The grammaticalisation of pronominal *man* in contemporary grime lyrics

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This paper focusses on the use of pronominal *man* in grime, a popular genre of mostly London-based rap. My corpus consists of 500 songs totalling 178,133 words. It will be shown that the language used in the recordings shares various features with the emerging variety of Multicultural London English (MLE; cf. Cheshire et al. 2011). Uses of *man* as a personal pronoun are especially salient:

(1) Man (1st Sg) talk slang / So the feds can't work out what I just said to a man (n)

In the corpus, more than 800 such examples were found, including singular, plural and indefinite pronouns. The absolute and relative frequencies of pronominal *man* by far exceed those recorded in previous studies on the feature in MLE (Cheshire 2013). It will be seen that this distribution is grounded in the lyrical content of the songs and the identity construction of the rappers. This claim will be supported by qualitative observations and diverging text frequencies in thematic sub-corpora.

The central part of this study finds that every principle of grammaticalisation proposed by Hopper (1991) applies to *man*: *layering*, *divergence*, *specialization*, *persistence* and *de-categorialization*. While co-existing with standard personal pronouns (layering), *man* is serving as a model of language change processes in its noun form, such as new alternative plural forms, e.g. -*dem* suffixation (cf. *girldem*, *boydem*, *dogdem*). Regarding specialization, up to 17% of pronominal references in the corpus make use of *man* (3rd Ps, both in singular and plural). The study will also show that *man* retains several of its nominal properties, both semantical (e.g. +male) and morphological (e.g. plural; possessive form *man's*). While characteristics of all five principles are found, it is argued that the observed process of grammaticalisation is still in its initial stages.

Broader issues regarding the feature will be addressed with reference to identity constructions by the artists in the context of sociolinguistics of performance (cf. Bell & Gibson 2011). I am arguing that *man* serves as an adequate alternative to standard pronouns especially in the context of grime lyrics. In a final step, I will present a model depicting these aspects of pronominal *man* that tries to capture referents at all potential levels: personas and addressees in the songs, the audience and the external/outside world.

References

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