

Performing language and identity: Palatalization among Moroccan slam poets and rappers

This paper examines how Moroccan slam poets and rappers use palatalization of /t/ in order to perform their sociopolitical identities, seeking to answer the questions: Do slam poets and rappers in the same political circle use palatalization differently in their performances? And if so, why would they use palatalization differently, given that they are performing to the same audiences and dealing with the same subject matter? The paper proposes a divide between phonetic production in slam poetry and rap, even in artists who perform both. This suggests that while anti-regime slam poets and rappers work within the same social circle and tackle the same issues, differing social pressures upon the two forms of performative poetry compel them to perform different identities. The difference in production of /t/ also suggests that [tʲ] and [tʃ] have different first- and second-order indexes (Silverstein 2003).

Slam poetry is an important tool that marginalized communities, particularly North African communities in the banlieues of Paris, use to express resistance to political oppression (Fagerlid 2012). Given Morocco's long history of sung poetry as a tool of resistance (Almasude 2001, Ciucci 2012, Hoffman 2002), it is not surprising that young, politically active Moroccans easily adopted slam and have made it Moroccan. Rap plays a similar role in resisting oppression and political marginalization, and the community of anti-regime rappers is artistically and socially interwoven with the community of anti-regime slam poets.

As Hachimi (2007) noted, Fassis moving to Casablanca adopt certain indexical phonetic features of the Casablancon dialect in order to appropriate the "toughness", or *ħərjā* associated with the new urban Casablancon identity. However, Hachimi's study focused only on the production of /q/ and /t/, and focused specifically on migrant Fassis adopting indexical Casablancon features. While sociophonetic studies of coronal palatalization have been done on Egyptian Arabic (Haeri 1997, Geenberg 2012), to my knowledge, no sociophonetic research has been published on coronal palatalization in Moroccan Arabic, despite the salience of palatalization in the new Moroccan urban space.

The paper focuses specifically on the production of allophones of the phoneme /t/, specifically the weakly palatalized [tʲ] and the strongly palatalized [tʃ], because the degree of palatalization of /t/ in Moroccan Arabic (MA) is geographically salient. While the weakly palatalized [tʲ] is present in dialects throughout the country, the strongly palatalized [tʃ] is largely found in new urban centers, particularly Casablanca. The paper analyzes the degree to which the performers palatalize /t/ in order to explore the role of strong palatalization in performance registers of MA.

The analysis is based on 2 hours of video footage of slam and rap performances from 2012-2015. All of the performers are young men. Data was collected from publicly available sources such as YouTube and individual artists' Facebook profiles. Tokens of /t/ production were tallied for each performance and were separated into unpalatalized [t], weakly palatalized [tʲ], and strongly palatalized [tʃ], in order to analyze which speakers produced each allophone and in what phonological environment each allophone was possible. Analysis of production of unpalatalized [t] provided an understanding of phonological constraints on palatalization, which would be a confounding factor in analyzing the indexicality of palatalized forms of /t/.

Preliminary results show expected trends in production of these allophones, with one significant exception. All of the slam poets produced /t/ without any palatalization in two general cases – when the /t/ was the emphatic [tˤ] (in contrast with Cairene Arabic, in which palatalization of [tˤ] is possible, per Youssef 2013), and in the case of the perfective + subjunctive construction when /t/ was the last phoneme in the perfective verb, e.g. [bɣit nqəra] "I want to read". The artists who exclusively performed slam, some of whom are of Casablancon origin and some of whom are not, either produced both [tʲ] and [tʃ], or exclusively produced [tʲ]. The analysis of /t/ production of one artist who performs both slam and rap shows an interesting pattern of allophone production that suggests that rappers and slammers produce different degrees of palatalization. In one video he alternated between performing slam poetry and performing rap, and when performing slam he exclusively produced [tʲ], but when performing rap he produced both [tʲ] and [tʃ]. This pattern was confirmed in a music video of his, in which he produced [tʲ] and [tʃ]. His phonetic-code switching suggests that slam poets and rappers, even those who perform to the same audiences and deal with the same subject matter, are compelled to perform different identities, with different degrees of palatalization indexing these different identities.

Subfields: Sociolinguistics, Phonetics

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