

Rap Lyrics Translation: Theoretical and Practical Aspects

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ABSTRACT

Despite being a very popular music genre, Hip Hop does not seem to have drawn Translation scholars' attention. There are many studies on Hip Hop culture from a socio-linguistic point of view, but a theoretical debate about the translation of rap lyrics seems missing, even though rap songs, just like sung songs, can be included in a translation project in a number of circumstances, from audiovisual (i.e. dubbing and subtitling) to literary contexts (such as biographies, textbooks etc.). This paper attempts to show – in a limited space – the theoretical and methodological aspects which emerged during the comparative study of poetry and song translation theories, and the analysis of some real examples of rap lyrics translation from English into Italian.

KEYWORDS: audiovisual translation, Hip Hop, rap, translation of songs, translation and music

1. Introduction

In just four decades of existence, Hip Hop has evolved very differently from other genres. Born in the 1970s as a cultural and artistic movement to promote non-violence among Afro-Americans living in the Bronx (Watkins 2005:9), its musical expression (also called rap music) saw a sharp rise in popularity in the 1980s, when it began to gain commercial appeal and to be accessible to non-black audiences, even outside the USA. In the 1990s, with the emergence of gangsta rap, a debate about the alleged loss of the original Hip Hop values and the negative influence of modern rap on its audience began to spread, and is still an open issue among fans and experts (Watkins 2005:5-6). Hip Hop globalization and its socio-cultural aspects are quite common topics among academics (e.g. Chang 2005; Watkins 2005; Alim 2006; Herson 2011; Taviano 2012) who are interested in how American Hip Hop culture, values and artistic expression have been exported to other countries; the language used within the various Hip Hop communities; and the function

of Hip Hop as a link between different cultures.

Today, Hip Hop is a global cultural concept and an internationally known music genre. Rap has also spread as a vocal technique, being adopted in a surprising range of different genres and contexts. For these reasons, the probability of a translator being commissioned to work on a translation project involving a rap song has increased significantly. Such a project may consist of a written and printed translation, subtitles, or a new version of the song to be performed in another language. As will be shown, the different contexts in which sung songs are translated have already been broadly analysed, but there are factors which make rapped songs different from sung songs – the importance of rhyme in rap in particular – emphasizing the necessity for a thorough discussion and analysis of approaches and strategies for the translation of rap lyrics. However, this aspect of rap seems not to have drawn academics' attention as much as others.

This paper is therefore an attempt to describe the under-discussed topic of rap lyrics translation, with a particular focus on rhyme mediation, drawing on examples of translations from English into Italian. The paper is divided into two main parts: the first consists of an overview of theories of poem and song lyrics translation, which relates to common elements that rap shares with poems and sung songs, the latter in the case of audiovisual translation in particular; in the second part, an analysis of four real examples of rap lyrics translation is presented. Before carrying out the analysis, it is necessary to clarify that:

- the focus will be on the transfer from one language to another of any lyrics and rhymes performed in rap style, leaving aside many other aspects related to Hip Hop as a cultural movement, since there can be rap songs that have little to do with Hip Hop culture;
- in light of the above observation, the word “rap” and related expressions (such as “rap song” and “rap lyrics”) will be preferred to “Hip Hop” (“Hip Hop song”, “Hip Hop lyrics” etc.), since this term better defines any vocal performance in that particular style without any cultural implications;
- the songs taken into consideration as examples all belong to US mainstream

culture, and are part of a product (TV series, film or book) that has been translated and released abroad.

The main goal of the paper is to answer the following question: How is the translation of lyrics and rhyme in rap songs approached in various contexts, as compared to poems and sung songs?

2. Hip Hop, Globalization and Translation

The lack of existing literature on the specific topic of this paper does not represent a general lack of interest in Hip Hop culture within the field of linguistics, as proven by the existence of a sub-field called Hip Hop Linguistics, which focuses on many sociolinguistic aspects related to Hip Hop communities around the world and their language. Studies of English varieties within US black communities first emerged in the mid-sixties (e.g. Abrahams 1964; Mitchell-Kernan 1971; Labov 1972), paving the way for the analysis of Black English, which would then characterize the Hip Hop Community (Alim 2006:5-6). The sociolinguistic aspects of American Hip Hop culture began to be discussed by academics in the early nineties. One of the first such academics was professor Marcyliena Morgan with her paper *Hip Hop Hooray!: The Linguistic Production of Identity* presented in 1993, along with Geneva Smitherman, who wrote *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* in 1994.¹ By then, rap music had become a global form of expression for two completely different realities: artists who reached mainstream success, on the one hand, and underground artists who chose rap to address social and political issues, on the other.

Beyond the American context, Stefania Taviano defines Hip Hop as:

the result of a complex interplay of globalisation and localisation processes whereby a global form of music is appropriated and interpreted according to local musical traditions and cultures and is expressed through an international language, English, also combined with local languages and dialects (2013:1)

1 <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002792.html> (accessed October 15, 2015).

Hence, Hip Hop Linguistics is not only about Black English and other slang forms within the United States, but also about their diffusion throughout the world thanks to the popularity of rap music, and their influence on new local slangs. The sociological aspect of Hip Hop Linguistics, in addition, considers how not only language, but also the key values of Hip Hop culture, are interpreted in non-American contexts.

In Australia, for example, rappers commonly use (even in an exaggerated way) local accents to maintain their cultural and linguistic identity; in this way, Australians try to distinguish themselves from US Hip Hop, while sticking to core Hip Hop values such as authenticity and sense of belonging (Dominello 2008).

In Japan, on the other hand, the distance between US and Japanese culture has led to the development of different themes within the Japanese Hip Hop movement, such as the crisis of values among the middle class, so that authenticity corresponds to anti-conformism towards consumerist trends which have spread throughout the country (Condry 2007: 653). Many Japanese rappers also focus on social themes like class and gender inequality, as well as youth issues.² Thus, despite the cultural differences, Hip Hop has acquired a similar function as a means of communication and social criticism as it originally had in the Bronx.

In Italy – the cultural context chosen for this study – Hip Hop began to spread between the late Eighties and the early Nineties thanks to the commercial success of US Hip Hop songs, concerts performed by US artists in Italy and documentaries. However, early Italian Hip Hop was largely an imitation of form rather than content, due to a poor knowledge of the English language that prevented listeners from understanding the messages of the songs and the values of the original culture (Vecchi 2013: 10). The mid-Nineties saw the golden era of Italian rap music, with growing mainstream visibility and the underground scene getting closer to US Hip Hop models, leading to a growing awareness of Hip Hop culture. However, the underground hostility towards mainstream rap – due to the latter's links with media and big record labels – led to an artistic

2 <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/639/hip-hop-is-for-everybody-examining-the-roots-and-growth-of-hip-hop> (accessed October 15, 2015).

stagnation which eventually resulted in the end of the golden age (Vecchi 2013: 11-12). Today, rap music in Italy is experiencing a new moment of growth, owing to the widespread use of social media among young people, among other things (Vecchi 2013: 12).

The issue of “translation” in a broad sense is discussed in the essay *Rezoulutionist Hip Hop* by Taviano, who claims that “in terms of language creativity, the similarities between translation and Hip Hop are striking”, since “both translation and Hip Hop contribute to subverting common views about language and empowerment” (2012: 4). The Italian researcher also includes ‘Hip Hop’ among the so-called *translation terms*, that is, “concepts which do not necessarily express the same idea in different societies” (2013:6).

In her 2013 paper about Syrian-American rapper Omar Offendum, Taviano affirms that “translation in Hip Hop lyrics goes well beyond traditional notions of a transfer from one language to another” (2013:1). However, while recognising the importance of Taviano's work, there still is a scarcity of studies of rap lyrics translation in its conventional sense, which this paper means to address.

3. From Poetry and Song Translation Theories to Rap Lyrics: the Translation of Poems

Poetry translation theories generally deal with the dualism between expression and content, which combine with each other and form the artistic sign in literary and poetic texts, generating an effect of untranslatability (Lotman 2010:258).

Umberto Eco claims that in poetry, “expression appears more decisive than content”; but, he warns, “saying that content is irrelevant would be wrong” (2010:140; my translation). Eco goes on to suggest that when translating a poem, it is indeed correct to pay attention to its structure, but it is also important that the translator does not make her/himself a subject to it, in order not to lose those poetic images which are created through the content (2010:141).

As noted by Sholeh Kolahi, "in translating [especially] poetry there is a great tension between form and content", therefore "a poetry translator's main concern is whether to prefer the form over the content or vice versa" (2012:451). In the specific case of a poetic text, the tension between form and content is particularly marked as poetry, differently to prose, has both literary and musical features (Kolahi 2012:453).

Kolahi then specifies the elements that distinguish the poetic form, which can be summarised with reference to denotation, connotation and, above all, versification, the latter of which includes the concepts of rhythm, meter, verse and rhyme (2012:453-54). Denotation and connotation refer to the juxtaposition of the direct relationship between word and defined object (denotation) with the implicit meanings beyond the dictionary definition (connotation), which is realized through figures of speech such as metaphor. The term "versification", by contrast, defines the act of writing in verses: a verse (or line) is the smallest unit of poetry. Each line, as each utterance, has its own rhythm, which is marked by the tonic accents on each syllable; if accents fall within the poem according to a precise scheme, the concept of meter or metric is applied.

In his analysis of the translations from Persian to English of Shorab Sepehri's poems, Kolahi relies on André Lefevere's seven strategies for poetry translation, which "are inclusive enough since they cover all the poetic features: formal and contextual" (Kolahi 2012:460). As described by Kolahi, Lefevere's view of poetry is that of a context in which "form, content and aesthetic issues are closely intermingled but all of the issues have their own special value" (*ibid.*). With his seven strategies, he observes that the translation of a poem can be phonemic or literal, metrical or verse-to-prose, rhymed or free-verse, a version or an imitation of the source text (ST).

Bruno Osimo also developed seven approaches to poetry translation (2004:117-119): direct access to the original; interlinear translation with parallel text; philological translation; single-dominant translation (which means that only one aspect of the ST should be considered); translation with a hierarchy of dominant and subdominants;

cultural transposition; poetic translation or author's translation.³

Lefevere and Osimo's strategies have been identified as effective tools for elaborating an approach to rap lyrics translation for two main reasons: firstly, they are both arranged in lists, which makes the ST analysis easier; secondly, they are flexible, as each element in the list can be affected by another. For instance, a translation may not be literal or phonemic only, nor does it necessarily have to be a single-dominant translation: the application of more than one strategy with the right balance helps to obtain a translation as compliant as possible with the preset goals.

4. The Translation of Song Lyrics and Audiovisual Translation

The lack of scholarly material on rap lyrics translation is also due to the fact that song lyrics in general have only recently begun to be studied from a translational point of view, even though music plays an important role in many people's everyday life (Åkerström 2009:9). In 2008, *The Translator* released a special issue in order to foster research activity on music translation, explaining that the so far relatively limited interest in the topic was due to it being “considered somewhat outside the limits of translation studies, as traditionally conceived”.⁴

Music's multimodality makes the translation of song lyrics inevitably related to other disciplines and bound to elements beyond the written text, making it a branch of the so-called “constrained translation” category, which also includes the translation of movies and comics. The expression was coined by Roberto Mayoral, Dorothy Kelly and Natividad Gallardo to emphasize how translation dealing with texts related to other forms of expression (images, music, voice etc.) is more complex, since it is constrained by these forms (1988:356).

The song translator's choices generally depend on the translation's function. As previously mentioned, the project may consist of a printed translation, subtitles, or a new version of the song to be performed in the target language. In the first instance, the target text (TT) is freer from extra-linguistic aspects, while in other cases the translator will

3 <http://www3.uji.es/~aferna/H44/Translating-poetry.htm> (accessed October 15, 2015).

4 <https://www.stjerome.co.uk/tsa/issue/28/> (accessed October 15, 2015).

have to pay attention to the musical background (Salmon 2010:194). Gianluca Valenti contrasts the translation of poems with that of songs, observing that, while there is “an absolute metric liberty” in translating poetic text because of the lack of relationship with music, a song translator must “devoutly respect the original text structure, since a high number of metric variations would alter the melody on which the text itself is modulated” (2013:30; my translation). Choosing to keep both the same melody and musical structure means keeping the same metric structure, occasionally to the detriment of lexical or semantic fidelity (Valenti 2013:112).

The relationship between song and audiovisual translation is particularly strong due to the intersemiotic relationship between text and music, as the TT has to be not only read, but often also interpreted. A very common situation where a ‘singable’ translation is needed is when a musical film is translated for its international release. In regards to this matter, Paolinelli and Di Fortunato (2005) define three specific situations of songs within a movie:

- songs included in the original soundtrack (OST) with a text relating to the plot;
- actor(s) singing a song in a scene of the movie;
- musical films, where songs lyrics are part of the dialogue.

In the first two cases, it is the dialogue adaptor who decides whether to use subtitling/dubbing or not: if the song is part of the OST and contributes to the final message of a specific scene, the subtitles can help the viewer to get the whole message but, if s/he is not used to watching subtitled movies, s/he may focus excessively on the written text and not see some crucial visual elements. When an actor is singing a song, the decision is made according to the specific situation: if the song is not popular – or if there is an Italian version – it is usually translated and dubbed. However, if it is a popular tune, or if it comes from another source besides the actor's voice (e.g. a radio), it is generally left in the source language (SL).

With musical films, the strategy is often related to commercial reasons: translating songs

in Disney movies is necessary, for example, since they are products for children. The strategy with other musical films (such as *Chicago*, *Moulin Rouge*, etc.) is different: the songs are never dubbed, because they have already become popular in the SL. The most common alternative is subtitling (Paolinelli and Di Fortunato 2005:53-54). When a song (and a dialogue in general) is dubbed, the word “synchronism” defines the connection between the words pronounced by the voice actors, and the actors' labial and body movements on the screen (Pavesi 2009:13-15). As for subtitling, Panayota Georgakopoulou (2009) describes a series of constraints which the translator (and/or the subtitler) has to face in the process, dividing them into technical, textual, and linguistic. The first category includes those unavoidable spatial and temporal constraints in which the subtitles have to be contained: since readability is the main parameter, a subtitle is usually divided into no more than two lines and with a certain number of characters. In addition, the physical length of a subtitle is directly related to the time it remains on the screen since, as Georkapoulou observes, “no matter how perfect a subtitle is in terms of format and content, it will always fail to be successful if viewers do not have enough time to read it” (2009:22).

Instead of focusing on music in films, Johan Franzon deals with song translation in general in *The Translator* special issue, where he makes a list of five possible choices for a translator when dealing with a song (2008:276):

- non-translation;
- translation without considering musical aspects;
- creation of a new text with the original music;
- translation of the text and adaptation of the music to the TT;
- translation of the text and adaptation of the TT to the music.

The choice depends on the project's goal and, as Franzon himself says, “in actual cases, it may be evident that only one of these options is possible or that some of them may be combined” (2008:277).

Peter Low, on the other hand, elaborated an approach for ‘singable’ translations inspired by pentathlon. Through a metaphor, Low compares the song translator with a pentathlete: if the pentathlete has to compete in five different disciplines getting as many points as possible, the song translator also obtains a good translation by fulfilling five parameters: singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme (2005:192). After an accurate text analysis, the translator sets a scale of importance of the five parameters – based on the project's goal – just like the pentathlete prepares for the competition according to his/her skills in the various disciplines.

According to Low, however, the rhyme parameter is a “special case”: focusing on performed song translation, he argues that “to the question 'Do song-translations need to rhyme', the first answer must be: 'Not if they are not intended to be sung'” (2008:1). In fact, rhyme superfluosness in translations not intended to be sung is quite a common idea, as proven by the translations of songs contained in books about musicians and their works.

To understand how important a rhyme is in a song, Low sets three questions to ask oneself during the text analysis: “(1) Are rhymes frequent in the source text? (2) Is rhyme important in the source text? (3) Is it a comic song?” (2008:6). With (1) and (2) in particular, Low also refers to precise rhyme schemes in the ST which do not have to be exactly the same in the TT: “Although song-texts usually have one rhyme per line, there is no law saying that a translation must replicate this” (2008:7). Instead, a song can be translated by maintaining the rhyme only in “strategic” positions, such as at the end of a quatrain.

5. A Rap Perspective for the Existing Theories

Rap is poetry, but its popularity relies in part on people not recognizing it as such. After all, rap is for good times; we play it in our cars, hear it at parties and at clubs. By contrast, most people associate poetry with hard work; it is something to be studied in school or puzzled over for hidden insights (Bradley 2009: XII)

Adam Bradley's *Book of Rhymes – The Poetics of Hip Hop* offers a thorough analysis of Hip Hop music through a comparison with poetry, stressing many similarities in aspects such as rhyme, meter and versification. However, “rap's reliance on rhyme distinguishes it [...] from most contemporary poetry” since “rap celebrates rhyme like nothing else” (Bradley 2009:51).

The affinity between rap and poetry also arises when it comes to translation. The aforementioned tension between form and content (see Kolahi), for example, is particularly stressed in the case of lyrics about social and political issues. As for Lefevere and Osimo's techniques, they can be adapted and applied to rap song lyrics as well as to poems. Some of them – such as literal, free verse and prose translation – have to be excluded since they would lead to a translation without rhyme. Since rhyme is a fundamental element of rap music, the project goal should always be to achieve a rhymed translation as well. This should also count for printed translation, since listening to the original song with the support of an Italian free-verse translation without any rhythm could generate an estranging effect that could break the rhythm of the ST itself. Peter Low's theory on rhyme superfluosity in song translations mainly refers to sung songs, where rhymes are arranged in a way that provides the translator with more liberties, both when the TT has to be sung, and when it is going to be printed (in the latter case, free-verse translation prevails).

As will be seen in the following pages, phonemic translation – that is, reproducing the source language sound in the target language – is an important strategy in audiovisual translation in particular, while the cover version is the musical equivalent of an author's translation or imitation.

According to Osimo's strategies, it seems appropriate to adapt the two dominant-related strategies into one that can be called multi-dominant translation. As for Lefevere's techniques, rhymed translation and metrical translation appear to be the most relevant, though the concept of meter has to be seen from a musical point of view: if the metrical system in poetry is mainly defined by accents and syllables, in music it is defined by tempo. In translating songs intended to be sung, the translator has to respect melodic

constraints related to the ST musical background in addition to tempo. In Hip Hop music, however, the connection between the MC's⁵ voice and music mostly resides on in the musical base, the *beat* and the *loop*:

Great pop lyricists, Irving Berlin or John Lennon or Stevie Wonder, match their words not only to the rhythm of the music, but to melodies and harmonies as well. For the most part, MCs need concern themselves only with the beat (Bradley 2009: XV).

Rhythm and word stressing in rap are not random, but the beat is quite a flexible metric system, though able to set a well-defined structure. This feature is realized through? the concept of *flow*, that is, “an MC's distinctive lyrical cadence, usually in relation to a beat” (Bradley 2009:6). The Hip Hop meter, being flexible, allows different flows on the same beat.⁶

6. Dubbing, Subtitling and Translation: Some Concrete Examples

When a translation project involves a song with the TT intended to be sung, it usually involves audiovisual translation. Literature, on the other hand, biographies – or books in general – about singers and musicians always contain quoted or commented lyrics from their songs.

This section will focus on four examples drawn from real data, the first three being audiovisual translations and the last a literary translation:

- the Italian version of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* theme song, translated by Rossella Izzo and Edoardo Nevola;
- the Italian version of a short rap extract from *Scrubs*, originally performed by the Sugarhill Gang;
- the Italian subtitles for the freestyle rap battles in the movie *8 Mile*, with Eminem;

5 "MC" is short for "Master of Ceremonies" or "Mic Controller". It is often used as a synonym for “rapper”, though an MC is a rapper who is particularly skilled, especially on stage.

6 Bradley demonstrates rap's rhythmic versatility with the analysis of the song “Childz Play” by Cee-Lo featuring Ludacris.

- the translation of Eminem's song lyrics contained in his autobiographical work *Angry Blonde*, translated into Italian by Michele Monina.

6.1 Willy, il Principe di Bel Air

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air is an American television sitcom that originally aired on NBC from 1990 to 1996. The show stars Will Smith – a popular rapper in the late 1980s – as a teenager of the same name from West Philadelphia, who moves in with his wealthy relatives in their mansion in Bel Air, Los Angeles.

The theme song and opening sequence set the premise of the show: while playing basketball in his neighborhood, Will accidentally gets involved in a fight. This causes a confrontation that frightens Will's mother, who sends him to live with his aunt and uncle in Bel Air. He flies from Philadelphia to Los Angeles on a one-way ticket in first class. On arrival, he takes a taxi that has a license plate with the word "FRESH" on it and eventually pulls up at his new home.

The theme song was translated and rerecorded in other languages, probably due to the importance of the information it provides for the viewer. The Italian version was translated by Rossella Izzo and Edoardo Nevola, who also performed it as Will Smith's Italian voice:

Table 1: 'The Fresh Prince of Bel Air' lyrics⁷ (left), their Italian translation (center) and the English back translation (right).

	Original Lyrics	Italian Translation	Back-translation into English
1	Now, this is the story all about how	Hey! Questa è la maxi-storia di come la mia vita	Hey! This is the maxi-story of how my life
2	My life got flipped, turned upside down	Cambiata, capovolta, sottosopra sia finita	Ended up changed, flipped, turned upside down
3	And I'd like to take a minute, just sit right there	Seduto su due piedi qui con te	Sitting on my feet here with you
4	I'll tell you how I became the prince of a town called Bel Air	Ti parlerò di Willy superfico di Bel Air	I'll tell you about Will, supercool guy from Bel Air

⁷ Willard C. Smith and Jeffrey Townes. *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Performed by DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince. © 1990 Jazzy Jeff And Fresh Prince Publishing C, Universal Music - Z Tunes LLC.

5	In West Philadelphia, born and raised	Giocando a basket con gli amici sono cresciuto	I grew up playing basket with my friends
6	On the playground is where I spent most of my days	Me la sono spassata, wow! che fissa ogni minuto	I had a great fun, wow! How cool was every minute
7	Chillin' out, maxin', relaxin' all cool	Le mie toste giornate filavano così	My cool days would fly like this
8	And all shootin' some B-ball outside of the school	Tra un megatiro a canestro e un film di Spike Lee	Between a mega-basket shot and a Spike Lee film
9	When a couple of guys who were up to no good	Poi la mia palla lanciata un po' più in su	Then my ball, thrown a little bit higher
10	Started makin' trouble in my neighborhood	Andò proprio sulla testa di quei vikinghi laggiù	Went exactly on those Vikings' heads over there
11	I got in one little fight and my mom got scared	Il più duro si imballò, fece una trottola di me	The toughest got mad, made me a spinning top
12	And said, "You're movin' with your aunty and uncle in Bel Air"	E la mamma preoccupata disse "Vattene a Bel Air"	And my worried mum said "Go to Bel Air"
13	I begged and pleaded with her the other day	L'ho pregata scongiurata ma dallo zio vuole che vada	I begged her, pleaded with her but she wanted me to go to uncle's
14	But she packed my suitcase and sent me on my way	Lei m'ha fatto le valige e ha detto "Va' per la tua strada!"	She packed my bags and said "Go your way!"
15	She gave me a kiss and then she gave me my ticket	Dopo avermi dato un bacio e un biglietto per partire	After giving me a kiss and a ticket to leave
16	I put my Walkman on and said, "I might as well kick it!"	Con lo stereo nelle orecchie ho detto "Qua meglio sgommare!"	With the stereo in my ears I said "Here is better to clear off!"
17	First class, yo this is bad!	Prima classe, ma è uno sballo!	First class, it's a blast!
18	Drinkin' orange juice out of a champagne glass	Spremute d'arancia in bicchieri di cristallo	Orange squeeze in crystal glasses
19	Is this what the people of Bel Air are livin' like?	Se questa è la vita che fanno a Bel Air per me	If this is the life they have in Bel Air, to me
20	Hmmm, this might be alright	Hmmm poi tanto male non è	Hmmm, is not that bad then
21	I whistled for a cab and when it came near	Ho chiamato un taxi giallo col mio fischio collaudato	I called a yellow cab with my tested whistle
22	The license plate said	Come in Formula Uno mi	I was feeling thrilled as in Formula

	«Fresh» and had a dice in the mirror	sentivo gasato	One
23	If anything I could say that this cab was rare	Una vita tutta nuova sta esplodendo per me	A brand new life is exploding for me
24	But I thought, nah forget it, yo home to Bel Air!	“Avanti a tutta forza portami a Bel Air!”	“Full speed ahead, take me to Bel Air!”
25	I pulled up to the house about seven or eight	Oh che sventola di casa, mi sento già straricco	Oh! What a cool house, I already feel super rich
26	And I yelled to the cabbie, "Yo homes, smell you later"	La vita di prima mi puzza di vecchio	The life before smells old to me
27	Looked at my kingdom, I was finally there	Guardate adesso gente in pista chi c'è	Look now people who's entered the scene
28	To sit on my throne as the prince of Bel Air	Il Principe Willy lo svitato di Bel Air	The Prince Willy, the crazy man from Bel Air

Rizzo and Nevola used phonemic translation⁸ when Will Smith's face is visible on video, necessitating compatibility between the actor's body movements and Nevola's voice. The translation of "smell you later" with *mi puzza di vecchio*, for instance, is an example of paralinguistic synchronism, that is, the compatibility between dialogues and the actors' movements and gestures (Pavesi 2009:13-15). In Rizzo and Nevola's translation, end rhymes are the dominant, but the alternation between perfect and imperfect rhymes⁹ helps avoid the lullaby effect.

The main, quite unsolvable issue in rhyme translation is to maintain the same end focuses,¹⁰ i.e. the same rhyming words at the end of the line. The word in the end focus position in the ST, once translated, often finds itself moved and replaced by another word in the TT; this process involves a change from the syntactic and stylistic point of view, but the line (and its couplet) can still be semantically unvaried. This can be seen in the opening lines:

1	Now, this is the story all about <u>how</u>	Hey! Questa è la maxi-storia di <u>come</u> la mia
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⁸ It is difficult to determine whether that was a conscious choice.

⁹ A rhyme is "perfect" when words share the same final sounds (*school/cool*); it is "imperfect", instead, when the final sounds are similar rather than identical (*back/that*).

¹⁰ In linguistics, front focus, middle focus and end focus are three parts of the sentence where information can be emphasized, namely at the beginning of the sentence, in the middle or at the end of it.

		<i>vita</i>
2	My <i>life</i> got flipped, turned <u>upside down</u>	Cambiata, capovolta, <u>sottosopra</u> sia <i>finita</i>

The words forming the source rhyme (SR) are moved from their end focus, but the entire couplet does not change from a semantic point of view.

The TT as a whole retains the information needed to understand the story, but in the second quatrain (lines 5-8) the geographic reference to West Philadelphia is missing, being replaced by the cultural reference *giocando a pallacanestro* (→ “playing basketball”). The TT preserves the fronted theme and the ellipsis, even though the latter is more marked¹¹ in the ST as it violates the grammar rule of the obligatory subject:

5	<u>In West Philadelphia</u> , [I was] born and raised	<u>Giocando a basket con gli amici</u> [io] sono cresciuto
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The next line contains a reversed *wh*- cleft which is lost in the TT:

6	On the playground is where I spent most of my days	Me la sono spassata, wow! Che fissa ogni minuto
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In the same quatrain, the slang word “B-ball” (line 8) is replaced by *un film di Spike Lee*. The Italian reference to the director of *Do The Right Thing* could have been chosen by the translators as a solution to let the Italian audience know about the socio-cultural context in which Will used to live in an indirect way, since an Italian is unlikely to know about West Philadelphia's ethnographic features.

In the third quatrain (lines 9 to 12), the TT gives more detail about the brawl Will got involved into than the ST, as it better describes what is seen on video, that is, Will being bullied by two other boys after hitting them by accident with a basketball.

¹¹ In linguistics, a sentence has a fronted theme if its initial element is something that is not the subject. The structure of a sentence is marked when it deviates from standard language rules.

In the Italian lines 21 to 24 there is no description of the taxi, which, with its “FRESH” plate and the fuzzy dice hanging on the rear-view mirror, draws Will's attention in the ST, since it is not in line with the high-class environment in which he is going to live.

However, Will also sees a connection between the taxi and his old neighborhood, and realizes that he could also feel out of place at his new home. In the ST, line 24 is partly direct thought – through which Will drives away his doubts – and partly free direct speech – when he says to the taxi driver to go to Bel Air. In Italian, the latter part only is expressed:

24	But I thought "Nah, forget it", "Yo home to Bel Air!"	“Avanti a tutta forza portami a Bel Air!”
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In the Italian version, Will expresses different feelings and sensations. In fact, he is not surprised by the taxi, nor doubtful about his change of lifestyle, but he feels excited as if he were in a Formula One race. Finally, in the last four lines of the ST, Will dismisses the taxi driver with “smell you later”, and the actor holds his nose while pronouncing these words in the video. In the TT, the written text is still coherent with the visual text, but in this case, Will says life in Philadelphia already “smells old” (*mi puzza di vecchio*) as he sees the luxurious house he is going to live in.

The aspects of meter and rhythm of the song's translation can be considered to have been respected: the credit for the good result – demonstrated by the success obtained among Italian viewers – obviously goes to the translators, but also (and in particular) to Nevola as a singer and musician (and rapper for the occasion). Though relying on Smith's flow, the voice actor articulates some words and syllables differently, still respecting the beat in the musical background, placing the right accents on both *kicks* and – above all – *snare*s at the end of the loop.

6.2 JD and the Sugarhill Clock

Scrubs is an American comedy television series that aired from 2001 to 2010 on NBC. The series follows the lives of Dr. John “JD” Dorian (interpreted by Zach Braff) and his

fellow employees at the fictional Sacred Heart Hospital. Many of the surreal gags in the series originate from JD's daydreams. However, *Scrubs* also presents many deeper and more intense moments, with elements of drama, which usually introduce the viewer to the moral of the episode.

One of JD's comic daydreams features a cameo by the American Hip Hop group The Sugarhill Gang, who perform a short passage of their best-known single “Rapper's Delight” (1979) with modified lyrics. This takes place in the first episode of the fourth season, *My Old Friend's New Friend*, in which JD is revealed to have a Sugarhill Gang clock with “Rapper's Delight” as wake-up alarm. JD imagines a miniature version of the rappers popping out from the clock and beginning a sort of mini live performance of the song with different lyrics from the original:

Table 2: “Rapper's Delight” lyrics¹² and their edited version used in *Scrubs*.

“Rapper's Delight” (1979)	The Sugarhill Gang (<i>Scrubs</i> , 2004)
I said a hip hop the hippie the hippie to the hip hip hop and you don't stop	I said a hip, hop, the hippy, the hippy to the hip-hip-hop you don't stop
The rockin' to the bang bang boogie say up jump the boogie to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat	The rock it to the bang bang boogie, said up jump the boogie to the rhythm of the boogity beat!
Now, what you hear is not a test, I'm rapping to the beat	Now what you hear is not a dream, so listen up, you nappy head!
And me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet	Yo, hear my rhyme, it's wake-up time, so get your white ass outta bed!

The daydream is then interrupted by JD himself, who turns the alarm off and goes back to sleep.

As seen by comparing the two texts, the first couplet (the song's main chorus) does not

12 Sylvia Robinson, Henry Jackson, Michael Wright, Guy O'Brien. “Rapper's Delight”. Performed by The Sugarhill Gang. © 1979 Sugarhill Records Ltd.

change, while the Gang adapts the second one to urge JD to get up. The perfect end rhyme changes from *beat/feet* to *head/bed*, and a new internal rhyme, *rhyme/time*, is added. In the previous line, the words *nappy* and *listen up* are bound by assonance and consonance, as are *hear* and *dream*.

Although the passage is less than 20 seconds long, its Italian translation is interesting for different reasons, as is discussed shortly.

Table 3: The Italian translation of The Sugarhill Gang's rhymes in *Scrubs*

Original Italian translation of The Sugarhill Gang's rhymes in <i>Scrubs</i>	Back-Translation into English
E adesso hop! Hop! Cammina, cammina fino al bagno non fermarti E lavati la faccia, fatti la doccia e ora sei in ritardo come al solito, vai!	<i>And now hop! Hop! Walk, walk to the bathroom, don't stop And wash your face, have a shower and now you're late as usual, go!</i>
Non stai sognando, non stare lì, se aspetti non arrivi più Ascoltami e svegliati che l'ospedale non aspetta te!	<i>You're not dreaming, don't stay there, if you wait you'll never arrive Listen to me and wake up because the hospital doesn't wait for you!</i>

First of all, the “Rapper's Delight” introductory, highly rhythmical chorus – almost a gibberish based on rhymes, repetitions, and alliterations around the words “hip hop” and “boogie” – has been replaced by complete sentences. The double interjection *hop!* is the only element of resemblance between ST and TT, most likely for synchronic reasons. As in the ST, the first couplet has no end rhyme; however, if *Rapper's Delight* finds its rhythmical balance with a perfect internal rhyme (*hop/stop*) and with several assonances and consonances, the TT relies on close repetitions (*hop* and *cammina*) in the first line, and on the internal slant rhyme *faccia/doccia* and the repetition of consonantal and vocalic sounds in the second line:

Original Italian Translation

E lavati la faccia, fatti la doccia e ora sei in ritardo come al solito, vai!

Back-Translation into English

And wash your face, have a shower and now you're late as usual, go!

The absence of end rhymes endures in the second couplet but, in this case, it is particularly marked, since the perfect rhyme *head/bed* is replaced by the vocalic dissonance between /u/ and /e/. The internal rhyme *rhyme/time* turns into a repeated imperative, *ascoltami/svegliati*, while in the previous line the repetition involves a negative clause with the verb *stare* with both its functions, auxiliary (*non stai sognando* → “you are not dreaming”) and lexical (*non stare lì* → “don't stay there”). A parallelism is actually used every first bar: besides those already described, the double repetition *hop!/cammina* in the first line; and the double clause with a reflexive verb in imperative form (*lavati/fatti*) with rhyming direct objects (*faccia/doccia*). This particular kind of structure seems to originate from the beat of the original song, with its well-defined kicks and snares. This feature is easily perceivable in the opening line:

Tables 4/5: Two examples of parallelisms coinciding with kicks and snares

	kick	snare	Kick	Snare	
E adesso	hop!	Hop!	Cammin a	Cammin a	fino al bagno non fermarti

	kick		Snare		kick	snare
Non	Stai	so-	gnan-	do	non sta-	-re lì

From a methodological point of view, in Levefere's terms, the translator mainly applied metrical translation (which consists in reproducing the source language meter) by imitating the rapper's flow, and phonemic translation, the latter being necessary for technical reasons related to the dubbing process. Besides *hop* in the first line, another example is the vocalic sound /e/ of the word “bed” which is transferred in *te*, or again the line shown in Table 4, containing slightly different vocalic sounds, yet produced by

similar articulatory movements:

Table 6: Elements of phonemic translation

<i>Now</i>	what	<i>you</i>	hear	<i>is</i>	not a	Dream
Non	Stai	so-	gnan-	-do	Non sta-	-re lì

Rhymed translation, on the other hand, does not seem to have been particularly considered, as the few rhymes of the ST have not been transferred, especially the final one, at the end of the text, in the most focal position. In addition, the TT has some imitation features, since the structure is preserved for the most part, but the content of the TT is completely new, even though it expresses the same concept (JD must get up). Elements of resemblance can be seen in *Non stai sognando* (i.e. “You’re not dreaming”) replacing “What you hear is not a dream” and in *ascoltami e svegliati* (i.e. “Listen to me and wake up”) for “hear my rhyme, it’s wake up time”.

As for the differences, the first couplet has been completely transformed. This change seems coherent with the dubbing choice: an Italian equivalent for the original song’s chorus, the latter being extremely popular worldwide and quite nonsensical in its own language, would have been particularly awkward and extremely complex.

6.3 Hip Hop and Cinema: 8 Mile

8 Mile is a 2002 American movie directed by Curtis Hanson and set in 1995 in Detroit. The story is about Jimmy “B-Rabbit” Smith, Jr. (Eminem), a young white rapper who wants to fulfill his dream of a successful career in a genre dominated by African Americans. Though skilled, Rabbit faces disapproval from the black majority. However, Jimmy eventually comes to be respected after winning a rap battle tournament at *The Shelter* – the nerve centre of Detroit’s Hip Hop community.

The dialogues in the Italian version of the movie are dubbed, while the rap battles are

subtitled. A heterogeneity of strategies and approaches to rhyme become apparent in the analysis of the TTs.¹³ This leads to the supposition that at least three different translators were involved. Free or blank verse translation is the most applied dominant strategy used: in these cases, the subtitles are mostly rhymeless, as the translator mainly focuses on semantic content. However, the strategy is rarely applied throughout the entire scene or passage:

Table 7: An example of blank-verse translation from Lickety Splyt's freestyle.¹⁴¹⁵

Original Passage	Italian Translation
Yo, this guys a choke-artist, ya catch a bad one Ya better off shootin ya-self with Popa Doc's handgun Climbin' up this mountain, you're weak I leave ya lost without a paddle, floatin' shit's creek	È un artista che si strozza!// se ne becchi uno tosto Fai meglio a spararti// con la pistola di Papa Doc Per scalare questa montagna// sei debole Ti lascio a navigare// in un mare di merda

Where the subtitles have rhymes, those exhibit particular features:

- they are scattered, that is they are generally found in the TTs in blank verse, without a precise order;
- they include easy and desinential rhymes;¹⁶
- they are linked in a different way than conventional rap texts.

The third point of the list requires further explanation. The ST can appear in three different ways: orally, when performed by the actors (A) and textually, both in transcriptions (B) and in the English subtitles (C). Rap rhymes are usually organized in couplets with end rhymes and horizontal internal rhymes, sometimes multisyllabic as well; in the passage from B to C,¹⁷ a rap line of standard length corresponds to a subtitle

¹³ Each rap passage is considered as a separate text.

¹⁴ Lickety Splyt is interpreted by Gerald L. "Strike" Sanders. The scene is at 1:26:00 of the official DVD (Universal Pictures, 2002).

¹⁵ The double slash (//) indicates a two-line subtitle in the TT for a single line in the ST.

¹⁶ In Italian, a rhyme is desinential when is composed of two words with the same desinence, such as verbs in the infinitive form like *cantare* (to sing) and *camminare* (to walk). See *rima desinenziale* in Pinchera (1999:232-33).

¹⁷ Assuming dialogues and song have been transcribed before the subtitling process.

divided into two lines, which in turn correspond to the bars of the beat in the background. This new textual organization allows rhymes to be visualized differently as well: vertical rhymes (such as *made/aid* in Table 8) now appear in sequence, while many internal horizontal rhymes, often between bars, become vertical within the subtitle (*renegade/aid*):

Table 8: The first couplet from Rabbit's freestyle in the parking lot scene (0:28:00), along with its English subtitles.

Your style's generic, mine's authentic made	Your style's generic Mine's authentic made
I roll like a renegade , you need clinic aid	I roll like a renegade You need clinic aid

End rhymes in transcription appear disconnected in subtitle mode to, since the rhyme, in this instance, is between subtitle 1 and subtitle 2.

In other words, vertical and horizontal rhymes in transcriptions are transmitted in two ideal dimensions: height and length, respectively. However, when they become subtitles, the third dimension of depth, represented by end rhymes between consecutive subtitles, also comes into play.

This structural difference also reflects on the TTs, which are to be reproduced in C-mode for the Italian audience. Supposing the translator wants not only to help comprehension of the text, but also to recreate rap and rhyme's rhythm and immediacy, vertical rhymes in the subtitles seem to serve the purpose, as they are – indeed – perceived immediately.

Table 9: A longer extract from the same scene as Table 8

	English Transcription	Italian Subtitles		Back-Translation into English
A	Your style is generic, mine's authentic made	Il tuo stile è generico Il mio inimitabile	A	<i>Your style is generic Mine is inimitable</i>
A	I roll like a renegade You	Con le rime sono abile	A	<i>With the rhymes I'm skilled</i>

A	need clinic aid	Tu sei uno psicolabile	A	<i>You're mentally unstable</i>
B B	My technique is <u>bizarre</u> <u>and ill</u> ; I <u>scar</u> and <u>kill</u>	La mia tecnica è cattiva Ferisce, è nociva	B B	<i>My technique is evil</i> <i>It hurts, it's noxious</i>
B B	You were a <u>star until</u> I served you like a <u>bar and</u> <u>grill</u>	Eri una star Poi ti ho servito come snack al bar	C C	<i>You were a star</i> <i>Then I served you like a</i> <i>snack at the bar</i>
C C	As I proceed to cook and <u>grill ya</u> that's all that took to <u>kill ya</u>	Che mi ci vuole a cucinarti? Andare avanti è ammazzarti	D D	<i>What does it take for me to</i> <i>cook you?</i> <i>To go on is to kill you</i>
C	You better recognize me like I look <u>familiar</u>	E questa faccia farai meglio a non dimenticarti	D	<i>And this face</i> <i>You'd better not forget</i>

Table 9 shows one of the few examples where, despite subtitling constraints and the (practically inevitable) sacrifice of multisyllabic rhymes, the translator managed to create a homogeneous structure similar to the ST, to some extent. The Italian couplet B, with both horizontal and vertical internal rhymes, becomes two single lines with horizontal rhymes, each of them represented on the screen by a two-line subtitle with vertical rhyme that preserves the text's rhythm. Furthermore, the link between end rhymes in couplets A and D – which was vertical in the transcription – does not lose the effect of immediacy thanks to the horizontal rhyme, which acts as glue. However, the analyzed scene, along with Lotto's rap passage,¹⁸ is the only example of coherence. As pointed out, sporadic rhymes in a blank-verse translation are much more frequent. This kind of choice could depend on a sort of compromise between two dominants, i.e. rhymes and ST's message: the semantic aspect has been preferred on the one hand, but the metric-rhythmic aspect has not been totally ignored on the other.

6.4 Hip Hop and Literature: Angry Blonde

Blank-verse translation was also the strategy chosen by Michele Monina, Italian translator of *Angry Blonde*, an autobiographical work by Eminem in which the rapper comments on a number of his songs. Besides Eminem's commentaries, Monina also

¹⁸ Lotto is interpreted by Nashawn "Ox" Breedlove. The scene begins at 1:29:30 of the official DVD.

translated the lyrics with the common approach of focusing on the song's message and semantic aspects without any metric-rhythmic element.

The same TT structure does not relate to the structure of songs, since the line organization follows syntactic criteria, rather than musical:

Table 10: Some lines from *The Way I Am*¹⁹ (2000) and their Italian translation by Michele Monina (Eminem 2001:159) with an English back translation.

Original Text	Italian Translation	Back-Translation into English
Sometimes I just feel like my father	A volte mi sento come mio padre, e odio essere molestato da tutte queste cose senza	Sometimes I feel like my father, and I hate to be bothered with all of this
I hate to be bothered with all of this nonsense it's constant	senso: è una costante	nonsense: it's a constant
And, "Oh, it's his lyrical content	E "Oh, è il contenuto lirico dei suoi testi"	And "Oh, it's the lyrical content of his lyrics"
The song <i>Guilty Conscience</i> has gotten such rotten responses"	La canzone <i>Guilty Conscience</i> ha scatenato una reazione del cazzo	The song <i>Guilty Conscience</i> has triggered a shitty reaction
And all of this controversy circles me	Tutte queste controversie che mi hanno circondato	All these controversies that surrounded me
And it seems like the media immediately points a finger at me	Ed è stato un po' come se i media non aspettassero altro per puntarmi il dito contro	And it was as if the media weren't looking forward to pointing the finger at me

It is true that Eminem's lyrics are quite complex texts, thus the creation of a both rhymed and semantically accurate TT is an extremely difficult task, as it means retaining a high percentage of multisyllabic and internal rhymes.

One possible strategy could consist of searching for assonances and consonances in order

¹⁹ Marshall Mathers. *The Way I Am*. Performed by Eminem. © 2000 Aftermath Ent./Interscope Records.

to compensate rhyme density, keeping end rhymes only; if this became prohibitive, internal phonetic parallelism could be put aside. Free-verse translation is then the final solution, in case none of the previous strategies is satisfying.

This step-by-step process, instead of excluding rhymed translation from the start, can also help the translator find a compromise when working on a written translation of song lyrics. Since, in this case, the TT is intended to help analyze and comprehend the ST, the use of footnotes is possible.

7. Conclusions

The main goal of this paper has been to show that a study of appropriate translation strategies for rap lyrics is needed, given the particular features that distinguish them from sung lyrics. The main distinctive trait is the importance afforded in this context to rhyme (and, more generally, to phonetic parallelism), which is constantly in a focal position and a crucial tool for rhythm organization. Another difference resides in the connection between vocal parts and musical background, which is not as strong in rap as it is in sung songs. In the latter case, when the translation is to be performed in the target language, the TT must respect the melodic constraints of the ST, unless the music is changed or adapted as well. In translating a rap song for dubbing, the creation of rhymes also depends on kinetic and synchronic constraints. However, the performer of the TT does not have to follow the rapper's flow, since the semi-spoken vocal style allows more liberties than singing does, on condition that rhythm and rhyme are respected: in a dubbed rap, in fact, a rhymeless translation turns out to be particularly – or exceedingly – marked.

As for subtitling, rhyme is transmitted in three ideal dimensions: if vertical and horizontal rhymes in the subtitle respectively represent height and length, end rhymes between consecutive subtitles correspond to depth. In other words, along with the spatial dimension of rhymes there is the temporal dimension of subtitles. When a rap text is turned into subtitles, rhymes are displayed differently compared to full-text transcriptions: internal rhymes, for example, become end rhymes. This difference can

lead the translator to insert rhymes in the TT that are not in the ST. After the analysis of a delimited *corpus* of subtitled rap texts (*8 Mile* rap battles) three different strategies have been identified: rhymed translation, free-verse translation and mixed translation; a certain incoherence in translational choices has been noticed. It would be interesting to analyze wider *corpora* for each audiovisual context to verify how much these strategies are used – or if others are used – in similar cases.

Peter Low's concept of the superfluousness of rhyme is brought into question, as it may lead to the exclusion of a rhymed translation from the start, failing to achieve a translation that is functionally equivalent. Thus, an alternative step-by-step approach has been suggested: the translator takes rhymeless translation into consideration only after ascertaining that a satisfactory rhymed translation is impossible. However, this approach is still just a theoretical suggestion and needs to be verified in practice.

There are many other issues that will need further analysis in future studies with the same translational perspective as this article: these include rap music features which are more related to Hip Hop language and culture, such as Black English, Hip Hop jargon and local slangs, as well as more generic aspects like linguistic deviations and pop culture references.

Another question that arose while writing this paper is whether it is possible to find translational equivalents by comparing rap lyrics from similar contexts in different languages, in other words, if it is possible to talk about parallel texts in rap music.

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