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The Linguistic and Lyrical Development of 2Pac in Relation to Regional Hip-hop Identity and Conflict

Steven Gilbers

Introduction

From Public Enemy to Jay Z and from N.W.A to Kendrick Lamar, hip-hop has a rich history of artists using their work to “fight the power”, and few—if any—genres of music can be considered as socio-politically engaged as hip-hop. Following in the footsteps of black political activists such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Panthers as well as artists such as The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, rappers have always been the newscasters of “black America’s CNN” (Chuck D, as cited in Thorpe, 1999), voicing their dissent and their dissatisfaction with the treatment of African Americans and other minorities in society, often in aggressive, provocative tone. As a result of this, there are countless instances of rap songs that criticize police brutality (e.g. N.W.A’s “Fuck tha Police”, 1988), racial profiling (e.g. Jay Z’s “99 Problems”, 2003), the war on drugs, governments’ lack of effort to improve living

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conditions in inner-city neighborhoods (e.g. 2Pac's "Changes", 1998), corporate avarice (e.g. Lupe Fiasco's "Words I Never Said", 2011), and any other issue that may negatively affect the (predominantly black) hip-hop community. Nevertheless, some of hip-hop's most ferocious expressions of dissatisfaction have not targeted politicians, media outlets, or even police; they have been aimed at other rappers. The culture has been marked by conflict among rappers from its inception—which is unsurprising considering hip-hop's competitiveness and its battle culture—and rappers have squared off with each other on stage, on records, and unfortunately also violently on the streets.

Historically speaking, one of the most prevalent motives for hip-hop conflicts has consistently been regional status. The reason for this is likely that the concepts of region and place are central to hip-hop culture and the identity of its aficionados, who express local pride by, for instance, referencing local customs and places in rap lyrics or by using their regional African American English (AAE) dialects to highlight linguistic dissimilarities with other regional hip-hop subcultures (Hess, 2009; Morgan, 2001). Regional hip-hop tensions reached their peak after hip-hop had spread from New York to California in the mid-1980s and a strong desire emerged among the new West Coast hip-hop community to challenge New York's regional hip-hop hegemony. Consequently, when the rappers 2Pac and The Notorious B.I.G.—representing the West Coast and the East Coast respectively—became embroiled in a personal conflict in 1994, their feud was quickly absorbed into a national conflict which was then further escalated: the infamous 1990s East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war (Forman, 2002). During this conflict, 2Pac came to be the primary avatar of West Coast hip-hop while expressing his grievances with East Coast hip-hop (Hess, 2009). Considering hip-hop's fundamental concept of (regional) authenticity (Cutler, 2007), this is quite a striking accomplishment, as 2Pac—ironically enough—was born in New York and did not move to California until he was 17 years old.

This chapter is concerned with examining the sociolinguistic dimension of dissatisfaction and dissent as expressed in regional hip-hop feuds. It does so by exploring from a lyrical as well as a sociolinguistic perspective how 2Pac communicated his allegiance to West Coast hip-hop during the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war and simultaneously distanced

himself from his East Coast roots. The chapter's first part addresses the importance of region and place to hip-hop culture and the hip-hop community's sense of identity, paying special attention to the role language use plays in this respect. This section is followed by an overview of how different regional hip-hop scenes developed throughout the United States over time as well as a discussion of different types of hip-hop conflicts. This section focuses on hip-hop battles waged over regional status and pays special attention to the infamous East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war of the 1990s and the role that 2Pac played during this conflict. Next, the selection of 2Pac as a case study subject is outlined, followed by an analysis of regional affiliation in 2Pac's rap lyrics, comparing his lyrics from before and during the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war. Finally, the results of a diachronic study on 2Pac's acquisition of West Coast AAE as a second dialect (Gilbers, 2015) will be discussed and related to the aforementioned lyrical analysis. It is concluded that 2Pac, who was shown to have made a conscious effort to sound like a "native speaker" of West Coast AAE during the conflict, communicated the message that he was the quintessential West Coast hip-hop artist through his belligerent anti-East Coast lyrics, but manipulated his accent to lend his message the authenticity and credibility required for it to be accepted by the West Coast hip-hop community.

Regional Hip-hop Identity in Relation to Language Use

One of the core characteristics of hip-hop culture is its focus on region and place, and the fact that regionality is central to hip-hop community members' identities (Forman, 2002; Hess, 2009; Morgan, 2001). Hess (2009, p. viii) points out that hip-hop community members often feel a great sense of local pride and that this sense of pride causes hip-hop community members to:

... name-check the regions, cities, boroughs, streets, and neighborhoods that they call home (...) whether the broad regions of East Coast, West Coast, Midwest, and Dirty South [Southern hip-hop], or any one of New York City's five boroughs, or even a specific neighborhood. (p. viii)

By doing so, they invoke a social experience that is shared with others from those places, linking one to the respective region's traditions. However, following hip-hop's central concept of authenticity—"keeping it real"—pretending to be from somewhere else than you really are is generally frowned upon and can lead to a loss of reputation or even ostracization (Cutler, 2007; Hess, 2009; Morgan, 2001; Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

Morgan (2001) states that next to referencing local places and landmarks, one of the most important means of expressing regional identity and affiliation is through usage of one's regional AAE variety, arguing that "in [hip-hop] culture, language is not simply a means of communication (...) but is viewed as a series of choices that represent beliefs and have consequences" (p. 190). As Morgan states, when hip-hop was exported across the country during the 1980s, this led to "new speech community formations and a drive to distinguish and articulate linguistic characteristics to represent major cities and regions on the East and West Coasts" (p. 188) as well as the emergence of a "locally marked lexicon" (p. 188). Despite the fact that the differences between regional dialects of AAE are very subtle—so much so in fact that it was long erroneously held by sociolinguists that AAE was spoken in a uniform manner across the United States (e.g. Baugh, 1983; Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 1977), the so-called supraregional myth (Wolfram, 2007) or heterogeneity myth (Wolfram & Kohn, 2015)—hip-hop community members are aware of phonological differences between regional dialects of AAE in particular. Moreover, they make use of their regional phonological features to distinguish regional differences, especially with regard to vowel duration, which is relatively short in East Coast AAE and relatively long in West Coast AAE (Cutler, 2007; Gilbers, 2015; Morgan, 1993, 1998, 2001).

Development of Regional Hip-hop Scenes Across the United States

Since hip-hop was initially not as widespread as it is today, regionality did not always play as much of a role in hip-hop as it does today. Having emerged from the South Bronx and subsequently invaded New York

City's other boroughs during the 1970s, hip-hop was very much New York oriented: virtually every part of hip-hop culture—from its sounds to its looks and from its slang to its references—was originally dominated by the New York hip-hop community (Hess, 2009). New York's hip-hop hegemony began to wither in the mid-1980s, when hip-hop culture not only spread to other cities on the East Coast but also across the United States to the West Coast. There, a raw interpretation of hip-hop arose that was distinct from New York's: the so-called gangsta rap movement. Influenced by Los Angeles street gang culture's extreme territorialism, a desire emerged among the members of the new West Coast hip-hop community to assert themselves as distinct from the New York hip-hop community that had always dominated the look and sound of the culture (Forman, 2002; Hess, 2009). As Morgan (2001) puts it, "[f]or the first time, the [hip-hop] community had to consciously address whether the emergence of different regional styles constituted a split in the [hip-hop] nation" (p. 193). Such a split in the hip-hop nation did indeed occur in the 1990s, when tensions between the West Coast and the East Coast reached their zenith during the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war (Forman, 2002; Hess, 2009). By the end of the 1990s, the conflict between the two coasts had receded, and other regions such as the South and the Midwest started gaining popularity as well. They created their own regional styles and cultures (Cutler, 2007) and even managed to take over the East and West Coasts' grip on hip-hop culture. In fact, a Vibe Magazine survey revealed that in 2004, Southern hip-hop artists accounted for 43.6% of the airplay on urban radio stations, Midwest rappers for 29.7%, East Coast rappers for 24.1%, and West Coast hip-hop artists for only 2.5% (Sarig, 2007).

Hip-hop Conflicts

Hip-hop culture has been characterized by conflicts between rappers from the beginning, which is understandable considering hip-hop's competitive climate in which outdoing one's competitors and gaining respect from your peers may well be among the most important driving forces for many rappers, deejays, graffiti artists, and hip-hop dancers (Hess, 2009).

Hip-hop has a longstanding tradition of (freestyle) rap battles, dance offs, and graffiti tagging wars, which are often aggressive in nature but not necessarily rooted in ill feelings toward competitors on a personal level. However, hip-hop also knows plenty of cases of actual feuds between rappers—so-called beefs. There have been beefs between rappers for seemingly endless reasons, from feuds over stolen lyrics (e.g. Grandmaster Caz versus Big Bank Hank, the latter of which purportedly plagiarized the former's lyrics for the 1979 hit song "Rapper's Delight"; Lyubovny, 2014) to feuds over leaving a rap group (e.g. Ice Cube versus his former crew N.W.A; The Breakfast Club, 2014), and from conflicts over crew disloyalty (e.g. 50 Cent versus The Game; Reid, 2005) to a recent strife over allegedly using a ghostwriter (Meek Mill versus Drake; Ramirez, 2015).

Among this diverse array of reasons for rap feuds, there is one type of "beef" that keeps surfacing: hip-hop conflicts over geographic affiliation. As Hess (2009) states, rappers and deejays often appeal to local or regional allegiances among the crowd to get them on their side during battles, adding that "[hip-hop]'s local pride has bred competition between neighborhoods, cities, and even sides of the country, and territoriality has become a topic of several [hip-hop] conflicts over where true [hip-hop] resides" (p. xix). Regional status conflicts can essentially be divided into two categories: conflicts between rappers from the same region (henceforth: intraregional conflicts) and conflicts between rappers from different regions (henceforth: interregional conflicts).¹

Arguably the most noteworthy intraregional feud in hip-hop history was the so-called King of New York battle between Jay Z (from the Marcy Projects in Brooklyn) and Nas (from the Queensbridge Projects in Queens), which stemmed from a power vacuum after the 1997 passing of The Notorious B.I.G., the Brooklyn rapper who had previously held the title of "king of New York" (i.e. he was deemed the best and most successful New York rapper). Although there were many reasons for these two New Yorkers to be feuding (for instance, Jay Z had sampled Nas's voice on his debut album without permission and claimed to have been with the mother of Nas's child), the reason Jay Z started off the battle with Nas—a certain competitor for New York hip-hop's regal vacancy—was unquestionably to establish himself as the new number one of New York hip-hop. To illustrate, the hook to his "Takeover" (2001) diss record

samples the phrase “we run New York” as rapped by KRS One. Nas responded with the vicious song “Ether”, which contains the lyrics “the king—you know you not” and “the king is back, where my crown at?” (2001).

One of the earliest and most memorable interregional hip-hop feuds was the one between Boogie Down Productions from the South Bronx and the Juice Crew from the Queensbridge Houses: the Bridge Wars (Hess, 2009). The feud started because of the latter’s song “The Bridge”² (1986), on which the Juice Crew rapper MC Shan seemed to claim that hip-hop was founded in the Queensbridge Projects rather than in the Bronx. Boogie Down Productions took offense to this claim and, representing for their neighborhood and defending its regional status, responded with the song “The Bridge is Over”, on which the group’s leader KRS One raps that the “Bronx keeps creating it, and Queens keeps on faking it” (1987).

The East Coast-West Coast Hip-hop War

By far the most striking interregional hip-hop conflict—and undoubtedly the most memorable hip-hop conflict overall—was the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war (Forman, 2002). The conflict originated from New York rappers being frustrated with the West Coast’s dominance over hip-hop during the early 1990s, which made it difficult for East Coast rappers to thrive. The New York rapper Tim Dog first brought these tensions between the two coasts to light in his song “Fuck Compton” (1991),³ which triggered a few responses (most notably Dr. Dre’s “Fuck wit Dre Day (And Everybody’s Celebratin’)” and the comedic skit “The \$20 Sack Pyramid” on his 1992 album *The Chronic*). The bicoastal tensions were further fueled during the 1995 Source Awards. As Hess (2009) writes:

A true turning point in the perception of rap music as an East Coast or West Coast thing came with the 1995 Source Awards. [Hip-hop], from its inception, had been fiercely territorial, but this second annual event, held in New York City’s Madison Square Garden on August 3, 1995, brought regional tensions in [hip-hop] to a head. (...) The New York audience

members remained loyal to their hometown artists and booed [Snoop Doggy Dogg],⁴ one of rap's biggest stars. Snoop famously responded, his voice incredulous, "the East Coast ain't got no love for Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg and Death Row?" The audience booed again. (p. xxii)

At those same Source Awards, Marion "Suge" Knight, CEO of the West Coast-based record label Death Row Records, went on stage and subliminally mocked Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs, the founder of Bad Boy Records, which was the most popular East Coast rap label at the time. The attack ignited a rivalry between the two labels and their label heads that would become increasingly grim.

Despite the fact that the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war had been going on since the early 1990s already, it was not until 1995 that the gangsta rapper who would eventually become the conflict's most important player became involved: Tupac "2Pac" Shakur. 2Pac was born in East Harlem, New York City in 1971 and grew up on the East Coast—initially in New York City and later in Baltimore, Maryland—before moving to California at age 17 in 1988. There, he began pursuing a career in music, releasing his first album in 1991 and becoming increasingly successful from then onward. Although he moved to the West Coast, 2Pac stayed in regular contact with friends and family from the East Coast and cooperated with artists and producers from New York. However, his relationship with New York hip-hop changed drastically after 2Pac survived being shot five times in a Manhattan recording studio where 2Pac's friend, the Brooklyn rapper, Christopher "The Notorious B.I.G.". Wallace was present. 2Pac believed The Notorious B.I.G. to be complicit in the shooting, causing a rift between the two. Soon after, 2Pac was incarcerated at Clinton Correctional Facility on a sexual abuse conviction, a conviction he served 11 months of before Marion "Suge" Knight posted 2Pac's \$1.4 million bail in exchange for 2Pac signing to his label Death Row Records. As a result, 2Pac and The Notorious B.I.G.'s personal conflict became entwined with the existing conflict between their record labels (The Notorious B.I.G. was signed to Bad Boy Records), a feud that was itself rooted in the conflict between East Coast and West Coast hip-hop culture, and escalated the East Coast-West Coast war to cataclysmic levels.

Fueled by his new affiliation with Death Row Records and his rage against The Notorious B.I.G. and the New York scene in general, 2Pac became increasingly hostile toward East Coast hip-hop culture and more overtly affiliated himself with West Coast hip-hop. In the process, 2Pac, despite being from the East Coast, ironically became the West Coast's leading figure in the bicoastal hip-hop war (Forman, 2002). 2Pac's increased affiliation with the West Coast (from the end of 1995 onward) was apparent from his comments during interviews, his lyrics, the production style of his songs, and the cover of his 1996 album *All Eyez on Me*, on which he posed making the characteristic West Coast "W" hand gesture. Nevertheless, 2Pac struggled with his regional identity and allegiance ever since moving to the West Coast, which is understandable considering hip-hop's focus on regionality, authenticity, and the fact that representing another region than one is originally from is often frowned upon. The latter of these frustrated 2Pac, as evidenced by the following agitated remarks he made during an interview with Vibe Magazine in May 1996:

This is not a new allegiance to the West Coast. I been on the West Coast all this time. (...) It's just that by me keeping it real, I always said where I came from. I always gave New York they props.⁵ On *Me Against the World*, I took a whole song ["Old School"] to give it up [for New York]. So now on the next album [*All Eyez on Me*], when I want to give it up for my home, where I'm at, everybody got a problem? Why didn't they have no problem with [The Notorious B.I.G.] saying "Brooklyn in the house" every fucking show he do? (...) Why is it not hip-hop when I do it? (Shakur, 1996)

Perhaps the most telling example of 2Pac's struggle with regional identity comes from the intro to his posthumously released song "Thug Style", where he says: "I guess I ain't East Coast enough for my niggas back in New York, and I ain't West Coast for these niggas on the West, huh?" (1997).

Tragically, as the "extremes that artists and their followers were willing to go to in order to demonstrate East Coast and West Coast loyalties culminated in the deaths of two of [hip-hop]'s most gifted performers" (Morgan, 2001, p. 193), 2Pac became the victim of a drive-by shooting

on September 7, 1996 which caused him to die six days later at the age of 25. Although neither the shooter nor the reason for the attack were ever officially identified, it has often been speculated that the homicide was a direct consequence of the regional hip-hop rivalry, especially in light of the murder of 2Pac's adversary The Notorious B.I.G. at the age of 24 just six months later (Cramer & Hallett, 2010; George, 1998; Hess, 2009; Morgan, 2001).

Case Study: 2Pac's Dissent Against the East Coast

The present chapter—which is concerned with the sociolinguistic dimension of dissatisfaction and dissent as expressed in intraregional and inter-regional hip-hop battles—investigates how 2Pac, despite having been born and raised on the East Coast, managed to become the main representative of West Coast hip-hop culture during the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war, specifically looking at the way he used his lyrics and manipulated his accent to this end. The case study comprises of two parts: (1) an analysis of the development of 2Pac's lyrics with regard to regional affiliation, and (2) a diachronic study on the development of 2Pac's speech accent from a phonological and sociolinguistic perspective that was reported by Gilbers (2015).

The motivation for selecting 2Pac in order to study regional hip-hop battles from a lyrical and sociolinguistic perspective is multifold. First of all, 2Pac was one of the two main protagonists in the greatest regional conflict in hip-hop history. Second, because he migrated from one dialect region to another, 2Pac is a second dialect learner. This makes him a viable subject for a diachronic study on the sociolinguistic factors playing a role in second dialect phonology acquisition, especially since 2Pac did not distance himself from his home region until he became involved in the East Coast-West Coast feud near the end of his life. The latter allows for a comparison between the development of his accent before and during 2Pac's involvement with the bicoastal hip-hop war, potentially revealing conscious pronunciation decisions 2Pac made to communicate his allegiance to the West Coast and express his dissent against the East

Coast. Finally, from a methodological perspective, 2Pac's language development can accurately be studied diachronically because there is a vast amount of speech material available from the moment he moved from the East Coast to the West Coast (age 17, 1988) until his death (age 25, 1996). This is because even before 2Pac became internationally famous as a musician, he frequently appeared in the media as a black civil rights activist, and many of these recordings were preserved.

Part 1: The Development of Regional Dissent in 2Pac's Lyrics

The present section examines the lyrics of a selection of 2Pac songs relevant to his role in the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war, analyzing how 2Pac expressed his regional affiliation and comparing his lyrics from during the conflict to those from before. It will be shown that his lyrics before and during the conflict (i.e. his lyrics from before and after he signed to Death Row Records) are clearly different regarding 2Pac's appraisal of East Coast hip-hop culture and the degree to which he uses his lyrics to represent for the West Coast and express dissent against the East Coast.

Throughout his professional rap career, 2Pac was based in California and would occasionally represent for the West Coast in his songs, for example, for the city of Oakland on his 1993 songs "Representin' 93" and "Nothing but Love". Nevertheless, despite having left the East Coast in 1988 already, 2Pac would often pay homage to East Coast hip-hop culture in his music as well. An example of this is his 1995 song "Old School". In that song, which was recorded before 2Pac was shot in Manhattan, he pays homage to New York's different boroughs, dozens of New York rappers and deejays, New York hip-hop fashion, and even typical New York street culture phenomena such as the Ringolevio children's game that originated in New York City.

After getting shot and nearly killed in Manhattan, doing time in prison, and signing to Death Row Records, however, 2Pac's lyrics changed drastically when it comes to the degree to which he used them to represent for the West Coast. Moreover, the lyrics from this period reflected how 2Pac's

view of East Coast hip-hop had changed. Roughly two months after he was released from prison and signed to Death Row Records, 2Pac released his first song under the banner of Death Row Records: “California Love” (1995). The appropriately titled song is an ode to California and West Coast hip-hop culture, and it features Dr. Dre and Roger Troutman, two artists who played a crucial role in shaping the funky sound and style of West Coast hip-hop during the early 1990s (i.e. G-Funk; Quinn, 2005). 2Pac raps only a single verse on the track. Through these 16 bars, however, he unequivocally communicated his newfound allegiance to the West Coast, as the verse contains well over a dozen references to California and/or West Coast hip-hop. For instance, he mentions a myriad of Californian cities and iconic locations such as Los Angeles, Long Beach, the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento, and Rosecrans Avenue in South Los Angeles. He also alludes to California pop culture by referencing his own label Death Row Records, Dr. Dre’s typical West Coast G-Funk production style, the 1965 song “California Dreamin’” by Californian rock group, The Mamas and the Papas, the 1985 movie *To Live and Die in L.A.*—which is referenced in relation to the 1992 Los Angeles riots as well as said city’s street gang culture—and West Coast hip-hop fashion trends.

The song’s most revealing line for an analysis of 2Pac’s regional affiliation in the “California Love” verse is the following: “In L.A., we wearin’ Chucks—not Ballys.” Although it may seem like a relatively trivial line in which 2Pac describes West Coast hip-hop sneaker fashion, the line is particularly relevant because it reveals that 2Pac is not just paying homage to West Coast hip-hop culture but that he is also purposely disrespecting East Coast hip-hop culture. Chucks—or Chuck Taylor All-Stars sneakers—were especially popular among the West Coast hip-hop community at the time. In contrast, Bally sneakers—which were popular among the East Coast hip-hop community during the 1980s and 1990s—were considered too flashy and corny by the West Coast hip-hop community. The idea that 2Pac is really taking sides through this song is supported by the song’s outro, when 2Pac raps the following: “Let’s show these fools how we do it on this Westside, ’cause you and I know it’s the best side.” The song thus not only serves to affiliate 2Pac with West Coast hip-hop culture, but also to distance him from the East Coast. This type of subtle criticism of East Coast culture while praising West Coast culture

that was found in “California Love” can be found throughout his first Death Row Records album *All Eyez on Me*, for instance on the song “Heartz of Men” (1996), when he refers to the West Coast as the real side, implying that the East Coast is comparatively fake: “Now, me and Quik finna⁶ show you niggas what it’s like on *this* side—the real side.” Considering the importance attached to the concept of “keeping it real” in hip-hop culture (Morgan, 2001), this assertion should be interpreted as a display of great disrespect toward East Coast hip-hop culture.

As the tensions between 2Pac and The Notorious B.I.G., Death Row Records and Bad Boy Records, and the West and the East Coast increased, so did the viciousness and explicitness of 2Pac’s anti-East Coast lyrics. A clear example of this are 2Pac’s lyrics on “Hit ’em up” (1996), a song which journalist Chuck Philips described as “a caustic anti-East Coast jihad in which the rapper threatens to eliminate Biggie,⁷ [Puff Daddy] and a slew of Bad Boy artists and other New York acts” (2012). Amid countless expletives, insults, and threats, the song’s outro reveals that in 2Pac’s eyes, this is definitely no longer just a personal conflict—“now, when I came out, I told you it was just about Biggie, [but] then everybody had to open they mouth with a motherfucking opinion”—but rather a regional one—“any of you niggas from New York that want to bring it, bring it (...) Westside ‘till we die!’” (2Pac, “Hie ’em up”, 1996). What is especially salient in this respect is the “us versus them” message that 2Pac communicates throughout the song, with “us” referring to the West Coast hip-hop community and “them” to the East Coast hip-hop community. By doing so, he further establishes the coastal dichotomy, his allegiance to the West Coast, and, most importantly, the fact that he himself is to be considered a true member of the West Coast hip-hop community despite originally being from New York.

Part 2: The Development of Regional Dissent in 2Pac’s Accent

In the present chapter, it has been asserted that in hip-hop culture, language use is one of the prime means to express regional identity and affiliation, and that hip-hop community members make use of their regional

AAE dialects' phonological features to communicate their regional identity (Morgan, 2001). For East Coast and West Coast AAE, the most salient phonological feature in this respect is vowel duration, which is relatively short for East Coast AAE and relatively long for West Coast AAE (Cutler, 2007; Gilbers, 2015; Morgan, 1993, 1998, 2001). In light of this, this section presents the results of a study by Gilbers (2015) on how 2Pac—a native speaker of East Coast AAE—acquired West Coast AAE as a second regional dialect of AAE, a study which focused on the diachronic development of 2Pac's vowel duration and on how this development is related to the way 2Pac communicated his dissent against the East Coast.

Hypotheses on 2Pac's Accent Development in Relation to Anti-East Coast Sentiments

Gilbers (2015) studied 2Pac's accent development between 1988 (the year of his migration to California) and 1996 (the year he was murdered), focusing on how 2Pac's changing sentiments toward the East and West Coast over time affected this development. It was hypothesized there were two phases of 2Pac's accent development over time, namely the period until 1995 and the period after 1995 (the year that 2Pac started feuding with the East Coast on behalf of the West Coast), phases that are clearly distinct regarding the degree to which 2Pac's relationship with the East Coast (in terms of dissent) influenced his accent.

Phase 1 (1988–1995)

Upon migrating to California, 2Pac's accent would gradually assimilate to West Coast AAE pronunciation norms (i.e. increased vowel duration over time; Exemplar Theory; see e.g. Pierrehumbert, 2001) as well as display greater variation in speech production (i.e. his language system would become less stable; Complex Dynamic Systems Theory; see e.g. De Bot et al., 2007). These types of gradual, diachronic accent changes are not the result of someone's conscious language choices. Rather, they occur unconsciously and can be considered unavoidable effects of moving to another dialect region.⁸

Phase 2 (1995–1996)

In contrast, it was hypothesized that from 1995 onward, 2Pac would actively seek to manipulate his accent to sound like a Californian rather than a New Yorker, which would result in faster assimilation toward West Coast AAE accent norms than before. There is much evidence that suggests sociolinguistic factors such as feelings of identity and attitudes toward the new and the old dialect's speech communities may profoundly impact individuals' acquisition rates (e.g. Chambers, Trudgill, & Schilling-Estes, 2002; Eckert, 2006; Nycz, 2013; Waninge, Dörnyei & De Bot, 2014). Considering the strong sociolinguistic relationship between language use and regional hip-hop identity, manipulating one's accent in such a way would accomplish two things in 2Pac's case. Firstly, it would add credibility to his (lyrical) anti-East Coast campaign, since sounding like someone from the East Coast when you are feuding with that region would be problematic for obvious reasons. Secondly, within the hip-hop community, a conscious decision to distance yourself from your East Coast linguistic roots could be interpreted as a subtle yet powerful expression of disrespect and dissent.

2Pac's Projected Accent Development

Figure 2.1 presents a visualization of 2Pac's diachronic accent development as it was hypothesized above. It shows a stable period around East Coast AAE vowel duration norms until 1988, followed by a period of gradual assimilation to West Coast AAE's longer vowel norms as well as increased variability until 1995. This gradual assimilation reflects the hypothesis that before 2Pac became involved with the bicoastal conflict, his acquisition of a West Coast accent was a mostly unconscious process. After 1995, the rate of 2Pac's assimilation toward West Coast AAE norms increases. This increase in the rate of assimilation reflects the hypothesis that when 2Pac became West Coast hip-hop's leader in 1995, he would deliberately manipulate his accent to sound more like a Californian.

Fig. 2.1 Predicted developmental trajectory (schematically represented) of 2Pac's vowel duration (mean and range). The horizontal, dark gray dashed line indicates a hypothetical West Coast AAE baseline; the horizontal, light gray dashed line indicates a hypothetical East Coast AAE baseline (Gilbers, 2015)

Discussion of Method and Results

Eight recordings of interviews with 2Pac were analyzed, all of which were conducted between 1988 and 1996 (one per year, except for 1990).⁹ The recordings were controlled for speech rate so that this would not influence vowel duration measurements. The recordings were analyzed for vowel duration in 2Pac's /æ/ vowels followed by voiceless consonants (hereafter: voiceless postvocalic context) and sonorants (hereafter: sonorant postvocalic context). Per recording, 20 tokens in stressed position were analyzed per postvocalic context. Vowel duration was measured in milliseconds (ms) using PRAAT (version 5.3.84; Boersma & Weenink, 2014). From the collected vowel duration data, descriptive statistics were obtained. To limit outlier noise, raw measurements were also smoothed using a moving window approach (i.e. values measured for any given year were averaged with those of the years immediately before and after).

Fig. 2.2 Mean and range for 2Pac's /æ/ vowel duration in ms (voiceless postvocalic context; Gilbers, 2015)

As is evident from Figs. 2.2 and 2.3,¹⁰ Gilbers (2015) found that until 1995, 2Pac's /æ/ vowels gradually became longer on average, and that his production in terms of vowel duration showed more variation as time progressed. These findings thus confirm the 1988–1995 hypothesis.

Moreover, Gilbers (2015) reports that in the period from 1989 until 1995, on average, 2Pac's vowel duration increased by only 2.31% per year. From 1995 until 1996, however, his vowel duration grew by 18.86%, meaning that 2Pac's yearly rate of assimilation to West Coast AAE pronunciation norms was roughly nine times higher during his involvement in the East Coast–West Coast hip-hop war than it was before. This suggests that 2Pac did indeed consciously manipulate his accent to sound like he was from the West Coast and distance himself from his East Coast roots. Gilbers's reports of overshooting instances (i.e. instances where 2Pac's vowels were even longer than native speakers of West Coast AAE would pronounce them) in only the 1996 recording reinforce the idea that this increase in 2Pac's rate of assimilation toward West Coast AAE accent norms originates from a conscious effort to sound like someone from the West Coast. In other words, the vowel duration measurements reveal that 2Pac deliberately manipulated his pronunciation in order to use his accent as a means of expressing dissent against East Coast hip-hop.

Fig. 2.3 Mean and range for 2Pac's /æ/ vowel duration in ms (sonorant postvocalic context; Gilbers, 2015)

The Bicoastal Hip-hop War's Effect on 2Pac's Lyrical and Linguistic Development

Although there had been tensions between East and West Coast hip-hop for years already, 2Pac did not become involved with the East Coast-West Coast hip-hop war until he signed with Death Row Records in late 1995. In his lyrics from before this period, 2Pac represented for the West Coast but also paid homage to East Coast hip-hop culture. After signing to Death Row Records, however, he seemed to increase how much he represented for the West Coast. Moreover, he no longer spoke positively of East Coast hip-hop culture, but instead disrespected it. This display of pro-West Coast and anti-East Coast sentiments in his lyrics was relatively subtle and playful at first, but turned more explicit, aggressive, and violent as tensions between East Coast and West Coast artists were rising.

In parallel, 2Pac's accent gradually moved toward West Coast AAE norms until 1995, with his language development trajectory showing no signs of 2Pac purposely attempting to acquire the West Coast AAE accent during this period. Instead, his cognitive language system

changed in a way that is typical for people who move to another dialect region when there are no significant sociolinguistic factors affecting their motivation to acquire the new dialect region's accent. During the period when he was involved in the bicoastal hip-hop war, however, 2Pac's rate of assimilation toward West Coast AAE accent norms increased by a factor of 9 compared to his average yearly rate of assimilation before 1995. Moreover, Gilbers (2015) found evidence of 2Pac overshooting West Coast AAE targets for vowel duration, which suggests that he was purposely trying to sound like someone from the West Coast and let go of his East Coast language roots. Crucially, the sudden, post-1995 spike in 2Pac's rate of assimilation toward the West Coast accent as well as the observed overshooting effect in 2Pac's 1996 recording cannot be accounted for by purely linguistic theories; a sociolinguistic perspective is needed to explain these observations. In other words, there is no theoretical foundation to conclude that 2Pac did not consciously manipulate his accent during this period, and considering the circumstances in which he found himself during the bicoastal feud, the most likely reason for 2Pac's pronunciation behavior was a desire to express his dissatisfaction with the East Coast.

Considering that during this period, there were indeed societal circumstances causing 2Pac's East Coast roots to be problematic—one can imagine that lyrically disrespecting New York hip-hop culture while still sounding like a New Yorker might sound inauthentic—the diachronic accent analysis data reveal that 2Pac deliberately manipulated his accent to sound more like a native speaker of West Coast AAE from 1995 onward. Manipulating his accent this way lent his claims that he was the true embodiment of West Coast hip-hop culture the authenticity and credibility required for 2Pac to be accepted as such by the West Coast hip-hop community. Furthermore, his decision to abandon his East Coast AAE accent as much as possible also served as yet another means of attacking the East Coast and expressing his resentment of the whole New York hip-hop scene, for it meant that in every single one of 2Pac's utterances during the bicoastal feud—no matter their semantic content—there was a subtle expression of dissatisfaction with and dissent against East Coast hip-hop culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, two of hip-hop culture's most notable characteristics are its competitive nature and its emphasis on region and place. Because of these characteristics, regional status has been the source of numerous feuds between rappers, and the way in which rappers express their dissatisfaction during these battles is often particularly ruthless. Considering that regional AAE accents are among the primary tools to communicate regional affiliation (Morgan, 2001), the present chapter aimed to investigate how sociolinguistic factors might play a role in regional hip-hop conflicts. 2Pac's deliberate manipulation of his accent to compensate for the fact that he was not actually from the region he represented and to constantly defy his East Coast roots suggests that sociolinguistic factors indeed play an important role in regional hip-hop conflicts: 2Pac expressed his dissatisfaction with East Coast hip-hop not just through the words he said, but also through the way he pronounced them. The results thus suggest that regional accents are important tools for rappers to ensure that the regional affiliations they express in their lyrics are taken seriously by the hip-hop community

Notes

1. In this chapter, "intraregional conflicts" and "interregional conflicts" are meant to refer solely to conflicts over regional status, not to conflicts between rappers from the same region or different regions over other types of issues.
2. *The Bridge* stands for "Queensbridge Houses".
3. Compton, California is one of Los Angeles County's cities, and as the hometown of notable West Coast gangsta rappers (e.g. Eazy-E and Dr. Dre), it is closely linked to West Coast hip-hop (cf. N.W.A's 1988 album *Straight Outta Compton*).
4. Calvin "Snoop Doggy Dogg" Broadus—who hails from Long Beach, California—was signed to the West Coast-based label Death Row Records at the time.
5. The phrase *to give props* is slang for "to give credit" or "to pay respect".

6. The song's producer DJ Quik, one of the West Coast's most influential producers; *finna* is a slang expression meaning "going to".
7. Another nickname that The Notorious B.I.G. went by.
8. For more information on Exemplar Theory and Complex Dynamic Systems Theory, see Gilbers (2015).
9. No interview recordings of sufficient quality could be obtained for the year 1990.
10. This chapter's graphs from Fig. 2.2 onward include 1990 on the horizontal axis even though no data were collected for this year, because if 1990 were omitted from the timeline, it might seem as if the development from 1989 until 1991 took place within one year. For the unsmoothed measurements, the plotted 1990 data points are consistently the same as the 1989 ones.

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