

Translanguaging in Chinese rap music: A tripartite framework

Code-switching refers to shifts across separate and bounded language systems, while recent translanguaging approaches emphasize the flexible multilingual practices drawn from an integrated linguistic repertoire [1]. Such practices are employed for a range of functions, including identity construction, stance-taking, and stylistic expression [2]. Chinese rap provides a particularly fertile site for examining these practices, as performers routinely move between Mandarin and other Chinese varieties, alongside global languages such as English [3].

This study examines code-switching in Chinese rap as a patterned multilingual translanguaging practice, drawing multilinguistic knowledge from a single repertoire. We conducted a corpus-based analysis of rap lyrics and audio, investigating how rappers alternate among Mandarin, English, and regional Chinese varieties across different linguistic levels. We propose a tripartite framework in which translanguaging is motivated at the social-pragmatic level by persona construction and stance-taking, at the lexical level by economy and accessibility, and at the phonological level by rhyme and prosodic alignment.

At the social level, *persona building* captures the deliberate code-switching that construct a global-oriented persona (via English) or a local-grounded persona (via regional languages). At the *lexical* level, rappers select words that are more accessible or culturally appropriate, an attested motivation for code-switching in the broader literature [4]. Social and lexical motivations can overlap. For example, in the song 不得了 *Freestyle* ‘Incredible Freestyle’, the lyrics 坐在飞机上听 *Pop Smoke* 拜拜了纽约 (‘sitting at the airplane, listening to Pop Smoke, and saying Goodbye to New York’) contains a switch from Chongqing Hua to English, as *Pop Smoke* is a rapper name that lacks a Chinese translation equivalent. Moreover, referencing this New York rapper signals the artist’s familiarity and association with the birthplace of hip-hop, solidifying a global hip-hop persona.

Our data also reveal an underexamined dimension unique to the rhyme position: Chinese rap incorporates rhyme-driven alternations and tone-intonation alignment during multilingual use, which we term *phonological rhyming*. While rhyme is typically viewed as a segmental feature in line-final syllables [5], Chinese languages integrate tonal information into wordplay [6]. When switching occurs between two Chinese varieties, it creates rhymes both segmentally and tonally. For instance, in the lyrics 有味没味 [*wei1*], 你还搞鬼 [*kwei1*] (‘having the taste or not, you made the mess’, from 泥巴 ‘mud’), the couplet switched from Changsha Hua to Mandarin in the last word, i.e., 鬼 [*kwei1*] (otherwise 鬼 [*kwei1*] in Changsha Hua), to ensure a tonal match with the Changsha Hua 味 [*wei1*]. Moreover, the Chinese words with falling tones appear disproportionately in positions that rhyme with English words bearing falling intonation, showing the alignment between Chinese tones and English intonation.

By foregrounding the social, lexical, and phonological motivations shaping multilingual choice, we present the multilingual use in Chinese rap music as a flexible translanguaging practice. Crucially, beyond social and lexical motivations, suprasegmental level information can also drive code-switch in rap performances, highlighting the interplay between artistic practice and the multilingual ecology of Chinese rap.

References [1] García, O., & Wei, L. (2015). Translanguaging, bilingualism, and bilingual education. *The handbook of bilingual and multilingual education*, 223-240./ [2] Halim, N. S., & Maros, M. (2014). The functions of code-switching in Facebook interactions. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 118, 126-133./ [3] Wang, T., & Lin, Y. (2024). Variation is the way to perfection: imperfect rhyming in Chinese hip hop. *Linguistics Vanguard*, 10(1), 505-515./ [4] San, H. K. (2009). *Chinese English code-switching in blogs by Macao young people* (Master’s Thesis, The University of Edinburgh)./ [5] Zwicky, A. M. (1976). Well, this rock and roll has got to stop. Junior’s head is hard as a rock. *Proceedings of Chicago Linguistics Society*, 12, 676–697./ [6] Liu, J., Dong, H., Yuan, J., Ma, H., & She, A. (2023). Linguistic tone in Chinese rap: an interdisciplinary approach. *Journal of New Music Research*, 52(4), 265-284.