

# Iconicity in Rap Music

## The challenge of an anti-language

by *Paola Attolino*

### Abstract

Starting from the assumption that iconicity, as a means of narration, is prevalent in circumstances in which a new language is invented, the paper investigates the anti-language (Halliday, 1978) of rap music, considered as a performed narrative genre belonging to the long-standing African American oral tradition. As they vividly describe the social conditions and the plight of urban young blacks, most rap songs, in fact, offer powerful narratives of inner-city life, which are to be taken into consideration in a sociolinguistic perspective, both in their narrative structure and in the language used.

The analysis, which is pragmatic, is based on a corpus of one hundred songs, collected from 1979 (the year of the first rap record release) up to nowadays. The iconic use of idiophones, alphabetic letters, onomatopoeia, rhyme, metonymy, eye dialect and word-formation processes will be discussed, in an attempt to investigate the extent to which iconicity is a driving force towards lexicalization, but also to what extent the iconic one-to-one principle is violated by individual reinterpretations due to the interaction between author and listener.

### I

### Introduction

The present study starts from the assumption that iconicity, as a means of narration, is prevalent in circumstances in which language is created. If we accept this premise, the language of rap music, as a form of anti-language, may be an interesting field of analysis.

Rapping is part of a continuum of performed narrative genres including toasting, signifying and the dozens, all longstanding elements of the African American oral tradition<sup>1</sup>. As they vividly describe the social conditions and the plight of urban young blacks, most rap songs offer powerful narratives of inner-city life, which are to be taken into consideration in a sociolinguistic perspective, both in their narrative structure and in the language used. As Klapproth argues:

People tell stories in order to *do* certain things, and [...] their actions are recognised and understood by their interlocutors as socio-culturally typified ways of communicative interaction<sup>2</sup>.

Among the communicative purposes of narrative discourse, storytelling serves the function of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge, as well as social values. The common denominator in the African American oral tradition is the power of the word. The spoken word, in fact, was the building block of the slaves' communication system. As they came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and as the use of their mother tongue was often forbidden, slaves developed a language of their own, which became both a community-building element and a medium to exchange messages functional to survive the hardship of slavery. In this way, the black version of the language of the master acquired a double meaning, turning into an anti-language that «slipped the yoke and turned the joke back upon those who would destroy them»<sup>3</sup>.

As Halliday<sup>4</sup> suggests, an anti-language develops out of an anti-society and stands as a mode of resistance to the society within which it exists, in an effort to exclude outsiders for various reasons. One striking motivation for the existence of an anti-language is to hide the activities of the group. Halliday gives evidence for this claim through the existence of Elizabethan thieves' cant, a form of communication derived in the Calcuttan underworld that inmates in English prisons still use as a means of communication that guards would not understand<sup>5</sup>.

Rap songs have always been marked by controversial lyrics because of their unique use of language, which is notoriously irreverent and obscene. Nevertheless, from a sociolinguistic perspective rap is «a part of a culture in real, historical time, a culture that must be contextualized»<sup>6</sup>.

Rap music often blasts African American rage into mainstream American culture and with its call-and-response choruses and violent, no-holds-barred lyrics, questions societal tradition and authority.

As it is the language of the *inner city*, one of the most interesting facets of rap idiom is its coding, in other words its cryptic vocabulary<sup>7</sup>. This is what qualifies rap language as an anti-language comparable to Halliday's definition. Since virtually everything the users of an anti-language engage in is illegal, lexical innovation in rap lyrics does not involve any semantic field, but it purposely applies to the sub-cultural activities or interests together with what has been termed semantic derogation, a feature common to sexist languages, as illustrated in FIG. 1.

As we can see, the highest percentages of new words and expressions regard sex, drugs and crime. This is the reason for the well-known Parental Advisory sticker (FIG. 2), which rap record sleeves have been labelled

FIGURE 1

The main semantic fields in rap anti-language (<http://www.rapdict.org>)

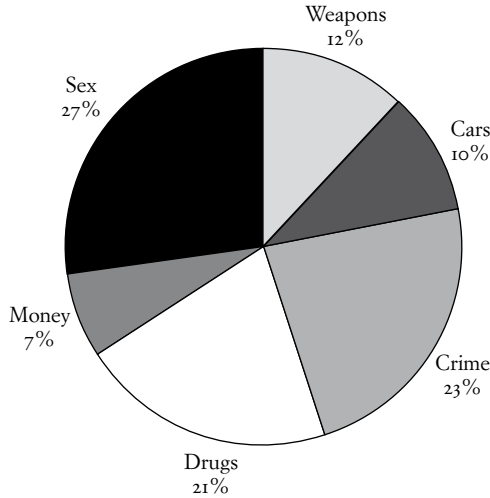


FIGURE 2

The so-called “Tipper-sticker” appearing on rap record sleeves since 1989



with since 1989 as a result of the so-called anti-rap crusade, a campaign launched by the American PMRC (Parents Music Resource Centre) and headed by Tipper Gore, wife of the former vice-president Al Gore<sup>8</sup>.

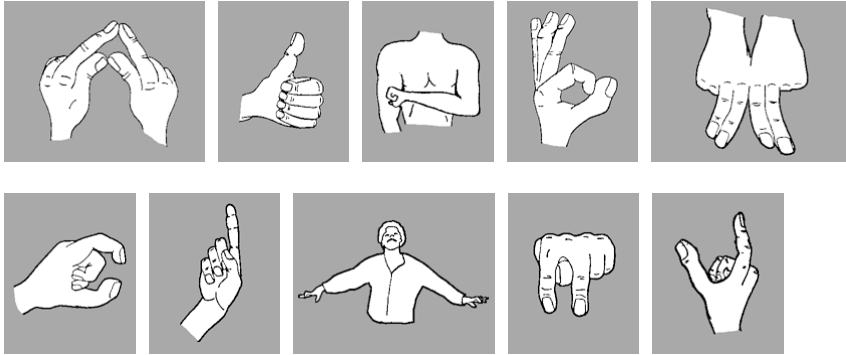
As noted by Bouissac<sup>9</sup>, the term “iconicity” is polysemous. On the one hand, it can apply to categories that have innate iconic properties; on the other hand, it can be understood only in relation to specific contexts of use.

As far as hip-hop culture is concerned, iconicity extends beyond the music itself to such corollary expressions as *graffiti art* or *writing* and the competitive world of *break dancing*, a phenomenon rooted in the rapidly

changing and fading gang culture of American ghettos, which can be interestingly found also in the gestures rappers' performances are always accompanied with (FIG. 3).

FIGURE 3

Examples of rappers' gestures referring to their belonging to criminal gangs  
(www.streetgangs.com)



By drawing mental pictures of senses, those gestures reveal individualized senses of meanings<sup>10</sup>.

However, the focus of the present analysis is verbal communication, in other words linguistic iconicity in rap lyrics. Since music, even popular music, is a form of art, iconicity, or rather *iconization* is to be viewed as a cultural process that involves the members of a given cultural or linguistic community<sup>11</sup>. Iconicity, in fact, refers to the ability of language to present, rather than represent or designate, its meaning. Here meaning is not something that accompanies the word but is performed by it<sup>12</sup>, in that iconicity plays a significant role on the higher level of discourse organization rather than on the level of grammatical analysis<sup>13</sup>.

Songs are among the most social and socially responsive forms of contemporary art. Rap songs, in particular, tend to display an argumentative dimension, which is constructed dialogically through recognition and exchange with an audience, hence they appeal to one's "iconic competence", a mechanism that «may be intentionally used for various purposes, from purely aesthetic considerations to ideological and/or political manipulation»<sup>14</sup>.

The empirical basis of the investigation is a corpus of approximately one hundred songs, covering a time-span of twenty years, from 1979 – the

year of the first rap record release – to 1999. The lyrics have been selected cross-checking music-related websites and according to three main criteria:

1. the inner-city life theme;
2. the use of Labov's narrative categories<sup>15</sup>;
3. their representativeness of the rap speech community enduring in time, a rather slippery concept referring to a widespread knowledge of the songs.

The analysis carried out is pragmatic rather than structural because interaction between the author and the listener is one of the most distinctive features of songs as a narrative genre.

On the one hand, with the help of specific BEV (Black English Vernacular) and rap dictionaries available on the web<sup>16</sup>, I have tried to scrutinize to what extent iconicity, both as concrete iconic images and as more abstract iconic diagrams, may be considered as the driving force towards lexicalization.

On the other hand, I have paid particular attention to another crucial question: to what extent the iconic one-to-one principle – that is to say the strict correspondence between word-forms and cognitive concepts – is violated by individual reinterpretations due to the interaction between narrator/performer and listener.

## 2

### **Imagic *vs* diagrammatic iconicity in rap lyrics**

#### 2.1. Onomatopoeia and ideophones

Besides terms which are truly iconic, as they convey a natural analogy between the signifier and the signified, rap language offers examples in which form and meaning are linked through diagrammatic iconicity, where the similarity between sign and object is more language-dependent and context-dependent.

Rappers, in fact, make frequent use of *double talk* because they rely not only on the target's linguistic competences, but above all on a shared legacy of knowledge. When they sing, they think of a double audience divided between the people who will immediately understand the real meaning of their message and the ones who will not get the *inside joke*. They do that with the help of *tonal semantics*, a linguistic device consisting in the practice of using voice inflection and altered rhythm of speech to convey meaning in discourse<sup>17</sup>. As a result of this practice, virtually any word can assume totally contradictory meanings.

This is a feature common to African American speech, as Geneva Smitherman<sup>18</sup> suggests:

The words given the special black slant exist in a dynamic state. The terms are discarded when they move into the white mainstream [...]. This was/is necessitated by our need to have a code that was/is undecipherable by foreigners (i.e. whites).

Historically, the need for Black English speakers to have an exclusive use of certain meanings may be traced back to slavery, where a kind of secret language was extremely useful for communication. As large sectors of the Black population continue to live in informal segregation and alienation, this linguistic strategy continues to have significant effects in differently productive dimensions of iconization.

Onomatopoeia and ideophones offer the best-known examples of imagic iconicity, in that «signs are motivated by the “object” in the real world that they represent, and they are therefore non-arbitrary»<sup>19</sup>.

The world rappers narrate is *their* real world: *the hood*, the ghetto. Not surprisingly, in the corpus at least three onomatopoeic terms, namely *pop*, *buck* and *rat-a-tat-tatt*, mime the same meaning of the verb *to shoot*, but suggest different degrees of pathos. *Pop* and *buck* are employed in epizeuxis, a figure of speech that consists in the repetition of a word in immediate succession and that can be used, iconically, to express strong emphasis<sup>20</sup>, while *rat-a-tat-tatt* is used in more dramatic situations, as we can see in the following examples:

- (1) *Pop pop pop*  
When it's shot who's to blame?  
Headlines, front page, and rap is the name  
(Stop the Violence All-Stars, *Self Destruction*, 1988)
- (2) *BUCK BUCK*, Lights out  
(Dr Dre & Ice Cube, *Natural Born Killaz*, 1990)
- (3) Escaped alive, though the car was battered  
*Rat-a-tat-tatted* and all the cops scattered  
(Slick Rick, *Children Story*, 1988)

Also significant is the presence of two occurrences of the iconic and critical nexus *bl* that in the English language evokes something relating to light or brightness<sup>21</sup>. The first term is *bling-bling*, which in American slang means *expensive jewellery*, whereas in rap anti-language, after jailhouse lingo, it means that *officers are coming* and mimes the sound of the cluster of keys moving as officers walk along prison passages. The second term is *blink*, with the meaning of *opening and closing one's eyes quickly*. In this case the function of the critical nexus is similar to alliteration, in that it emerges in moments of great pathos, as in the following example:

- (4) But the dude stares endlessly  
*Blinking*  
*Blink, blink, blink*  
 (RUN-DMC, *On the Subway*, 1986)

An element which seems worth pointing out is that onomatopoeia and ideophones in an anti-language may offer borderline examples between imagic and diagrammatic iconicity, because some expressions are perceived as iconic features more easily, if not exclusively, by the members of the *inner circle* of rap speech community.

The term *ching-chow*, for instance, refers to the way of speaking of Orientals and is often used with a derogatory connotation, while *boo-yaa* is an example of how the iconic one-to-one principle may be violated by personal reinterpretation: the term is an onomatopoeia for a gun shot, but it ended up referring to crack, the sound of the word being evocative of the devastating effect this powerful drug has on the human brain.

Another onomatopoeic expression of this kind is the term *po-po* for the police, which resembles the echo of police sirens wailing in ghetto streets. *Jazzmatazz* is a term which indicates black music in general as praiseworthy, and is an ad hoc variant on the term *razzmatazz*, which means noisy and noticeable activity.

Finally, the term *bebop* is an interesting example of lexicalization: the expression was coined by Dizzie Gillespie and Charlie Parker to identify the kind of jazz born in the 40s as a reaction by young black musicians to the commercial swing performed by the white big bands of the 30s; it is an onomatopoeic word which refers to a particular rhythmical effect obtained with the drums, but it ended up becoming synonymous with “black”, in other words “excellent” rhythm, as a reaction to the fact that, like rap, bebop was initially attacked as unmusical and immoral<sup>22</sup>. Iconically significant is also the title of Gillespie’s autobiography: *To Be or Not to Bop*<sup>23</sup>.

## 2.2. Alphabetical letters and numbers

Writers since ancient times have used alphabetical letters as iconic images of objects in their verses or prose<sup>24</sup>. This is a feature we can find in song lyrics too and in rap lyrics it is possible to note how different meanings are mimed by the same form in different contexts and/or co-texts.

For example, the letter *G* is used as the alphabetic icon of *god*, as well as *girl* or *gangsta*, a term that indicates a member of a gang, but it may be also an icon of money, more precisely *grand*, that is to say a 1000 dollar bill.

The letter *H* refers to *heroin*, the drug which rappers refer to also as *eight*, *H* being the eighth letter of the English alphabet.

The capital *B* is employed as an iconic sign for *black*, for example in expressions like *B-boy*, whereas *b-boy*, with small *b*, stands for *break-boy*, that is to say one, not necessarily a black boy, who breakdances.

In an anti-language the iconic value of numbers is linked to underworld activities. The use of numbers offers interesting example of rappers' pragmatic approach to reality, in that they refer to everyday life in the inner city.

Consequently, the pair of numbers *1-2* fits rappers' image of a left-right combination punch recalling the ability of fighting in the streets, which is usual among black gangs in the ghettos. Likewise, the number *10* is one of the countless ways to indicate a gun, namely a 10-bullet model.

An interesting example is offered by the number *86*, which is a borrowing from restaurant lingo, where it means that you want to cancel an order already placed with the kitchen; obviously, the connotation the number acquires in rap anti-language has nothing to do with food: the hidden meaning refers to the abortion of a criminal plan, mostly the plan to kill someone.

Similarly, *187* refers to homicide, and its iconic origin has to be found in the Californian penal code number for this crime, used by the police as a sort of spoken shorthand on the radio, while *411* is an icon for the expression *I need information*, which as is well known is the US phone number operating this service.

The duo *7-11* is used iconically as an adjective with the meaning of *available*, in that it comes from those convenience stores which open from 7am to 11pm, when other stores are closed. Similarly, *24/7/365* is a cryptic expression that mimes *all the time, always* in meaning, as it comes from 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Particularly creative is the iconic use of number *5000* as a farewell bidding enacting the state of being a fugitive from justice; it originates after the *Audi 5000 car*, a very rare sight nowadays because the model has been renamed.

A quite tricky example where numbers stand for letters of the English alphabet is offered by the sequence *4-9-3-11*: the result is the spelling of *D-I-C-K*, a very offensive term, overused by rappers.

### 2.3. Eye-dialect

Eye-dialect is a particular feature of Black English Vernacular and other non-standard varieties of language; it refers to the use of misspelling, in that eye-dialect consists in spelling words as they sound<sup>25</sup>. This aspect underlines the iconic function of phonological elements, since «to the speaker it seems as if the sounds were especially suited to the meaning»<sup>26</sup>.



Eye-dialect is one of the reasons why purists have defined BEV as broken English. It is noteworthy that some linguists reject the definition of BEV, which they consider negatively connoted because it refers to a dialect rather than a language. These linguists prefer *Ebonics*, a blend term between the words *ebony* (black) and *phonics* (sounds), putting great emphasis on the African origins of this language and its rich oral tradition<sup>27</sup>.

A typical example of eye-dialect in rap lyrics is offered by the context-bound word *nigga*, which may have different connotations according to the perlocutionary effect it has on the target: if the word is uttered by a white, it is perceived as an insult, while uttered by a black it can be quite affectionate<sup>28</sup>. It is no coincidence that rappers often use *nigger* rather than *nigga* when they report white people's opinions.

Similarly, the term *homiez* refers both to close friends and to members of the same gang, which for rappers is often the same.

A further example of eye-dialect is offered by the term *Haarlem*, reproducing a drawl, the typical black slow way of speaking in which the vowel sounds are lengthened; pronounced and spelled like this, it refers to the "black" vision of the well-known American black ghetto: as the black poet Al Young suggests, «New York has its New Yorks»<sup>29</sup>.

### 3

#### Iconicity and word formation

As Ungerer<sup>30</sup> suggests, the iconic one-to-one principle, expression of the isomorphic word/content relationship of words, is violated by all word formation processes involving more than one concept.

Nevertheless, iconicity may be seen as the driving force towards lexicalization, with particular reference to word formation processes like clipping, acronyms, blending and conversion, whereas compound and contraction are more challenging.

In rap lyrics, among the cases of clipping there are nouns like *pen* for penitentiary, *vets* for veterans – the latter refers not to the people who have served in the armed forces for years but to those who have spent many years in prison – *Cali* for California, *dis* for disrespect and *mag* for the 44 Magnum, whereas *'lac* stands for Cadillac.

In the following examples from the corpus, it is possible to realize to what extent the compression of information resulting from clipping corresponds to a reduction of conceptual meaning, or denotative content<sup>31</sup>:

- (5) You'd rather see me in the *pen*  
(N.W.A., \*\*\* *Tha Police*, 1988)

- (6) To the *vets* you're a duck  
(The Stop the Violence Movement, *Self Destruction*, 1988)
- (7) Thinkin' *Cali* is just fun  
(Tupac, *To Live & Die in L.A.*, 1996)
- (8) You'll get *dissed*, expect it  
(Boogie Down Productions, *Part Time Sucker*, 1988)
- (9) I touch you with my *mag*  
(Dr. Dre and Ice Cube, *Natural Born Killaz*, 1990)
- (10) *Mac's drive 'Lacs*  
(Big Mello, *Mac's Drive 'Lacs*, 1993)

Among the numerous acronyms coined in rap language, an example of iconicity which leads to lexicalization is offered by *C.R.E.A.M.*, which stands for *Cash Rules Everything Around Me* and means *money*, but is pronounced as a distinctive and autological – hence self-describing – word evoking the best part of something.

Other acronyms need a higher contextualization: *B.G.*, for instance, stands for *Baby Gangster*, as opposed to *O.G.*, *Original Gangster*. In the hip hop community, an *O.G.* has his name linked to the things he did in the past and must always live up to his name, whereas a *B.G.* has still to gain his reputation as a gangster.

Further examples are offered by *O.J.*, acronym which refers to a big car, after the name of the famous football player O. J. Simpson who was the adman for numerous Ford commercials; *G.T.A.* for *Grand Theft Auto*, legalese for stealing a car; *J.P.T.* for Japanese People Time, used by rappers with the meaning of *being on time*.

Finally, *R.T.D.* is an acronym for recontextualizing *Rapid Transit District* – the Los Angeles County Mass Transit Bus – as *Rough Tough and Dangerous* emphasizing the fact that people who travel on these buses get robbed or mugged on a regular basis.

As far as blending is concerned, there is an extensive use of the term *edutainment*, which refers to the ability to *educate* through *entertainment*, which, in an effort to inform black people about their past and their present, is one of the main aims of rap music.

An interesting example of lexicalization in a diachronic perspective is offered by *Phat*: in the 60s, in fact, it was a blend between *physically* and *attractive*, but the term evolved into more creative and potentially offensive acronyms, respectively *Plenty of Hips And Thighs* in the 70s and *Pussy Hips And Tits* in the 80s.

As to conversion, a word-formation process peculiar to American English and strongly disapproved of by English language purists<sup>32</sup>, the corpus offers several examples of nouns converted into verbs, such as *battle*, used with the specific meaning of freestyle – or lyrics improvisation – competition, and *gun*, miming iconically the action of shooting, as in the following examples:

- (11) You wanna *battle*? [...]
   
Don't come into this rap game if you don't belong.
   
(Gang Star, *New York Straight Talk*, 1998)
- (12) 'Coz I'm mad and I'm *gunning*.
   
(Ice-T, *Freedom of Speech*, 1989)

Most of the compounds created by rappers may be considered as examples of what has been termed semantic derogation<sup>33</sup>, as they refer to women acquiring demeaning or sexual connotations. Some examples are the terms *cateye*, *hoodrat* and *chickenhead*. I leave to my reader the task of inferring their meaning.

Finally, in rap language there are numerous examples of phonological contractions. Some of them are *Imma* for *I am going to*, *figga*, which is split into *finger on the trigger*, referring to someone always prepared to shoot if necessary, *DT* for *detective* and *furilla* instead of *for real*, with reference to something known to be true. As we can see, the constituting words are mixed in a way that ignores common grammatical rules for contractions, giving prevalence to the iconic function of sound.

#### 4

### Sounds from the inner city: contextualized iconicity

As we have seen so far, rappers enrich their language with expressions coming from their everyday experience, whose iconic value is understandable only to their speech community and in relation to specific contexts of use.

The contextualization of iconic images is even higher in such expressions that may be termed *borrowings from the cinema*, in that they are taken from those Hollywood movies which appeal to the rap community. Such borrowings may include both names of actors or characters and *sound-bites*, very short pieces of footage uttered by a movie star. Examples of the former are the following verses:

- (13) So I *bogart* and never get scared
   
(Eric B & Rakim, *In the Ghetto*, 1990)

- (14) But now I'm *Swayze*  
(EPMD, *It's Going Down*, 1992)
- (15) Infra red aimed at your head  
like your name is *Sarah Connor*  
(Dr. Dre and Ice Cube, *Natural Born Killaz*, 1990)

The expression in (13) is used as a verb with the iconic meaning of behaving like Humphrey Bogart's characters, who have a reputation for toughness, while the expression in (14) connotes the situation of *being out of here*, and refers to the movie *Ghost* (1990), a supernatural thriller which features the late actor Patrick Swayze as a spirit caught in a limbo between here and the afterlife. The name in (15) belongs to the main female character of the movie *The Terminator* (1984), featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger as a futuristic cyber-creature who hunts for the poor Sarah Connor with the sole purpose of killing her.

As to *soundbites*, let us consider the following examples:

- (16) *fuck 'em all!*  
(Geto Boys, *Scarface*, 1989)
- (17) Takin' out a police will *make my day*  
(N.W.A., *\*\*\* Tha Police*, 1988)

The expression in (16) is copied verbatim from the movie *Scarface* (1983), featuring Al Pacino as the gangster Tony Montana, a character who is an icon for rappers, because he embodies the realisation, even if a questionable one, of the American Dream.

As for (17), the *soundbite* comes from the movie *Sudden Impact* (1983), the fourth in the *Dirty Harry* series, starring Clint Eastwood as the uncompromising, tough and streetwise inspector Harry Callaghan.

An iconic function may be identified also in the countless terms and expressions relating to cars, which are notoriously significant status symbols for rappers. Here are some examples:

- (18) I used to get no play, now she stays behind me,  
'cause I said I had a *Benzo* 190  
(N.W.A., *I Ain't The One*, 1988)
- (19) *Pancake*, front-to-back, side-to-side  
(Dr. Dre, *Let Me Ride*, 1992)

The expression in (18) refers to the Mercedes Benz, the well-known brand of expensive German cars, whereas the expression in (19) is more descrip-

tive, as it mimes iconically the hydraulic manoeuvre where the suspensions of a car are adjusted to set it closer to the ground.

Iconic features are recognizable also in those idiomatic expressions coming from jailhouse lingo. *Da house*, for instance, is an example of morphological iconicity conveying specificity<sup>34</sup>: the expression presents the free morpheme *da*, which is the eye dialect form for the determiner *the*. In this case form and meaning are linked by a similarity not between sign and denotatum but between the relation of signs and the relation of denotata: *da house*, in fact, is the way veterans call their cells.

A further example is offered by *toe-to-toe*, an underworld term for cell companion, which describes iconically the situation of sharing a very small cell with another criminal. Similarly descriptive is the expression *up north trip*, with the meaning of being sent to jail.

A great number of iconic expressions come from the criminal underworld. The locution *peel yo' cap*, for instance, describes grotesquely the action of killing someone shooting him to his head and disfiguring it, while *red rum* is the palindrome of *murder*, which gives interesting insights into how this poetic technique can be used as an icon of disorientation<sup>35</sup>, especially in an anti-language.

Particularly interesting is the expression *Rodney King*, which comes after the name of the black man who was brutally and unreasonably beaten by four policemen of the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department), and the ensuing Los Angeles riots in 1992. Inner-city riots erupted when the jury found the four policemen not guilty, in spite of the footage that showed their violent and unfair behavior. As a result, the expression above has gained a considerable narrative force, becoming synonymous with *police brutality*.

Other idiomatic expressions that perform an iconic function are *boys in blue* and *ghetto bird*, which stand respectively for *policemen* and *police helicopter*.

*Death* is often mimed by the expression *lights out*, whereas there are at least three different iconic verbs referring to a *murder*, namely *to do*, *to smoke* and *to wet*, the last one with the meaning of killing someone with great bloodshed.

## 5 Stylistic features

As Haiman<sup>36</sup> suggests, style is essentially iconic, while the substance of what is said is more or less symbolic.

Iconicity, on the other hand, can also provide a way of listening to songs as narrative texts, where the iconic focus shifts from an individual

word to the chosen mode of performance: the stress and tempo, for instance, may offer an iconic reading of rappers' performance style<sup>37</sup>, whereas the rhythmical phenomena may be interpreted in terms of iconicity as *kinetic metaphors*, although rhythmical dimensions of lyrics are encoded only imperfectly in their written representations<sup>38</sup>.

Iconicity in language is often bound up with the emotive value of certain sounds, particularly in oral poetry with its heavy use of the evocative power of rhyme, assonance, repetition, and alliteration. Since rap, as a musical genre, is to some extent a form of oral poetry, rappers make abundant use of rhyme, a poetic device which may be employed not only for merely decorative or mnemonic purposes. A rhyme recurring throughout a song, for instance, may form an icon of constancy<sup>39</sup>, especially in songs setting the rhyme scheme pattern with couplet rhymes (aa, bb, cc, dd), as we can observe in the following example:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (20) Broken glass everywhere                                      | a |
| People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care       | a |
| I can't take the smell, can't take the noise                      | b |
| Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice                 | b |
| Rats in the front room, roaches in the back                       | c |
| Junkies in the alley with the baseball bat                        | c |
| I tried to get away but I couldn't get far                        | d |
| Cos a man with a tow truck repossessed my car                     | d |
| (Grandmaster Flash & The furious Five, <i>The Message</i> , 1982) |   |

The sound of the couplet rhymes in this song reflects iconically the condition of the protagonist, who is narrating the feeling of a black man imprisoned in his own, never-changing life in the ghetto.

As a testimony to the long-standing oral tradition rap music belongs to, the stylistic feature represented in (21) may be found in preachers' speeches as well as in black work-songs, where it is possible to recognize also an iconic use of chiasmically arranged rhymes, a sort of bilateral symmetry which may express iconically blacks' antagonistic point of view, as in the following example:

- (21) We raise de wheat,  
 Dey gib us de corn;  
 We bake de bread,  
 Dey gib us de cruss;  
 We sif de meal  
 Dey gib us de huss...<sup>40</sup>

Iconicity becomes particularly instrumental in conveying emotions through the use of alliteration, a figure of speech that may form an icon of pa-

thos, giving great emphasis to what is narrated and described. Let us consider this example:

- (22) The place you play and where you stay  
 Looks like one big alleyway  
 You'll admire all the numberbook takers  
 Thugs, pimps and pushers, and the big money-makers  
 Drivin' big cars spending 20's and 10's  
 And you wanna grow up to be just like them, huh  
 Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers  
 Pickpocket peddlers, even panhandlers  
 (Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, *The Message*, 1982)

In the last verses of (22) alliteration contributes to the pathos of the narration, performing an iconic function that provokes in the listener an effect similar to that obtained turning the volume up<sup>41</sup>.

Not surprisingly, rap lyrics make prolific use of figurative language. As Wagner suggests, «Tropic usage opposes and counteracts that of conventional usage»<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, the most pervasive manifestation of distancing occurs just in the use of tropes, where distancing has to be viewed as the differentiation between the self and the other<sup>43</sup>, an expression of the self as autonomy and mastery of the conventions which establish meaning.

Grice, in his famous analysis of conversational implicatures<sup>44</sup>, has used the term *flouting* to characterize this provocative and creative break from conventions. Thus, the decisive point about tropes is that their use is social<sup>45</sup>, that they involve an element of power, and that they have an iconic value, especially in an anti-language.

Metaphors, for instance, are notoriously iconic, as illustrated in Peirce's triad including imagic, diagrammatic and metaphoric iconicity<sup>46</sup>.

As demonstrated by Lakoff and Johnson<sup>47</sup>, metaphors shape our view of the world and structure our very conceptual system, in that they are understandable by people who share not only the same language but also the same knowledge of the world. For this reason, metaphor may form an icon for an in-group, as in the following examples from the corpus:

- (23) Once upon a time, not long ago  
*When people wore pajamas and lived life slow*  
 (Slick Rick, *Children Story*, 1988)
- (24) I feel like a outlaw, broke my last glass jaw  
 You want some more? *livin' on a see-saw*  
 (Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, *The Message*, 1982)

The metaphor in (23) is understandable only by those people who associate the act of wearing pajamas with a sense of discretion, whereas the one in (24) can be construed easily by anyone who has had experience of ups and downs in their own life.

Similarly, metonymy is a trope which may form an icon of importance, as in the example below:

- (25) You got a problem?  
 I got a problem solver  
 and *his* name is revolver  
 (Dr. Dre & Ice Cube, *Natural Born Killaz*, 1990)

The use of the male personal adjective *his* rather than the neutral *its* referring to a weapon illustrates how essential a gun is for a rapper.

Another two tropes that may play an iconic role are irony and hyperbole, which are very common in the African American oral tradition<sup>48</sup>. What is brought into action here is a co-existence and correlation link called «double hierarchy»<sup>49</sup>. Irony, in fact, skilfully exploits some words or expressions by driving them to convey the opposite (antiphrasis) of what either is or is supposed to be, but also to bring something else to attention by means of comic paradox.

Hyperbole, on the other hand, makes someone or something sound much bigger, better or more important than they are, and in the African American tradition it regards almost exclusively black males' sexuality, as a result of centuries of inferiority complex caused by slavery and abuses<sup>50</sup>. The following are some verses of a rap song characterised by the presence of hyperbole. It is noteworthy that their authors in 1990 went to court accused of obscenity and were found not guilty after Henry Louis Gates Jr gave the jury a sociolinguistic explanation of this rhetorical device<sup>51</sup>:

- (26) I'll play with your heart just like it's a game  
 I'll be blowin' your mind while you're blowin' my brain  
 I'm just like that man they call Georgie Puddin' Pie  
 I'll fuck all the girls in Dodge and make 'em cry  
 (2LiveCrew, *Me So Horny*, 1990)

## 6 Conclusions

Iconicity works through various devices to achieve various ends. As Geoffrey Leech says, «the possibilities of “form enacting meaning” are virtually unlimited»<sup>52</sup>. This is particularly true in circumstances in which a new language is invented, like rap *cant* or anti-language, a *hostile style*<sup>53</sup> that may



be a challenging field of discourse analysis inasmuch as iconicity is a matter of description and narration, where individual (re)interpretation violates obstinately the iconic one-to-one principle:

In the black expressive system, life is constantly viewed as a performance [...]. Where the SE [Standard English] universe of discourse makes a strong distinction between non-causal performance and causal interaction (such as conversation), this is a distinction simply not made in BE. Rather, *all* expressive behaviour is judged as a performance – that is, in terms of its ability to affect onlookers, drawing them into some type of sympathetic participation<sup>44</sup>.

Iconicity may function as a literary strategy in a musical work. Rappers use iconic expression as words *painted* by music, in order to organize the physical, mental and temporal spaces within the world of their lyrics' narrative.

If we accept the assumption that meaning is a particular *way of seeing things*<sup>55</sup>, the fact that imagic, diagrammatic and metaphoric iconicity in rap language combine and overlap is symptomatic of the power of language to modify the perceived environment: observations of language in use show that in rap lyrics signifier and signified, which may be expressed as the speaking and the thinking, constitute a complex, dynamic entity rather than a *natural* resemblance, an entity to be contextualized and explored before we can understand it.

## Notes

1. *Toasting* is an ancient style of lyrical narration over a beat; *Signifying* is a practice of storytelling involving a verbal strategy of indirection which exploits the gap between the denotative and figurative meaning of words; *Playing the dozens* is a verbal game, a duel consisting of a ritualized, improvised use of language that aims to put down the opponent. Cfr. G. Smitherman, *Talkin that Talk*, Routledge, London-New York 2000.

2. D. M. Klapproth, *Narrative as Social Practice*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin 2004, in part. p. 102.

3. J. Wideman, *Playing, not Joking with Language*, in "The New York Times", 14 August 1988.

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5. J. Tozer, *Convicts use ye olde Elizabethan slang to smuggle drugs past guards into prison*, in "The Daily Mail", 8 June 2009.

6. T. Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown 1994, in part. p. 2.

7. W. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, University of Philadelphia Press, Philadelphia 1972.

8. P. Attolino, *Stile ostile. Rap e politica*, CUEN, Napoli 2003.

9. P. Bouissac, *Iconicity or Iconization? Probing the Dynamic Interface Between Language and Perception*, in C. Maeder, O. Fischer, W. J. Herlofsky (eds.), *Outside-In – Inside-Out. Iconicity in Language and Literature 4*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 2005, pp. 15-37.

10. J. Antas, *Gestures: Images of Concepts and Schemata of Thoughts*, in E. Tabakowska (ed.), *Iconicity in Language and Literature*, Universitas, Krakow 2006, pp. 71-96.
11. Bouissac, *Iconicity or Iconization? Probing the Dynamic Interface Between Language and Perception*, cit.
12. C. Bernstein (ed.), *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Oxford University Press, New York 1998.
13. E. Tabakowska, *Linguistic Expression of Perceptual Relationships: Iconicity as a Principle of Text Organization (A Case Study)*, in M. Nänny, O. Fischer (eds.), *Form Miming Meaning*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 1999, pp. 409-22.
14. E. Tabakowska, *Iconicity as a Function of Point of View*, in Maeder, Fischer, Herlof-sky (eds.), *Outside-In – Inside-Out. Iconicity in Language and Literature 4*, cit., in part. p. 376.
15. Based on the study he conducted in Harlem, Labov's Model of Oral Narrative consists of six categories which serve to address a hypothetical question about narrative structure: Abstract (What is this story about?), Orientation (Who or what are involved in the story, and when and where did it take place?), Complicating Action (Then what happened?), Evaluation (So what?), Resolution (What finally happened?), Coda (How does it all end?). These elements are not necessarily present in all narratives. Cfr. W. Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1972.
16. P. Atoon, *Rap Dictionary* (online publication) <http://www.rapdict.org>; AA.VV., *The Ebonic Dictionary for Social Workers*, at [www.blackrefer.com](http://www.blackrefer.com); AA.VV., *The Prisoner's Dictionary*, at [www.prisonwall.org](http://www.prisonwall.org); AA.VV., *Rap Dictionary*, at [www.rapdict.org](http://www.rapdict.org); AA.VV., *Urban Dictionary*, at [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)
17. M. Watkins, *Black Humor from Slavery to Stepin Fetchit*, 1979 (online publication: <http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APFo204/Watkins/Watkins.html>).
18. Smitherman, *Talkin that Talk*, cit., in part. p. 61.
19. O. Fischer, M. Nänny, *Introduction: Iconicity and Nature*, in O. Fischer, M. Nänny (eds.), *Iconicity* [Special Number of the "European Journal of English Studies", 5, 2001], pp. 3-16, in part. p. 7.
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31. Ivi.
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33. S. Wareign, *Language and Gender*, in Singh, Stilwell Peccei (eds.), *Language Society and Power*, cit., pp. 75-92.
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