Started From the Bottom, Now We’re Here: A Linguistic Perspective   
on Cardi B and the Greater Influence of Hip Hop Music

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Table of Contents

[Abstract 3](#_Toc87534385)

[Started From the Bottom, Now We’re Here: A Linguistic Perspective on Cardi B and the Greater Influence of Hip Hop Music 4](#_Toc87534386)

[Cultural Chameleon 5](#_Toc87534387)

[The Feminine Persona 8](#_Toc87534388)

[Larger Influence 10](#_Toc87534389)

[References 13](#_Toc87534391)

Abstract

This piece seeks to determine the linguistic effects diversification in the larger mainstream media can attain through the focal lens of Cardi B. Through a look at her linguistic background, dialect, and previous portrayals of the feminine presence in hip hop culture, the larger influence and exposure to AAVE and Caribbean influence English is documented, as well as the social effects this exposure could have for women of color.

Keywords: Cardi B, sociolinguistic, hip hop, rap, feminism

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Music is many things. Entertainment, a soundtrack for the mundane routines of life, an agent for social change, amongst other things. But music can also be used to gauge cultural attitudes and shifts. Take for instance the folk music revival of the 1960’s where music served as a vehicle for all of the aforementioned. With Bob Dylan singing protest songs and Joni Mitchell creating the mind map for intimate introspection, this sonic signature was allocated to the moment in history that marked one of the largest counterculture movements in the United States. Like any culture, the folk maintained a set of standards and customs that distinguished those who were in the culture, and those who were not. One of the key aspects that served this function was the lexical library and linguistic traits that denoted followers of the movement.

But as music changes with time, it’s role in society and culture does not. Though the soft strumming of acoustic guitars from the folk movement was replaced with the overdriven amplifiers of Hendrix and the psychedelic wave, that too was replaced by a shift in the mainstream. However, the music scene has recently witnessed the shift from a small sub culture that started in the early 70’s in the South Bronx to the massive global phenomenon it has become in 2021, one that has crossed social, economic, and ethnic lines to dominate the industry and culture. This, of course, is hip hop. Like the folk movement of the 60’s, modern day hip hop maintains many linguistic marks and trends that have largely become the hallmark of the genre. For the purpose of this study, I will be examining a figure that has largely come to dominate the field and, in turn, the mainstream culture, in order to take a closer look into the particular linguistic origins and effects they had had on the culture. The figure for this case study will be none other than the current queen of hip hop, Cardi B.

While many different cultural icons could be substituted, I believe Cardi B provides a compelling contrast to previous incarnations of music genres through her diversity and specific linguistic patterns exhibited. Born Belcalis Almanzar, Cardi B is descended from African and Caribbean ancestry, and lived a wildly colorful life before finding success (Editors, 2018). Additionally, I will examine how Cardi B represents the shift in cultural zeitgeist towards a more progressive, inclusive sociolinguistic environment in the mainstream. Ultimately, I will expand on my contention of Cardi’s use as a focal point for the progression and wide legitimization of linguistic diversity in the mainstream, while examining the counterarguments given in response to her cultural impact.

# Cultural Chameleon

As with any culture that sees substantial growth, there’s an influx of artists who seek to participate. However, Cardi B presents herself as unique case due to her diverse ethnic background which, in turn, is audible through her voice. I believe in order to be able to fully appreciate her large scale impact on the linguistic mainstream, we must first examine her origins. As previously mentioned, she derives much of her heritage from the Caribbean (Editors, 2018). In a 2018 interview with *People* magazine, she attributed growing up in the Bronx with her Dominican father and Trinidadian mother as responsible for her “broken English” (Petit, 2018). It is worth mention that her father only spoke Spanish to her growing up (Petit, 2018). As Erik Wayne Willis observed in his doctoral thesis, “The Intonational System of Dominican Spanish: Findings and Analysis” in 2003, Dominican Spanish is characterized by several interesting phenomena regarding the phonology of the language compared to other dialects. One particular segmental behavior that Willis observes is a “frication during the initial portion of the trill (often referred to as preaspiration)”. Interestingly enough, this is a linguistic behavior exhibited by Cardi B quite prominently. Her “catchphrase” as some have coined it, is a variation on the word *ok*, or as Cardi B would say it, *okurrr.* Phonetically, this would be [okr̠], with a voiced trill in the [r̠] sound. It is in this example, that we are able to observe the same phenomena that Willis detailed in his study of Dominican Spanish as the frication is audible during the onset of the trill. The trill is not a phonetic sound often employed in MAE, so I would contend that given Cardi B’s upraising, this linguistic trait is likely borrowed from Dominican Spanish. This hypothesis is backed by Eric Kellerman’s 1987 dissertation, “Aspects of Transferability in Second Language Acquisition” in which he observes the transfers of different linguistic traits from a speaker’s L1 to their L2.

Coming hand in hand with the linguistic trademarks transferred from Dominican Spanish are the societal perceptions and cultural identity that they entail. In her 2009 dissertation “Perceptions of Dominican Spanish and Dominican Self-Perception in the Puerto Rican Diaspora”, Eva-Maria Suarez Budenbender outlines the trends between language shifts and loss noting: “For these heritage speakers (i.e. speakers with variable proficiency in their heritage language, whose dominant language is that of the majority) the creation of identity is a more complex process”. This creation of identity, in the linguistic sense, is something that Cardi has be largely open about. In interviews, the rapper has been honest about the way she speaks and pronounces words and is, admittedly, self-conscious. The reason this becomes a large point of contention is the widely held belief of a “standard English” dictating how speech is supposed to sound, and anything other than MAE is an incorrect deviation. However, as I will later demonstrate, these phonetic variations and linguistic tendencies are what help to define Cardi B’s image.

Any discussion on the linguistic patterns of hip hop and rap would be rendered entirely moot if one did not give heavy credit to the African American presence and culture in the United States. Likewise, one who only distills Cardi B down to her Caribbean influences is also remiss. Cardi B also claims African American heritage, and the evidence of AAVE in her dialect is much more overt. One does not need to look any further than the first track on her debut album, *Invasion of Privacy*, to see examples. In the latter half of the track, entitled *Get Up 10*, Cardi raps a line that goes: “I walked into the label, ‘Where the check at? (Where the check?)’”. The exclusion of the copular verb *is*, transforming *Where is the check at?* to *Where the check at?*, is one of the syntax rules that guides AAVE. Use of the African American Vernacular here lends itself to a certain credibility, something that author Cheryl Lynette Keyes discusses in her book Rap Music and Street Consciousness (2004). In the book, Keyes observes the way her identity as an African American woman interacts in dialogue with the participants she interviewed for the project (Keyes, 2004). She noted that though her gender became a hinderance in discussion with certain artists, her ethnicity did create “a certain sameness” (Keyes, 2004). It is this through “certain sameness” that Cardi B, and hip hop music in the larger context, seeks to use to create connection with the audience by using AAVE. This sentiment is further echoed in the book “Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity” by Adam Krims (2000) in which he observes how one song, Ice Cube’s classic, “The N\*\*\*\* Ya Love to Hate”, is able to portray the artist as a “revolutionary African American subject” through its identity crafted from the shared historical contexts and semantic references, thus connecting with its audience while giving gravity to the artist’s own credibility. This is a rhetorical device also employed within *Get Up 10* as Cardi paints the familiar rags to riches story that resonates with many within the hip hop community which is in turn bolstered by her dialect to firmly substantiate her identity within the culture.

## The Feminine Persona

As previously mentioned in the introduction, music is an art form that is constantly moving and going through changes. Shifts occur even within a specific culture, and as the current prevailing culture, hip hop is no different. In this regard, Cardi B is the embodied agent of change on the grand scale. While she may not be the first female MC, or the last, Cardi is arguably one of the largest in the genre. For instance, her debut studio album, *Invasion of Privacy,* recently became the first album to spend three full years on the Billboard 200, surpassing *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Harris, 2021). In the genres of hip hop and rap music, this feat is monumental. For the explanation why, one needs to look no further than Wietzer and Kubrin’s article for the 2009 volume of Men and Masculinities entitled, “Misogyny in Rap Music: A content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings”. In the piece, the authors note the distinct dominance in the way women are portrayed in rap and hip hop records. From a body of more than 400 rap songs, they observed not only the subordinate role women were consigned to, but the downright graphic depictions of physical and sexual violence against women, especially against black women (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Even within the popularized degradation of women in the music industry, this distinct viscerality is unique to the genre, as a cross examination between other genres that placed women in lower status were found to be lyrically more subtle (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009).

In contrast to this, Cardi B stands as unique paradox. In her verses, the rapper tends towards the very language that has previously been used in the prevailing misogynistic culture of hip hop. For example, take the a line from her hit single “Bodak Yellow”: “Dropped two mixtapes in six months/ What bitch working as hard as me?/ I don’t bother with these hoes, don’t let these hoes bother me.” Additionally, a couple of lines later she states, “My pussy feel like a lake/ He wanna swim with his face, I’m like, ‘Okay’”. From the employment of vulgarities and slang to the graphic depictions of sexual acts, it would be easy to dismiss the verse as simply being an extension of the misogynistic culture. However, I believe this would be a ham-fisted oversimplification of the subtleties that the semantics truly hold. Take for instance, the now infamous *7 Minute Freestyle* performed by Big L and Jay Z. In Big L’s second verse he raps, “The bitch type I dislike, I’m rougher than a fist fight/ All chicks ain’t shit, ain’t no such thing as Mr. Right/ So we can never be a couple, hun/ Fuck love! All I got for hoes is hard dick and bubble gum.” While employing many of the same words and vulgarities, there is a jarring difference in the way gender is perceived here. The first response line, “I’m rougher than a fist fight”, would seem to hint at the potential of a physical altercation, and the referral to women as “hoes” is intended with a bite, in an effort to degrade the feminine presence to nothing more than a tool for sexual gratification as validated in the line “All I got for hoes is hard dick and bubble gum.” This graphic, demeaning portray of women has largely become the standard in American hip hop and rap (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). This has become the case so much so that the comedic folk troupe Flight of the Concords from New Zealand parodied this trend in their rap song, “Hiphopopotamus vs. Rhymenoceros”, saying, “Yes, sometimes my lyrics are sexist/ But you lovely bitches and hoes should know that I’m trying to correct this.” Similar to the way that Flight of the Concords acknowledged the previous tenets of the portrayal of women and mocked it for a comedic effect, Cardi B uses previously established lexicon to reillustrate women in hip hop. The terms “bitches” and “hoes” become terms of endearment, as she affectionately refers to herself as a hard working “bitch” in “Bodak Yellow”. The portrayals of explicit sexual content become one of sexual empowerment to the feminine as she describes the desire her partner possesses.

But this elicitation of the image of modern femininity does evoke controversy, even for those who are disciples of contemporary intersectional feminism. In her 2017 article “Cardi B: *Love & Hip Hop’s* Unlikely Feminist Hero”, author Sherri Williams observes some of the classist critiques towards Cardi’s brand of feminism from the more formal spaces. One of the undercurrents running through the piece as Williams contrasts the rapper’s more ground roots approach to feminism to the more academic and formal variety is the dialect that Cardi B possesses. Williams gives an example through a 2016 social media post in which the rapper states:

If you believe in equal rights for women, that makes you a feminist. I don’t understand how you bitches feel like being a feminist is a woman that have a education, that have a degree. That is not being a feminist. You discouraging a certain type of woman, that certainly doesn’t make you one. Some bitches wanna act like “oh you have to read a book about feminists.” That’s only a definition for a simple word. The problem is that being a feminist is something so great and y’all don’t want me to be great but too bad. Because at the end of the day I’m going to encourage any type of woman. You don’t have to be a woman like me to encourage and support you and tell you “yes bitch, keep on going.” And that’s why you mad you little dusty ass bitch.

This statement not only demonstrates the rapper’s intent in shifting the paradigm of what constitutes a modern feminist but is also a beautiful example of her use of AAVE.

Larger Influence

Each of the aforementioned pieces are not something that are inherently present only in the case of Cardi B. The distinction that makes these phonetic and lexical tendencies important, and one worth discussion in the sociolinguistic realm, is Cardi’s social elevation and visibility. Previously in this piece, I discussed a particular catchphrase (or “catchnoise” as one journalist coined it) she is associated with: “okurrr”. This particular morpheme was the focus of Pepsi’s 2019 Super Bowl LIII advertisement in which Cardi B is featured saying her signature phrase. An extended version of the ad featured online showed the super star showing those around her how to say it. As one of the most watched TV events, the Super Bowl indirectly exposed millions of American households to the Dominican tinged dialect of Cardi B. That is also discounting the millions of streams she accrues each year across all platforms (Harris, 2021). This exposure to the Afro Carribbean rapper builds a rapport with the public collective and, paired with the largely positive critical and popular acclaim, allows for the positive reinforcement of a feminism rooted in African American culture that directly serves as foil to previous portrayals.

The discussion on societal perception of black women is a vast one, but Cardi B is very much a focal point in the discussion. This is a point brought up in a piece by Ashley Payne entitled, “The Cardi B-Beyonce Complex: Rachet Respectability and Black Adolescent Girlhood” (2020). In it, Payne outlines the policing both internally and externally in the way young black woman behave, including in their speech patterns. Payne commends artists like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion for being “loud, rachet, and unapologetically themselves”, and outlines the way in which this serves to redefine what it means to be a black woman in the modern age (Payne, 2020). I would go as far to say that this statement is not only true but will set the cultural norm in future discussions on black womanhood. With posterity as the audience, the actions of woman like Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, and Beyonce will define the way in the mainstream will interact and shape their perceptions of the culture.

Ultimately, what I believe Cardi B to be doing, from the sociolinguistic perspective, is acting as the both the gateway and, for lack of better term, scapegoat for young woman of diverse ethnic backgrounds. By unapologetically being herself, in character and in dialect, she has drawn criticism, but also acclaim. I believe the dialectical patterns that come through her interviews and music allow her audience to identify with her, and yet it is the same materials that her naysayers use as ammunition. Through it all, her mainstream presence in the American media has persisted, if not grown stronger (Harris, 2021). In the end, Cardi B directly engages the American mainstream in a dialogue in favor of sociolinguistic diversity, and builds towards the progression of a more inclusive future in entertainment.

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