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Grammar

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[ɛpsɪlan]: The Rapper's Delight

As a musician who has dabbled in rap, I never quite understood how other rappers could speak as fast as they could. This technique, called doublespeak by many, involves speaking syllables at twice the beats per minute of the song itself or faster. At first my hypothesis was that these rappers were honing in on the consonant bilabial stop sounds of [b] and [p], which of course I was not aware that this was my hypothesis because I was unaware of the phonetic symbols for those consonants until I was taught them in class this semester. Upon further investigation of the doublespeak second verse of the song *Strong As An Oak* by George Watsky, this thesis was proven wrong for a reason that can be seen in my phonetic transcriptions at the end of this paper, wherein the two aforementioned consonant sounds are not used more or less than other consonants. As well, the consonant sounds do not have much of anything to do with Watsky's ability to use the doublespeak technique.

However, there is a very large pattern within the vowel sounds; Watsky has used a massive amount of deletion and substitution transformations to eliminate vowel sounds that deviate from the vowel [ɛ]. Epsilon is a vowel that keeps the tongue in a state of muscle relaxation in the front and middle of the mouth, right near the alveolar ridge, and it is the pervading vowel within this portion of the song followed closely by [ɪ] and [ə], both of which are also vowels that involve the relaxation of the tongue. By keeping his tongue in a state of relaxation, Watsky keeps his entire jaw in a relaxed state, which allows him to rap along to twice the beat of the song at a very high speed. The English of the song differs from conversational

English however, in that one would not use this dialect for fear of sacrificing meaning; if one were to say the transcription of this song at a normal speed, one would simply sound like they were slurring. The speed at which the syllables are said is what retains the meaning of the original words.

[ɪ] takes center stage within the first line of the first stanza, immediately marking a difference between the traditional pronunciation: in the phrase [ʃəd ay sit ɒn], four separate words, become [ʃɪdɪ sɪdɪ], significantly decreasing the amount of tongue movement involved in the phrase. The [ʃ] consonant is still present because the vowel in the first word of the line is [a], and even though this is a vowel voiced in the back of the mouth, Watsky only needs to close his jaw to create the consonant [ʃ], and thus why it remains in the song due to the ease of transition between the two sounds. Watsky substitutes the [y] consonant in [my] with [a] to remove the glide the former would require. The reason for this is to make the vowel [æ] easier to transition to, for the velum remains static in the transition from the word [ma] to the word [æs].

Similarly, Watsky removes the consonant [ŋ] from the second line, and indeed every time it occurs, for a similar reason; the velum tends to remain static throughout this portion of the song with the exception of the [g] consonant that starts some of the later lines and the [k] consonant, but both of these occur very infrequently. Continuing with the second line of the first stanza, Watsky changes a word completely in order for the vowel to remain the same; [læv] becomes [lɪf] due to the following word. He changes this as well by adding an additional [ɪ] and deleting the [t], because the following word [ikuəl] is emphasized by elongating the vowel [i].

This is a phenomenon that Watsky does a lot within this verse; in order to emphasize the meaning of the particular lyric, he almost reverts to the traditional English phonetic pronunciation. [ikuəl] is a good example of this, but it is prevalent in better examples such as the end of the second stanza. [bət ɪf ðæt məntɪn kəms tu mi aɪm klaymɪŋ ɪt] versus his

pronunciation of [bæt ɪf ðæt məntɪn kəms də mɪ aɪm klaymɪn ɪt]. Once again he removes the enigma consonant, but we also see him change the [tu] to [də] here. This makes sense because the meaning is not lost between pronunciations, and he gets to keep his tongue relaxed for the schwa to boot. These points in the verse occur when Watsky reverts to singing the lyrics along to the beats per minute of the song itself, in essence stepping out of doublespeak in order to highlight a point in the lyrics.

However I have yet to talk about the titular vowel of this verse, [ɛ]. In the first line of the second stanza, he uses a single epsilon to replace four words in the traditional pronunciation as well as most of the vowels besides: [bi plæniŋ layk ðey kəd bi fɪtɪŋ ə kæməɪ] becomes [bi plɛnɛ dɛ fɛtɛn ɛ kæməɪ] without sacrificing meaning in any way despite four entire words being deleted for a single syllable. It is of course unintelligible if spoken slowly, which is the most interesting part of doublespeak: speed returns meaning to sounds as transformed as these because the way Watsky is writing this verse is to put as much meaning into as few syllables as possible without tensing up his tongue so that he can say it as fast as the song will allow, or indeed as fast as his mouth will allow.

The second line of the second stanza exhibits a use of epsilon that replaces vowels of a word while still retaining the same meaning. Watsky takes the word [ɪntu] and pronounces it [ɛntɛ]. The reason for this particular shift is that the consonant [ð] follows directly afterwards, and the tongue is already centered in the mouth from the epsilon. Thusly, it is only a small feat to move the tongue forward towards the front of the mouth to make an interdental fricative. If one were to pronounce the vowel [u] instead, the tongue would be in the back of the mouth and tensed in order to create the sound, and thus it would take more time and effort to shift in order to produce the [ð] sound. Granted not much time and effort, but the key here is shaving down as much time that the tongue is stressed as possible.

Sometimes however Watsky decides that even the schwa is not what he needs in a vowel, and opts for the epsilon instead. Returning to the first stanza in the third line at the very end when the word is [fɛðər]. He swaps out the schwa for the epsilon in the last syllable because following this word is the word [ænd], which he turns into [ɛn] in order for it to be pronounced like [fɛðər ɛn]. Again we see that rather than letting his tongue return to the center of his mouth he keeps it forward and relaxed while pronouncing these vowels, making epsilon the perfect choice to keep the syllables coming.

In that example however we see the beginning of Watsky start to utilize assimilation in order to have the words all crash together. The third stanza is utterly full of this, and in the case of line one, if one did not know the original lyrics they'd be slightly hard pressed to keep up with him. [gat ə brik ænd aym læyɪŋg ɪt dɒn] becomes [gada brɪɡɪnɪm leɪɛn ɪdɒn], the first two words fusing together, [ɪ] returning to fuse three words together, and so on. The key here is that the syllable count remains the same, but the word count itself goes down as they all fuse into their partners.

Watsky uses epsilon for this task in this stanza quite effectively in line three wherein [bɛkæuz aym ɪn ðə rɛd bæt ɪts ɒnli ə kələr] becomes [bɛkɛz ɛmɪndɛrɛd bɛtɛts ɒnlɛ dɛkɛlər]. Again, the number of syllables here does not change, but the number of words does as they all mash together to make the line as a whole flow quickly and easily with the tongue doing as little as possible during all of the vowel sounds. With the consonants surrounding the vowels all different voicings, the constant return of the tongue to the front of the mouth in mid height with relaxed tension makes it an easy springboard into each and every consonant possible. The phenomenon is almost like a paper fortune teller, wherein one returns it to its closed position after one opens it every time. The effect is a whiplike effect where Watsky's tongue can whip out consonants in doublespeak while returning to epsilon as a home position each time. Of course he does this not

only with epsilon, but the schwa and the vowel [ɪ] as well.

An interesting substitution that I noticed occurs in the sixth line in the third stanza, with the word [wɪθ]. Watsky adds a voicing to the interdental fricative here to make it [wɪð] instead. This mostly has to do with the word [hu] that follows, and he simply pronounces [u]. The transition between the consonant [ð] and the vowel [u] is treated almost as a flap, likely remnants of the [h] sound that Watsky shaved off here. It is because of the breath of air from the glottal [h] that the fricative becomes voiced instead of voiceless, but the [h] itself never materializes, instead lending its intended voicing to the [θ], turning it into [ð].

Continuing with the word [wɪθ], there is one other occurrence of it in this verse, and that is the third line in the first stanza. Here, the fricative is deleted altogether because of the awkward transition between [θ] and the [l] in the following word [ləsər]. The fricative interdental is just about the opposite position of the tongue in comparison to the lateral alveolar position, making the possibility of stumbling over one's words quite high even when trying to pronounce the transition carefully. Thus, Watsky deletes the fricative altogether so that there is absolutely zero chance of there being a stumble within this doublespeak part of the song. The transition between the vowel [ɪ] and the consonant [l] in comparison is much smoother, as the vowel leaves the tongue lax in preparation for the lateral.

Deletion is at play quite a bit in the third stanza in regards to the glide [y]. In the traditional pronunciation [y] litters the third stanza, but Watsky pronounces precisely one of them in the first line in the word [leyən]. All of the other [y] glides are completely removed so that the tongue can do a minimum of gliding, instead leaving it in the front of the mouth for the epsilon vowel. Watsky can get away with not pronouncing the glide and still maintaining the meaning of the words because the glide is not essential to the meaning of the words he is removing it from. Moreover, he tends to assimilate the following word into the place where the glide would be,

such is the case in the fifth line of the third stanza at the end, the word [dɛdɛkɛɪtu]. Originally three words in [dɛdɪkæyt it tu], the ash, the glide, the consonant [t], and even the vowel [ɪ] are assimilated into one all encompassing [ɛ]. At the speed of doublespeak, the replacement epsilon seems to sound like the [æy] sound in that word.

To use an example of a deletion that does not get replaced with an epsilon, the second line in the third stanza has the words [ʃəvəl nəw aɪm] that get assimilated into the word [ʃəvələm] by Watsky. [nəw] is completely deleted and [aɪ] is assimilated into a single schwa. This particular glide is completely insignificant because it is only in existence because of the contraction “I’m,” so the most important sound in that word is the [m] anyway. In this case however he deletes both a word and an entire syllable, affecting the syllable count. However this is also insignificant because the word that Watsky assimilated the remaining syllables into is easier to say than the traditional pronunciation while still retaining the same meaning.

Arguably this is a completely different dialect of English than one is used to. Traditional English pronunciations that one would only acquire when pronouncing each syllable extremely carefully is one thing, conversational English is another thing, but this is something entirely different. First of all this dialect is totally useless in normal speech because one would always have to talk fast in order to be understood. Second of all, deleting so many consonants to the point where the words run together causes there to be a lot of slurring in speech that is covered up by the speed of how they are said, but is easily heard if one records themselves and speeds down the audio, which is how I managed to listen to the song closely enough to get a phonetic transcription out of it. However if one were to leave the dialect in its context, doublespeak is undoubtedly fascinating to study because patterns emerge upon closer examination. Knowing the phonetics behind the technique is invaluable to someone seeking to learn it.

The utmost important thing to note about this entire epsilon phenomenon however is that

it is highly unlikely that George Watsky is aware that he is even doing it. In rapping terminology he would probably say that he just structures the syllables so that it “flows” with the “beat” better, but he would not be able to explain how precisely he is speaking so quickly with such precision as the terminology of phonetics offers. In fact he says simply that he has always been able to talk fast from the time that he was very young, so it is highly likely that he learned how to speak in doublespeak in the same way that young kids learn grammar: he was more than likely surrounded by lots of rap music with lots of doublespeak as a child and learned how to do it through mere exposure to it. This particular song is not even the fastest that Watsky can rap, as the song that gave him his claim to fame was even faster than this particular piece. Regardless, it is clear that through the use of phonetic analysis, one can easily determine the root of the success of this verse, and that falls neatly to the vowels [ɛ], [ə], and [ɪ].

Song's Lyrics:

Why should I sit on my ass on the couch
 Be askin' why love isn't equal
 With lesser possessions I'm light as a feather
 And so I can fly like an eagle
 Cause' everyone dies
 And I wonder why leaders in power
 Would lie to their people.

Be planning like they could be fitting a camel up into the eye of a needle.
 But damn it id settle for fitting a
 94' Camry inside of my driveway
 I'm sick of the image,
 I'm livin' my life, and I'm doin' it my way.
 I'd rather be makin' the choices I'm proud of
 Than chasing the mountain of money.

But if that mountain comes,
 To me, I'm climbin' it.

Got a brick and I'm laying it down,
 Gotta shovel, now I'm breakin' this ground.
 Because I'm in the red
 But it's only a color that I will be
 Paintin' this town.
 Because when I make it,
 Then I dedicate it to the friends that stood with,
 Who would do me favors.
 Even lend me paper, when I couldn't pay for
 A little take-out. [George Watsky 2013]

Traditional English Phonetic Transcription:

[way šəd ay sit ɔn my æs ɔn ðə kauč
 bi æskiŋg way ləv ɪznt ikuəl
 wɪθ lɛsər poʒɛʃəns aɪm laɪt æz ə fɛðər
 ænd so ay kæn flai lik æn igəl
 kɔz evəvrywən days
 ænd ay wəndər way lɪdərz ɪn pæwər
 wəd lay tu ðər pipl]

bi plæniŋg layk ðey kəd bi fiŋŋg ə kæməɪ
 əp ɪntu ði ay əv ə nidl
 bət dæm ɪt aɪd sɛtl fər fiŋŋg ə
 naɪnti fUər kæmri ɪnsayd əv may drayvweɪ
 aɪm sɪk əv ðə ɪmɪʃ]

aym liviŋg may layf ænd aym duiŋg it may wey
ayd raðer bi maykiŋg ðə ɔɪseɪz aym praud əv
ðæn ɔæsɪŋg ə mɒntɪn əv mənɪ
bət ɪf ðæt mɒntɪn kəms tu mi aym klaymiŋg ɪt

gat ə brɪk ænd aym læyiŋg ɪt dɒn
gat ə ʃəvəl nəw aym brækiŋg ðɪs græund
bekæuz aym ɪn ðə red bət ɪts ɒnli ə kələr
ðæt ay wɪl bi pæntɪŋg ðɪs tæun
bekæuz wɛn ay mæyk ɪt ðen ay dædɪkæyt ɪt
tu ðə frɛndz ðæt stUd wɪθ
hu wəd du mi fevərs
ɪvən lænd mi pepr wɛn ay kədnt pey fər
ə lɪtl tekæut]

Watsky's English Phonetic Transcription:

[wa ʃɪdɪ sɪdɪ ma æs n ma kauč n
bi æskɪn wa lɪf ɪzɪn ikuəl
wɪ lɛsɛr pɛzɛʃɛnz ɛm lɪt ɛz ɛ fɛðər
ɛn so ay kɪn flay layk ɛn ɪgl
kəz ɛvrɪwɛn days
n ay wəndər way lɪdɛrz ɪn pæwər
wəd lay də ðər pipl

bi plɛnɛ dɛ fɛtɛn ɛ kæməl
əp ɛntɛ ðɛ ɪy əv ɛ nɪdl
bɛ dɛmɛt ayd sɛdl fər fɪdɪn ɛ
nayndɛ fUər kɛmrɛ ɪnsɪd əv mɪ drɪvɛ
am sɪk ə də ɪmɪʃ
am livɪn may layf ɛn am duɪn ɪt may wey
ɛd rɛðər bi mɛkɪn ðɛ ɔɪseɪz ɛm prɛd əf
ðɛn bi ɔæsɪn a mɛntɛn əm mənɛ
bət ɪf ðæt mɒntɪn kəms də mɪ aym klaymɪn ɪt

gada brɪɡɪnɪm lɛyɛn ɪdoun
gada ʃəvələm brɪɡɪndɪs græund
bɛkɛz ɛmɪndɛrɛd bɛtɛts ɒnlɛ dɛkɛlɛr
ama bi pɛntɛn ðɛs tæun
bɛkəz wɛnæmɛkɪt ðɛnɪ dɛdɛkɛtɪtu
əl dɛfrɛnzɛt stɛd wɪð
u wədu mɛfɛvɛrz
ɛvɛlɛmɪ pepr wɛnɪkɛdɛn pɛfər
ɛ lɛtl tɛkut]