm that is a binary opposite of “they-them-their,” on the other hand, the artists depict class struggles that are engendered by capitalism and political corruption. While this calibration of class struggles connects with a similar strategy in the global hip hop nation where self-identification with the streets is an irreducible locus of authenticity, it reminds us more importantly of the long-standing African tradition of political songs in which artists employ inclusive linguistic strategies to sing on behalf of the masses. The latter point may explain why Fela Anikulapo Kuti (a modern embodiment of this tradition) serves as huge inspiration to these artists.

6. Final remarks

In the foregoing, I have focussed on how language is used to perform identities (ranging from cultural, political, bi/multilingual, to global) and sustain the in-groupness of a growing urban youth subculture in Nigeria. With signifying and slangifying, I describe how Nigerian hip hop artists privilege their cultural and individuated selves through the use of rhetorical strategies that inscribe ambiguity and indirection. The same argument is extended to reading double meaning in the music. That is, by using the plural semantic affordances of double entendre, artists are believed to circumscribe both legal and cultural censorships. Finally, I discuss the nature of pronominals and ghetto naming that artists employ in constructing their political identity in a postcolonial country such as Nigeria. It will be interesting to see how future studies elaborate on these features.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewer and the editors of this journal for their comments and suggestions, which have greatly improved the substance and presentation of this paper. I thank Olanike Orie for the same reason and especially for her questions and generous feedback at every stage of the writing. I would also like to thank Judith Maxwell and Tope Omoniyi for helpful discussions, and Galia Binder, for her editorial assistance.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions

The transcription conventions used in this paper are based on the system developed by Morgan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).
CAPITAL LETTERS indicate some form of emphasis that may be signalled by changes in pitch or amplitude.

BOLD CAPITAL LETTERS indicate loud speech.

Italics indicate a change in the quality of speech.

. A period indicates a stopping fall in tone, not necessarily the end of a sentence.
, A comma indicates a continuing intonation, not necessarily between clauses of sentences.
: : Colons indicate that the sound just before the colon has been lengthened.
? A question mark indicates a rising inflection, not necessarily a question.
! An exclamation point indicates an animated tone, not necessarily an exclamation.
- A single dash can indicate a short untimed pause; halting, abrupt cutoff; or, when multiple dashes hyphenate the syllables of a word or connect strings of words, the stream of talk so marked has stammering quality.
[ All overlapping utterances, including those that start simultaneously, are marked with a single left bracket.
] The point where overlap stops is marked with a single right bracket.
= When there is no interval between adjacent utterances, the second being latched immediately to the first, the utterances are linked together with equal signs. Equal signs are also used to link different parts of a single speaker’s utterance when those parts constitute a continuous flow of speech that has been carried over to another line to accommodate an intervening interruption.
( . ) A period within parenthesis indicates a one-second pause.
( ) When intervals in the stream of talk occur, they are timed in tenths of a second and inserted within parentheses either within an utterance or between one.
( ( )) Double parentheses in italics provide the transcriber’s description of the quality of talk and the activity related to talk.

References


Lane, Nikki (2011) Black women queering the mic: Missy Elliott disturbing the boundaries of racialized sexuality and gender. *Journal of Homosexuality* 58.6-7: 775-792.


Sendén, Marie Gustafsson, Torun Lindholm, and Sverker Sikström (2014) Selection bias in choice of words: Evaluations of “I” and “We” differ between contexts, but “They” are always worse. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 33.1: 49–67.


**Discography**


*MICHAEL TOSIN GBOGI* received an MA in English Literature from Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK, and is currently a Ph.D. student in the Interdisciplinary Program in Linguistics at Tulane University, New Orleans. His research interests cover Hip Hop linguistics, African literature, and literatures of the African Diaspora.

Address: Linguistics Program, Tulane University, 6823 St. Charles Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70118, United States. Tel.: +1-504-6383994, e-mail: tgbogi@tulane.edu or tosingbogi@gmail.com