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Variation is the way to perfection Imperfect rhyming in Chinese hip-hop

Previous research on imperfect rhyming in English (Zwicky 1976) and Japanese (Kawahara 2007) hip-hop demonstrates its value as a source of implicit phonological knowledge. The present study focuses on how Chinese rappers compensate imperfect rhyming through linguistic performance and what it reveals about the social salience of language variation.

From a corpus of 55 songs performed by Chinese rappers, we identified 328 instances of imperfect rhyming based on orthographic representation. Further auditory analysis revealed that 60 such instances were realized as perfect match in the surface form. These cases fall into two linguistic types: 1) Mandarin-English mixing or monolingual English (N=29); 2) Mandarin regional variation (N=31). For Type 1), perfect rhyming is achieved primarily through the deletion of postvocalic obstruents, which serves to satisfy the Mandarin syllabic constraint of only allowing for sonorant coda. As rhyming V with V+obstruent is also the dominant form of imperfect rhyming in English songs (Zwicky 1967), its abundance in our data highlights Chinese rappers' familiarity with pop-music-specific rhyming techniques. Type 2) mostly involves the place neutralization of final nasal (e.g., *in-ing*), a pan-regional feature that is becoming increasingly prevalent in mediatized Mandarin. Through a comparison of the 'perfected' imperfect rhymes and those that remain unaltered in production, we will further address how the investigation of rap rhyming not only reflects relatively stable shared phonological knowledge as explored in previous research but also sheds light on potential directions of sociolinguistic change.

References

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