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PHONETIC, GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL FEATURES OF MODERN ITALIAN RAP EXEMPLIFIED BY THE SARDINIAN GROUP SALMO

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Abstract

Aim. Identification of linguistic features of Italian-language rap as a special textual genre as exemplified by Salmo's lyrics.

Methodology. The method of continuous sampling was used to identify and list examples of phonetic and grammatical features specific to rap lyrics; the method of contextual and discourse analysis was applied in order to analyze why borrowings and culturally specific elements are used. The texts from the album "FLOP" and the single "Estate (Vabb balliamo)" served as the research material.

Results. The results show that phonetically Italian rap has borrowed some features from American rap tradition, however it has preserved some specific features. The analysis of grammatical structures showed that literary Italian prevails and such grammatical phenomenon as subjunctive mood is not neglected. As for the lexical peculiarities, the borrowings from Spanish, French and Japanese are of interest, as well as the wide presence of culturally specific elements, which add imagery to the lyrics.

Research implications. In Russian linguistics the study of Italian-language rap is not widely represented, so a further analysis of the rap discourse in Italian will gather material to conduct comparative studies.

Keywords: borrowings, culturally specific elements, edlibs, Italian language, Salmo, rap discourse

ФОНЕТИЧЕСКИЕ, ГРАММАТИЧЕСКИЕ И ЛЕКСИЧЕСКИЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ СОВРЕМЕННОГО ИТАЛЬЯНСКОГО РЭПА НА ПРИМЕРЕ САРДИНСКОЙ ГРУППЫ SALMO

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Аннотация

Цель. Выявление лингвистических особенностей италийского рэпа как особого текстового жанра на примере текстов песен группы Salmo.

Процедура и методы. Метод сплошной выборки использовался для выявления и перечисления примеров фонетических и грамматических особенностей, характерных для рэп-лирики; метод контекстуального и дискурсивного анализа применялся для анализа причин использования заимствований и культурно-специфических элементов. Материалом исследования послужили тексты из альбома "FLOP" и сингла "Estate (Vabb balliamo)".

Результаты. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что фонетически итальянский рэп заимствовал некоторые черты из американской рэп-традиции, но при этом сохранил ряд специфических особенностей. Анализ грамматических структур показал, что в итальянском языке преобладает литературный итальянский язык, и такое грамматическое явление, как сослагательное наклонение употребляется в рамках литературной нормы. Что касается лексических особенностей, то интерес представляют заимствования из испанского, французского и японского языков, а также широкое присутствие культурно-специфических элементов, придающих текстам образность.

Теоретическая и/или практическая значимость. В отечественной лингвистике изучение италяязычного рэпа представлено недостаточно широко, поэтому дальнейший анализ рэп-дискурса на итальянском языке позволит собрать материал для проведения сопоставительных исследований.

Ключевые слова: заимствования, культурно-специфические элементы, эдлибы, итальянский язык, «Сальмо», рэп-дискурс

Introduction

Rap as a music movement is currently at the peak of popularity. Rap as a verbal part of hip-hop culture originated in the 1970s in the United States, in the marginal areas of Bronx. In Italy, until the late 1980s, most people had not even heard of the existence of such cultural phenomenon [12]. The first Italian rap artists (Dj Skizo, Soul Boy, Sean, Dj Gruff, Top Cat e Kaos One) rarely turned to Italian as the main language to create rap discourse, partly because they proudly associated themselves with the English-speaking world and American culture. “Though the flow of new tendencies and innovations in popular music almost always comes from the English-speaking market, in the process of appropriation (“acquisition”) on the local level hip-hop becomes the mechanism of expressing the local identity” [3].

The popularization of rap music in Italy started rather from the rising interest in the visual component of hip-hop culture – graffiti. In 1984 in Bologna¹ the exhibition “Arte di frontiera. New York graffiti”² was open (in the gallery *Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna*) and other events devoted to street art followed.

As for the musical component of hip-hop culture is concerned, 1990 is considered to be the starting point: that's when the composition “Batti il tuo tempo” by “Onda Rossa” was released, which became “the birth of Italian rap” – “*la nascita del rap italiano*”³.

As more and more rap artists appear on the Italian music scene, a transformation is gradually taking place: a rap piece from a “rhythmical recitative set to music with a jagged rhythm”⁴ acquires features of a full-fledged literary work filled with poetical meaning. Along with this, there is a shift from traditional American rap themes such as “racial inequality”, “injustice”, “beautiful life”, “money” towards acute social themes: inequalities of different kind, social injustice, religion and faith, friendship, love, creativity etc.

Within this research we will not consider the musical side of the issue, we are interested in rap as a textual genre. Academic studies devoted to this topic (to rap music as a text genre in different countries) are rather scarce, most of them appeared as a result of research interest to hip-hop culture in America (T. Rose [10], J. Ogbar [9], B. Kitwana [7]).

“As a carrier of unified forms of cultural expression, rap contributes to the standardi-

¹ La mostra “arte di frontier”. In: *Bologna Online*. Available at: https://www.bibliotecasalaborsa.it/bolognaonline/cronologia-di-bologna/1984/la_mostra_arte_di_frontiera (accessed: 16.02.2023).

² Breve storia del rap italiano. In: *T. Blog*. Available at: <https://www.thomann.de/blog/it/breve-storia-del-rap-italiano/> (accessed: 23.01.2023).

³ Breve storia del sintetizzatore. In: *T. Blog*. Available at: <https://www.thomann.de/blog/it/breve-storia-del-sintetizzatore/> (accessed: 23.01.2023).

⁴ Рэп словарь // Портал Делай рэп. Available at: <https://delairap.com/uchebnik/slovar-rap/> (accessed: 23.01.2023).

sation of artistic practices and at the same time offers some cultural and social space for the articulation of models and values of local communities" [3]. With the spread of rap and hip-hop culture around the world, other studies began to emerge – research interest emerged in German¹, Russian rap [4], etc. Italian rap has also started to be studied in recent years, researchers like A. Miglietta [8], J. Bagatta [6], M. Tucci [11] and others can be mentioned.

Turning to the history of Italian rap, it is worth noting that "there has been a transition from purely English-language rap to dialectal and multilingual lyrics in which dialectal elements, foreign borrowings, technical terms, neologisms and obscene expressions alternate with a base borrowed from the language of youth and the Italian language of everyday communication, since rap language was born as an expression of street culture"².

Italian language rap has not received much attention among Russian authors, so research in this area seems particularly relevant.

Materials and methods

There are not many original Italian rap artists; mostly musicians try to adapt American hip-hop or Spanish-language reggaeton for Italian listeners. However, over time, distinctive national performers began to emerge, with their unique style and national characteristics. Salmo is considered one of such performers.

The material for the study consists of several compositions by Salmo. The tracks taken from the album FLOP (2021) are "L'angelo caduto", "YHWH", "Kumite", "A DIO", "Mi sento bene" and the single "Estate (Vabbè balliamo)" (2017). Interestingly, the

album cover "FLOP" was inspired by the painting "Fallen Angel" (1847) by the French artist Alexandre Cabanel.

The main research methods were the method of continuous sampling, the method of contextual analysis and the method of discourse analysis. The method of continuous sampling was used to identify and list the examples of specific to rap text genre phonetic and grammatical features. The method of contextual and discourse analysis was implemented in order to analyze why loanwords and culturally specific elements are used in the lyrics.

Phonetic features

The pronunciation of Italian-language rap is as close as possible to *italiano standard*. This is an important difference from English-language rap, especially in the so-called *ebonics* (ebony "black" + phonics "acoustics") – the sociolect African-American English – which is characterized by a number of phonetic features [1]. This phonetic "structure" of Italian rap is possible partly due to the phonetic features of the language itself: there is no vowel reduction in Italian (which is a major characteristic of rap compositions in other languages, in particular, Russian and English). However, it should be noted that there are a number of performers who actively use dialectal impregnations (for example, the performer Caparezza from the Puglia region), which affects the overall phonetic picture of the rap discourse produced due to the specific phonetics of a particular dialect of the Italian language. In our opinion, in such cases we are already talking about a subgenre of Italian-language rap discourse – its dialectal variation.

However, there are a number of distinctive features. Since, as described above, Italian rap discourse relies heavily on the language of youth and the Italian language of everyday communication, it shares some features with contemporary Italian everyday discourse. One of these features is the phonetic phenomenon of abbreviations. Here are examples of such abbreviations.

¹ German rap: a brief look at the history. Available at: <https://outstyle.org/article/nemeckij-ryepkratkij-yekskurs-v-istoriyu> (accessed: 01.04.2020).

² "Sulla lingua del rap italiano. Analisi quali-quantitativa dei testi di Caparezza" di Annarita Miglietta. In: *Letture.org*. Available at: <https://www.lettura.org/sulla-lingua-del-rap-italiano-analisi-quali-quantitativa-dei-testi-di-caparezza-annarita-miglietta> (accessed: 24.01.2023).

1. *Elision* – the letter lapse is marked with an apostrophe:

– “Farò una vasca a dorso, fra' c'ho l'estate addosso / Quindi levatevi... che mi state addosso” – in this example there was a reduction of “fra” from “fratello” – “brother” as well as a reduction of the colloquial particle “ci” before the verb “ho” to the vowel “c'ho”;

– “Sono completamente impazzito / Ho parlato col demonio in maschera e non m'ha capito” – the abbreviation of the personal pronoun “mi” before the vowel “m'ha”;

2. *Apokopa* – the dropping out of a syllable/s at the end of a word:

– “Bella **fraté**, se ci sei batti un colpo che qua c'è un problema”;

– “La vita a volte non è dura, **fra**, è meschina (uh) Puoi farti un piano per la fuga come Mesina (ah)”;

3. *Aphesis* is the dropping out of a syllable at the beginning of a word:

the demonstrative adjective “questa”/ “questo” has become “sta” / “sto”:

– “**sta** macchina è una tomba / Faccio un giro di ronda, il sole picchia come Ronda”;

– “A '**sto** punto, sì, è meglio morire, fra' // È come svegliarsi e tornare a dormire”;

Common to rap discourse in other languages is the presence of edlibs in Italian rap. Edlibs (from the English “Edlib”, which in turn comes from the Latin “Ad Libitum” – “at will”) are like random shouts or words that dilute the main text¹. The edlibs usually have little meaning and often mimic laughter, gunshots, repetitions of the last words of a line and serve to enhance rhythmic musicality. Salmo's texts contain:

1. Italian interjections serving the function of edlibs:

– “Chiedilo a Ariana, che facciamo? / **Vabbè** balliamo / E allora balliamo”;

2. English-language edlibs:

– “E allora balliamo / **Yeah, yeah, yeah** / E allora balliamo”;

– “Come quando fuori piove (**yeah yeah**) / Aspetto arrivi la mia onda / Chiamo un uragano col tuo nome (**yeah yeah**) / Io spero che tu mi risponda”;

– “**Yeah, yeah, yeah, check, oh**”;

– “Questo è un amore kumite, **baby**, è un kumite”;

3. Mixing of languages:

“**Yessir, Lebon al mic, yaoh, yaoh, ah**” – in this example the edlib “Yessir” is borrowed from English (“Yes” + “sir”) and “Lebon al mic” is an interesting example of mixing: “Lebon” (the name of the label in which Salmo is recorded) is combined with Italian “al mic” – a fused preposition with the article “al” and the abbreviation “mic” from “microfono”;

– “**Ehi, ehi, yeah, ehi, ehi / Ehi, ehi, yeah, ehi, ehi / Mi senti tu, oh, oh / Just do it, just do it**”;

4. Sound simulation:

– “Sei la persona sbagliata (**Yah**) al momento perfetto (**Brr**)”;

– “Siamo alle solite, siamo alle comiche // Mi girano le palle (**brr, brr**) come pale eoliche (**brr, ah**)”;

– “Ma quel giorno mi vedrai nei riflessi degli specchi, **ehi**”;

– Scarrello sopra il beat tipo full **clip clip** // Apro Lebonski, faccio un tre e sessanta **flip, flip, flip**”;

5. Repetition of the final syllable of the stanza:

– “E pare fra' che parlino i fatti ('**ti**) // Ma sono le cinque e parlo solo coi fatti ('**ti**) / Sembro meno matto, sempre agli occhi dei matti ('**ti**) / Sono un tipo disturbato, sì, ma solo dagli altri, ah-ah”.

Grammatical features

In general, the performer's texts conform to the grammatical norms of *italiano standard*, with no particular deviations from the norms of modern Italian. On the contrary, it can be said that the texts are literate.

One obvious characteristic of literate Italian speech and the speaker's level of education is the correct use of the Subjunctive Mood (Modo Congiuntivo). In Salmo's

¹ What is edlib (Что такое эдлиб). In: *Slovar' molodozhnogo slenga* [Dictionary of youth slang]. Available at: <https://slang.su/content/эдлиб> (accessed: 23.01.2023).

compositions we can see that the subjunctive mood is used correctly in all kinds of adjectival sentences. Here are some examples of proper use of the subjunctive mood in the lyrics from the album "FLOP":

1) in independent subordinate clauses (proposizioni indipendenti):

– **"Sia benedetto** il tuo nome, Signore, che il mondo lo salva un dottore / Se non hai timore, neanch'io / In fondo la lettera c'è scritto: "Addio, amen";

2) in subject subordinate clauses (proposizioni soggettive):

– "E pare fra' **che parlino** i fatti ('ti)";

3) in object subordinate clauses (proposizioni oggettive):

– "Sì, penso **sia inutile guardare** un film o una serie TV / Quando mi basta il TG";

– "Io spero **che tu mi risponda**";

– "Credi che qualcuno **ti veda** dall'alto / Chiedilo agli angeli / Chiedi quanto tempo per noi ti è rimasto";

4) in determinative subordinate clauses (subordinate relative):

– "Vuoi qualcuno **che ti ami o che lenisca** le insicurezze";

– "Padre, non sono un infame, no / Io che volevo trovare qualcuno **cui valga la pena pregare**";

5) in subordinate clauses of time (subordinate temporali):

– "Aspetto **arrivi** la mia onda";

6) in subordinate clauses of manner (subordinate modali):

– "Ah-ah, rido **come se avessi** una colica"¹.

There is one more feature to note. Rap music has been popular since its inception and its popularity has steadily grown in recent years. The scientific explanation for the effect of rap on the brain lies in the rhythm: the drum beat causes a certain hypnotic effect, which creates a good environment for the delivery of a certain thought to the listener.

Salmo's compositions contain a large number of verbs in the Imperative Mood, which gives the lyrics an imperative meaning:

– **"Non avere paura, non restare** nell'ombra / **Allaccia** la cintura, sto concerto è una bomba";

– **"Conta** solo su di te, mica su di me / Questo è un amore kumite, baby, è un kumite";

– **"Allora fatti da parte** (Eh), giuro, solo sto meglio (Eh)";

– **"Quando a cena lasci un posto vuoto sappi** che io sono lì con te";

– **"È** come svegliarsi e tornare a dormire / **Allaccia** le scarpe che fuori c'è il sole ma non posso uscire";

– **"Odiami** pure, ti fa stare bene, ma almeno **rispondi** ai messaggi / La gente che prega ti chiama la sera e rispondono i centri massaggi";

– **"Dicevi** la mia vita non è niente di che / Allora **dimmi** perché stavi proprio con me, nah";

– **"Credi** che qualcuno ti veda dall'alto / Chiedilo agli angeli / Chiedi quanto tempo per noi ti è rimasto".

Lexical features

As for the lexical features of Salmo's lyrics, it is worth to say that the vocabulary used mostly belongs to the common vocabulary and the presence of obscene vocabulary is minimal. There are also several clearly visible semantic fields: both relatively "traditional" for rap music – "beautiful life", "money", "social injustice", and more original semantic fields specific to a particular performer – "religion", "frustration", "personal growth", "rejection of material values".

Analysis of loanwords

A distinctive feature of Salmo's texts from the point of view of lexical analysis is the diversity of foreign-language loanwords: there are both "classical" English loanwords and loanwords from other languages (French, Spanish and Japanese).

The presence of borrowings from the English language in rap discourse seems

¹ Горячкин А. Р. Итальянское сослагательное наклонение. Функциональные особенности и некоторые аспекты перевода: учебное пособие для студентов переводческого факультета (II курс, I семестр). М.: ИПК МГЛУ «Рема», 2011. 189 с.

logical, as this musical movement originated in the anglophone environment. On the one hand, some borrowed words underline the universality – many English words are already firmly established in the Italian language (despite the presence of the Italian counterpart) – and are familiar to a large part of the listeners (and speakers of other languages as well). Here are a few examples of such borrowings:

– “Lo giuro tipo scout, con quel culo così grande / Puoi venire al mio concerto e **fare sold out**”;

– “Non faccio **hit** estive, ti sfascio il club privé / Stai con chi mal vive, io in Sardegna, Maldive”;

– “Ho fatto **il cash**, tango, e Salmo dos Santos / Rimbalzo sopra questi rapper come il Super Santos”;

– “Vieni con me, sono il re senza alcun trono / Conosco un posto **cool**, fanno un Moscow Mule buono”;

The English-language loan words in the above examples are hardly perceived as loan words any more: the lexemes “*sold out*”, “*hit*”, “*cash*”, “*cool*” are firmly in use and firmly assimilated in Italian, as indicated by their grammatical assimilation – the article (*il cash*) and the noun-adjective agreement (*hit estive*).

At the same time, Salmo's lyrics include English-language loanwords, which underline the shared conceptual apparatus of rap music fans:

– “Sento la buena onda, sono **la new wave** / Tu aspetti ancora il grande salto, Blue Whale”;

– “Non ho rubinetti d'oro a casa come Monica (uh) / Vivo la città con i fra' senza **bodyguard** (ah) / Il tuo mito è troppo ricco, la tua invidia è cronica”;

– “In gallery cibo per la mente, con il rap ti ho fatto il catering / Scarrello sopra **il beat** ti folk clip clip”;

– “La mia crew ti mette a testa in giù come Belzebù / Quando vede il crocifisso di Gesù, ah (tu-tu)”;

– “Ah, **off-topic** / Vedo i mostri come a Milwaukee”;

– and even a whole passage in English: “You are the source of my strength / We invite you to clap your hands, stamp on your feet (you are) / Lift your hands and feel free to rejoice with us (the source of my strength) / You are welcome”;

Such loanwords – *il beat*, *off-topic*, *new wave* – may no longer be understandable to all native Italian speakers, but are likely to be understandable to fans of rap music.

In the lyrics of the Italian rap discourse borrowings from other languages are common, in particular from French and Spanish, which are close to Italians, for example:

– “Ah, a noi ci va così, così bene / Che non so che cosa dire / Tu diresti **c'est la vie**”;

– “Ho fatto il cash, tango, e **Salmo dos Santos** / Rimbalzo sopra questi rapper come il Super Santos”;

– “Non faccio hit estive, ti sfascio **il club privé** / Stai con chi mal vive, io in Sardegna, Maldive”.

There are also some more exotic loan words for the Italian language:

– “Conta solo su di te, mica su di me / Questo è **un amore kumite**, baby, è un kumite” – “kumite” – is not the most famous Japanese word. Its presence in the text shows a desire to create poetic imagery briefly and metaphorically, while at the same time demonstrating its erudition.

Analysis of culturally specific elements

A distinctive feature of many pieces of music is imagery. The lyrics of the rapper Salmo are no exception: they are a vivid example of how the use of culturally specific speech nominations gives volume and expressiveness to a statement that is often devoid of poetic imagery. We will use the term “cultureme” to refer to such nominations.

We will understand the term “cultureme” or “linguocultureme” [2] to be synonymous with the concept introduced into scientific usage by Y. S. Stepanov [5], i. e. “a nationally marked image of culture, which has linguistic expression in the form of a word, phrase or sentence and conveys some linguocultural

content which is essential for understanding the national features of native speakers”¹.

Such “complex” speech units combine both the linguistic (symbolic, iconic) and the extra-linguistic (conceptual). Many culturally marked elements are found in Salmo texts. Among them, a number of cultural elements based on Italian realities and culture can be distinguished:

– “Nessun dorma” – “Let no one sleep” – this is how Salmo’s composition “Mi sento bene” begins. “Se non dormo io, nessun dorma, / non chiedetemi il perché” immediately evokes the association with the aria of the same name from Giacomo Puccini’s opera “Turandot”, which begins with the phrase “Nessun dorma! Nessun dorma!” and is well known in Italian culture. In the plot of the opera, Princess Turandot, not wishing to marry the unknown Prince Calaf, tries to unravel his name and decides that no one should sleep that night until his name is guessed. The opera is one of Puccini’s best-known operas, and after 1990, when the BBC channel used the composition “Nessun dorma” performed by Luciano Pavarotti as the main theme during the World Cup, the aria became one of the most famous pieces of classical music in the world. “Let no one sleep” in the rap artist’s lyrics refers the listener to this aria, the author draws on the cultural experience he shares with his (Italian-speaking) audience.

– “Ti guardo ed è già Halloween, non è che c’hai **un Aulin** / Lo vedi ho preso il volo come un fottuto monaco Shaolin” – “un Aulin” – the author uses the name of the medicine as a common anti-inflammatory drug in Italy, as people in Italy are familiar with the name, there is no difficulty in understanding it.

– “In giro scooteroni, segni di copertoni / Trenta birre Peroni, cimiteri di ombrelloni” – “Peroni” – a popular beer in Italy;

– “Guardo brutte notizie / **come il TG alle otto** / L'estate sta finendo, ho / già messo il giubbotto / Ho messo pure il casco / perché tu parli troppo / È un canto di protesta, / cerco il punto G8” – “come il TG alle otto” – it is a reference to the traditional viewing of the evening news bulleting “il TG” – short for “il telegiornale”.

However, the author does not only refer to the Italian cultural background, he uses images that have spread in the global cross-national cultural space, for example:

– “Ah, off-topic / Vedo i mostri come a Milwaukee” – The “Milwaukee Monster” is the name Jeffrey Dahmer, a serial killer committing crimes in Milwaukee, USA (his story gained even more publicity after the release of the series on Netflix).

Conclusions

The analysis of the performer’s texts showed that the Italian language within the performer’s rap discourse is close to the standard Italian language, the so-called italiano standard. Phonetic deviations are insignificant and narrow down to abbreviations of separate sounds and syllables, such phenomena as elision, apokopa and apheresa. In Italian-language rap discourse such characteristic feature of rap in other languages as adlibs is present, but vowel reduction typical for other languages is not found in Italian (in the compositions of the performer in question).

Grammatically, the texts correspond to the norms of the modern Italian language. Despite the obvious “colloquiality” of the rap discourse, the Italian rap discourse (within the rap discourse of the performer in question) is built within the norms of the modern Italian language, which is particularly evident in the correct use of the subjunctive mood (in which native speakers often have errors in colloquial speech). Though it should be mentioned that it can be called the author’s style – other rappers do not have such respect for the Subjunctive Mood.

The amount of substandard vocabulary and profanity is minimal, and in the lyrics of most of the songs there are no words at

¹ Азимов Э. Г., Шукин А. Н. Новый словарь методических терминов и понятий (теория и практика обучения языкам). М.: Издательство ИКАР, 2009. 448 с.

all, which distinguishes this performer from other Italian rappers. Salmo's lyrics are replete with cultural references from the Italian to the global cultural field.

As for the purposes of further research in this field, it is worth mentioning that identifying the linguistic specificity of Italian-lan-

guage rap as a textual genre will allow, firstly, to compare it with raps in other European languages, as well as to reveal the ways to influence the audience through contemporary song lyrics discourse.

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