

Multilingual Code-Switching in Montreal Hip-hop: Mayhem Meets Method or, “Tout mounè qui talk trash kiss mon black ass du nord”

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1. Introduction

M'al chèche travay, blan en di se kob li m'ap volè

[I look for work, the white says I'm stealing his job]

M'al chèche kay, yo di mwen malprop,

[I look for a house, they say I'm dirty]

Se pou mwen tounen lakay

[That's why I want to go home]

Lekol, mèt la di mwen se kretin

[At school, teacher says I'm dumb]

Tout fanmi'm gaye

[The families are all scattered]

Lavi a pa fasil

[Life's not easy]

Se pou sa nou rasanble

[So we have to stick together]

The words of this 1999 hit song by the Montreal hip-hop group Muzion speak directly to the sense of alienation experienced by young members of one non-white immigrant community—the Haitian community—but in that year they also resonated with many other young Montrealers from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom are not actually fluent in Haitian Creole (the language of the extract shown¹). Hip-hop audiences at clubs in this multiethnic Canadian metropolis reverberated to the chorus, *Lavi a pa fasil, se pou sa nou rasanble* (“Life’s not easy, so we have to stick together”),

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¹The decision has been made here to refer to “Haitian Creole” rather than to “*Kreyòl*” (see Valdman, 1988) as the former term is more familiar in the Montreal context. This usage also reflects our understanding that there are many languages that might legitimately refer to themselves as (a) /kreyol/.

easily understood and approximated by French-speakers.² The lyrics of at least some Montreal hip-hop groups turned out to be protest poetry people could dance to.

The texts produced by these Montreal rap artists also turn out to contain many instances of code-switching or code-mixing between the languages or language varieties that are commonly in use in the ethnically and racially diverse urban contexts in which Montreal hip-hop is grounded. In this first foray into hitherto unexplored territory we will limit ourselves to giving examples of some instances of code-switching in Montreal hip-hop and identifying some functions this switching appears to perform at the lexical/phrasal level.³ Further analysis of code-switching at the grammatical level, along with a more comprehensive discussion of the reasons for the prevalence of code-switching in these texts—particularly as it contributes to the formation of a new, hybrid cultural identity among young Montrealers—will be found in Sarkar, Winer and Allen (in preparation).

1.1 Background to the study of the language of hip-hop

Hip-hop is a relatively recent arrival on the North American youth culture scene, although its roots reach far back into Black North American culture. Hip-hop as a locus for academic interest is even more recent. Several book-length published studies of the rap music phenomenon exist, all published within the last ten years (for example, Rose, 1993; Potter, 1995; Krims, 2000; Keyes, 2002). An annual symposium on hip-hop was initiated at Concordia University in Montreal in February 2002 and has now taken place twice. However, existing studies of hip-hop rarely focus on structural details of the language used in rap lyrics.⁴ Applied linguists are newcomers to hip-hop. Two well-established scholars in the field of African American English (AAE) studies have devoted some time to an analysis of the language of rap within the context of AAE and Black American culture (Morgan, 1998, 2001; Smitherman, 1997). Smitherman illustrates the continuity of communicative practices in the “Hip-Hop Nation” with older Black/AAE traditions in the U.S. and elsewhere. Morgan has analyzed the ways in which particular language forms in hip-hop, such as *crew* or *MC*, are used to create a hip-hop identity; she points out links with working class or vernacular American culture as well as with AAE *per se*, and refers to the hip-hop delight in “casting lexical havoc” (2001, p. 194).

Keyes (2002) and Newman (2002) identify four essential elements of hip-hop culture: graffiti or “writing”, breakdancing or “b-boying”, turntabling or “deejaying”, and rap. Rap as a musical form necessarily includes the underlying “beat”, often created by a specialized beatmaker, and elements of turntabling, in which portions of material created by other performers are creatively recombined and used to frame the lyrics— “the rhythmic, cut’ n’ mix sound that is at the very heart of the hip-hop aesthetic” (Potter, 1995, p. 39), as well as the rap lyrics themselves. Our analysis here will be restricted to rap lyrics, specifically a narrowly defined subset of rap lyrics from Montreal hip-hop, and at this initial stage will not go beyond a preliminary discussion of some forms of code-switching in the lyrics studied. It will be evident, however, that this is a rich field for further investigation. Montreal hip-hop in particular, with its myriad linguistic influences, has a unique fascination for the applied linguist.

1.2 Different perspectives on code-switching

The study of code-switching as a sub-field of applied linguistics and of language study generally has been active for several decades in the Anglo-American academic tradition. Code-switching has generally been studied as it occurs in spontaneous speech (for the success of which the development of modern recording technology was essential). The title of Auer’s (1998) edited volume, *Code-*

²This refrain may be rendered in standard French as *La vie n’est pas facile, c’est pour ça qu’il faut nous rassembler*.

³This kind of code-switching has also been labelled “nonce borrowing” (Allen 2003): “single content words from one language mix into the other”. We use “code-switching” here as a general term to cover both lexical and grammatical switches inter- and intra-sententially, rather than reserving the code-switching label solely for intrasentential grammatical mixing.

⁴For example, none of the papers given at the two Montreal symposia spoke to the issue of language use in rap lyrics specifically.

switching in conversation, reflects this emphasis. Different perspectives on code-switching have been developed, reflecting a variety of scholarly orientations—some more strictly linguistic in nature, others concerned with the social context in which code-switched language occurs as well as with the linguistic nature of the switches. Conferences such as the International Symposium on Bilingualism have proved themselves to be particularly fruitful sites for the development of theoretical perspectives on and the exchange of new ideas about code-switching and the way it functions, based on an increasingly rich and diverse body of empirical evidence. This academic activity is, not coincidentally, occurring in a world in which both inter-ethnic mixing at national and supranational levels (with a concomitant mixing of languages), and a public *awareness* of that mixing, are becoming more and more widespread. The classification-defying diversity of kinds of music commonly lumped together as “World Beat” by beleaguered inventory-compiling employees of record stores is one small but revealing indication of this phenomenon.

The “matrix frame” model of code-switching as elaborated by Myers-Scotton (see Myers-Scotton, 2000, for a recent discussion) is applicable to the study of rap lyrics in Montreal French hip-hop in some respects, as most of the code-switches found in the lyrics analyzed were embedded in a Quebec French “frame” or base language. (An English tradition of hip-hop in Montreal also exists; however, Quebec rap lyrics using English as a base language do not fall within the scope of the present study.)

The “social identity” model of code-switching, as it is used in the work of Rampton (1998), can also appropriately be applied to the study of Montreal rap lyrics; indeed, it offers more possibilities for extended analysis in the context that interests us here, as questions of identity formation are central to an understanding of hybridity and youth culture in inner-city Montreal and the role language plays in this arena. Code-switching has long been recognized to be an important identity marker in bilingual populations; we extend this to an analysis of its identity-marking function in *multilingual* populations, specifically the population of inner-city Montrealers under 40 who have grown up in a French-schooled, English-using environment. Many young people in this multiethnic milieu speak a home language that is neither English nor French.⁵

1.3 Code-switching in song lyrics

In the fields of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, code-switching as a phenomenon arouses interest chiefly with respect to what might be called its on-line properties; it is the language-mixing behaviour of bilingual or multilingual speakers in the process of speaking that seems to fascinate us most, not without reason. However, an examination of code-switching as it is premeditatedly and *artfully* employed by poets and songwriters can also yield insights into the way in which two or more languages or “codes” may interact to index and enact a particular speech community’s collective linguistic and cultural identity. In an early investigation of this phenomenon, Stølen (1992) analyzed Danish-English code-switching in songs written by one songwriter from the midwestern Danish-American community in the first half of the twentieth century.⁶ Winer has examined the case of calypso lyrics (1986), and investigated the degree of comprehensibility to North American audiences of reggae lyrics (1990), although she does not focus on code-switching *per se* in the latter.

In a more recent study, Bentahila and Davies (2002) take a detailed look at Arabic-French switching in the lyrics of Algerian *rai* music. They point out that code-switching in song lyrics is a very different phenomenon from code-switching in conversation, as it is neither spontaneous, nor is it intimate (that is, it is not addressed to one interlocutor, or at most to a small group, all of whom are

⁵Links could be made between the rise of this particular multilingual population and the compulsory French language-of-schooling legislation enacted in 1977 in Quebec (“Bill 101”); a full discussion falls outside the scope of the present paper. It is interesting to note, however, that the international rise of hip-hop culture and of rap as a poetic form coincided very propitiously with the coming of age of an ethnically diverse generation of young Montrealers affected by the legislation in question (Danielle Rousseau, personal communication, June 2003).

⁶Stølen also refers in passing to the little-studied phenomenon of mediaeval macaronic verse in western Europe, which was most commonly composed in a mixture of Latin and the local vernacular. This is probably the earliest attested form of code-switching in song lyrics as such. Older poetry, of course, contains many examples of code-switching (usually in an oral rather than in a written tradition) but the knowledge of how to sing or chant it has not, alas, survived.

known personally to the speaker). When code-switching moves into the arena of public discourse, discourse intended for large audiences of strangers and carefully pre-written at that, it requires a different approach to analysis. Bentahila and Davies consider that the use of French switches in Arabic *rai* lyrics, and indeed the use of Arabic inserts in otherwise French texts (as *rai* moves across national boundaries to become a French as well as an Algerian form of cultural expression), performs the two important functions of “globalization” and “localization” at the same time. That is, the performers demonstrate their links with a global culture outside the local context, while simultaneously serving to ground the increasingly internationally recognized *rai* phenomenon in local, Arabic-speaking Algerian culture, even as *rai* moves away from its geographical place of origin: “the expansion of international communication and global media seems to be making it easier for a group to assert their own, local identity and at the same time offer a universal message to the rest of the planet” (p. 206).

It seems to us that the multilingual code-switching that characterizes Montreal hip-hop may also act as a locus for collective (and to some extent conscious) theorizing about border-transcending identity formation processes in the in-group made up of young multiethnic Montrealers. At the same time, of course, it reflects to a large (and as yet unanalyzed) extent the *unconscious* processes of language mixing that are in fact a frequently observed local feature of spontaneous speech among members of the group. We turn now to a closer look at this group.

2. The context for Montreal hip-hop

The code-switching in Montreal hip-hop draws on more than two languages.⁷ This reflects the fact that Montreal’s urban youth community has a multilingual orientation, as mentioned above. Many thousands of young people from immigrant backgrounds have now graduated from an all-French school system; a large number of these young adults also use English in their daily lives. Inter-ethnic mixing in the schools has meant that performers from diverse backgrounds frequently decide to join forces. Montreal hip-hop groups are a mirror of the ethnolinguistic diversity that is so salient a feature of the downtown Montreal scene.

Hip-hop culture in particular already favours an openness to other languages and cultures in both the structure and content of rap. A great deal of American rap music is openly critical of a political and economic system that has not been experienced as empowering by the American Black population. The undertones of rebellion and resistance that characterize much (not all) rap make it attractive to young people across cultures, and appreciation for American rap has now spread far beyond the borders of the United States. As performers in other countries have appropriated this art form, they have imparted to it a variety of local characteristics. It is now common to hear rap performed in non-western languages such as Korean, Japanese and Chinese, as well as in European languages such as German, Italian and Spanish (see Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2002, for a valuable preliminary analysis of some discourse topics and linguistic patterns in European rap lyrics). British rap has long drawn on South Asian musical traditions and fusion forms such as *bhangra* to create a style in which Punjabi or Bengali are as likely to be heard as English.⁸ In addition to the linguistic richness and diversity now typical of rap lyrics at the international level, the beats and turntabling frames used by producers and performers also draw on a wide variety of musical traditions. Extraordinary creativity is often evident in the way musicians interweave rhythms, sounds and lyrics from several linguistic and cultural origins, all in the same song.

In the Montreal hip-hop context, therefore, a population which already perceives itself as multilingual and multicultural has felt free to draw on a multilingual and multicultural musical tradition to create a form of rap with many unique features. The tolerance for diversity which characterizes both the youth culture and the art form is not necessarily typical of other elements of Quebec society. Montreal hip-hop is rapidly evolving as a form of popular culture that has been enthusiastically adopted by the relatively new in-group of young, urban, multiethnic Montrealers who

⁷The study of multilingual code-switching in Montreal hip-hop therefore stands in contrast to the existing literature on code-switching, most of which has examined language use in bilingual populations.

⁸In fact a great deal of code-switching also characterizes much British rap; to the best of our knowledge, the linguistic aspects have not yet been formally studied.

are comfortable in French, also capable of using some (sometimes a great deal of) English, and often possessing another language as well.

It is important to point out, however, that the level of bi- or multilingual proficiency that characterizes many hip-hop *performers* may be quite different from that of their *audience*. Until we have had the opportunity to investigate further, we cannot say with any certainty what proportion of the people who attend Montreal hip-hop concerts and purchase the CDs actually understand the lyrics written in languages other than French. Knowledge of American rap has almost certainly made many young people familiar with many AAE words and expressions. It seems likely to us that certain high-frequency lexical items, often code-switched, may function as salient in-group markers in the youthful urban population that constitutes the largest audience for hip-hop in Montreal. However, the extent to which any one individual from this group may be able to function in a language other than French must remain an open question.

It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that the use of code-switching in performance art as a way to unify participants of diverse origins has long been typical of the Quebec artistic scene. Writers, musicians and visual artists have long felt free to draw on both Quebec French and Canadian English sources in the process of creation; this artistic freedom has now extended itself across a multitude of other languages and cultures. Indeed, language use in Quebec generally has featured extensive borrowing from English into French and from French into English for at least a century. The *Office de la langue française* (Office of the French language) set up by a protectionist provincial government as a way to safeguard the purity of the French language in Quebec, has slowed down, though not stopped, this tendency of Quebec French speakers to borrow heavily from English. In this regard, Montreal hip-hop is therefore following a well-trodden path marked out by generations of language users in Quebec. Although many Quebec speakers have been and are monolingual in one or the other of Canada's official languages, that has not stopped them borrowing from the other at will.

Quebec is, of course, officially unilingual in French. Outside Montreal, most Québécois are still monolingual in Quebec French, especially in rural areas where very little English is spoken or understood. English is the majority language of Canada outside Quebec, and continues to exert a powerful pull on immigrants to Quebec, despite the difficulty of gaining access to fluent English through the regular (French-language) school system. In Montreal, a multilingual, multiethnic metropolis of well over three million people, about 40% of the population identifies as French-Canadian and uses French as the home language; perhaps 30% identify as English-Canadian; and the other 30% (a rapidly growing proportion) has another ethnolinguistic origin of some kind, and may speak their own language at home (making them, in Quebec official parlance, "allophones").⁹

Quebec government concern for the health of French in the province has led to a number of government policies designed to boost the number of fluent French-speakers, among them the language-of-schooling legislation already referred to. Another such policy is one giving would-be immigrants to Quebec who already speak French more immigration "points", thus making it easier for them to come. Montreal is home to a very large population of Haitian origin; the growth of this community has been fostered by the language-related aspects of Quebec immigration policy, as well as by the relative ease with which Haitians (who traditionally perceive the process of formal education as being conducted only in French) can integrate into Quebec French society, at least where public language use is concerned.¹⁰

3. Code-switching in Montreal hip-hop

3.1 Relevant languages and language varieties

Several languages and language varieties are commonly used and mixed by Montreal rap artists working in French as a base language. In the lyrics analyzed for this phase of the study, nine

⁹Figures approximated from recent Canadian census data.

¹⁰Young Haitian-origin Québécois' perceptions of the systemic racism that exists in Quebec against non-white Québécois, particularly against Blacks, has been examined in an exploratory study by Potvin (1999).

categories were relevant, as follows. We think it likely that this exuberant proliferation of linguistic influences may make Montreal hip-hop unique.

3.1.1 Varieties of French

1. Standard Quebec French. This is the base or “matrix” language (Myers-Scotton, 2002) for the greater part of the lyrics analyzed. It differs from “standard” international French mainly in the use of distinctively Quebec phonological features, such as the assibilation of /t/ and /d/ before a high front vowel.

2. Non-standard Quebec French. The local dialect is characterized by a large number of extremely common lexical items that are not normally comprehensible to speakers of standard “international” French, such as *dépanneur* for “convenience store”, *gougounes* for “flip-flops” (sandals), or *garrocher* for “to throw, hurl” Local swear words such as *crisse*, “christ”, *tabarnac*, “tabernacle”, and *hostie*, “host”, tend to be derived from Catholic sacred terms and to be idiosyncratic to the Quebec context. Non-standard Quebec French also contains many assimilated borrowings from English that are fully integrated into French phonologically and morphosyntactically. Thus, the English verbs “to watch” and “to shine” have become the non-standard Quebec French verbs *watcher*, *shiner*. Nouns such as *joke*, *luck*, *tank* (sometimes spelled *tinque*) are considered French and are commonly used by monolingual Quebec speakers with no knowledge of English.

3. European French. There are many lexical items typical of European French, and in particular of street slang, that are known in Quebec. Words such as *nana* for “girl, chick”, or *bagnole* for “car”, may be used by any Quebec French speaker (often with a mock-pretentious tone) but remain marked.

3.1.2 Varieties of English

4. Standard North American English. Switches into English in the texts analyzed were coded as such because they are clearly not assimilated into the French matrix in the way non-standard Quebec lexical items that originated as English loanwords are.

5. African-American English. Initial identification of items as AAE terms was confirmed on the basis of academic sources such as Smitherman (1998) and Morgan (2001), as well as through on-line resources (The Rap Dictionary and The Ultimate Rap Dictionary are two examples).

6. Hip-hop “keywords”. These items may be considered a subset of the AAE terms identified; they have been noted (by, for example, Morgan, 2001; Newman, 2002; Smitherman, 1997) as being particularly characteristic of hip-hop and therefore a useful way for performers to establish their identity in the “hip-hop nation”. Words such as *rap*, *MC* (“rapper”), *underground*, *crew*, serve to ground the text in hip-hop culture specifically.

7. Spanish loanwords. These are not frequent in the corpus analyzed, but occur with enough regularity to justify establishing a separate category for them. Words such as *loco*, *puto*, *amigo*, have come into the common hip-hop lexicon through American rap written by bilingual speakers of English and Spanish in whose spontaneous speech mixing is common. This phenomenon has been widely observed on both East and West coasts, for example in the New York area, with its Puerto Rican influence (Poplack, 1980) and in the American Southwest, where the influence is Mexican.

3.1.3 Caribbean creoles

8. Haitian Creole. This is the only other language to be used as a “matrix” in the lyrics analyzed, reflecting the cultural origins of the rap artists studied. Within sequences of Haitian Creole, switches into other languages and varieties are common, exactly as for the more common base language Quebec French. Haitian Creole, a language in its own right (Valdman, 1988), has French as its primary lexifier language.

9. Jamaican Creole. Sometimes called Jamaican Creole English or Jamaican nation language, this creole has English as its primary lexifier language and also qualifies as a language in its own right. Reggae music commonly uses mainly Jamaican Creole and is closely associated with this idiom. Lexical items such as *rudeboy*, *spliff*, *ganja*, are instantly identifiable as Jamaican Creole.

3.2. Research questions

The research questions under consideration during the analysis of the lyrics covered here were:

- What is the nature and function of code-switching in Montreal hip-hop?
- How does code-switching in this context contribute to the creation of an in-group among young Quebecois?

Space limitations make it necessary to restrict the discussion to preliminary answers to the first of these questions here. A fuller discussion, and some initial exploration of the second question, will be found in Sarkar, Winer & Allen (in preparation).

3.3. Data pool and coding procedures

The data pool used consisted of the 1999 output of the two Montreal hip-hop groups Muzion and Sans Pression (“without pressure”). In that year, both these groups released their first compact disc: Muzion’s *Mentalité Moune Morne (Ils n’ont pas compris)* and Sans Pression’s *514-50 dans mon réseau*. The first title can be roughly translated as “Clueless/sluggish world view” (and as such is understood to be an attack on mainstream society); the second is a reference to 514 and 450, the two telephone area codes that cover the Greater Montreal calling area; this translates as “514-50 in my network”.

This body of lyrics constituted a useful sample of convenience. At the time of analysis, three years after the publication of the CDs, most of the lyrics not already issued with the albums were available on the Web; this would not have been true for more recently released material. The two groups in question have a loyal “underground” following in Montreal hip-hop circles, and 1999 marked the beginning of their rise to semi-commercial success. Muzion’s second album came out in November 2002 and Sans Pression’s in June 2003; both of these were heavily mediatized events, in contrast to the release of their first albums. We consider that the 1999 output of these two groups is a synchronic “snapshot” that constitutes a representative sample of rap from the Montreal underground at that time.

Multiple passes were made through the lyrics and all words and phrases coded for one of the nine linguistic categories listed. When the lyrics were available on the CD inserts, these were transcribed; otherwise, lyrics were usually available on the Web. A minimal amount of new transcription was necessary. After all the lyrics had been set down, they were checked at least twice against the recorded versions of the songs by two different coders, and corrections were made as necessary. Considerable debate among coders ensued, as generational differences naturally resulted in differences in the categorization of loanwords—older coders tending to see a loanword where coders under 20 saw a Quebec French word.

When the coding was complete, the available formatting resources of our word processing software had been thoroughly exploited to enable us to code every word in one of the nine categories listed, using every possible combination of bolding, italicizing and underlining, as follows:

FRENCH

1. Standard Quebec French (unmarked code)
2. **Non-standard Quebec French (bolded)**
3. **European French (bolded and underlined)**

ENGLISH

4. Standard North American English (underlined)
5. *African-American English (AAE) (italicized)*
6. *“hip-hop keywords” (italicized and underlined)*
7. Spanish loanwords (outlined)

CARIBBEAN CREOLES

8. ***Haitian Creole (bolded and italicized)***
9. **Jamaican Creole (bolded, italicized and underlined)**

3.4 Functions of code-switching in Montreal hip-hop

3.4.1 Lexical/phrasal code-switching

Our analysis starts with a look at the lexical or phrasal level switches in the corpus. The two are considered together, as “chunked” phrases often seem to function as single lexical items at discourse level.

3.4.1.1. To identify/draw attention of addressee (utterance-initial/final)

The most evident function of lexical/phrasal switches is the vocative function; that is, the switch functions to draw the attention of, or to identify, the addressee. This can be seen in examples (1) through (6).¹¹ In all these examples the base language is French and the switch is into a non-standard variety of English. Example (1) uses two common phrases from Jamaican Creole. A *rudeboy* is an assertive, even aggressive, young man, one not to be trifled with. The expression *lick one shot* literally refers to rapid-fire gunshot, but may also have a sexual connotation. The text allows of either interpretation.

- (1) *Rudeboy, lick one shot* et si tu sais ce que je veux dire
'*Rudeboy, lick one shot* and if you know what I mean'

In example (2) the addressee is a young woman, or *sista* (in AAE) and the switch includes the rhetorical greeting *what up?* The same greeting is used in the sentence-initial switch that serves to attract the attention of the interlocutor in example (3), followed by the common AAE discourse marker *yo*.

- (2) *Yo, sista, what up?* Tu sais qu'on n'est pas beaucoup...
'*Yo, sista, what up?* You know we're not very...'
(3) *What up yo?* Shit, les rues sont fucked up
'*What up yo?* Shit, the streets are fucked up'

The expression *nomsayin'* (“you know what I’m saying, you hear me”), as in example (4), occurs frequently in the corpus and also serves as a discourse marker—here, to attract the attention of the addressee at the outset of an utterance that then continues in French.

- (4) *Nomsayin'*—on t'attend, on t'oublie pas
'*Nomsayin'*—we'll wait for you, we won't forget you'

In examples (5) and (6), the appellations *boy* and *blackman* in sentence-final position provide closure to utterances that can be seen in context to function as warnings to the interlocutor. Phonological considerations motivated the decision to code *boy*, here pronounced /bwai/, as Jamaican Creole rather than as AAE.

- (5) Tu cherches la faille, *boy*
'You're looking for trouble, *boy*'
(6) Et toi, *blackman*
'And you, *blackman*'

¹¹In these, as in the other examples given, the original French is followed by an English gloss in which the English translation is substituted for the original unmarked French, but the coding conventions are otherwise respected.

3.4.1.2. As markers of social/cultural identity

Code-switching as a marker of social or cultural identity is a very prevalent function of code-switching in this corpus. It can be subdivided into several categories, depending on the type of identity marking the rapper chooses to foreground in a particular sequence.

(a) Black North American culture

Rap is known world-wide as a phenomenon of Black American origin, although it has now spread to include artists from every conceivable background. By seamlessly inserting AAE words and phrases into otherwise French sequences, the rappers discussed here, all of whom are in fact Black, assert a certain cultural and ethnic allegiance that identifies them as young *Black* Québécois. Ibrahim (1999) has shown how this decision to use, not just Standard English, but “Black English as a Second Language” or “BESL” is made by young African immigrants to southwestern Ontario, Canada. In fact, white French-Canadian origin Quebec rappers (not present in the corpus for this study) also frequently make use of AAE words and phrases, and in so doing can be seen to be identifying themselves with the Black community as well as with rap culture generally. The phenomenon of the “wigga” or “wannabe nigga/white nigga” has been perceptively analyzed by Cutler (1999).

The adjectives *ill* and *chill* in examples (7) and (8) are common AAE lexical items. *Ill* in fact has an overwhelmingly positive connotation, in a semantic reversal of a kind common in non-standard usage. The utterance exploits this meaning in a bilingual pun with “maladie” (“illness”). *Chill* has the same force as “cool”.

(7) *Tellement ill*, on dirait que j’ai ma maladie
‘So *ill*, seems like I’ve got my disease’

(8) Pas *chill* dans le territoire hostile
‘[It’s] not *chill* in this hostile territory’

In example (9), the AAE term *Five-Oh* for “police” is used to stinging effect. The problematic nature of the relationship between Black communities and the police in North America has meant that in rap texts, references to police are necessarily frequent, usually derogatory, and often made through substitutions for the word “police” itself.

(9) pour le *Five-Oh*, cinq négros par jour, c’est assez bon
‘for the *police*, five blacks a day is pretty good’

The common AAE phrases *talk shit* and *you tha man* in examples (10) and (11) are stressed by being placed in utterance-final and utterance-initial position respectively. *Talk shit* refers to lying or boasting; *you tha man*, often a term of admiration (“what a guy!”) is here used with heavy sarcasm by female rap artist J.Kyll, describing the overbearing and inappropriately boastful behaviour of a would-be admirer who all the women definitely do *not* want.

(10) T’empeste l’étage avec ton *talk shit*
‘You stink up the floor with your *lies*’

(11) *You tha man*, toutes les femmes te veulent, oh! ouais!
‘*You tha man*, all the women want you, yeah, right!’

Celli is an AAE abbreviation for “cell phone”, and in example (12) is inserted into a list of luxury items typically owned by rappers, or others, who have “made it”. The reference is disparaging, as the rapper then goes on to criticize this type of materialistic obsessiveness.

(12) *Celli*, auto et grosses bagues
‘*Celli*, car and big rings’

(b) Black Caribbean Anglophone culture

The corpus is peppered with lexical/phrasal items from Jamaican Creole English, as in the insertion of lick one shot noted in example (1), and seen also in example (14) in a less rhetorical sense. Example (13) uses rude boy not in a vocative sense (as in example (1)) but to assert the rapper's own identity. The line functions as an introductory signature for Sans Pression ("SP for initials"), who in this way prefaces his name with traits he wishes to be known for. The coding of criminal as Jamaican Creole is based on the phonological properties of the suprasegmentals (syllabic rather than stressed) and of the final vowel (/æ/ rather than schwa).

(13) Rude boy, criminal, SP comme initiales
'Rude boy, criminal, SP for initials'

(14) si t'es de chez nous lick one shot
'if you're one of us lick one shot'

Terms originally from Jamaican Creole English, but now familiar to all marijuana-using North Americans (among whom we may count most rappers) can be seen in examples (15) and (16), below. A spliff is a marijuana cigarette. Ganjah (also spelled ganja) is marijuana itself; the word is Hindi, and came to the Caribbean with Indian indentured labourers.

(15) Ceux qui spark ton spliff
'Those who spark your spliff'

(16) le ganjah est quelque chose qui a toujours été là
'ganjah is something that's always been there'

The Jamaican Creole English expression one love, as in example (17), may be familiar to many North Americans from the reggae output of the late Bob Marley and others as an expression of political unity.

(17) j'espère que tu m'entends. One love!
'I hope you hear me. One love!'

(c) Hip-hop culture

Here we focus on two typical hip-hop markers: the use of key lexical items, and geographical localization. As noted above, Morgan (2001), Newman (2002), and Smitherman (1997) draw attention to the use of certain key lexical items that serve to ground rap texts in hip-hop culture and to identify these texts as rap. The word rap itself, as in example (21), is one obvious example. MC is the usual hip-hop word for "rapper"; example (18) seems to imply that in this context (although by no means in all), "rapper" and "racketeer" are synonymous. A rapper is of course often to be found with his crew of fellow rappers or other friends and supporters, as in example (19). Example (20) conjoins Spit rugged and drop the beat, two hip-hop phrases that refer to style of rapping; it is the hip-hop context that confers meaning on this sequence.

(18) Deux MCs, deux racketeers
'Two MCs, two racketeers'

(19) ...que j'sois seul ou en crew
'...whether I'm on my own or with my crew'

(20) Spit rugged drop the beat j'y vais
'Spit rugged drop the beat I'm off'

- (21) De *rap* pur, pourquoi tu murmures?
'It's pure *rap*, why are you whispering?'

The frequent use of *underground* to refer to a way of life, as in example (22), is a choice made by these rappers specifically; both Sans Pression and Muzion go to great pains to distinguish their art from other, more commercial and less "pure", kinds of rap by contemporaries who they perceive as having sold out to the Establishment. The French equivalent, *souterrain*, is used frequently by Sans Pression with its English hip-hop meaning, and figures in the title of the song *L'étage souterrain* ("The underground storey").

- (22) Donc l'*underground* c'est une mode de vie
'So the *underground* is a way of life'

A less obvious way of grounding the text in hip-hop culture can be seen in example (23), where a local geographical reference is used to situate the action not only in the city of Montreal (to which there are many references in the corpus) but also in the heart of the traditional red-light district, which is defined by the intersection specified. This juxtaposing of the action in rap lyrics with sites locally known to the hip-hop community has been noted by Morgan (2001) as being typical of hip-hop. The writer of this rap lyric, Sans Pression, can be quite sure that most of his listeners would recognize the geographical reference and would appreciate its significance.

- (23) une victime frime *coin St-Laurent et Ste-Catherine*
'a victim [of] a con game corner of St-Laurent and Ste-Catherine'

(d) Haitian culture

Of the five rappers who are members of Muzion and Sans Pression, three—J.Kyll and Impossible of Muzion and Ti-Kid of Sans Pression—are of Haitian origin. The Haitian roots of these rappers, and of a substantial proportion of Montreal's Black community, are evident in the corpus of rap lyrics analyzed. Not only is there frequent code-switching between French as a base language and Haitian Creole, but there are also extended text sequences in Haitian Creole as a base language, which often themselves incorporate switches into varieties of French or English (not discussed here). We give a few examples of lexical/phrasal code-switching between French and Haitian Creole: for instance, the use of the word *patnai* ('close friend, buddy, pal'), originally from English "partner" in example (24), and found frequently throughout the corpus. At this point *patnai* is so widely used by young people of Haitian and non-Haitian origin alike that it seems to be well on its way to becoming assimilated into the Quebec French of the under-30 generation as a full-fledged loanword, at least in inner-city Montreal. An investigation of the ongoing evolution of Quebec French as a result of ethnolinguistic mixing—currently under-researched—would undoubtedly repay further study. Assimilation is in progress with a number of other Haitian Creole words as well, such as *fwékan* ('smartass') seen in example (27),¹² *popo* ('police') in example (28), *kob* ('money, cash') and the swearword *kget*,¹³ all of which are frequently used by young people who are aware of the origins of these words but themselves have no knowledge of Haitian Creole. The phrase *ça ou pas cònnain* (example 25) on the other hand, would be opaque to a non-speaker of Haitian Creole. The Haitian Creole words *lakay* ('home'), *piyajé* ('trouble, hassle') in example (26) and *jescome* (example 29) are also not in common use among non-speakers of Haitian Creole. We have observed that the English origin of *jescome* ('just

¹²We have observed a tendency among non-speakers of Haitian Creole to hypercorrect the pronunciation of this word to *fréquent* ('frequent'). Even L1 speakers of Haitian Creole sometimes adopt this pronunciation. This retro-rhoticization seems to be a recent phenomenon, and would merit further study.

¹³The decision was made to code such words as switches into Haitian Creole, however, rather than as examples of non-standard Quebec French (to which we turn in the next section), as they are not acknowledged as French by most adult speakers.

come, just off the boat’) does not seem to make it more transparent to French-speakers who do not know Haitian Creole.

- (24) Un *patnai* se fait tirer
‘A *friend* gets shot’
- (25) *Ça ou pas cōnnain* tu vas le croire
‘*What you don’t know* you’re gonna believe’
- (26) protège ton *lakay*, y a du *piyajé*
‘protect your *home*, there’s *trouble*’
- (27) je répande sur le cher-plan, ‘*Fwékan!*’
‘I spread out all over the place, ‘*Smartass!*’
- (28) Malgré la *popo* ce soir, ça s’passait
‘It happened tonight in spite of the *cops*’
- (29) Qui traîne est appelé *jescome*
‘Someone who lags behind is *just off the boat*’

(e) Francophonie

i. Non-standard Quebec French

French as it is used in Quebec has incorporated a large number of words originally from English, many of which have been in accepted use in a non-standard register by speakers from all walks of life for years or decades. The English noun “bad trip”, for instance, has been adopted as a verb, **badtripper** (‘to be shocked and dismayed, to bum out’), as we can see in example (30). To the best of our knowledge there is no precise syntactic/semantic equivalent in English, as “bad trip” is not used as a verb by English speakers.

- (30) je **badtrip** quand j’étudie la diagnostique
‘I **badtrip** when I study the diagnostic’

The noun “down” has been transplanted intact in example (31) and means exactly what it means in non-standard English.

- (31) Montréalité sur un **down**
‘Montreality (‘my-reality’) on a **down**’

The verb “to shine” has been assimilated into Quebec French, and in the infinitive form, instantiated in example (32), takes the French morphological ending *-er*. The phonology remains influenced by English, so that **shiner** is pronounced /faine/ rather than /fine/ as French spelling conventions, strictly interpreted, would require. The type of usage seen in examples (30) through (32) is very frequently observed among speakers of Quebec French of all ages in less formal contexts.

- (32) Juste quand tu pensais **shiner**
‘Just when you thought you would **shine**’

The English swearword **fuck** is also commonly heard in more relaxed non-standard Quebec French environments, where it has become assimilated (in the form of the verb **foquer**; something that is **foqué** is in some way unsatisfactory or defective). In these contexts it is in fact *not* considered a swearword, and to hear this common French verb from the mouths of well-educated and well-spoken interlocutors can be a disconcerting experience for English-speakers. In example (33), however, **fuck** is used in its English sense (for emphasis, as a swearword), as it frequently is in the corpus. The

English loanword **fun** in example (33) has long been accepted as a regular French masculine noun by Quebec speakers.

Example (33) also contains a word belonging to a slightly different category of lexical items signalling the rappers' identification of themselves as fluent speakers of non-standard French, **astheure** ("à cette heure", "at this hour, now"). This is a common non-standard pronunciation of *à cette heure*, and is found in other parts of the French-speaking world as well.¹⁴

(33) **Astheure** c'est le **fun, fuck**, ça déconne
'**right now** it's **fun, fuck**, it's loosening up'

Examples of typically French-Canadian swearwords are frequent in the corpus. Quebec French (in contrast to European French) is known for its swearwords derived from Catholic sources; one such word, **hostie** ("host, communion wafer") can be seen in example (34), and another, **crisse** ("christ") in example (35).

(34) **hostie** que t'es **twit**
'**goddamn** you're such a **twit**'

(35) comme **Villeneuve, crisse** que ça clenche¹⁵
'like **Villeneuve** [racing car driver], **christ** it really takes off'

ii. European French

The use of lexical items from non-standard Parisian French, while less frequent in the corpus, is nevertheless significant and seems to signal a certain ironic assertion of pan-Francophonie identity on the part of the rappers. This irony, as we judge it, arises out of the uneasy tension between feelings of inferiority ("we are the colonized and we're made to feel we never quite measure up") and feelings of disdain ("they think they're so much better than us but they're not so great") that have traditionally characterized Quebec attitudes towards France as the colonizing country. There is of course a well-established body of French rap from France; artists such as MC Solaar and the groups IAM and Fonky Family have achieved international renown. Quebec rap artists, working in a multilingual and multicultural environment, are free to draw both on the American and on the European French rap traditions.

The utterance in example (36) uses two terms from European French slang to frame the content. **Frangin** for "brother" and **bambin** for "child, kid" are not normally used by Quebec French speakers.

(36) **frangin**, vais-je élever mes **bambins**
'**brother**, am I going to raise my **kids**'

Balade ("excursion") and **week-end** in example (37) are sometimes heard from Quebec French speakers¹⁶, but remain identified with European French; the slang word **nana** ("girl, chick"), in the same example, is not used in Quebec.

(37) **balades** les **week-ends** avec une paire de **nanas**
'**outings** on **week-ends** with a couple of **chicks**'

Similarly, **baraque** ("building, house"—cf. "barracks") as in example (38), and **nabot** ("dog") as in example (39) are not used in Quebec except when a distinctively European (some would say, *ipso facto* a somewhat pretentious) flavour is desired.

¹⁴Randall Halter, personal communication, April 2003.

¹⁵ The use of a local reference to ground the text in Quebec culture can be seen in the use of **Villeneuve** in example (35). Jacques Villeneuve is a Formula One racer and well-known local celebrity. No young Montrealer could fail to miss the reference. The sentence refers to the effect of a puff of marijuana.

¹⁶The usual expressions in Quebec would be *promenade* and *fin de semaine*.

(38) j'fais sauter l'toit d'la **baraque**
'I blow the roof off the **place**'

(39) Les **nabots**, je les battle, y a pas de cadeau
'I battle **dogs**, no Mr Nice Guy'

Boulot ("job"), however, as in example (40), has acquired a certain currency in Quebec while retaining European French connotations.

(40) Flow, c'est mon **boulot**
'To flow is my **job**'

3.4.1.3. To facilitate internal rhyme

Rap music relies on rhyme and rhythm for its effect, rather than on melody. A strong "beat" underlies the spoken or chanted text.¹⁷ Beats are commonly devised by specialists ("beatmakers"), who collaborate with rappers to put together the final product. As Keyes points out in her comprehensive discussion of the production of rap, in this kind of music "time is technically complex" (2002, p. 140). The text must follow the beat in order to qualify as good rap—to "flow". The use of rhyme in rap lyrics—both final and internal—is crucial to the success of any rap number. A powerful use of rhyme can be very effective in ensuring that the lyric adheres to and enhances the beat; internal and final rhyme structures are often extremely sophisticated.

In Montreal hip-hop, the possibilities for creating internal and final rhyme are multiplied by the availability of so many languages and language varieties. Rappers draw on all possible linguistic sources in their rhyming. The end product is rich, dense, and complex in its use of rhyme. It makes extensive use of code-switching to achieve this effect. In example (41), the rhyming syllable is /o/. It occurs in four words, none of them French, although the utterance matrix is French. In this line, each switch facilitates the internal rhyme scheme.

(41) Et **blow yo**, quand le système est loco t'entends les sirènes des **popos**
'And **blow yo**, when the system's crazy you hear the **cops**' sirens'

The rhyming syllable in example (42) is /e/. It occurs in "switché", "obligé", "dealer", and "every day".

(42) Ç'a vite **switché**: 17 ans, 2 **kids**, obligé de **dealer un shit every day**
'Fast **switch**: 17 years, 2 **kids**, had to **deal some shit every day**'

In example (43) two switches into English permit the use of /in/ as the rhyming syllable:

(43) Un Al Capone **clean** d'un **cypha** trop **mean**
'A real **mean cypher** from a **clean** Al Capone'

The line in example (44) is interesting in that it contains no French words at all, although it is embedded in a song for which the base language is indisputably French. The rhyming syllable, /e/, occurs four times, in **away**, **lave**, **pafume**, and **way**. Phrases in English urging the addressee to leave the singer (female rapper J.Kyll) alone are used to frame the Haitian Creole message of contempt for his personal habits.

(44) **Go away, neg pa lave, pafume, no way!**

¹⁷The text may be improvised ("freestyle") or previously composed. The corpus under discussion here, as it was taken from commercially recorded sources, consists of carefully composed lyrics.

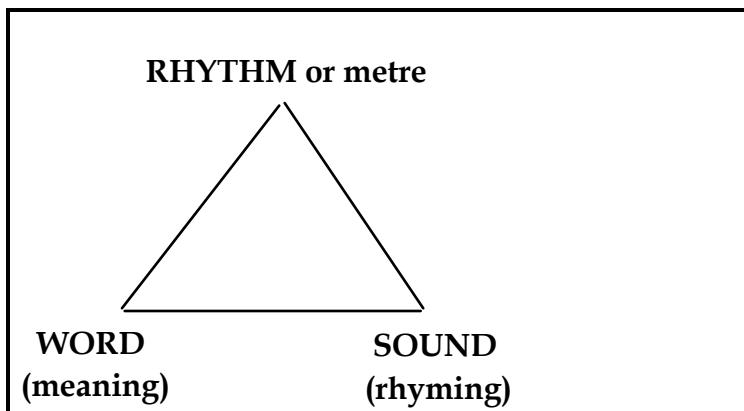
‘Go away, black who’d rather wear perfume than wash, No way!’

Example (45) consists of the first few lines of a song by Muzion, and allows us to see how code-switching is used to sustain the rhyming syllable /o/ through a longer sequence. This is a good example of the “boasting” genre, in which the rapper, Impossible, extols his proficiency and that of his crew (the other members of Muzion are Dramatik, i.e. “D”, and J.Kyll, i.e. “J.Ko”) while denigrating the rivals who only know how to “steal his style”. In real time this sequence is ten seconds long. The syllable /o/ occurs twelve times, in *yo*, *umō*, *putō*, *flow*, *boulot*, *sumo*, *couteau*, *nouveau*, *J.Ko.*, *égo*, *écho*, and *steelo*. Six of these are in code-switched words. “J.Ko.” is an abbreviation of J.Kyll that deliberately warps the usual sound pattern of the name to create an additional rhyme. The words in which /o/ occurs are stressed, which sometimes requires an utterance to be drawn out or compressed rhythmically. This is rhyming of a very high order of sophistication.

(45) *Hey*, *yo*, *umō*. *Teste moi pas*, *putō*. *Flow*, c’est mon *boulot*. *Phat* comme un *sumo*, mes mots tranchent comme un *couteau*. *Nouveau standard*, j’emmène avec *D* et *J.Ko*. *Pas d’égo* que des *échos* : Les *mc’s bite* mon *steelo*.

‘Hey, *yo*, *first*: Don’t test me, *whore* (m.). It’s my *job* to *flow*. *Phat* like a *sumo*, my words cut like a knife. *New standard*, I’m bringing it with *D* and *J. Kyll*. *No ego* except *echos*: the *mc’s* steal my *style*.’

As we see from these examples, rhythm is paramount (as indeed it is in rap generally). The words are fitted to the metre when required, and are chosen for their rhyming potential (with code-switching freely and dexterously used) as well as for their semantic content. The multilingual pool of words available to Montreal rappers greatly facilitates this process and lifts it to a level of virtuosity that makes it very impressive to observe in action. This three-way relationship between rhythm, rhyme and meaning may be diagrammed as follows:



3.4.2 Grammatical code-switching

Code-switching that goes beyond the lexical/phrasal level to the morphosyntactic level, while less frequent in the corpus, occurs in several forms. Analysis of this type of code-switching in the corpus is under way and will be discussed more fully, with examples, in Sarkar, Winer and Allen (in preparation). In the verb phrase, switches were found between the verb phrase and the subject or object (“je thank God”/ ‘I thank God’) and within the verb phrase itself (“est-ce que tu peux bounce?”/ ‘can you bounce?’). In the noun phrase, the English plural morpheme on a loanword may be retained in a French matrix which would normally require its deletion (“j’ai payé mes dues”/ ‘I’ve paid my dues’). English loanwords acquire French grammatical gender, with consequences for the rest of the utterance (“je monte au top”/ ‘I climb to the top’). It is expected that other types of grammatical switching will be found after a complete analysis of the corpus.

4. Discussion and future directions

Our investigation of the linguistic properties of French-based Montreal rap is still in its beginning stages. Working with a limited sample consisting of the rap lyrics commercially released by the two groups Muzion and Sans Pression in the year 1999, we found several interesting types of lexical/phrasal code-switching, and have tentatively identified a number of the functions this code-switching seems to us to perform. We anticipate that analysis of an extended corpus will confirm and extend these findings, and will also allow us to incorporate fuller data on grammatical or morphosyntactic code-switching. Our forthcoming paper (Sarkar, Winer & Allen, in preparation) will include a discussion of such findings.

We hope to expand the database to bring in work by other Montreal rap artists, with samples of both older and more recent compositions, and extending the data-gathering to include freestyling. Limiting the analysis to code-switching alone would clearly still leave us with plenty to look at, and we intend to continue our analysis along those lines; however, we hope to go beyond the code-switched aspects of Montreal rap lyrics that initially attracted our interest. We have gone some way toward a partial answer to our first research question, “What is the nature and function of code-switching in Montreal hip-hop?” Many other linguistic aspects of Montreal rap lyrics could be touched on: questions of discourse topic and genre, for example, and a more fully developed picture of the structure of this poetic form *as* poetry, in its multilingual Montreal incarnation.

The second research question we started out with, “How does code-switching in this context contribute to the creation of an in-group among young Quebecois?” is one that continues to absorb our energy in ongoing discussion and reflection. We plan to carry out a series of interviews with both hip-hop performers and with their “core” audience of adolescents and young adults, both men and women, and to go beyond code-switching in the analysis of linguistic elements under study. Both *what* the members of Montreal’s hip-hop community have to say, and *how* they say it, will be important in helping us understand the way this recently formed in-group is evolving. It seems to us that the language of Montreal rap is being used in quite deliberate ways by both rap artists and their audiences to subvert school rules about what does and does not constitute “good” French. Frustration with the rules of the academy and of *l’Académie (française)* is evident when young people meet to talk about artistic expression through Quebec French. Both the form and the content of the rap lyrics we have looked at thus far embody this sense of frustration, as in this line from a verse contributed to Sans Pression’s 1999 album by Montreal rapper 01étranj (*un étrange*, “a strange guy, a weirdo”), *J’represent un étranjj pis chus mon propre Béscherelle* (‘I represent the strange and I’m my own grammar book’).¹⁸ Grammar, spelling and lexical choice all resonate with the rapper’s declared intention of flouting the rules of *le bon français*. The scope of this paper unfortunately obliges us to leave a discussion of the important hip-hop speech act of “representing” until a later stage of reporting (but see Potter, 1995, and Keyes, 2002).

We look forward to addressing the question of the ways in which language use in multilingual Montreal hip-hop is used to enact hybridity and assert multiple linguistic and cultural allegiances on the part of young people from a wide variety of ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The feeling of alienation and marginalization that is so common among urban youth in monolingual cities is exacerbated in inner-city Montreal by rage against systemic exclusion based on the intersection of not only class and colour, but also language use. This rage finds eloquent expression through hip-hop culture. In this respect, hip-hop functions as a particularly biting form of local social commentary and one to which older Montrealers would be well advised to pay attention. There are clear implications (not explored

¹⁸Every student in the French school system in Quebec is required to own and to be thoroughly familiar with their *Béscherelle*, which is the standard reference for French verb conjugation. Many verbs in common use in Quebec have acquired non-standard forms, but these are not permitted in oral or written compositions in school contexts, as they are not in *Béscherelle*. The name therefore carries a special, often peculiarly hateful significance for young people in Quebec.

here in any detail) for educators and policymakers. If the creativity, the eloquence, and the constructive anger channelled by hip-hop culture could be legitimized and used to help people of all ages work for change, there would be tremendous potential for transformation. As Ibrahim (1999) asserts, “the choice of rap...must be read as an act of resistance...”. An act of resistance, and a positive one. We are eager to explore this further in future work.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks are due first and foremost to J.Kyll, Impossible and Dramatik, the members of Muzion, and to Sans Pression and Ti-Kid, the members of Sans Pression at the time of recording. “Representin’” artists of their caliber in the academic arena is as much a privilege as it is a challenge. We also wish to express our gratitude to Dawn Allen, Lawrence Carrington, Cecilia Cutler, Mary Maguire, Alastair Pennycook, Leila Ranta, Danielle Rousseau and Krys Verrall, as well as the members of the Concordia-McGill SLA Research Group, for providing references, suggestions and moral support. Charles-Alexandre Edouard helped us with translations from Haitian Creole into Quebec French. Any remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the authors. We welcome additional feedback and suggestions at mela.sarkar@mcgill.ca or lise.winer@mcgill.ca.

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ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism

edited by James Cohen, Kara T. McAlister,
Kellie Rolstad, and Jeff MacSwan

Cascadilla Press Somerville, MA 2005

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ISBN 978-1-57473-210-8 CD-ROM
ISBN 978-1-57473-107-1 library binding (5-volume set)

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