REVIEWs


(Received 3 September 2003)

DOI: 10.1017/S0047404505313055


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This book is a collection of 10 articles treating different aspects of francophone rap music and hip-hop culture. Despite the facts that the first French rap recordings date from 1984 and that France has since become a center of rap music second only to the United States, this is the first book devoted to the subject. André Prévos begins the volume with a history of French rap music from its origins through the 1990s. Here we are introduced to many of the names that appear in later chapters. The following chapters treat the regional specificity of Marseilles rap (Jean-Marie Jacono); rap audiences in Marseilles (Anthony Pequeux); the politics of French rap (Paul Silverstein); rap as a social movement (Manuel Boucher); hip-hop as an aesthetic subculture (Anne-Marie Green); an ethnography of tagging (Alain Milon); hip-hop dance (Hugues Bazin); rap in Libreville, Gabon (Michelle Auzanneau); and rap in Québec (Roger Chamberland). All the chapters except those by Prévos, Silverstein, and Chamberland were translated from French.
The title, *Black, blanc, beur*, refers to the multiracial composition of most French *banlieues* or housing projects, and it is mentioned in passing that all of IAM’s members are foreign or of foreign origin. Nevertheless, the *métissage* aspect of French rap is one of the things that sets it apart from the American scene, and this was not as clear as it could have been. The book would have benefited from a chapter on the recent history of immigration to France. I also expected to see a more directed discussion of Islam, which is a growing topic of discussion in both French and American rap music.

Given the interests of the readers of *Language in Society*, I will concentrate on the two chapters that give us the most insight into the role of language in francophone hip-hop culture. Several authors mention the use of slang, or *verlan*, and borrowings from English and immigrant languages, especially Arabic. Paul Silverstein situates language use within the present scope of economic globalization that has engendered a backlash of French cultural protectionism, including linguistic surveillance. Laws like the 1994 Toubon Law, which specifies that foreign words must be excluded in the public sphere when an appropriate French word or expression exists, cast an illegal tint on rap music. Silverstein explains that the vocal style of rapping mimics everyday speech by youth in the housing projects in word choice, rhythm, enunciation, and prosody, and often this speech indexes very specific localities and origins (p. 53). Doing an ethnography of voices within rap songs, Silverstein talks about rappers “changing their flow” and playing other characters: hardcore gangsters, immigrants just off the boat, bourgeois Frenchmen, police officers. They also “sample” journalist’s reports and political speeches. In so doing, Silverstein explains, French rap groups effectively normalize the argot of the housing projects as unmarked in contrast to the contextually marked speech forms of mainstream France. This is a beautifully written article that stands out in the book.

Auzanneau also brings us many insights into the language of rap, but her focus is on the multilingual city of Libreville in Gabon, where languages from ten or more linguistic families are spoken as well as some English and several varieties of French. Her study is based on 81 songs from 10 Libreville groups. Within this corpus, she is looking at three levels of language: enunciatory (pronouns, terms of address, etc.), linguistic (the forms and reasons for choices of languages), and sociocultural (content, external context). Auzanneau analyzes a rap text by Siya Po’ossi X called “To kill La Wana.” The local variety of French used in the song is similar to other urban varieties developed by young people in Africa and in some French suburbs. It consists of French syntax and a composite lexicon including English and local vernacular languages, and French slang. Auzanneau opposes this “relexified French” to code-switching, which also occurs in the music. The degree to which different languages and varieties are used indicates the songwriters’ individual styles. The language used is partially determined by their ideologies and social positioning, but it also depends on the aesthetic and musical
constraints of a song and the social norms of linguistic behavior in society. For example, French is used to express themes of socioeconomic misery and socio-political critiques, while local languages are used for mysticism and tradition. Insults are usually given in nonstandard French or English.

Similar to Silverstein’s example of how rap normalizes the nonstandard French of the Parisian suburbs, Auzanneau sees the devalorized language of the Libreville youth revalorized in rap. In using this variety, Libreville youth mark their attachment to Gabonese culture at the same time as they mark their break with the values of both their own traditional society and dominant Western society. This is the beginning of a multi-sited ethnography focusing on how rap as a social movement and urban discourse reveals certain urban sociolinguistic dynamics at the same time as it takes part in them, so we have more important discoveries to look forward to.

It would not be honest to review this book without mentioning the unevenness of the editing and the often problematic translations. A global editorial policy on how original texts were to be handled would have been a big improvement. Quotes and italics are not used consistently, so it is not clear whether French rappers are using the English term or translating it. This makes most of the book difficult to use for even broad linguistic analysis.

We cannot expect French academics who are writing about France in French to change their style of writing or to know which points need more explanation for an American audience, but good translators should know and should be in communication with the authors to make sure that the meaning is clear and that register is respected to the extent possible. Sometimes the translations in this book disturb reading simply on the level of lexicon. For instance, we read “literality and metaphorality” instead of “literalness and metaphor.” More often, reading is choppy because of stylistic problems. Sentences such as the following one, which begins Boucher’s article, show a lack of communication among author, translator, and editor: “As I have shown in a previous research project regarding the protagonists of integration, the combination of logics (strategic, repressive, mediating, integrative, subjective) expressed by these actors reveals the face of a society riddled by rapports of domination and exclusion” (68). Translation of French academic style to American academic style is a thorny problem, but one that researchers of language and culture should be sensitive to. A more easily remedied problem is the deletion of original texts. The richness of the texts discussed in Auzanneau’s article was sadly lacking in several other articles, where no originals were provided and we were left with translations of rap songs such as “He’s my spitting image, my girlfriend thought it was I” (37). One can hardly imagine an American rapper using the “correct” subject pronoun in this situation.

(Received 10 September 2003)