

Haku, hermanoykuna: Language Mixing in Contemporary Maya and Quechua Rap Music

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Introduction

On Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula and in the Andes of Peru, young Indigenous musicians are rapping about pride in their heritage, love for their languages, and their hopes for a future which pays greater respect to Indigeneity. Many of these songs are monolingually performed in Yucatec Maya (800,000 speakers in Mexico and Belize) or Quechua (4.4 million speakers in Peru, about 10 million speakers worldwide). However, a number of songs are bilingual, mixing an Indigenous language with the colonial language, Spanish.

Given the songs' messages of Indigenous pride, as well as the artists' explicit calls for language maintenance/revitalization, the incorporation of Spanish in some songs is surprising and raises several related questions. How do bilingual rap songs function on a linguistic level? How does switching languages semantically affect lines/stanzas? Does incorporating two languages affect the overall message of a song?



A still from the music video for "Hijo Del Sol" by Maya rapper Pat Boy. His Tupac tee shirt and the skyscrapers in the background represent a conscious effort to situate this song, as well as Maya rap/Maya language more generally, in modernity. Also worth noting is the fact that Tupac Shakur was named after Túpac Amaru, an Inka man who led a revolt against the Spanish in late 18th century.

Methodology

This research project examined 8 bilingual rap songs, selected based on popularity and positive audience reception (to the extent that this can be measured). Four songs switched between Maya and Spanish; four songs switched between Quechua and Spanish. With help from native speakers, we transcribed and translated the songs into Spanish and English. Then, I reviewed the lyrics, paying particular attention to:

1. Interlingual puns, wordplay, and rhyme
2. Relationship between lyrical structure (rhyme, meter, etc.) and choice of language
3. Literal semantic meanings vs. more nuanced social messages conveyed within each language
4. Artist translation: which Quechua/Maya lines did artists choose to repeat in Spanish, and which lines did they say only in the Indigenous language? Vice versa?

Findings

Y en las calles ando rolando, con mi chan trici ando paseando,	Y en las calles ando rolando, con mi pequeño trici ando paseando,	And I'm riding in the streets, With my small cart I'm walking around
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An example of short-term language switching for structural and musical purposes (MC Chama, "Ki'imak in wóol). The artist switches to Maya for one word, "chan," because the Spanish equivalent "pequeño" has two extra syllables.

la vida es muy corta eso bien lo sé.	la vida es bien corta eso bien lo sé.	Life is very short, that I know well.
Táan u máan in che'ej in wojel.	Estoy andando sonriente lo sé.	I'm walking around smiling, I know,
Sé que algún día partiré y jamás regresaré.	Sé que algún día partiré y jamás regresaré.	I know that one day I'll leave and never return.

An example of interlingual rhyme scheme (Dino Chan, "Plasmo lo que Siento"). In the song, the final "L" sound in "wojel" is not pronounced, so it rhymes with "bien lo sé" and "regresaré."

Desde el Andesground La vitalidad que me lleva. Music revolution, el emblema. Viajando como el <u>kuntur</u> que se eleva.	Desde el Andesground La vitalidad que me lleva. Music revolution, el emblema. Viajando como el <u>kuntur</u> que se eleva.	From the Andesground The vitality that carries me. Music revolution, the emblem Traveling like the Condor which rises
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Inclusion of English, Spanish, and Quechua, demonstrating a wide array of linguistic and musical influences (Liberato Kani, "Pawaspay").

Cada vez somos más en este panorama,	Cada vez somos más en este panorama, con	More and more, we are in this panorama, along with
Urqunta qasanta hatun apukunawan;	Montañas, nieve, y los grandes dioses;	Mountains, snow, and the great gods;

In this example, one sentiment is expressed across two lines and across two languages (Liberato Kani, "Pawaspay").

Conclusions

1. Incorporation of Spanish disavows popular notions of Indigeneity as "frozen in time," emphasizes that Indigenous people are fully part of the contemporary landscape
 - a. This can also be seen in the choice to perform hip hop, which centers youth/modernity, orality, and "coolness" and is itself one of the newest musical genres to spread globally
2. Many instances of language-switching for structural purposes (e.g. to meet desired syllable count for a line), emphasizing artists' simultaneous command over both languages and supporting notions of *translanguaging* over code-switching
3. Some artists repeat messages in both languages, reflecting their (often explicitly stated) desires to be understood by a variety of audiences
4. Diverse inspirations and influences reflected in language use; for example, the incorporation of Venezuelan slang in Quechua, and the use of English



A still from Renata Flores's video for "Tijeras," prominently featuring traditional dress and rural landscapes. Like Pat Boy's, Flores's video alternates between images like this one, which evoke antiquity or nostalgia, and consciously-modern images. This alternation is a common feature of almost all Maya and Quechua rap music videos, and clearly represents the artists' prescribed task of connecting past, present, and future.

Significance

Maya and Quechua rappers are not the only Indigenous youth using hip hop to promote their languages and change perceptions of Indigeneity; there are similar movements in other parts of Latin America (Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil) and the world (Canada, India). Understanding the role bilingualism plays in these two specific contexts may shed light on how language use can affect the composition and interpretation of music lyrics, particularly in the realm of Indigenous identity assertion.

Similarly, Indigenous rap music represents a distinctly grassroots method of language promotion which tends to contrast with bureaucratic, often government-led efforts. In the case of Maya and Quechua, this contrast is exacerbated by the creation of bilingual rap music, because the bureaucratic efforts place emphasis on language purism. The language-mixing in these songs highlights a long-standing power struggle, and raises questions about who has the most authority on a given language, as well as how a language should be promoted.



Scan this QR code for a trilingual PDF of the song lyrics used in this project (transcribed in standard orthography, translated into Spanish and English)



Scan this QR code for a playlist of songs used in this project (mp3 format as well as YouTube video format)

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