

Variations in the English Language Depending on Audience as Seen Through Tyler, The Creator

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ABSTRACT

Tyler, the Creator is one of the most popular artists of the late 2010s. Perceptible in many of his works, Tyler changes the way he speaks depending on the context of his song and his audience. This paper argues that, in order to fit into the hip-hop community, Tyler uses more variations characteristic of African American English whereas personal albums stray away from variations to focus on the content itself. This is because Tyler is more focused on his story than fitting in. Hip-hop is to the 21st century as the epic poem was to the 3rd Century BC. Music is the platform in which artists express not only their emotions, but also their artistry. Though poetry and storytelling still exist, they are simply not as popular as music. As streaming platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, SoundCloud and others rise in popularity, more and more people are listening to not only music, but also hip-hop. Similar to Homer's epics, hip-hop contains many literary devices. Rhymes, alliterations, double entendres - the list goes on but they are all shared by music and epic poems. The biggest difference, however, is the lack of research surrounding the linguistic artistry of music. Though there has been a recent rise in research, the field is relatively empty. As such, it is important to populate this field with more and more literature to match the growing appreciation of music within society. Within the context of art, music is probably the most expressive and understandable way to display emotions. Websites like genius.com allow listeners to read lyrics and create annotations breaking down lyrics. Furthermore, the artist is expressing his or her words, whereas other forms of art are more up to interpretation. From the linguistics side, hip hop varies wildly. Different subgenres such as mumble rap creates new languages as words as mumbled and combined. There are also changes in pronunciations of many words. Often, the use of African American English, or AAE, in hip hop is common. AAE, codified by the likes of researcher Sammy Alim, includes the omission of copulas, the deletion of the final consonant, and dropping 'g' at the end of present active participles. Thus, the occurrence of an artist invoking this variety in some performances while avoiding the use of AAE entirely and reverting to standard English in another is significant. As I will explore in this research, Tyler, the Creator actively and consciously uses standard English in order to convey emotion, while uses AAE to better fit into the supposed hip hop community. The foundations of hip-hop analysis are rooted far outside of the hip-hop world. In the 1960s, Peter Trudgill began performing linguistic analysis on British and American rock stars like The Beatles. He found distinct variations in pronunciation depending on location. In the case of The Beatles, they sounded American despite their British heritage. Soon, when other researchers began to examine African American English, the dialect most commonly found in hip-hop, the variations from standard English that they found began to shed light on some of the inner-workings of hip hop. I credit Sammy Alim with creating a strong foundation to start this paper. Some of his studies, such as *Street Conscious Copula Variation*, paved the way for further research to be done as he was one of the first to truly take a look at hip-hop. I also took note of many of his modeling techniques and quantitative approaches to create my own analysis. In a work done by Danielle Hodge, the precedent was set to introduce an artist's life into research. The paper also explored the concept of intertextuality in music. Finally, in a paper published by Maeve Eberhardt and Kara Freeman, the concept of "realness" in a hip-hop community was laid out. Iggy Azalea, a white pop star, sings and speaks in different dialects depending

on her audience. In her music, she uses African American English in an attempt to seem more “real” and to fit into the hip-hop community. In spoken interviews, she used Australian English, distinct from African American English. This is an example of conscious variations to seem more likable or to be more accepted.

Theoretical Framework - Goffman Then On to Tyler (Maybe)

Hip hop as a genre was popularized in the 1970s by inner-city African Americans. It drew influences from myriad genres, including blues and jazz, Caribbean style music, and rock and roll. It often included artists creating a “beat,” or an accompanying instrumental, to complement their rap. As time grew, both the spoken lyrics of the rap as well as the beat developed. The spoken rap grew to become a means to convey multiple stories. Some artists used rap to fight social injustice. Others used it to convey their dreams and aspirations and even to “flex” or show off their material wealth. The most successful rappers, however, were the ones who were skilled with their words. Often these most skilled artists incorporated devices such as alliterations, double and triple entendres, and many other devices. With the growth of the spoken words, the supporting beats grew as well. Producers like RZA began to weave previously told stories into their beats through samples. Taking a certain part of a song and modifying it, artists like RZA were soon able to allude to other songs and fold other accounts into their own music. As the music developed, so did the practices of many artists. For example, Kanye West’s album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (often stylized as MBDTF) popularized the practice of “featuring” or including multiple artists on the tapestry that is an album. The art of featuring had many implications. It allowed artists to further intertwine multiple narratives into a single song. In doing so, it brought more weight into the stories being told, as I will argue in this analysis. Another feature of features was the ability for artists to play off of each other. In Kanye West’s and Jay-Z’s collaborative song “N****as in Paris,” Jay-Z and Kanye compare their wealth and their success to each other, both while marveling at the concept of being both wealthy and black. As these were often the most direct contact that artists had with other artists for their fan bases to see, features generally incorporate ways to display power and wealth. And display skill. On Frank Ocean’s “Pink Matter,” André 3000 displays extreme skills in word plays, double entendres, and references, almost as though he is showing off for Ocean. Through features, artists are able to solidify their places within the culture of the Hip Hop Nation (Alim).

As a researcher, the multiple perspectives add new layers of complexity as they are adding multiple voices to a single story. In this paper, I chose to use Ervin Goffman’s production format framework to approach the analysis of how artists may use this opportunity to either build or to contrast the story. In his model, he described three contributors to any utterance: principal, author, and animator. According to Goffman, the principal is the one in charge of what is being said. The author is the one that creates the spoken words. Finally, Goffman described the animator as the one who actually speaks the words.

When looking at musical creation, these same terms can be applied. The principal is the one who gets the final say of what goes into the album, they hold the artistic vision. In the context of an album, this is the producer, though it can also be the record label. This is an important point. Often, record labels will hold final say over the release of an album. They may deny studio time or prevent releases, which removes the artist from being the principal. To combat this, however, there have been multiple solutions. Jay-Z created his own label, called Roc-a-Fella Records, to have total control over his music. Kanye created GOOD Music, which stands for Getting Out Our Dreams. These have been the most direct routes. Frank Ocean, though he also created his own label, was also tied up in contracts. In order to “escape,” he pulled a heist of his own. Frank Ocean made a \$2 million advance from his label to gain access to the top collaborators, writers, mixers, etc. When the time came to release the album, Ocean instead released a 45 minute visual album. It was sparse, beautiful, and lacking. It was not worth the money Ocean had supposedly spent on it. Despite that, Apple Music paid millions for exclusive distribution rights. With that money, Ocean paid off his advance. With the album released, he had also fulfilled his recording contract. The very next day, under his own label, Ocean released one of the most

influential albums of all time, *Blonde*. It soon became obvious where all of the money went. Ocean had total control of the album while also fighting Big Record. This is the greatest example of how important the role of principal is to the artist.

The author creates the content that the principal can edit from. As they also edit much of the work, the line between author and principal is not clear among contributors. The producer, the main artist, and the featured artist can also be seen as authors, or at least as co-authors. The role of author is further muddled by copyrights and other intellectual properties. An artist will often sample small bits from another, older song. Depending on the sample, it could be just the drum, lyrics, instrumental, backup, etc. Artists must give credit to the sampled song by citing the sampled writer in their own song credits. This can make song credits extensive and hard to navigate. It also makes it harder to determine who has full control on authorship without contextual knowledge.

The animator is the actual singer who gives life to the author's work and displays the true virtuosity of hip-hop. As the documentary "Talking Black in America" highlights, the culture surrounding spoken rap is based on skill and artistry. In today's modern, globalized culture, artists use other rappers' platforms to display their prowess. This is colloquially known as a feature. One artist "features" or makes a special appearance on another artist's song. The main artist continues to exercise control over which features are included on their tracks by determining who is invited to draft a feature, which verse makes the cut, and which beat is played underneath. The concept of features plays heavily into the roles of animator and author without being the principal. Often, an artist will work with another singer to create a verse that "flows" well with the album. Sometimes, like in the case of Jamie Foxx's feature on Kanye's "Gold Digger," they will be spontaneous and then further enhanced through production. In this way, the animator has no control over their words after they have been spoken. Other times, a feature artist will submit a proposed feature that will be left untouched. Either way, multiple influences affect how a single set of words are perceived, thus muddling the meaning and message. In The Weeknd's "Here We Go Again," Tyler, the Creator is the featured artist. He raps in a more somber tone than The Weeknd. He highlights the realities of love and the dangers it can bring in the context of pre-nuptials or "prenups." By contrast, both Jay-Z and Kanye West build on each other as they rap in "N****as in Paris." They both tell stories of their material wealth and how they got there, despite having completely different up-bringsings.

To perform this analysis, I created a coding sheet. It analyzed the first seven songs of "Igor" and four singles featuring Tyler, the Creator. It analyzed key characteristics of AAE and found how often these variations occurred relative to how often it was possible to have occurred.

The biggest findings were:

1. Tyler used more variations in features than in "Igor"
2. For some features, upwards of 2% of his time speaking was through variations.

Table 1. Songs by Tyler, The Creator coded to track variations.

	Ear-fquake	I Think	Running out of Time	New Magic Wand	A Boy is a Gun	Puppet	What's Good	Cash in Cash Out (1 Verse) 1:55-3:15	Here we go again (1 Verse) 2:08 - 2:37	After the Storm (1 Verse) 1:41-2:05	Lost and Found Free-style (1 Verse) 1:24-2:49
Omission of Copula [Ø]	0	0	0	0	16/35	0	7/14	11/16	0	3/9	8/12
[θ] pronounced as	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4/6	2/3	2/3	6/8

[d]											
got instead of have/has	0	0	0	2/4	4/4	0	0	1/1	0	0	0
Dropping "g" at the end of ing	5/10	5/6	23/27	7/9	9/10	1/1	6/13	8/10	3/3	2/2	5/6
Dropping first [θ] in them {θ} [θ] [d] [0	0	1/1	0	3/3	0	2/3	0	0	0	0
{ə} as [a] (omission of r)	0	2/32	0	0	0	2/11	11/15	0	0	2/3	1/1
Unconjugated be	1/13	0	0	0	1/19	0	0	2/18	0	0	0
x variations/ y possible variations across duration	6/23 in 3:10	7/39 in 3:32	24/28 in 2:57	9/13 in 3:15	17/36 in 3:30	3/12 in 2:59	26/51 in 3:25	26/51 in 1:20	5/6 in 0:29	9/17 in 0:24	20/27 in 1:25
% of variations across total time spoken	0.13 %	0.00%	0.48%	0.36%	0.22%	0.14%	0.25%	0.64%	2.87%	2.20%	0.87%

Something especially worth noting was the overstressed “urr.” This only occurred in features. It is a key characteristic of speaking in St. Louis. Tyler, the Creator, however, is not from St. Louis. This shows a conscious variation and an attempt to be a part of a different community.

In Tyler’s most recent trilogy of albums, a cohesive story has formed. Exploring themes of loneliness, homosexuality, and love, Tyler addresses his emotions in *Flower Boy*. In songs like “Who Dat Boy” and “Pothole,” Tyler seems to be trying his hardest to escape. As he raps in Pothole, Tyler “speeds off ... talks barely ... got too much drive, doesn’t want to steer off path.” Using his car as a metaphor, Tyler drives away from his problems for fear of getting distracted and losing his way. Yet, for a man fearful of losing his way, he is surprisingly lost to begin with. As he sings in “Garden Shed,” it becomes painfully obvious that Tyler is scared to continue forward as well: “garden shed ... that is where hiding.” This song has the strongest connotations of Tyler’s angst toward his sexuality: “garden shed for the garcons, them feelings that I was guarding.” Using the garden shed as a metaphor for being in the closet, it soon becomes clear that Tyler’s feelings for “garcons,” or boys in French, are frightening him and he is scared to address them. In 911/Mr. Lonely, Tyler claims that “These items is fillin’ the void, don’t even know if I enjoy them.” In a very material confession, Tyler admits that he is lonely and that his tendencies to spend keep him going. Furthermore, it ties the themes of fear into the narrative as he is too scared to make the first move. Instead of pursuing his lover himself, Tyler takes a passive stance when he asks repeatedly “call me sometime.” This album was the introduction to Tyler’s love affair, but he delves further in *IGOR*.

After a supposed skip in the Tyler storyline, *IGOR*, begins with an alarming buzzing noise in “Igor’s Theme.” No full sentences are made in his song, but it does set the tone for the album. The buzzing that rushes into drums and disembodied voices counting out prepare the listener for the flurry of emotions that Tyler expresses. In *Earthquake*, Tyler describes how his world shakes as though he is in an earthquake after he has fallen in love. In “I Think” Tyler claims to be in love. A short interlude introduces conflict and tension - time is running out for Tyler to act, but it is unclear whom or what Tyler must be quicker than. Running out of time sees Tyler and his lover interact for the first time: “Take your mask off, stop lying for these n*****stop lying to yourself, I know the real you.” Tyler, not confident enough to encourage others to be honest about their sexuality, pushed his lover to come out into the open. Tyler, though respecting his partner’s wish, no longer wants to hide their affair. Tyler also mentions that he “needs to get her out the picture.” Referring to his lover’s girlfriend, the tension in the story is clear - Tyler is fighting a losing battle for the attention of a man who, though his feelings may be real, does not want to deviate from the norm, hurting Tyler in the process. In a reprisal from reality, Tyler imagines his lover’s girlfriend gone in “New Magic Wand”: “I need to get her out the picture ... she’s gonna be dead, I got a new magic wand, we can finally be together.” In a bout of obsessive feelings, Tyler imagines killing the woman standing in his way of being with his lover. He is emotional and distraught. In “A Boy is a Gun,” Tyler laments of his love “you so motherf*****n dangerous ... how come you the best to me? I know you the worst for me.” In a shift towards reality, Tyler has finally begun to realize how toxic his relationship is. Now, he is torn between his romanticized version of his lover and the reality of his relationship. Becoming desperate to make his reality come true, Tyler is willing to do anything. As he croons in “Puppet,” he is his lover’s “puppet, [his lover] controls me.” Tyler, throwing reason aside, is willing to do anything to be with the man he loves. Tyler finally “sees the light” in “What’s Good,” though the final words at the end of the song are: “I don’t know what’s harder, letting go or being ok with it.” Tyler has finally realized the importance of separating himself from his lover, though he is not ready to accept it quite yet. Then in the last few tracks of the album, he thanks his paramour for the happy memories, claims to be over him, and then relapses into asking to be friends. This final song “Are We Still Friends” ends on a similar buzzing note as the first song. This final note is finally resolved and the album sounds complete when the first note of the first song is played. Tyler creates an entire loop, reliving the entire story as he considers falling back into the relationship.

Again, skipping into the future, Tyler raps about traveling the world in *Call Me if You Get Lost*. This album includes more features, more songs, and much more time than either of the previous two albums. Despite its length, the album is relatively empty in terms of emotional content. Tyler briefly mentions his lingering feelings for a past lover, his qualms about a new lover, and even a sad story that he mumbles through. Though his heartbreak is his reason for travel, he seems to shirk from dwelling on those feelings as he is trying to escape them in the first place. In this album, Tyler features a much more prominent narrator that guides the listener to Tyler Baudelaire’s journey, Tyler’s new persona. This album is much more loose, as Tyler seems to no longer feel compelled to express his emotions.

Igor is the most significant of these albums. It is the most personal album. Through the significantly different singing style relative to other singles and albums, *Igor* is meant to be an emotional album rather than one to help Tyler fit into the hip-hop community.

In the case of “Igor,” Tyler holds all three viewpoints - principal, author, and animator. As “Igor” is self produced, Tyler is the principal and controls what is put into his album and how his story is told. This also includes his inclusion of features. For every song on *Igor* Tyler is credited as the main writer. Again, he maintains full artistic control of his lyrics. Tyler spent very little time allowing features to run within the album. There is approximately two minutes and 30 seconds of feature time compared to the 42 minutes that Tyler has to himself. Because the music focuses so much more heavily on Tyler’s voice, he is the animator. Tyler, by taking part in all three forms of narrative, is able to maintain authentic, full artistic control over his album and therefore the story he is telling. This is starkly different from other examples of creative control. Since it was self-produced, samples build Tyler’s story and therefore do not conflict with his narrative and – as I will argue

– do not count as features; more on this later. The first feature is Playboi Carti on “Earquake.” It is incoherent, indiscernible and, in the style most often given to Carti’s music, is “baby-talk.” The lack of meaning and understanding is a device used by Tyler through Carti to display the complexity and confusing nature of love. While it may be possible to interpret some lyrics, the majority of Carti’s verse is so incoherent that it carries no averse messages to Tyler’s personal story. Unless you are listening closely, you will miss the second, important features. Kanye speaks at the end of “Puppet.” With only four lines of lyrics before cutting himself off, Kanye reflects Tyler’s emotions. Lost and exhausted, Tyler shows his confusion through his lyrics. Kanye, by stopping short and his repetition, shows his own confusion and lack of direction. Though they add perspectives to Tyler’s personal story other than his own, the nature of the features - both their paucity and lack of content - add weight to Tyler’s emotions and message.

By contrast, as a featured artist, Tyler’s approach changes. Using the example of “Cash In Cash Out,” each frame of view is slightly different. The producer is Pharrell Williams. Widely known for his production, he created the beat and arranged the final edit. As such, he is the principal. The author is a combination of three people - 21 Savage, Tyler, the Creator, and Pharrell Williams. Each wrote their own verse and therefore told conflicting stories. While 21 focuses on material wealth and his appreciation for Pharrell, Tyler sings about non-financial hardships. This lack of continuity is intrinsic to the multiple authors. Finally, the animators are Tyler and 21. Even though the song is released under the name of Pharrell, the animators of the song are completely different.

This shows the collaborative nature of hip-hop but also points to the peculiarity of *Igor* as a truly personal narrative. This makes *Igor* stand out all the more, as it is one voice across three frames working towards telling a singular cohesive story.

In “Cash In Cash Out,” Tyler can be heard invoking an overly emphasized “r”, a key characteristic of St. Louis style African American English. Tyler is from California. As such, he is clearly emulating a different manner of speaking in order to seem more connected to the hip-hop realm and to seem more “real.”

In examining the coding chart, it becomes clear that Tyler has augmented his style of speaking for *Igor*. Again, he does not care to fit in with the rest of this population. A possible explanation for this is how personal the topic of the album is. Throughout the album, Tyler admits to having murderous thoughts and to being in love with a man. Both of these topics are stigmatized and often frowned upon in certain communities. Almost as though he is recognizing that he will not be accepted, Tyler puts no effort into being a part of the greater hip-hop community. On songs like “After the Storm” and “Here We Go Again,” Tyler does not mention inflammatory subjects. His focus will not get him ostracized, so he puts in more effort to being a part of the broader community.

Something else to note is the lack of copulas. A copula is a connecting word, most often “be” and its conjugations. Though the percentage at which the copula is omitted varies from song to song, 3 out of the 4 features omit copulas. According to John Rickford, this is a means of fighting against “seeming white” (Rickford). As though he is trying to act as others act to fit in, Tyler also rejects the use of the copula. This, however, does not cover the entirety of Tyler’s motivations. Since he also omits copulas in songs off of “Igor,” Tyler is reflecting his obstinance to following trends. Deeper analysis is necessary as the sample size is too small to make a definitive claim in regards to the copula.

As seen in this paper, Tyler, the Creator seems to make an active decision to fit in with the hip-hop community in certain artistic pieces, but the more personal he gets, the less he seems to care about fitting in. This is an important finding as it shows a precedent for artists to use dialects and variations as a rhetorical device. This furthers music’s status as the most modern form of expression and highlights its lack of academic investigation. Research must be done on the extent of this practice, if there are other ramifications of conscious choices in music, to what extent should AAE be considered different from standard English, as well as other specific variations such as the overstressed “r” on a more globalized scale.

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