



Regional variation in African-American English speech and rap

Steven Gilbers
University of Groningen

Regional variation in African-American English (AAE) is especially salient to its speakers involved with hip-hop culture, as hip-hop assigns great importance to regional identity and regional accents are a key means of expressing regional identity. However, little is known about AAE regional variation regarding prosodic rhythm and melody. In hip-hop music, regional variation can also be observed, with different regions' rap performances being characterized by distinct "flows" (i.e., the rhythmic and melodic characteristics of a rap performance). In this talk, I present a study on regional variation in AAE speech and rap, specifically regarding the United States' East and West Coasts. It investigates how East Coast and West Coast AAE prosody are distinct, how East Coast and West Coast rap flows differ, and whether the domains of speech and music follow similar patterns in the AAE/hip-hop context. To this end, free speech and rap recordings of 16 prominent African-American members of the East Coast and West Coast hip-hop communities were phonetically analyzed regarding rhythm (e.g., syllable isochrony and musical timing) and melody (i.e., pitch fluctuation) using a combination of existing and novel methodological approaches. The results mostly confirm the hypotheses that East Coast AAE speech and rap are less rhythmically diverse and more monotone than West Coast AAE speech and rap, respectively. They also show that regional variation in AAE prosody and rap flows pattern in similar ways, suggesting a connection between rhythm and melody in language and music.