



# Ambitionz az a ridah: 2Pac's changing African-American English accent and rap flow

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Regional variation in African-American English (AAE; hip-hop's primary language variety in the US) 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. For rappers, using a regionally marked rap style (i.e., "flow": the rhythmic and melodic characteristics of a rap performance) is another important tool to represent where they are from.

Comparing East Coast and West Coast AAE prosody, West Coast AAE is marked by greater melodic variation and greater rhythmic variation. Similarly, West Coast rap flows exhibit more melodic and rhythmic variation than East Coast flows. This suggests a strong link between language and music in the AAE/hip-hop context, showing that rappers follow similar patterns in the domains of language and music when expressing their regional affiliations.

So what would happen to the speech and rap of a prominent rapper if they moved to another region, switching regional allegiances? To answer this question, this study diachronically tracks the speech and rap of the late rapper 2Pac throughout his career. 2Pac was originally from the East Coast, but later moved to California, where he would become West Coast hip-hop's leader in a conflict with his native East Coast scene.

The results show 2Pac's speech and rap became more West Coast-like over time, with the rate of this development towards West Coast norms increasing once he turned his back on the East Coast. He also regularly 'overshot' the target during this time, sounding more West Coast-like than his Californian peers. These observations suggest 2Pac consciously manipulated his speech and rapping to sound like a Californian when his changed regional identity demanded it, indicating that second (linguistic/musical) dialect acquisition involves both passive and active processes.

## About Steven Gilbers

Steven Gilbers (September 25, 1991) is an assistant professor in the field of hip-hop linguistics from Groningen, the Netherlands who specializes in the connection between language and music in a hip hop context as well as regional variation in African-American English and rap flows from the American West Coast and East Coast. In 2021, he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation titled *Ambitionz az a ridah: 2Pac's changing accent and flow in light of regional variation in African-American English speech and hip-hop music* at the University of Groningen. Gilbers is a former Fulbright Visiting Scholar at New York University and the University of California, Los Angeles where he worked with Renée Blake and H. Samy Alim. Aside from his academic endeavors, he is also active as a rapper and producer, and is involved with Dutch hip hop platform Homebase.