

Exploring linguistic features in Vietnamese rap songs to support music education in schools

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Abstract: This paper explores the linguistic devices employed by Vietnamese rap artists to create their unique musical style. With the growing number of rap enthusiasts and supporters in Vietnam, artists like Binz, Karik, and Wowy have gained widespread recognition across the country. One of the distinctive features of Vietnamese rap songs is their language use, including rhyming patterns, wordplay, and code-switching. This paper analyzes the lyrics of some of the most popular Vietnamese rap songs to gain a deeper understanding of the language used in this fresh and dynamic music genre. The findings of this study provide deeper insights into how Vietnamese artists convey their messages and connect with audiences through their linguistic choices.

Keywords: Rhyming, wordplay, code-switching

1. Introduction

As a relatively new genre in Vietnamese arts, rap has undergone a unique development process and carries its own distinctive features. Besides catchy rhythms and creative rhyming patterns, another distinctive characteristic of Vietnamese rap songs is their language use. In this paper, we will explore some key linguistic features in Vietnamese rap, examining how artists use linguistic devices such as metaphors and wordplay to convey messages and connect with audiences. Through analyzing lyrics from some of the most popular Vietnamese rap songs, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the language of this rapidly growing and dynamic music genre.

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

Rap music in Vietnam has become increasingly popular over the past decade, with a unique style characterized by language use and how artists employ it to convey their messages. This Literature Review will examine some of the linguistic devices used by artists in Vietnamese rap songs, aiming to gain insights from scholars and researchers in this field.

2.1.1. Rhyme

A linguistic device commonly used in Vietnamese rap songs is rhyme, which is defined as the repetition of similar sounds in the final syllables of different words in Cambridge Dictionary. In Vietnamese rap songs, rhyming is often used to create catchy rhythms and emphasize the main themes and ideas of the song. According to Hoang (2017) and Trinh (2019),

Vietnamese rap songs typically employ two types of rhymes: perfect rhymes and assonance. Perfect rhymes involve the repetition of both vowels and consonants at the end of two words, while assonance involves the repetition of only vowels.

2.1.2. Wordplay

Wordplay is another linguistic device frequently used in Vietnamese rap songs. Wordplay can take many forms, including puns, metaphors, and compound word formations. As suggested by Smith (2018), wordplay in Vietnamese rap songs is often used to convey deeper meanings or to add a layer of complexity to the lyrics. For instance, in the song “Chạy” by Karik and Orange, the artists use wordplay to create compound words with “chạy”, which means both “run” and “avoid”. The artists use this form of wordplay to convey messages about the struggle for survival in a rapidly changing society.

2.1.3. Code-switching

Research on code-switching has been developed by many linguists, with significant contributions from Myers-Scotton (1993) and Auer (1998). Myers-Scotton developed the Matrix Language Frame Model, suggesting that in code-switching there is a dominant language (matrix language) and an inserted language (embedded language). Meanwhile, Auer (1998) focused on studying code-switching in conversation and emphasized the role of communicative context in analyzing this phenomenon.

Code-switching in Vietnamese rap songs involves the combination and use of multiple languages or

dialects within a song. Code-switching is a common feature of Vietnamese rap music where artists often incorporate English, French, and other languages into their lyrics. Code-switching allows artists to convey a sense of internationalism and connect with international audiences.

2.2. Research Methodology

This paper employs qualitative research methods to explore the linguistic devices used by artists in Vietnamese rap songs. The data collected consists of lyrics from popular rap songs in Vietnam over the past decade. The selection of songs will be based on their popularity, relevance to Vietnamese rap music, and availability of lyrics. The lyrics will be analyzed using content analysis methods to identify the most commonly used linguistic devices such as rhyming, wordplay, code-switching tools, and social commentary.

2.3. Research Results

2.3.1. Rhyme

In his song “Đưa Nhau Đi Trốn”, Đen Vâu uses perfect double rhyming to create a captivating and memorable chorus: “*Mình rời thành phố chật chội náo nức / Nơi mà cả việc thở cũng làm ta lao lực*”. “*Náo nức*” and “*lao lực*” represent an interesting double rhyming pattern that emphasizes the suffocation and constraints of urban life that inspire the author’s desire to escape. Perfect rhyming occurs when a word has an ending identical to other words. Additionally, with the tonal characteristics of Vietnamese, perfect rhyming is considered to require matching tones. For example, in Đen Vâu’s song “*Hai triệu năm*”, we also have rhyme at the end of each line:

*Anh cũng cần em nhưng không biết em sao
Anh không care lắm và anh quyết đem trao
Cho em hết nắng cho em hết đêm sao
Nhìn mặt anh đi, em nghĩ anh tiếc em sao?*

The unique triple rhyming pattern alongside his slow, straightforward narrative voice is also an interesting attraction for Đen Vâu’s listeners, demonstrating this rap artist’s skillfulness in using Vietnamese language. In “*Trốn tìm*”, Đen Vâu writes: “*Hồi đó anh Rút rè như đám cây mắc cỡ/ Gặp em làm anh hồi hộp tới mức gây tắc thở/ Ta đều không biết có điều gì sau đám mây sắp nở/ Trò chơi trốn tìm ngày đó, sau này đầy trắc trở*”. The phrases “*cây mắc cỡ*”, “*gây tắc thở*”, “*mây sắp nở*”, “*đầy trắc trở*” flow rhythmically as the author expresses the first stirrings of pure love, still filled with the shyness and

hesitation of youth.

Besides Đen Vâu, we can also find many other Vietnamese rap artists who have the ability to incorporate rhyming into their rap verses, such as DSK, Suboi, or Datmaniac. In “*Ngày tàn*”, DSK writes: “*Ngày tàn, có một anh nghệ sĩ nghèo ngồi gầy đàn, lấy le / Với cô bé, trèo cây me, một hạnh phúc, nhỏ bé / Chút may mắn, nhỏ lẻ / Hôm đây cô ấy thỏ thẻ...*”. The ending words of the rap verses above are identical to the ending words of the remaining lines, creating a chain of gentle melody in DSK’s narrative with “*lấy le*”, “*nhỏ bé*”, “*nhỏ lẻ*” and “*thỏ thẻ*”.

2.3.2. Wordplay

In the song “*Giàu vì bạn, sang vì vợ*”, RPT MCK uses wordplay to create a clever and humorous lyric: “*Nhà nào mà chẳng có mái / Không phải là sợ đó là tôn trọng*”. The use of the word “*mái*” in this context can be understood both as a roof of a house, or “*mái*” as the word indicating the female gender in Vietnamese (as in “*trống-mái*” meaning male-female). Thus, “*mái*” is a playful and gentle wordplay, comparing women to the roof of a house that protects happiness and peace in any family.

Similarly, in the song “*Chạy*” (Run) by Karik and Orange, the artists use wordplay with the word “*chạy*”, which can mean both “*to run*” and “*to avoid*”. The artists use this form of wordplay to convey a message about the struggle for survival in a rapidly changing society.

2.3.3. Code-switching

The combination of Vietnamese and English in Vietnamese rap songs brings diversity and depth to the lyrics, creating richness in language and music, while also demonstrating the global nature of rap in a culturally diverse context like Vietnam. This language mixing not only creates a unique style but also reflects the contemporary culture of Vietnamese youth - where language boundaries are increasingly blurred, while simultaneously showcasing Vietnamese hip-hop’s ability to integrate internationally while maintaining its distinct identity.

Đen Vâu is one of the rappers who uses code-switching between Vietnamese and English in his songs creatively and subtly. He skillfully combines the sound of falling rain with love emotions through the line “*Lộp độp, lộp độp/ Falling in love theo cách bộp chộp*” (“*Mưa trên những mái tôn*”), creating an interesting resonance between sound and meaning. The song “*Ghé thăm*” is a typical example of language intersection when combining Đen’s

Vietnamese rap part “*Chạm vào làn tóc rối, đôi má em ửng hồng/ Anh thức giấc trên bàn em pha sẵn ly trà xanh/ Kèm một vệt son đỏ rồi em sẽ lại đến thăm anh*” with Kimmese’s English lyrics “*Thought you’re seeking for something calls love/ Thing calls love...*”, showing the natural blend between the two languages in contemporary culture.

The song “*Hit Me Up*” by Binz is a typical example of code-switching in contemporary Vietnamese rap. The artist has skillfully mixed Vietnamese and English at different levels. At the individual vocabulary level, he naturally uses English words in Vietnamese sentences like “*phone*” instead of “*gọi điện*” in “*Phone cho anh những lúc em một mình*”, or the word “*feeling*” in “*Không ai mang cho em feeling nhiều vậy*”. Notably, the song features a complete English verse “*Hit me up when no one’s around and we gonna do things you already know/ Ain’t nobody ever gave you this kinda love...*”, then smoothly transitions back to Vietnamese. This language switching not only creates an engaging melody but also reflects the language usage trends of modern Vietnamese youth, where mixing two languages has become a natural part of daily communication. Binz also cleverly uses terms familiar to young people like “*sexy girl*”, “*next to me*” and naturally combines them with Vietnamese, creating a work that is both modern and relatable to listeners.

Similarly, in Suboi’s song “*N-Sao?*”, the lyrics switch between Vietnamese and English when describing the artist’s perspective on many frustrating social situations such as arguments between strangers on the Internet, discrimination against single people: “*N-sao mà thời bây giờ FA (Forever Alone) là nhúc nhĩ nà?/ N-sao mà giải thích chuyện mình cho người ta nà?*” Through this, the rapper conveys the message: Be true to yourself.

3. Conclusion

The results of this study show that Vietnamese rap songs employ various linguistic tools, including rhyming, wordplay, and code-switching, to convey messages and create a unique musical style. Rhyming is considered the most commonly used linguistic tool to create engaging rhythm and emphasize key themes and ideas in their songs. Wordplay is also frequently employed, with puns, metaphors, and compound words being used to convey deeper meanings and add layers of complexity to the lyrics. Additionally, the use of code-switching, combining

multiple languages or dialects within a song, is also a common feature of Vietnamese rap music, allowing artists to convey a sense of internationalism and connect with international audiences.

In general, the results of this study demonstrate that linguistic tools are an integral part of Vietnamese rap music, allowing artists to convey messages and connect with their audience on a deeper level. The use of these tools reflects the experiences and perspectives of Vietnamese youth while highlighting the role of rap music as a means of cultural and social expression in Vietnam.

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