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## **Style online: Doing hip-hop on the German-speaking Web**

### **1. Introduction**

Drawing on sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and research on computer-mediated communication, this chapter develops a sociolinguistic approach to language style on the Web. Based on findings of a study on German-speaking hip-hop websites and discussion boards, it aims at demonstrating how the notion of sociolinguistic style could deal with the complexities of linguistic variability in computer-mediated communication (CMC). In particular, this chapter proposes a framework of style analysis, which attempts to bridge the gap between the social contexts of CMC and micro-linguistic processes in online text and talk, thereby using genre as a crucial mediating factor between the social and the linguistic. I start by contextualizing my approach in a brief discussion of style, computer-mediated communication, and the discourse arena of interest here, i.e. hip-hop.

The notion of style adopted here is inspired by recent “speaker design approaches” (Schilling-Estes 2002: 388-94) as well as by the framework of “social style of communication” by Kallmeyer and Keim (e.g. 2003). Notwithstanding their particular differences, these fairly new developments are influenced by interactional sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication, and reacting to previous notions of style in sociolinguistics, in particular those by Labov and Bell (cf. Schilling Estes 2002; Bell 2001). In these latter frameworks, style is discussed in terms of stylistic variation along a one-dimensional axis between standard and non-standard/vernacular speech. By contrast, the approaches of interest here view style as a holistic pattern, in which linguistic structures on several levels work together with non-linguistic resources to index social positioning (cf. Bucholtz 1998, 2004; Coupland 2001; Eckert 2002; Eckerd and Rickford (eds.) 2001; Keim and Schütte (eds.) 2002). Rather than understanding style as a reaction to formality or addressee, the active and constructivist nature of style is now foregrounded. In speaker design approaches, style is viewed “as a resource in the active creation, presentation, and re-creation of speaker identity” (Schilling Estes 2002: 388). Likewise, in the “social style of communication” framework, style is organically related “to a group’s culture and its social identity” (Kallmeyer and Keim 2003: 29). Moreover, rather than focusing on a single linguistic variable, a whole range of linguistic features is now examined, to the extent they are shown to be situationally relevant, and even if they do not

lend themselves to quantification. Researchers of social style thus aim at understanding how clusters of linguistic (and non-verbal, semiotic) resources gain local meaning as indices of particular social orientations.

However, style in these approaches is mainly investigated in settings of face to face interaction. While Bell's language style framework (Bell 1999, 2001) has repeatedly been applied to media discourse, new approaches to sociolinguistic style have hardly been taken out of the realm of the interpersonal and unmediated (but see Coupland 2001, Holly 2002). In this chapter, I argue that the sociolinguistic style approach outlined above can provide a framework for addressing the complexities of language use in CMC as well.

Computer-mediated communication has been an increasingly popular topic in empirical and applied linguistics in the last years, but relatively few studies have examined it from a sociolinguistic point of view. Much linguistic research on CMC has focused on media-related determinants of language use, and on the linguistic innovations that emerge as a response to media constraints. While this research has made significant contributions to our understanding of language use in online communication, it tends to downplay the social diversity of language use on the Web. A case in point is Crystal's popular notion of "netspeak", which is defined as "a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet, [...] arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive" (Crystal 2001: 18). Crystal conceives of "netspeak" as a language variety, which is subdivided in the "language of e-mails" and the "language of chatgroups". However, it is empirically questionable whether anything like a "language of e-mails" exists, simply because the vast diversity of users, settings and purposes of e-mail communication outweigh any common linguistic features. Similarly, while emoticons – e.g. :- ) – and acronyms – e.g. *lol* 'laughing out loud' – are characteristic features of e-chat in general, it is the particular type of chat and the social profile of its users that are decisive in whether these resources are used, and to what extent. Crystal (2001: 155) does note the "variety of group practices" in CMC, without accounting for it in a systematic way.

By contrast, this paper is situated within a growing body of research inspired by sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, which aims at exploring the social and contextual diversity of language use in CMC (cf. collections by Androutsopoulos (ed.) 2006 and Danet and Herring (eds.) 2003; research overviews by Georgakopoulou 2003 and Herring 2003; as well as papers by e.g. Paolillo 2001, Sebba 2003b and this volume, Androutsopoulos and Ziegler 2004). Common denominators of these studies are the shift of focus from medium to user related patterns of language use, and the increasing emphasis

on the varying instantiations of online genres in their particular social contexts.

Georgakopoulou (2003: 2) points out the need for “contextual and particularistic analyses that shed light on how different contextual parameters shape and are evoked in the discourse of various types of CMC”. She identifies four main agendas of linguistic studies of CMC with a discourse-pragmatic focus: language use between writing and speaking, play and performance, self-presentation and identity, and the formation of online communities. In the following section, I draw on these agendas in sketching the framework of this paper.

Hip-hop culture offers an ideal setting for the study of sociolinguistic style in computer-mediated communication. Over the last 20 years, hip-hop has developed from an African American street culture into a globally acknowledged form of youth-cultural expression. A growing number of studies theorize the global spread of hip-hop as a process of cultural appropriation, in which forms of cultural expression – rapping, graffiti, dancing, dj-ing – acquire local features and invite local interpretations that no longer rely exclusively on their African-American origins (cf. collections by Mitchell (ed.) 2001 and Androutsopoulos (ed.) 2003). However, ‘local’ hip-hop does not completely separate from, but emerges in a constant dialogue with its ‘mother culture’. In Germany, for instance, hip-hop culture develops its own discourse around ‘local’ events and productions, all by drawing on U.S. American hip-hop as a source for new trends and a frame for the interpretation of local productions. Local hip-hop identities are immanently framed as part of globally distributed popular culture. The constant dialogue between the global and the local is manifested both in discourse and in language style. This is particularly salient in the language of German hip-hop fans with its vast amount of English, which extends beyond technical jargon and slang to communicative routines and emblematic code switching (cf. Androutsopoulos 2004).

From the point of view of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, hip-hop foregrounds issues of linguistic creativity, performance, the relation between globalization and language (Pennycook 2003), and the reflex of language variation in popular culture (Morgan 2001). Rap has been repeatedly celebrated as a creative form of expression, in which all linguistic resources of a speech community are poetically intermingled. Several studies have documented how this credo translates in local appropriations of rap (cf. Androutsopoulos and Scholz 2002; Berns and Schlobinski 2003, as well as papers in Mitchell (ed.) 2001 and Androutsopoulos (ed.) 2003). As Streeck (2002) argues, rap artists engage in (lay) sociolinguistics as they draw on a multitude of linguistic varieties and

styles in order to stage various, often conflicting social voices in their lyrics. Much the same could be said of the adolescents and young adults who use the Web “as a means of representing, critiquing and contradicting the images and issues of hip-hop culture” (Richardson and Lewis 2000: 251).

## **2. Locating style on the Web: fields, communities, and genres**

My sociolinguistic outlook on computer-mediated communication views the Web as a social space, in which like-minded individuals use the resources of the medium, such as interactivity, multimodality, and easy access to media production, to construct identity and community (cf. Baym 2000; Döring <sup>2</sup>2003). However, these familiar notions must be understood in terms of the new communicative potentials that are provided by the New Media. With respect to identity, I follow here Mendoza-Denton’s definition of social identity as

“the active negotiation of an individual’s relationship with larger social constructs, in so far as this negotiation is signaled through language and other semiotic means. Identity, then, is neither attribute nor possession, but an individual and collective-level process of semiosis.” (Mendoza-Denton 2001: 475)

Identities on the Web may, then, be conceived of as processes in which individual relationships to larger social constructs are constructed and negotiated through text and talk. Internet users do not necessarily reproduce offline (or real-life) identities in their Web literacy practices, but may choose to foreground alternative aspects of self. They do so by drawing on symbolic resources that are both restricted and extended, i.e. through image, animation, and sound, vis-à-vis direct interaction (cf. Chandler 1998; Hine 2000; Hawisher and Selfe (eds.) 2000; Snyder (ed.) 2002).

Just as in ‘real life’, identities on the Web are formed in a continuous dialogue with larger social formations, which are usually termed ‘online’ or ‘virtual communities’ in CMC research. Following Castells,

“A virtual community [...] is generally understood as a self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose, although sometimes communication becomes the goal in itself. Such communities may be relatively formalized [...] or be spontaneously formed by

social networks which keep logging into the network to send and receive messages in a chosen time pattern (either delayed or in real time)” (Castells <sup>2</sup>2000: 386).

Online communities are thus networks of interconnected individuals who engage in regular communication in a virtual space, such as a chat channel, a discussion board or a mailing list. Their members share a common interest or purpose; they develop social relationships and a set of shared interactional and linguistic norms. Virtual communities, as Castells points out, “are communities, but not physical ones, and they do not follow the same patterns of communication and interaction as physical communities do. But they are not ‘unreal’, they work in a different plane of reality” (<sup>2</sup>2000: 389).

The notion of virtual community links linguistic research on CMC with sociolinguistic theory, in which community – originally in the sense of speech community, more recently as a community of practice – has always played a crucial role (Paolillo 2001). However, in addition to the virtual community, a broader concept is needed. If we conceive of, say, the regulars on the discussion board of a football club as an online community, we also need a notion for the “meta-community” formed by several football-related discussion boards and websites, be it in a particular country or on a transnational scale. In other words, we need to acknowledge that online communities are embedded in larger patterns of online discourse and literacy practice.

For these larger patterns, I propose the notion of ‘computer-mediated discourse field’. It is based on the concept of field originally developed by Bourdieu (1991) and extended by Fairclough (1995), i.e. as a structured space of positions for the articulation of a social discourse. In my working definition, a computer-mediated discourse field is a set of discursively and hypertextually interconnected websites, which represent a social discourse on the Web. While the notion of online community foregrounds networks of users, the notion of discourse field foregrounds semiotic artefacts, i.e. websites, rather than the individuals behind them. These websites and their users (authors and readers) share a common discourse, including, as will become clear in this paper, a set of common symbolic resources for the display of affiliation; however, member categories, production formats (Goffman 1981) and individual patterns of engagement within a discourse field on the Web may considerably vary.

Online communities and discourse fields draw on a multitude of genres or text-types.<sup>1</sup> The choice of genre is part of the situated management of identities that emerges from online activity. Some genres of CMC extend traditions of media discourse in a more or less straightforward way, e.g. editorials, reviews, reports or newsletters. However, genre

blending and the emergence of hybrid genres are particularly salient in CMC, as is the case with personal homepages that draw on the private diary and the photo album (Chandler 1998; Karlsson 2002a, 2002b). The most important innovations of CMC are interactive multi-user formats such as chats, boards and newsgroups. Provided that they are regularly used by an online community, these sites of online talk host sequences that share at least some features of verbal interaction, i.e. dialogicity, sequentiality, and indexicality (cf. Herring 1999; Storrer 2000).

Though sites of one-way communication (e.g. homepages) and sites of online interaction (e.g. discussion boards) are densely interrelated in practice, they need to be analytically separated in the study of online style. In personal homepages and other website genres, language style is designed in advance, in a process of composition and editing, and then displayed to an audience. The style of websites typically evokes issues of multimodality, as it involves an interrelation of verbal and visual resources. Within the verbal mode, it involves the linguistic design of names and categories (e.g. navigation bars) as well as issues of text layout (e.g. text blocks as opposed to lists; cf. Karlsson 2002b; Kress 2003). Within the visual mode, style involves the selection and composition of resources in typography, image, and colour. In genres of online talk, on the other hand, communicative resources are essentially restricted to the verbal mode. In e-chats, newsgroups or discussion boards, each participant's linguistic style is subject to immediate negotiation in the online community. The positions articulated and the linguistic forms used by individual members may be ratified or challenged, aligned to or contrasted by other participants.

All genres of online text and talk can be sites of performance, in the sense of "a display of communicative virtuosity" for an audience (Bauman 2004: 9). However, they differ with regard to, among other things, the available semiotic resources and in the immediacy of audience reaction. It is in genres of online interaction that "performance particularly flourishes" (Danet 2001: 100). This coexistence of communicative modes makes clear the need for complementary methodologies in the sociolinguistic study of CMC, in particular variation, genre and conversation analysis.

How does the notion of style tie in with computer-mediated discourse fields, virtual communities, and genres? Social style emphasizes individual agency and the social embeddedness of online language use, as well as the interrelation of language with other signifying systems in constructions of social identity on the Web. It provides an interface between linguistic selections, interactional processes, communicative goals, and their

larger social contexts. Typical dimensions of linguistic variability in CMC – e.g. between spoken and written language, standard and dialect, monolingual and multilingual speech – are resources for the construction of sociolinguistic style, their capital value depending on the ideologies and genre conventions of each particular community and field. Individual styles of online writing draw on these resources to varying degrees, depending on community norms, genre traditions, and individual goals.

A task of the sociolinguistic style analysis proposed in this chapter is to disentangle style features related to a computer-mediated discourse field as a whole from those related to a particular genre or to individual users. Fields are constituted by a variety of genres, and any particular realization of a genre will carry the traces of its social context (Kress 2003: 100). Text and talk within a field can therefore be expected to contain ‘global’ style markers that occur across user networks and genres within the same field. On the other hand, genres rely on relatively stable patterns and conventions that operate across social contexts. We can therefore expect that genres within a field will be clearly distinguishable from one another, with indicators of genre differences operating on one or several linguistic levels.

However, there is a considerable degree of freedom in the individual realization of (at least some) online genres. Users may shape and transform genres in order to construct individuality and originality or to express a particular stance vis-à-vis other users. Therefore, genre is the level on which style in a collective *and* an individual sense is manifest. Different users have various degrees of exposure to and experience with CMC, and they may represent different orientations within a virtual community. We can expect these orientations to be indexed through linguistic choices, which, in turn, reflect the social-symbolic value of language styles in a particular community or field. The distribution of linguistic and interactional resources across genres and individual participants within a field of computer-mediated discourse is a central issue in the approach to online style outlined in this chapter.

### **3. Research context and aims of this paper**

The findings reported in this paper are drawn from a research project on ‘youth-cultural media styles’, which examined the language and discourse of German websites related to hip-hop culture.<sup>2</sup> In consonance with other studies of media discourse (Fairclough 1995; Scollon 1998), the project’s aim was to explore connections between media texts and the practices of their production and consumption, as well as participants’ awareness of

language style and variation in media discourse. For this purpose, a combination of linguistic analysis and online ethnography was developed.

Ethnography is a meeting point of sociolinguistics and CMC studies. For sociolinguistics, it is an essential resource for understanding the social categories of a community and the meaning of sociolinguistic variation from the members' point of view (cf. Eckert 1997; Kallmeyer and Keim 2003). CMC studies, on the other hand, draw on ethnography as point of access to the formation of online communities, the patterning of online literacy practices, and the dynamic unfolding of online activities in relation to offline events (cf. Danet 2001; Döring <sup>2</sup>2003; Hine 2000; papers in Hawisher and Selfe (eds.) 2000, Snyder (ed.) 2002).

Data collection included systematic observation of online activities as well as participant interviews. The reconstruction of the hip-hop field (cf. 4.1) was based on systematic observation, which started off from key nodes (portals, link directories), and browsed its way through to smaller sites. Several websites and discussion boards were repeatedly visited in order to develop a 'feel' for topics, trends and emblems in hip-hop discourse. A second set of ethnographic data consists of approximately 25 interviews with webmasters, homepage authors and community members. These interview partners were selected in a non-random manner, taking into account both the 'richness' of individual cases and practical issues such as regional location. The initial contact was established with an informal e-mail, followed by a semi-structured, face-to-face or email interview. The interviews covered a broad range of topics, including the website's aims and target group, production practices, semiotic resources, aspects of language use, personal opinion on hip-hop on the Web, and the relationship between online and offline cultural engagement. I confronted members with sample texts from their own website in order to elicit their awareness of style features and their evaluation of language variation.

For purposes of linguistic analysis, samples from various genres were collected partly through systematic sampling on a particular website, and partly on the basis of specific topical triggers. In a strategy familiar from Kallmeyer and Keim's framework (2003), board discussions were repeatedly scanned for controversial issues, based on the assumption that conflict interactions prompt condensations of social style and thus reveal constructions of identity in a particularly salient way. In hip-hop discourse, such issues include the representation of hip-hop in mass media, controversial artists and their new releases, the tension between regional hip-hop scenes (e.g. Berlin vs. Hamburg), and issues of sell-out and cultural authenticity.



Four dimensions of linguistic variability were examined in the project: (a) variation on the continuum of typically spoken vs. written mode,<sup>3</sup> (b) the use of non-standard language, especially regional varieties; (c) spelling variation without a correspondence to phonetic features, and (d) language contact between German and English as well as between German and migrant languages. The analysis draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods, thereby joining approaches that were separately used in previous linguistic research on CMC. As suggested by Bell (1999), the multi-level structure of language style entails that some of its features will be relevant in their relative frequency and distribution over large data sets, while other features will have a highly contextual significance. In CMC research, a quantitative approach has been proposed by Paolillo (2001), who focuses on relations of “micro-linguistic variation to the social mechanisms by which virtual communities are structured and maintained” (181). This approach demonstrates correlations of linguistic variables with social roles within an online community. An example for the interactional approach is Georgakopoulou (1997), who examines code- and style-shifting as contextualization cues in e-mail exchange, showing how participants draw on various linguistic resources in accomplishing interactional tasks. It seems to me that a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies is an advantage given the complexity of online language use (cf. also Siebenhaar 2006).

The remainder of this chapter will discuss hip-hop on the German-speaking Web as a field of discourse that consists of various types of websites, genres, and participation formats (cf. 4.1). Style features that are typical for the field as a whole will be shown to exist in various lexical and discourse-pragmatic categories as well as on the nonverbal level (cf. 4.2). Based on findings of a case study, I then focus on language style in different genres of a particular website (cf. 5.). I will provide evidence for the relationship between online genres and the orientation to a spoken or written language style, and present an interactional analysis of a board discussion to illustrate how participants’ strategic style choices reflect the social-symbolic value of linguistic resources within the German hip-hop community.

#### **4. Hip-hop on the German-speaking web**

Hip-hop’s popularity in Germany is reflected in the amount of computer-mediated activity by its fans who use the Internet as one additional means of articulating cultural affiliation and involvement. Reading online magazines dedicated to hip-hop, posting to dedicated discussion boards, chatting with other fans or making a personal homepage are practices of

‘vernacular literacy’ (Barton and Hamilton 1998) that enrich individual cultural experience without the aim of replacing real-life engagement.

The amount of hip-hop websites on the German-speaking Web cannot be stated in a precise and definite way, because new websites appear and disappear every day. Judging from large link directories on web portals, several hundred German-speaking websites claimed to represent hip-hop on the Web in 2003.<sup>4</sup> In this section, I first sketch a tripartite classification into (a) magazines/portals, (b) homepages, and (c) sites of online interaction, indicating relevant subdivisions where appropriate. In a second step, I outline a number of linguistic and non-verbal features shared by all websites in the field (cf. 4.2).

#### 4.1. Outline of the field

Following Döring (2003: 520-48), I assume that the structure of a computer-mediated discourse field can be grasped in terms of a core-periphery scheme, a website's core position in the field being indicated by the amount of page impressions and by the awareness of the website among users. At the time of my research, the core of the German hip-hop field on the Web consisted of no more than 12–15 online magazines, web portals and discussion boards that are widely known throughout Germany, including *rap.de*, *hiphop.de*, *mzee.com*, *rapz.de*, and *webbeatz.de*.

Hip-hop magazines and portals<sup>5</sup> operate in many respects like niche media (Thornton 1995). They address a comparatively wide audience, some receiving more than a million page impressions per month;<sup>6</sup> they provide a wide variety of genres and constantly update their content, thus making maintenance a resource-demanding enterprise. Large hip-hop portals such as *rap.de* and *hiphop.de* depend on the music industry for the constant flow of new information, and place advertisements on their website. Their managers are in their late twenties; they are socialized in the hip-hop scene, and are eventually turning their hobby into a profession. Young freelance writers contribute most of the site's content, which is post-edited by the managers.

While magazines and portals are the equivalents of traditional media institutions, homepages represent individual actors. Commercial homepages are run by established artists or music labels; personal homepages, on which I focus here, are run by fans, activists and amateur artists. Chandler (1998) suggests that the main purpose of making a personal homepage is to construct identity through text and other semiotic resources. In the hip-hop field, main communicative aims of homepages are self-presentation as an active member, promotion of individual productions, and making connections with like-minded

activists (cf. Androutsopoulos 2003). Personal homepages presume a clear notion of authorship. Authors may not reveal their real name, but nevertheless work on establishing individuality and continuity. Being visited by a far smaller audience than magazines, personal homepages usually feature no advertisement, and they contain a limited range of genres. The typical hip-hop homepage consists of an artist bio and photos, samples of the author's work, links to other homepages and/or to core websites, and a guest book.

Discussion boards and chat channels offer platforms for the formation of online communities, and thereby constitute the field's public sphere. Most large German-speaking hip-hop boards are hosted by portals (e.g. *rap.de*, *hiphop.de*), but independent boards exist as well (e.g. *mzee.com*). According to webmaster information, hip-hop board members are between 14 and 29 years of age, mostly males, with varying educational background. The six discussion boards I observed in more detail (*rap.de*, *hiphop.de*, *mzee.com*, *rapz.de*, *webbeatz.de*, and *epoxweb.de*) had a sum of more than 65,000 registered users in the summer of 2003. This number certainly includes a significant amount of occasional posters; others, however, stick to a board and develop social bonds, thus becoming community members over a period of time. My observations and members' judgements suggest that these large boards differ in terms of regulars, their music taste, favourite topics as well as in aspects of language use. In contrast to magazines and homepages, anonymity and reduced responsibility of authorship turn boards into liminal spaces (cf. Sebba 2003b). In liminal contexts, speakers cross certain borders of social behaviour and performance; they experiment with social identities and language styles in ways that are clearly outside their normal, everyday repertoire (Rampton 1995). In the German hip-hop context, acts of language crossing involve, expectedly, the 'gangsta' stereotype and other aspects of the imagery of African American hip-hop (cf. Androutsopoulos 2004).

Multi-generic literacy practices are characteristic for online activists, i.e. participants with a strong commitment and engagement. In addition to board or e-chat membership and the authoring of a personal homepage, activists typically assume various responsibilities in the field's public domain, e.g. as administrators of a discussion board or freelance writers for an online magazine. These activities involve different language styles, resulting in style-shifting as members turn from e.g. news writing to board contributions. A clear distinction between the language style of magazines and boards is borne out by the findings discussed in the next section (cf. 5.1.).

#### 4.2. ‘Global’ markers of hip-hop style

To what extent is style a useful notion with respect to the hip-hop field as a whole? To rephrase this in empirical terms, what style features do all these hip-hop websites and discussion boards have in common? The answer first points outside the verbal domain. Visual cues that are highly typical for the field include logos and navigation bars in graffiti type, visual metonyms or synecdoche for hip-hop’s four elements (i.e. sneakers for breakdance, a turntable for dj-ing, a microphone for rapping, and a spray can for graffiti), as well as certain features of photographic representation (cf. 5.3.). The answer then points to the naming patterns participants draw on in designing their personal nicknames and the names of their websites. For example, names such as *BeatSkill Crew* and *Bad Grade Click* are unmistakably marked as hip-hop by means of specific lexical items, name formation patterns and intertextual references (cf. Androutsopoulos 2001; Bierbach and Birken-Silverman, this volume).

The main linguistic realm of hip-hop style in the German-speaking Web is vocabulary and formulaic speech of English origin, including both major wordclass items (with various degrees of morphological integration into German) and instances of (emblematic) code-switching into (stylized African-American) English. This vocabulary includes a lengthy list of culturally significant key words that cut across hip-hop’s forms of expression, among them *battle*, *bite*, *diss*, *flow*, *freestyle*, *props*, *represent*, and *respect*.<sup>7</sup> Other parts of hip-hop vocabulary are more practically described in terms of lexical fields, e.g. terms for song structure and music production. This is more or less a technical jargon, which partially overlaps with lexis more widely used in pop music discourse. It is supplemented by slang items, notably evaluators (*whack*, *dope*, *fresh*, *burner*) and categorizations (*bitch*) as well as by an extensive set of formulas and conversational routines: openers and farewells such as *peace* and *one love*; exclamations such as *aight*; formulas for giving *props* or *respect* to other community members. Obviously, a large part of these items are not ‘school English’ but originate from exclusive hip-hop sources, and have a strong indexical function. The same holds true for a set of stereotypical spelling variants applied mostly to English items, in particular <z> as noun plural marker (as in *beatz*, *cutz*, *trackz*, and *stylez*), <ph> instead of <f> as in *phat* and *phunky*, and <k> instead of <c> on lexical items such as *kool* and *kru* (‘crew’). Though systematic research was restricted to German data, glimpses at hip-hop discourse in other European speech communities (notably in Italy, France, Greece, and Norway) suggest that these items and variants are indeed globally spread. What is characteristic for the German hip-hop field,

then, seems at the same time a good example for emergent global English “from below” (cf. Pennycook 2003; Preisler 1999).

To support these observations, a 35,000-word sample of record reviews, personal homepages and board discussions from *webbeatz.de*, the website discussed in more detail in the next section, was subjected to a concordance analysis. All items with five or more tokens (N=983) were examined in semantic-functional terms. In particular, almost all nouns with 10 or more tokens in this sample<sup>8</sup> refer to hip-hop and rap (e.g. *hip-hop*, *rap*, *flow*, *style*, *battle*, *mcs*) or to pop music in general (e.g. *beat*, *album*, *track*, *texte*, *band*). This list also includes items with stereotypical spelling variants (*beatz*, *cutz*, *trackz*, *stylez*), slang evaluators (*fett*, *dope*, *fresh*, *wack*), and conversational routines such as *peace* and *props*. This suggests that discourse on *webbeatz.de* is quite homogeneous in terms of culture- and topic-related lexical choices. Most lexical items in this cross-genre sample are highly specific to hip-hop discourse.

A writing style considered highly typical for hip-hop websites was termed “hip-hop slang” by some participants. Discussion of examples in the interviews suggested two main features of this member category, i.e. hip-hop related English (as outlined above) and markers of oral style. Hip-hop slang partly reflects face-to-face discourse; partly it is specific to computer-mediated communication, as some of its features are contingent to genres of online talk. Two examples will be used to illustrate these points:

**(1) board discussion**

*Um ehrlich zu sein, das Album finde ich echt dope. Afrob ist für mich sowieso eina der echt guten Texter. Sehr gute Lyricz und gute Beatz. Zwa jetzt keine Überbombe aba bessa alz andere Sachen die es zur zeit gibt, natürlich nicht so dope wie Azad aba es lohnt sich auf jeden fall mal reinzuhören.*

‘To be honest, I think the album is really dope. Afrob is in my view one of the best text writers anyway. Very good lyrics and good beats. It’s not the bomb, but still better than other things going on at the moment. Of course not so dope as Azad but it’s worth it listening to it.’

**(2) board discussion**

*@dable: hab gesehen, dass du mit civilrings nach berlin kommst. vielleicht können wa connecten, wie im Sommer 2001 (gloob isch).*

‘@dable: [I] saw that you’re coming to Berlin with the civilrings, perhaps we could connect like in the summer of 2001 (I believe).’

Example (1) displays a wealth of features which, as a webmaster suggested, are “judged as ‘underground’ affiliation” by members. There is a systematic substitution of *-er* endings by *-a* (*einer* > *eina* ‘one’, *besser* > *bessa* ‘better’, *aber* > *aba* ‘but’), and of *-s* by *-z* (*Lyricz*, *Beatz*, *alz* ‘than’). The *-a* variant is familiar from AAVE (cf. *gangsta*) and at

the same time a phonetic spelling with respect to German. The *-z* variant is a major global stereotype for hip-hop slang. Originally a phonetic spelling (cf. *boyz*), it is often used as a purely visual marker (cf. *lyricz*). The author of (1) idiosyncratically extends the distribution of *-z* to a German lexical item, *alz* ('than'). This is an illustrative example of what Sebba (2003a) terms "spelling rebellion", i.e. a deliberate transformation of orthography in an unregulated literacy field, which uses the distance from orthographic norm to contextualize attitudes or to index cultural affiliations. However, a dense patterning of phonetic and homophone spellings as in (1) is not the rule in my data. An instance of vernacular writing without any of these features is (2). This is heavily marked as spoken in syntax (subject pronoun deletion) and spelling (*habe* > *hab* 'I have', *wir* > *wa* 'we'). In addition, it includes a style shift to an approximation of Saxon vernacular (*gloob isch* instead of *glaub ich* 'I believe'), the morphologically integrated English verb *connecten* and the @ sign, which is widely used as an addressing particle in online talk.

These examples suggest that both German and English vernacular forms are valued resources in the German-speaking hip-hop field on the Web. However, assuming that hip-hop slang carries along uncontested symbolic capital would overlook the field's complexity in terms of genres and participation formats. The findings presented below suggest that hip-hop slang and the representation of typical spoken features are more densely patterned in online talk, but less so on personal homepages and even less in genres of edited content such as record reviews. Interviews with portal managers reveal a clear awareness of the appropriate language style for edited content. When it comes to the selection of freelance writers, *gutes schriftdeutsch*, i.e. a solid competence in written German is preferred to the vernacular style prevailing in boards and chats. My interviews also suggest that a writing style such as in extract (1) may seem prestigious to teenage board members, but is rejected as 'kiddie stuff' by older members with more experience and striving for a professional outlook.

### **5. A case study: Language style, genre, and member identities on *webbeatz.de***

Against this backdrop, we now focus on language style on a particular website, i.e. *webbeatz.de*. This is a well known website in the German speaking hip-hop field, with approximately 3000 registered members and 100.000 page impressions per month during research. According to the webmaster, a young adult who works in the ICT sector, *webbeatz.de* is a non-commercial "one and a half man project", which relies on volunteers for edited content and maintenance of discussion boards. While advert banners appeared

on the site later on, membership and music downloads were still free of charge (as of mid-2004). Like other large hip-hop sites, *webbeatz.de* features both edited content (e.g. reviews, interviews, reports) and a large discussion board. Its particularity is the *kostenlose HipHop Promotion Plattform*, i.e. a free of charge service, which provides amateur artists with a free homepage to present themselves and their music. At the time of research, *webbeatz.de* hosted more than 300 artist homepages, each composed of a short self-presentation text, a photo, a link to downloadable songs, and a link to a *Kritikforum*, i.e. a dedicated critique board. In a typical reception structure, the visitor will select an artist from the overview, read the self-presentation, listen to the songs, then proceed to the critique board, comment on the songs, and sometimes interact with other fans or the artists themselves who occasionally visit their board to read and respond to comments. Many critique boards feature dozens of entries, with discussions extending over weeks or even months. This is an ideal setting for a genre comparison as well as for tracing the construction of individual style.

### **5.1. Genre and spelling variation**

A random representative sample of the three main genres on *webbeatz.de*, i.e. artist homepages, critique boards and record reviews,<sup>9</sup> was subjected to a quantitative analysis of spelling variation focusing on ‘colloquial spellings’, i.e. orthographic representations of phonetic-phonological features of colloquial spoken German (cf. Androutsopoulos 2000). Before discussing the results, I briefly introduce the three genres and discuss one example for each.

Board discussions can be expected to display features of conversational style due to their situational features, i.e. immediacy of online interaction, spontaneous production, reduced responsibility of authorship, and affective interactional modality. By contrast, record reviews are modelled on a traditional written genre and are subject to post-editing by the website manager. Artist homepages on *webbeatz.de* require a careful planning as far as their communicative purpose, i.e. self-presentation, is concerned. However, they do not follow a unique generic model. Some authors draw on the personal diary or the short bio note in designing their texts, others opt for a conversational style, and still others imitate professional press releases (see examples 6 and 7 below). Examples (3)–(5) illustrate some aspects of the three genres’ content and speech style.

**(3) board discussion**

*Ich weiß nicht... reality HipHop und dann „Players“ im Namen? Der Beat hört sich für mich zu poppig an und die raps zu sehr nach fantastischen vier... also irgendwie kann ich mich damit nicht identifizieren, die hook ist auch ein wenig langweilig, also is nich grade mein fall*

‘I don’t know... reality hip-hop and then naming yourself ‚players‘? The beat sounds too poppy to me, and the raps are too much like fantastischen vier... [German rap band, J.A.] well I somehow can’t identify with it, the hookline is a bit boring too, well it’s not really my case.’

**(4) artist homepage**

*Eigentlich sind wir keine richtige crew, eher mehr so’n Soundsystem. Das alles begann mal Anfang des Jahres 2000 und flachte seitdem wieder ab! Zur zeit mache ich selbst nur noch Beatz und Smartie ging mehr in djing über, schade. Die ersten Sachen der Zeit werde ich in nächster Zeit euch mal zuschicken.*

‘We’re not a real crew actually, more like a sound system. It all began at the beginning of 2000 but levelled ever since! I’m doing only beatz at the moment, and Smartie has turned to DJ-ing, it’s a pity. I’ll send you some early stuff from this period in a while.’

**(5) record review**

*Nach „Break Ya Neck“, wohl einem der meistgespieltesten Club-Tracks dieses Jahr, gibts jetzt die nächste Auskopplung aus Busta Rhymes „Genesis“-Album. „Pass the Courvoisier, Part II“, das P. Diddy and Pharrell featured, knüpft genau da wieder an, denn der stark nach vorne gehende Neptunes-Beat ist definitiv Club-tauglich.*

‘After “Break Ya Neck”, one of this year’s most played club tracks, the next release from Busta Rhymes’s “Genesis” album now follows. “Pass the Courvoisier, Part II” featuring P. Diddy and Pharrell ties in with that, because the massively forward-pressing Neptunes beat is definitely club compatible.’

The author of (3) questions the artist’s stated mission (*reality HipHop*) vis-à-vis their name, *Players*, which evokes ‘gangsta rap’, and then comments on the song’s beat, rap style and hookline. His orientation to spoken syntax is indicated by simple clauses, paratactic structure, discourse markers such as *ich weiß nicht* and *also*. The last clause, *also is nich grade mein fall* (‘well it’s not really my case’) is heavily marked as spoken through subject pronoun deletion, the discourse marker *also* (‘well’), final consonant deletion (*ist* > *is*, *nicht* > *nich*), and interconsonantal vowel deletion (*gerade* > *grade*). The author of (4) presents himself and his band in a narrative mode, and directly addresses his readers in the last clause. Simple clauses and cliticization (*so ein* > *so’n*) indicate an overall informal style. The review excerpt (5) is written from an impersonal perspective. It includes comparatively longer, subordinate clauses, and complex noun phrases (*einem der meistgespieltesten Club-Tracks* ‘one of the most played club tracks’, *der stark nach vorne gehende Neptunes-Beat* ‘the massively forward-pressing Neptunes beat’).

The variables selected for analysis are typical features of spoken German (cf. Schwitalla 1997) and are repeatedly mentioned in German CMC literature as frequent



features of informal online writing. They occur in quantifiable amounts in my sample, ranging from 51 to 1440 tokens.<sup>10</sup>

- (a) deletion of word-final /t/ in consonant clusters, e.g. *nicht* > *nich* ('not')
- (b) reduction of the indefinite article in all genders and cases, e.g. *eine* > *ne* ('a' sing.fem.nom. or acc.)
- (c) negative adverb *nichts* (Standard German [nɪʦts] 'nothing') written *nix* (corresponding to the colloquial pronunciation [nɪks]);
- (d) cliticization of post-verbal *es* (object or dummy pronoun) after four different verbs (*finden* 'find', *geben* 'give', *gehen* 'go', *haben* 'have') in the 1st and 3rd person singular, e.g. *habe es* > *habs*, *gibt es* > *gibts*;
- (e) deletion of verb-final /e/ in the 1st and 3rd person singular of 16 different verbs (including high frequency verbs such as *brauchen* 'need', *haben* 'have', *kommen* 'come', *sagen* 'say'), e.g. *habe* > *hab*.

All five features have a 'written' variant, i.e. the standard orthographic representation, and a 'spoken' one, corresponding to the colloquial reduced or cliticized form. Based on all tokens of each variable, the frequency of spoken variants was counted for all three genres in the usual variationist way, i.e. all factual over potential occurrences of the variant, excluding categorically invariant cases.

Table 1. Frequency of five colloquial spellings in three genres

	reviews		artist homepages		boards		total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
final -t deletion	2	0,5	9	3	169	22	180	12,5
indefinite article reduction	6	2	14	5	105	38	125	15
<i>nix</i> (instead of <i>nichts</i> )	1	7	2	22	28	52	31	42
cliticization of post-verbal <i>es</i>	10	43	2	20	11	61	23	45
deletion of verb-final -e	4	21	42	49	178	62	224	57
total	23 / 753		69 / 680		491 / 1390		583 / 2823	
average %		15		20		47		34

The findings (table 1) suggest a clear distinction between the boards and the two other genres, and a more subtle distinction between artist homepages and reviews.<sup>11</sup> Board discussions have a much higher amount of spoken variants throughout, ranging from more than 60% for features (d) and (e), to slightly over half for (c), 38% for (b) and 22% for (a).

Homepages score higher than reviews for four features, (d) being the exception. This is largely due to the cliticized form of the construction *gibt es > gibt's or gibts* ('there is'), which is frequently used in the reviews. A look at each variable reveals different distribution patterns. Features (a) and (b) have lower than average scores for all genres, with extremely low amounts of colloquial spellings in reviews and artist homepages. Feature (e) scores higher than average in all genres, and particularly high in the artist homepages, in which a personal style is more frequent. The distribution of (c) is similar to the average.

In sum, these findings suggest that writing style in the hip-hop field is partly determined by genre. This pattern was repeatedly found in the data: boards capitalize on written representations of spoken/colloquial features to a far greater extent than other genres. As a full description of these genres is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that reviews feature comparatively more of the technical jargon of hip-hop, while board discussions are the principal site for slang items, conversational routines, and stylized African American English. Personal homepages have a less clear position in this respect.

## 5.2. Genre and individual styling

While these three genres are overall distinct in terms of their orientation towards the spoken or written mode, the language style of individual members sometimes follows and sometimes diverges from that pattern. Genres differ in the creative freedom they grant their users. While record reviews are quite homogeneously patterned in the *webbeatz.de* data, homepages display a striking range of individual variation. This is not surprising, taking into account that the main purpose of the artist homepage is precisely to communicate individual style. Some artists construe themselves in a more professional manner, while others aim at a style that is closer to street culture. Consequently, some homepage texts are stylistically closer to discussion boards, while others strive for a standard oriented writing style. This difference is evident in the two examples presented below. (Sentence numbering in square brackets is added for reference; *italics* in the glosses indicate English items in the original text; **bold type** in example (7) indicates reflexes of colloquial and regional speech.)

### (6) artist homepage text

- [1] Einer der erfolgversprechendsten Gruppen der Flensburger HipHop-Szene ist die BeatSkill Crew.  
 [2] Durch Zusammenarbeit mit Künstlern von Flensburg bis Salzburg, diverse von ihnen geplante Events und vor allem durch ihre Auftritte haben sich Mafuba und Dragon bereits einen Namen

*gemacht. [3] Während Mafuba durch ihren einzigartigen, teils mit Gesangspassagen gemischten Reimstil Eindruck macht, sorgt Dragon für die passenden, teils asiatisch und teils funk-inspirierten Beats. [4] Zur Zeit in Arbeit sind das neue Album, das diesen Sommer fertig sein wird, sowie ein Beitrag für die Querschnitt-Compilation, die im März mit einer Erstauflage von 1.000 Stück erscheinen wird. [5] Live sind die beiden als nächstes am 16.03. in Flensburg mit Justus & Fumanschu (M.O.R.) zu sehen, danach sind erstmal wieder Studio-Sessions angesagt.*

‘[1] One of the most promising bands from the Flensburg hip-hop scene is the *BeatSkill Crew*. [2] Mafuba and Dragon have already made a name through the cooperation with artists from Flensburg to Salzburg [= end points of the German-speaking area, J.A.], through the planning of various *events* and especially through their gigs. [3] While Mafuba impresses through her unique rhyming style, which is partly interspersed with singing parts, Deragon takes care of the appropriate, partly Asian and partly *funk* inspired *beats*. [4] They are currently working on their new album, which shall be ready this summer, and on a contribution to the *Qerschnitt compilation*, which will be out in March, starting with 1.000 copies. [5] Their next live appearance is at 16.03. in Flensburg, together with Justus & Fumanschu (M.O.R.), after that some more *studio sessions* will follow.’

### (7) artist homepage text

[1] *Straight Up Hip Hop – Straight aus München.*

[2] Akuma: „Wir **wolln** halt, dass **ma** München **ned** ausschließlich mit Sound wie Blumentopf oder David P verbindet. [3] Wo **is** der dreckige, abgefückte Scheiß hier? [4] Ich kann mir **nimmer** diesen ‚Was geht ab digga‘ Sound anhören, so **isses ned**. [5] Das Leben **is ned** nur aus Party und feiern und cool rappen, **oider!**“

[6] *Aufgenommen wird der Sound im jahrelang selber erweiterten BRA.CHI.AL Studio a bisserl außerhalb Münchens. [7] Die Beats bestehen zu 100% aus samples, sonst **nix!** [8] Gemastert wird das ganze vom S in Darmstadt. [9] Grüße an Ka, So, Kr, Ha, LC, Gr.*

‘[1] *Straight up hip hop – straight >from Munich*

[2] Akuma: “What we **want** is, that Munich be **not** exclusively associated with a *sound* like Blumentopf or David P. [3] **Where's** that dirty, *fucked-up shit* here? [4] I can't hear this ‘What's up digga’ *sound* **no more, that's not** how it is. [5] Life **is not** just partying and having fun and *cool rapping, mate!*”

[6] The *sound* is recorded in the BRA.CHI.AL studio, which we have been extending for years, *a bit* outside Munich. [7] The *beats* consist to a 100% of *samples*, **nothing** else! [8] The whole thing is *mastered* by S. in Darmstadt. [9] Greetings to Ka, So, Kr, Ha, LC, Gr.’

The first text (6) is strongly reminiscent of promotional discourse by the music industry. It is syntactically quite complex (see sentences 2, 3, 4), including two heavily modified noun phrases in sentence 3. Standard orthography is used throughout, indicated by noun capitalization, which is required in standard German, and the absence of colloquial spellings. These artists frame their self-presentation by their success potential (cf. *erfolgsversprechend* ‘promising’ in sentence 1) and foreground their current production activities.

By contrast, the writers of the second text (7) foreground issues of style in their local hip-hop community, i.e. Munich; they challenge established artists (cf. sentence 2), and stress their contacts to the local scene (cf. sentence 9). This self-presentation consists of a headline, a quotation by a band member, and a description of the band's sound. The quotation (sentences 2–5) is heavily marked as spoken (see items in bold type). Some of

these spellings reflect general features of colloquial German including the ones discussed above (e.g. *ist* > *is*, *wollen* > *wolln*, *nichts* > *nix*); others are more specific to Southern German varieties (*man* > *ma* ‘one’, *nicht* > *ned* ‘not’, *nimmer* ‘no more’, *a bisserl* ‘a bit’, *alter* > *oider* ‘mate (lit. ‘old man’)). The author draws on these features in stressing the band’s outlook on hip-hop in Munich, i.e. what they like and what they reject. The quotation also includes bits and pieces of hip-hop slang, e.g. the use of *Scheiß* probably modelled after AAVE *shit*, and the phrase ‘*Was geht ab digga*’ *Sound* (*digga* is a German hip-hop slang term of address). The last part of this text, a greeting to the writer’s crew, is reminiscent to online discussion boards and guest books.

Despite these differences, both texts are immediately recognisable as belonging to the field of hip-hop discourse. From a member’s point of view, as reconstructed in online ethnography, none of these texts is more ‘authentic’ or ‘fake’ than the other. These are rather two different ways of designing a young artist identity through language, which co-operate with other dimensions of mediated identity design, including photos, band logo, and the music itself. They demonstrate the importance of transgressing the seemingly homogeneous genre to include individual profiles in online style analysis.

### 5.3. Debating style in online talk: the case of *Hecklah & Coch*

Moving from homepage texts to online talk, this section will focus on a discussion that took place on the critique board of a band called *Hecklah & Coch*. These two young Berlin artists represent ‘Berlin rap’, a recently popular rap style that draws on the tradition of US American ‘gangsta’ rap. Their identity design on their homepage clearly appropriates aspects of ‘gangsta’ rap. This holds true for their name, which refers to the German gun manufacturer *Heckler & Koch*. Its respelling to *Hecklah & Coch* draws on the *-er/-ah* spelling alternation (as in *gangstah*, *sistah*), which is quite common in hip-hop discourse, and has a straightforward model in the name of the well-known US formation *Smif & Wessun*, which in turn appropriates the name of the U.S. gun manufacturers *Smith & Wesson*. Besides alluding to this U.S. predecessor, the respelling presumably protects the band from copyright trouble. Moreover, the homepage photo depicts the two band members holding guns and looking down to the viewer. This is a visual resource for positioning the represented person as powerful (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 146), and quite a popular pose in ‘gangsta’ rap, the imagery of which often capitalizes on aggressive domination (cf. Haugen 2003).

At the time of sampling, the *Hecklah & Coch* board included 90 contributions, posted in 19 days, with a sum of 4.056 words and an average length of 45 words.<sup>12</sup> I will focus here on the first 29 entries, which were posted by 16 persons in 43 hours. In terms of sequential structure, this is a series of reactive posts that comment on the band, interspersed by short interactive sequences, which start at entry 10 and occur until 26. Eight participants contribute one posting each, six contribute two, and three participants contribute three postings each. I will quote three lengthy parts from this thread, i.e. entries 2–8, 19–21, and 22–29.<sup>13</sup>

**(8) board discussion (original numbering)**

**1. webmaster – 13.18**

*Hier ist Platz für deine Meinung zu Hecklah & Coch.*

**2. Dan – 14.00**

*beat geht so...raps auch...alles standard.nichts besonderes..euer foto find ich krass lächerlich... aber wer weiss ..vielleicht läuft ihr ja in berlin wirklich so hart rum...dann is ok... dieses „geld macht sex..geld macht fame..macht hass..“ ..hört sich krass scheisse an.. peace.*

**3. Dan – 14.01**

*aber vielleicht hate ich auch einfach nur... auch möglich...dann erschießt mich halt.*

**4. P-A – 14.20**

*wer ist Dan? track ist fett. auch dicker beat*

**5. Rolex – 14.40**

*Ich find das Cover auch nich gut.....aber eigentlich isses mir Wayne! Beat is cool, Raps sind auch in Ordnung!*

**6. QM – 15.50**

*Hehe, dicker Track!*

[2nd and 3rd clause omitted]

**7. Jim – 16.23**

*berliner style => yes, ich hab paar tracks von euch am start und fand euch eigentlich schon recht fresh. also macht weiter jungs. Peace*

**8. Deep P – 16.35**

*Der beat geht nach vorn - ist aber trotzdem nichts besonderes.Zum text sag ich nur „hunde die bellen beißen nicht“ - mehr als peinlich jungs... Das photo ist echt der Hammer-fehlen nur noch zwei bitches, ihr seid soooo lächerlich...*

**‘1. webmaster – 13.18**

Express here your opinion on Hecklah & Coch.

**2. Dan – 14.00**

*beat is okay... raps too ... standard stuff. nothing special. your photo I find totally ridiculous... but who knows.. maybe you do run around as hard as that in berlin... in this case it's ok... this “money makes sex..money makes fame..makes hate..” [= quotes song lyrics, J.A. ].. sounds totally crap. peace*

**3. Dan – 14.01**

But maybe I'm just *hating*... could also be true... well then just shoot me.

**4. P-A – 14.20**

Who's Dan? the *track* is fat. fat *beat* too.

**5. Rolex – 14.40**

I don't like the cover either, but it's really the same to me! the *beat* is *cool*, the *raps* are also ok!

**6. QM – 15.50**

Hehe, fat *track*!

[2nd and 3rd clause omitted]

**7. Jim – 16.23**

Berlin *style* => yes, I've got some *tracks* >from you guys and always thought you're quite *fresh*. Well keep it up guys. *peace*

**8. Deep P – 16.35**

The *beat* moves forward, but is nothing special. About the text I can only say "barking dogs don't bite" – more than just embarrassing, guys... The photo is just about the limit – only thing missing is two *bitchez*, you're soooo ridiculous...'

The thread starts with a series of comments on the band's music and self-presentation, written in a usual board style. The contributions are quite short and syntactically simple; they feature non-standard orthography (lack of noun capitalization) and hip-hop slang (*fresh*, *bitchez*). The abundance of music-related terms (*track*, *beat*) and evaluators (*cool*, *fett*, *fresh*, *ok*) reflects the board's communicative purpose, i.e. discussing the artist's music. What is exceptional here is the attention paid to the band's picture (cf. entries 2, 3, 8 as well as 19, 21, 22 later on). In post 2, Dan points out that the picture probably does not reflect lived experience; in 3, he ironically challenges the band to prove their authenticity, i.e. use their guns. In post 8, Deep P suggests a missing element, i.e. *two bitchez*, to complete the visual cliché. Both call the photo *lächerlich* ('ridiculous'), emphasizing its lack of authenticity. Significantly, the posts that are positive towards the music, partly identifying its local style (cf. 7), hardly refer to the photo, with the exception of Rolex (5) who downplays its importance.

As the thread unfolds, other posters defend the band's style and react to the critique. Some of these responses display two techniques of derogation that are reminiscent of 'dissing', i.e. the genre of (aggressive) verbal challenge in hip-hop culture. These techniques are the derogatory reference to the opponent's origin and music taste. For example, in post 11 (not included here), Jimmy challenges Dan (author of posts 2 and 3) to *shut up or keep on listening to beginner* (original wording: *halt einfach dein maul oder hör weiter beginner!*) The reference to *beginner*, a commercially successful German rap band,

indexes a different music taste within German-speaking rap, which Jimmy presumably rejects as being too soft when compared to Berlin rap.

**(9) board discussion (continued)**

**19. Ryke – 14.25 (day after)**

[1st para discussing song omitted]

*euer foto.. naja, der eine ist aufm internat, der andere war fürn jahr im ausland, ob ihr gerade die richtigen seid um „das getto zu representen“ weiss ich jetzt auch net. versteh das nicht als dis gegen eure skills, da geht schon was, vor allem wenn ihr schon jams klargemacht habt und so... peace ryke*

**20. TOC – 14.54**

*tach...*

*@deep p*

*wo kommst du her? Pinneberg?*

*keine angst die tun dir nichts.*

*@ryke*

*sylvestah war '98 ein jahr in england*

*sonst sind alle in schöneberg geboren*

*und keiner war lange im ausland*

*(ausser letztes jahr auf hawaiiiii)*

*... und wer das mit dem cover immer noch nicht geplant hat, tut mir leid.*

**21. Ryke – 15.09**

*okay, ich weiss was du meinst, ihr wiss was ich mein ☺ ich finde guns ja auch ganz flashig und so.. aber besonders innovativ oder selbstironisch ist das halt nicht, gerade für berlin.*

*peace*

**‘19. Ryke – 14.25 (day after)**

[1st para discussing song omitted]

Your foto.. well, one is in a boarding school, the other one was abroad for a year, whether you guys are the right ones to “*represent* the ghetto”, I'm not sure. don't read this as a *diss* against your *skills*, which you do have, especially since you've already played on *jams* and all.. *peace* ryke

**20. TOC – 14.54**

*hi...*

*@deep p*

*where do you come from? Pinneberg?*

*don't worry, they'll do you no harm.*

*@ryke*

*sylvestah was one year in england in '98*

*but apart from that they're all born in schöneberg*

*and no one was abroad for a longer time*

*(except last year on hawaiiiii)*

*... and if you still don't dig the cover, I'm sorry for you.*

**21. Ryke– 15.09**

*Okay, I know what you mean, you know what I mean. ☺ I also find *guns* quite *flashy* and all... but it's not especially innovative or self ironical, especially as far as berlin is concerned.*

*peace '*

Another instance of verbal aggression towards the critics is post 20. Here, TOC's reply to Deep P (post 8) can be read as implying that Deep P, living in the provincial town of Pinneberg, is not familiar with the sight of guns the way Berlin youngsters are. In the

second part of his post, TOC responds to Ryke (post 19), who is positive towards the band's music, but doubts their legitimacy to represent criminal ghetto life. However, Ryke mitigates his critique by acknowledging the band's *skills* and by closing with a signal of community solidarity, i.e. *peace*. In the last clause of 20, TOC seems to imply that the band's photo should not be taken at face value, an argument he takes up in post 24. Ryke partly aligns with this in post 21. His statement (original wording: *ich finde guns ja auch ganz flashig und so*) seems to position guns as part of an impressive staging, a visual decoration without any correspondence to lived experience.

**(10) board discussion (continued)**

**22. Frank – 15.56**

*In gewisser Weise ist es clever jede Art von Kritik mit dem Vorwurf des „Ihr Hated Nur“ [Titel des Hecklah & Coch-Songs, J.A.] abzutun. Sehr einfaches, beneidenswert unkompliziertes Weltbild. Nur beschränkt man sich dadurch letztendlich selbst. Aber das fühlen Hecklah&Coch wohl nicht. Ein Quentchen übertriebener und es wäre beinahe humorvoll. So bleibt es, in meinen Augen, ein vergeblicher Profilierungsversuch der unterhalb der Mittelmäßigkeit rangiert. Der Beat fügt sich gut in diese Szenerie.*

**23. P-A – 16.08**

*blub blub blub.*

**24. TOC – 17.28**

*blub blub und abgesoffen!  
das man in alles immer so viel interpretieren kann.  
der track definiert sich ganz einfach. tighter beat, strophen geschrieben, aufgenommen.  
is doch nur RAP man, RAP !!!!!  
kritik is cool. aber Deeuutschläänd (Mr.Banjo said so) hört auf mit pseudo intellektuellen phrasen  
irgendwelche tracks zu analysieren. feier doch einfach den track. (@frisbee)*

@ryke

HAALLLOOOO

H.E.C.K.L.A.H. & C.O.C.H - 99% Treffsicherheit

- deutsche parade waffe - FlexRap

-----GUNZ auf dem Cover!!!!

**25. TOC – 17.39**

[21-word post offering web links omitted]

**26. Frank – 17.43**

*Was gibts da zu feiern TOC ? Ich finde diesen Track langweilig.  
Wenn Du Dich über unreflektierten Konsum freuen kannst, dann wünsche ich Dir viel Vergnügen.  
Ich kanns nicht.  
Hilfe. Ich bin Student.*

**27. DownTown – 22.36**

[11-word post praising the band's style omitted]

**28. Willy – 22.56**

[38-word post praising band's music and criticizing its photo omitted]

**29. Mark – 08.31**

*Frank schrieb am (DATUM):*

[ fullquote of (22) ]



*geh nach hause und höhr fanta4*

**‘22. Frank – 15.56**

In a certain way it is clever to block any form of critique with the reproach of “You’re just Hating” [title of a Hecklah & Coch song J.A.]. A quite simple, enviably uncomplicated worldview. But at the end of the day this amounts to a self-restriction, though Hecklah & Coch do not seem to feel this. A bit more exaggerated, and it would be almost humorous. But this way it remains, in my view, an unavailing attempt to gain profile that ranges below average. The *beat* fits in well in this scenery.

**23. P-A – 16.08**

blah blah blah

**24. TOC – 17.28**

blah blah and down it goes!

people can interpret so much in everything. the *track* defines itself quite simply.

*tight beat*, write the stanzas, and record it. it's just RAP man, RAP !!!!!

critique is *cool*. but Deeutschläänd (Mr.Banjo *said so*) just stop analysing these *tracks* with pseudo intellectual phrases. just celebrate the *track* (@frisbee)

@ryke

HEELLOOOO

H.E.C.K.L.A.H. & C.O.C.H – 99% marksmanship

– German parade gun – *FlexRap*

-----GUNZ on the cover!!!!

**25. TOC – 17.39**

[21-word post offering web links omitted]

**26. Frank – 17.43**

What's there to celebrate TOC? I find this *track* boring.

If you can enjoy unreflected consumption, then please enjoy yourself. I can't.

Help. I'm a student.

**27. DownTown – 22.36**

[11-word post praising the band's style omitted]

**28. Willy – 22.56**

[38-word post praising band's music and criticizing its photo omitted]

**29. Mark – 08.31**

Frank wrote at DATE:

[ fullquote of (22) ]

go home and listen to fanta4'

Post 22 introduces a markedly different style. Frank goes beyond the critique expressed so far, and provides an analysis of the artists' ideology. He attributes to H&C a simplistic worldview and judges their style as not exaggerated enough to be humorous. With seven clauses and 66 words, this post is considerably longer than the thread's average. It is also syntactically more complex and follows standard German orthography, including noun capitalization. Its most striking features are the absence of hip-hop slang

and the abundance of formal vocabulary and collocations such as *rangiert unterhalb der Mittelmäßigkeit* ('ranges below average'), *vergeblicher Profilierungsversuch* ('unavailing attempt to gain profile'), *beneidenswert unkompliziertes* ('enviably uncomplicated'), *beinahe humorvoll* ('almost humorous'). This post is written in the third person (except for a subjectivity marker, *in my eyes*), while most other contributions choose the first and/or second person. Other than previous critics, Frank does not round off his contribution with *peace*, which contextualizes his lack of orientation to the community.

Two immediate responses to Frank come from Berlin residents who are already active in this debate (place of residence is part of the member profile that is displayed together with each post). In the first of them (post 23), P-A disparages Frank's statement with a condensed evaluation, i.e. *blub blub blub* (equivalent to 'blah blah blah'). About one and a half hour later, TOC's reply follows (post 24). His opener is a repetition and variation of the preceding evaluation,<sup>14</sup> thereby demonstrating alignment with P-A. He rejects Frank's criticism, which he labels *pseudo intellectual phrases*, and draws attention to what he perceives to be the essence of rap. According to TOC, the (formal) quality of rap sound and lyrics should leave no need for further interpretations. He underscores his stance through a reference to a rap artist he identifies with.<sup>15</sup> In the second part of post 24, TOC elaborates his alternative reading of the photo. He seems to suggest that guns can be understood as a visual metaphor, which transfers positive qualities of the German gun brand Heckler & Koch, such as *99% treffsicherheit* ('99% marksmanship'), to the band. He also seems to imply that the gun metaphor is legitimate in the frame of *FlexRap* (battle rap), a rap genre that focuses on aggressive verbal competition.<sup>16</sup>

Just a few minutes later, Frank's reaction (26) keeps in line with his initial stance and style. He rejects TOC's suggestion to 'celebrate the track' and accuses him of 'unreflected consumption'. He retains twice the verb final *-e*, the deletion of which is quite common on these boards, as demonstrated above. Frank rounds off his post with a self-labelling as *Student* ('university student'). In current German slang, *Student* is a negative categorization among high school students; it stands for an intellectual outlook without real experience. Frank's self-labelling evokes this stereotype, perhaps in order to ironically confirm inferences by fellow posters and readers.

Entries 27 and 28 (not reproduced here) come in the default board style and re-iterate the controversy discussed above. The author of (27) praises the band's local style, whereas the author of (28) is positive towards the song but rejects the band's photo as *peinlich* ('embarrassing') and calls the band *möchtegern gangsta* ('wannabe gangstas'). Yet

another reply to Frank follows in entry 29. Mark, who also comes from Berlin and praised the band earlier in this thread (post 13), quotes Frank's critique in full, and challenges him to *go home and listen to fanta 4*, i.e. a highly successful German rap band of the 1990s, which is judged by many as too commercial and soft. As in post 11, the indexical power of this statement draws on the position of the referent within the discursive system of hip-hop. The brevity of this post and the misspelling of *hör* as *höhr* (imperative sing. of 'listen to') provide a formal contrast to Frank's critique as well.

Overall, the participants' positions with respect to the band's photo reveal a dichotomy between 'critics', most clearly represented by Dan and Frank, and 'defenders', most clearly represented by TOC. The defenders are residents of Berlin and present themselves as fans of Berlin rap, while the critics come from other parts of the country. The critics read the band's photo as a mere imitation of African American imagery, which is not rooted in the artists' local context, i.e. Berlin. To them, the band's visual style lacks authenticity because it deviates from a widespread maxim of rap discourse, i.e. that rap reflects lived experience. By contrast, the defenders, and in particular TOC, embrace a metaphorical reading of the picture, which is rooted in an equally widespread conceptual metaphor of rap discourse, i.e. *RAP IS A WEAPON* (cf. Androutsopoulos and Scholz 2002). While many posters from both sides equally draw on resources that are typical for hip-hop board discussions in making their point, in Frank's contribution this clash of cultural values is articulated with a clash of language styles. Frank draws on a markedly more formal style in producing a more 'elaborate' critique, which fans of Berlin rap in turn reject as 'intellectual babbling'.

However, Frank's writing style is not exclusive to a critical perspective on 'gangsta rap', just as the defenders' style is not exclusive to Berlin or to 'gangsta' rap fans. Moreover, a look at other postings by the protagonists of this debate suggest that they all style-shift to some extent. What we witness in this thread is how the capital value of linguistic resources in hip-hop discourse is reproduced, and contested, in a situated online interaction. The articulation of stance and style that is most salient in entries 22–26 is rooted in the fundamental ambivalence of spoken and written style in the field (cf. 4.2). Spoken and non-standard writing is a clear, often quite conscious divergence from school norms and mainstream media discourse, which all participants are familiar with. It is a resource for constructing non-mainstream and 'down to earth' attitudes; what this involves in every single case depends on local context and the topics at hand (cf. Eckert 2002). By contrast, more professional activities in the field, such as authoring and editing copy text

for a large website, capitalize on a language style that is inevitably closer to institutional and mainstream media norms. However, sites of online interaction provide a space in which a writing style traditionally vested with symbolic authority can be devalued and made fun of. The emerging picture is certainly not unknown to sociolinguists, as it basically illustrates how the structural relation of standard and non-standard, as well as the covert prestige of vernacular speech, is reproduced in a new setting.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate how the notion of sociolinguistic style could deal with the complexities of language use in CMC. A framework for online style analysis was sketched out, and its tripartite distinction between individual participants, genres, and computer-mediated discourse field was used to describe and interpret linguistic variability on a particular hip-hop website. The findings suggest that sociolinguistic style must be addressed at the intersection of these three levels, which frame and contextualize each other in online interaction.

In sum, on the level of the field as a whole, participants are ‘doing hip-hop’ by drawing on a small but highly typical list of items across various categories (vocabulary, discourse markers, spelling variation). They capitalize on vernacular English, and additionally draw on visual cues of affiliation. Hip-hop slang, a members’ resource, operates on this global level as well. Clearly, the prototypical instantiation of hip-hop slang is tied up to genres of online interaction. But hip-hop’s field of online discourse includes numerous other genres beside online talk, some quite close to offline traditions, and others genuinely specific to CMC. Hip-hop on the Web is constituted through non-institutional literacy practices, but these practices are not oblivious to genre differences. Depending on genre, users will follow established conventions, creatively transform them, or draw on different generic models to solve the communicative task at hand. The comparison of artist homepages suggests that the choice of a generic model is part and parcel of online identity design, as it contextualizes individual ambitions and alignments. Discarding a ‘default’ genre style and adopting a different generic model has stylistic significance and is clearly acknowledged as such by participants. Therefore, genre is the level on which online style in a collective *and* an individual sense is manifest. Finally, the analysis of the online talk suggests that the discussion board provides members with a discursive space to debate the artists’ visual and verbal style, and to construct their own style as community members.

Although this approach was developed on data from an arena of youth (sub)culture, its usefulness is not restricted to such an arena. As researchers have repeatedly pointed out, youth and youth culture are particularly suited contexts for gaining sociolinguistic insights that reach beyond youth itself. Developing and negotiating social style plays a crucial role in adolescent identity constructions (cf. Bucholtz 2004, Eckert 2000, and papers in Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (eds.) 2003); but the relevance of style in social life is obviously not restricted to youth. Given that the analytical distinctions developed in this paper are not exclusive to youth-cultural settings on the Web, this framework is capable of being applied to other fields of computer-mediated discourse as well.

In conclusion, this chapter has argued for a sociolinguistic perspective on computer-mediated communication. With the social spread of the internet, new forms of community are emerging between real-life social networks and imagined communities. Informal written language is gaining new domains, and variation in written language, and in particular spelling, is increasing (cf. Sebba, this volume). Sociolinguistics must address these issues and developments, modifying its tools and concepts to meet new social realities. It seems that the theoretical and analytic notions of sociolinguistics can account for the complexity of language use and variation on the Web, provided we adjust them to the new conditions of communication and community in what Castells (2000) has termed the ‘network society’.

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<sup>1</sup> On genre in the study of sociolinguistic style cf. Irvine 2001; Bauman 2001; on genre and online ethnography cf. Danet 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The project “Jugendkulturelle mediale Stile” was carried out from 2000–2004 as part of the research group “Sprachvariation als kommunikative Praxis”, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG); director Werner Kallmeyer, principal investigator Jannis Androutsopoulos, research assistants Daniel Kraft, Nina Nikolic, Ben Schneider.

<sup>3</sup> I draw on Koch and Oesterreicher’s (1985) model of conceptually spoken/written style here, which separates the (phonic or graphic) materialization of discourse from its (spoken or written) conception. This model relates linguistic features to communicative situations by means of two ‘continua’. The communicative situation is modelled on a continuum between nearness and distance, based on criteria such as level of formality, level of spontaneity, monologue/dialogue, synchronous/asynchronous mode, etc. The conception of discourse is modelled on a continuum between spoken and written style, based on features of discourse structure, syntax, lexicon, and phonology/orthography (cf. Androutsopoulos 2000 for an earlier application to media discourse).

<sup>4</sup> One of the fullest directories in the field, the mzee.com link project, featured 480 German-speaking websites in spring 2002. This figure rose to 831 sites some 15 months later. The link directory on *webbeatz.de* listed 263 and 458 German hip-hop sites, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> The terms ‘online magazine’ and ‘web portal’ are used interchangeably in the following, as the boundary between them is fuzzy from the participants' perspective.

<sup>6</sup> According to webmaster information, *hiphop.de* reached 3.5 millions of page impressions per month in the beginning of 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Morgan 2001, contributions in Mitchell (ed.) 2001 and *Rap Dictionary* ([www.rapdict.org](http://www.rapdict.org)).

<sup>8</sup> These are 99 types, excluding proper names, but including a few ambiguous forms as for word class membership and language, e.g.. *sample* (verb or noun) and *mag* (Ger. verb *mag* or Eng. noun *magazine*).

<sup>9</sup> The sample consists of a total of 54,550 words, divided into 73 reviews (17,400 words), 116 artist homepages (18,650) and 24 board discussions (18,500). It is representative with respect to the total amount of texts in these genres on *webbeatz.de* at the time of research.

<sup>10</sup> Feature (c) has the most tokens (1440), mainly due to the copula verb *ist*, followed by (a) (854), (b) (391), (e) (73) and (d) (51). Features occurring less frequently in the sample, and therefore excluded from analysis, are the clitization of *es* after a personal pronoun (e.g. *du es* > *du's*) and of definite article after preposition (e.g. *mit dem* > *mit'm*). Analysis of features (d) and (e) includes only verbs which show variation in the sample. Linguistic constraints were not examined. Although they presumably affect the distribution of the variants to some extent, genre differences are clear enough for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> The difference between the three genres is statistically significant,  $\chi^2$ : 121.2 (df: 8),  $p \leq 0.001$ .

<sup>12</sup> This sum excludes member profiles and system-generated data, but includes quotes from other posts.

<sup>13</sup> This is a simplified version of the screen display. Additional content such as member information and signatures as well as all features of online layout have been omitted. The time of posting has been retained, as swiftness of response is an important indicator for online interaction. Names of contributors are anonymized throughout. English items in the original are in *italics* in the glosses.

<sup>14</sup> In the German original, TOC's opener (*blub blub und abgesoffen!*) is a word play on German *blub*, i.e. the stem of *blubbern* ('bubble'), which also has the colloquial meaning ‘confused talk’.

<sup>15</sup> TOC refers to a song called “Deutschland” by Olli Banjo, and devises the spelling *Deeuutschläänd* in order to imitate the song's prosody.

<sup>16</sup> *Rap Dictionary* ([www.rapdict.org](http://www.rapdict.org)) defines the hip-hop usage of *flex* as follows: “To show one's mettle, flexing one's muscles, showing one's arsenal and readiness to put it to use, letting one's pugilistic prowess be known. To strike someone or to get up in someone's face for intimidation.” In my data, *Flexrap* is used as a synonym with *Battlerap*.

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