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(T)Rap Music and Language Education: Context of Italian Playful Language Teaching

Abstract

This paper explores how rap and trap music can be used to teach Italian as a second language. It looks at the close links between music and language learning, showing how rhythm, repetition, and wordplay can help students process and remember language more effectively. Drawing on research in playful language teaching, It is argued that rap—especially its modern trap and drill forms—offers authentic, engaging material that speaks directly to students’ real lives. The article analyses lyrics by Italian rappers, including second-generation artists like Ghali, Mahmood, and Slava, to show how slang, code-switching, and everyday speech can open new paths to cultural understanding. It also reports findings from a lexical study of Marracash, Salmo, and Ghali, revealing the high word density and expressive variety of rap language. Overall, the study suggests that rap can serve as a creative and inclusive tool for teaching language through genuine social expression.

Keywords

Trap music; Language education; Italian teaching; Secon language teaching; Second Generation

*1. Do We Really Know What Music Can Do for Language Learning?*¹

In the present article, we aim to provide a set of tools for the pedagogical use of rap music—particularly in its most recent trap and drill forms—within the context of language education. In particular, in the first part of the paper we intend to offer some reflections on the potential of words in music and their relevance for teaching, with specific reference to the motivational dimension of trap music. We will then turn our attention to the crucial role played by second-generation Italians among trap artists, and subsequently to the lexical features of trap lyrics.

As Caon (2022) observes, a playful approach to language teaching encompasses a wide range of meanings grounded in the learner’s motivation and full engagement, and not exclusively in explicitly game-like activities. “Playful language teaching does not coincide with play understood as an autotelic, free, and disinterested activity,

¹ The English revision of this text was assisted by OpenAI’s ChatGPT (GPT-5) model. The author reviewed and approved all final content.

nor is it to be reduced to mere didactic play. In our view, a playful approach to language teaching can fully encompass all those activities supported by intrinsic motivation which, although not overtly playful in nature, are capable of completely engaging learners and thereby enabling both targeted and incidental language learning. This occurs because such activities stimulate curiosity, interest, the desire to know, and mental concentration. [...] Within this pervasive *play* dimension of the activity, we identify what we call *playfulness*—understood as a vital energy in which strong motivational drives are integrated with the learner’s affective-emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions” (Caon 2022, 56-57, *our translation*).

The type of learner engagement generated by songs and by words set to music, in this perspective, can serve as the foundation for highly effective language-teaching practices. This approach is consistent with the pedagogical framework outlined by Mollica (2010, 2023), who applied similar principles to wordplay and to the broader repertoire of activities that he has, with notable success, conceptualized under the term *recreational linguistics*.

Recent research in language education has drawn increasing attention to the cognitive and neurological connections between music and language acquisition (Pino et al., 2023, Sachs et al. 2016, Rieb & Cohen 2023, Cohrdes 2016). Clinical studies—often overlooked within educational literature—offer significant insights into how musical experience can shape linguistic competence. Notably, electrophysiological research by Intartaglia et al. (2017) measured subcortical brain responses to English syllables in three participant groups: native speakers, non-native speakers without musical training, and non-native musicians. While native speakers demonstrated the expected advantage in processing language-relevant frequencies (compared to non-native speakers without musical training), non-native musicians exhibited neural responses closely aligned with those of the native group. This remarkable finding suggests that musical training may enhance the neural encoding of phonetic and phonological information, potentially offsetting limited exposure to the target language.

A broader perspective on these findings highlights the ways in which music education fosters auditory discrimination and supports phonetic-articulatory mapping. According to François and Schön (2014), the human brain is highly responsive to statistically recurring sound patterns, a faculty crucial for the acquisition of phonotactic and morphosyntactic structures. Musical training, they argue, strengthens sensitivity to such regularities, even in non-linguistic contexts such as musical timbre and pitch. This enhanced auditory learning appears to result in improved neural connectivity within the audio-motor system, thereby supporting both low-level auditory processing and higher-order language functions.

Pino et al. (2023) demonstrated that various musical features—most notably rhythm and melody—can exert a significant influence on multiple dimensions of language acquisition. Their findings suggest that these auditory elements contribute not only to semantic processing but also to the acquisition of grammatical structures, encompassing both syntactic components and phonological awareness. In a

broader sense, the evidence provided by this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate and multifaceted relation between music and language. It underscores the notion that music is not merely a complementary or peripheral tool but rather plays a foundational role in shaping language development, particularly during the formative stages of early childhood. Such insights reinforce the idea that the cognitive and perceptual mechanisms underlying music and language are closely intertwined from the very onset of human development.

These results are further corroborated by earlier studies. Musacchia et al. (2007), for example, found that musicians display faster and more robust cortical and sub-cortical responses to both auditory and audiovisual stimuli. The extent of these responses was positively correlated with the duration of musical training, underscoring the role of long-term musical practice in refining the sensory encoding of speech signals. Taken together, these studies indicate that musical expertise contributes meaningfully to linguistic processing, supporting the view that musical knowledge underlies and enhances language learning capacities.

In light of these neurological insights, it becomes essential to reconsider the pedagogical role of music—especially songs—in language education. While songs are often celebrated for their cultural richness, their potential to support linguistic development deserves greater emphasis. Historically, this aspect has not always been adequately integrated into teaching practices. Cardona (2009) explicitly criticized the frequent neglect of musical criteria in the selection of songs for language instruction, arguing for a more informed and purposeful use of musical materials. Similarly, Tim Murphey (1990: 102ff.) explored the cognitive mechanisms activated by music in the language classroom, emphasizing its interdisciplinary resonance, particularly with fields such as anthropology.

Although contemporary learners now have access to an abundance of authentic audiovisual content online—ranging from spoken dialogue to written language in richly multimodal formats—this does not diminish the unique pedagogical value of songs. Some scholars, including Caon (2023), have suggested that in today's digital age, songs may no longer be privileged as primary sources of authentic language input. Instead, they are increasingly seen as tools for cultural immersion rather than as structural linguistic models. Nonetheless, such a distinction risks underestimating the cognitive benefits songs can offer in terms of language development.

It is important to recognize that motivational and affective factors are deeply intertwined with cognitive outcomes in language learning. Musical engagement not only creates positive emotional conditions, but—as in Lozanov's Suggestopedia—can activate multisensory learning pathways that facilitate memory retention and reduce affective filters. Lozanov's approach (Lozanov & Gateva, 1983), often cited in educational contexts, is grounded in the notion that suggestion—understood as encouragement rather than manipulation—helps establish an optimal learning environment by combining music, visual input, and relaxation techniques. The pleasurable and immersive experience of music listening, therefore, contributes both to learner motivation and to enhanced neural processing of language stimuli.

Therefore, if music can improve the speed and depth of language acquisition through its effects on auditory perception, memory, and cognitive processing, then the pedagogical role of songs extends well beyond cultural familiarization. The relation between linguistic and cultural competence is, in fact, reciprocal: deeper engagement with one can facilitate the development of the other. As Martari (2022) argues, language and culture are mutually reinforcing domains, and their integration in educational practice—particularly through audiovisual materials such as contemporary songs circulated by the media—can promote a more holistic and effective learning experience.

These theoretical and empirical considerations form the basis for the present contribution.

2. Teaching Italian through Trap Music: a New Linguistic and Educational Horizon

The focus on linguistic structures constitutes one of the defining features of Mollica's notion of *recreational linguistics* (Mollica 2010), and it is along this same line of inquiry that recent research on the discourse and textuality of (t)rap songs develops in an equally engaging manner. Within the broader conversation on the intersection of music and language pedagogy, one fundamental question arises: what role should educational institutions play in addressing the real linguistic practices of their learners (Martari, Albasini 2024)? For instance, how should schools respond to a song like *Tuta Gold* (2024) by Mahmood—an immensely popular track among Italian children and adolescents, with lyrics such as “Con i fiori, fiori nella tuta gold / Tu ne fumavi la metà / Mi passerà, ricorderò / I gilet neri pieni di zucchero” [English translation: “With flowers, flowers in your gold tracksuit / You used to smoke half of it / It will fade, I will remember / The black vests full of sugar”]. Should this linguistic and cultural content be excluded from the classroom on the basis of its themes, or should educators instead attempt to interpret and contextualize such texts? This question underscores a crucial point: when contemporary music becomes part of young learners' everyday linguistic environment, the educator is compelled to address it—not necessarily to endorse its content, but to frame and explain it within a pedagogical context. As will be elaborated in the conclusion, such cases call for the inclusion of a new evaluative criterion in the didactic use of music: the song's actual presence and relevance within the learners' linguistic and social reality.

This reflection centers specifically on the pedagogical potential of (t)rap music—particularly in its most recent trap and drill forms—which, despite its cultural prominence, remains largely unexplored in the field of Italian L2 instruction. Unlike more conventional or institutionally accepted musical genres, rap often challenges traditional educational frameworks, demanding a reassessment of how music is selected and integrated into language teaching. Recent scholarship continues to favor traditional genres in educational contexts (see Tolentino Quiñones 2021; Mauroni

2011), yet such approaches may overlook the potential of genres that more closely reflect contemporary youth culture.

The selection of rap as a medium for exploring lexical acquisition is therefore not incidental. It stems from the genre's authenticity and immediacy, both linguistically and culturally. Like the tradition of the 'cantautori' [singer-songwriters: singers who perform songs they wrote themselves, giving particular importance to the lyrics] (Coveri 2020), rap offers a distinctly subjective and often provocative lens through which to view society. Whether one considers the socially reflective tone of Ghali's *Cara Italia* (see Nieddu 2024, Ferrari 2018, Grasso 2020) or the autobiographical sharpness of Guccini's *L'Avvelenata*, what unites these works is a deliberate, ideologically charged perspective. These are not passive representations of reality, but rather purposeful acts of expression—texts motivated by the desire for social critique, transformation, and often, a redefinition of identity. This expressive intentionality is precisely what grants them educational value, as it invites critical engagement and fosters language awareness.

In the field of educational linguistics, the concept of authenticity is central but often misapplied. As Spinelli (2000) notes, authentic materials must originate independently of any educational agenda. Yet authenticity also depends on two additional factors: minimal intervention by the teacher and the material's temporal relevance to the learner. Excessive modification—be it simplification, annotation, or decontextualization—tends to erode a text's cultural and linguistic integrity (Borro & Scolaro, 2021). Similarly, materials that are temporally distant from the learner's present linguistic and cultural experience may lack the resonance necessary for effective engagement. In this regard, trap and drill music—genres that have shaped the Italian soundscape since the 2010s—represent some of the most current forms of youth expression, both sonically and textually.

Given the particular nature of such texts, their pedagogical use requires carefully defined criteria beyond mere linguistic richness. As Long (2020) reminds us, the integration of songs into language teaching must stem from a clear methodological framework, embedded within curricular goals, learner profiles, and broader social and cultural considerations. The act of selecting a song, especially within these genres, becomes a complex didactic choice involving several intersecting factors: its authenticity, acceptability, functionality, and relevance to learners' lives. The challenge lies not only in aligning musical content with linguistic objectives but also in navigating the socio-cultural dimensions of the material—especially when themes such as violence, substance use, and materialism are presented through explicit vocabulary and controversial imagery.

In working with adolescent learners, educators must strike a careful balance. They must acknowledge the emotional and symbolic depth embedded in these songs—often rich with narratives of alienation, resilience, and desire—while also exercising pedagogical discretion and sensitivity (Coveri 2020, 176). The songs' cultural value lies precisely in their complexity, which demands that teachers approach them with both critical distance and semiotic awareness. In this sense, the

educational engagement with a rap text need not involve full textual coverage. As Kobayashi Hillman (2020) points out, attempts to abridge or expand such material often distort its meaning or dilute its expressive power. A partial analysis, focused on selected excerpts, can still offer substantial linguistic and interpretive insights.

Moreover, educators should distinguish between the textual object—the song itself—and the artist’s persona. A teacher may choose to focus on a song’s linguistic and cultural features without endorsing the artist’s broader public image or oeuvre. In line with Eco’s notion of the *intentio operis* (“intention of the work”) (1990), a song may be treated as a self-contained semiotic entity, whose meaning is embedded in its textual construction rather than the biographical or ideological background of its author. Indeed, artists widely deemed controversial—such as Simba La Rue—may produce songs that are pedagogically viable, while more classroom-friendly figures like Ghali may also create content unsuited for educational use.

Ultimately, the incorporation of trap and drill into language pedagogy raises important questions about the relation between institutional education and vernacular language practices. If the goal of educational linguistics is not merely to teach a grammatical system but to mediate access to the linguistic and cultural realities of contemporary society, then educators must be willing to engage with the very texts that shape learners’ lived experiences. This requires not only methodological clarity but also a willingness to confront and interpret the language of the present.

3. How to Use Rap Music for Teaching the Italian Language: Methodological Framework

In reconsidering the pedagogical role of music in language education, it is essential to revisit a well-established set of methodological principles that inform the integration of songs into classroom practice (see Martari 2019; Caon 2023; Coveri 2020). While these principles are widely acknowledged for their educational potential, this contribution seeks to reassess them through the lens of rap, trap, and drill—genres.

A nuanced evaluation of these musical forms reveals both their distinct advantages and their inherent challenges. Among the pedagogically beneficial aspects, three dimensions deserve particular emphasis: affective engagement and identification, repetition, and linguistic variation.

First, motivation and identification stand out as major benefits consistent with Mollica’s (2023) argument in the concluding chapter of a miscellany volume he edited, entitled “Motivating Language Students with Recreational Linguistics”. Rap lyrics, grounded in themes and perspectives that resonate with young learners, can foster a vibrant and emotionally engaging classroom environment. The cultural proximity of many Italian rappers—often second-generation Italians or ‘new Italians’ (Vedovelli 2017; Martari 2024)—to L2 learners offers opportunities for socio-linguistic identification. This dynamic not only reduces the affective filter (Krashen & Terrell 1983), but also models language as a tool for social recognition, creative expression, and personal empowerment. Classroom activities such as sing-

ing or composing lyrics can thus serve as gateways to linguistic confidence and social integration, positioning language not merely as a functional skill, but as a means of agency and self-affirmation.

Second, repetition—a hallmark of rap—offers clear advantages in language acquisition. The genre's structural reliance on recurring phrases and musical patterns (especially in choruses) provides learners with ample input exposure. Anaphoric constructions, frequent reiterations, and the brevity of many rap tracks make them ideal for repeated listening and close textual engagement, enhancing both retention and comprehension.

Third, linguistic variation is a defining feature of rap that can enrich learners' exposure to real-world language use. Rap lyrics often blend diatopic features (regionalisms and dialect) with diaphasic shifts (ranging from formal and poetic to colloquial and slang registers). Furthermore, the increasing presence of multilingual elements—notably English, Spanish, Arabic, and French—reflects the transnational and plurilingual character of contemporary urban Italian, offering learners insight into dynamic language contact zones.

However, these benefits are counterbalanced by several pedagogical limitations, especially when compared to other spoken genres. The main ones are issues related to tempo and phonetic distortion.

The speed of delivery in rap can present a barrier to comprehension. While rap often mimics the prosody of natural speech more closely than melodic genres like pop, many artists deliberately manipulate rhythm and pace as stylistic strategies. This can result in lyrical speeds that exceed normal conversational tempo, making listening tasks particularly demanding for language learners.

Phonetic distortion also poses challenges. As with many musical genres, rap modifies pronunciation for metrical and rhyming purposes. While rap may avoid some of the exaggerated vowel elongations typical of melodic songs, it often introduces nonstandard phonological features, especially through slang and creative linguistic manipulation. Such variation, though authentic, can hinder accurate phonological acquisition without careful scaffolding.

Given these complexities (which will be revisited in section five), it is crucial to consider how rap can be effectively integrated into classroom practice. Traditional pedagogical sequences for song-based activities generally follow a tripartite model:

- a) Pre-listening activities, involving exploration of contextual information such as the artist's identity, geographic background, and the historical or social relevance of the song;
- b) Listening tasks, focused on comprehension at the lexical, phraseological, or semantic level; and
- c) Post-listening activities, including grammatical focus, textual reworking, and lyric analysis.

However, when working with rap, a reordering of this sequence may prove more effective. Specifically, prioritizing textual recognition and analysis before listening can better prepare learners to understand the audio. By engaging first with the

written lyrics—identifying key structures, vocabulary, and themes—students build a conceptual and linguistic framework that facilitates subsequent listening comprehension. This inversion of the conventional sequence leverages the dense, semiotic richness of rap while mitigating the difficulties posed by speed and pronunciation.

In sum, a thoughtful and context-sensitive approach to rap in the L2 classroom can transform a culturally resonant yet didactically complex genre into a powerful medium for linguistic and intercultural education. The key lies in aligning musical authenticity with methodological adaptability.

4. Rap by Second-Generation Italians

While a comprehensive overview of the Italian rap music scene is beyond the scope of this section, we offer here and in the next paragraph two focused perspectives. The first consists of some reflections on the nature and pedagogical potential of lyrics produced by a core group of artists who are particularly relevant within the Italian sociolinguistic landscape—namely, a new generation of rappers who are second-generation Italians, or so-called new Italians, with multilingual family backgrounds (Grasso 2020; Ferrari 2018). The following section will instead examine a small corpus of songs by representative artists from the three main generations of Italian rappers, in order to highlight certain lexical features of the texts from a language-education standpoint.

Rap in Italy—particularly as expressed by second-generation artists—is a form of cultural representation marked by notable creative vitality, both from an intralinguistic and interlinguistic perspective. Some of the most prominent figures in this context, who will be briefly discussed in this paragraph, include Baby Gang (of Moroccan heritage), Simba La Rue (Tunisian), Mahmood (Egyptian), Ghali (Tunisian), Chadia Rodriguez (Moroccan), Rancore (Egyptian), Tommi Kuti (Nigerian), Hell Raton (Ecuadorian), Slava (Ukrainian), Mudimbi (Congolese), and Maruego (Moroccan). In reality, the list of second-generation Italian rappers includes several hundred names.

Among these, we focus here on Vyacheslav Yermak, born in 1994 and a native Russian speaker, known in Italy under the stage name Slava. He is a representative figure of the rap music produced and performed by new Italians. In his work, elements of the Brescian dialect and Russian (sometimes entire verses) are seamlessly interwoven with standard Italian. His lyrics are often shaped by the cultural tension of living between linguistic and cultural worlds, and his style balances irony with dramatic storytelling. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, his 2017 song *Quartieri del sonno* gained widespread attention, especially in comparison with other works such as *Itagliano* (2022). A linguistic analysis of the opening verses of both songs—quoted below—can help delineate the stylistic and linguistic boundaries that define his body of work.

Quartieri del sonno

Это мой город	(tr. En: This is my city
Я уезжаю и вернусь уже не скоро	I'm leaving and I won't be back anytime soon
Извини матушка Родина мне так больно	Sorry Motherland, it hurts me so much
Но ты пойми меня, мы тут видели только	But you understand me, here we've only
горе	seen pain
Всего лишь горе	Only pain
Извини матушка Родина мне так больно	Sorry Motherland, it hurts me so much
Я уезжаю и вернусь уже не скоро	I'm leaving and I won't be back anytime soon
И вернусь уже не скоро	And I won't be back anytime soon)

Vengo da queste strade

Da questa metropoli infame
 A cui non gliene frega un cazzo se soffri di fame
 Lei gode nel vederti abbandonato come un cane
 Ride se piangi perché non c'hai soldi per il pane
 Quanto tempo è passato, quanto è cambiato
 Praticamente niente, è tutto così come è sempre stato
 Mattoni rossi al posto delle ruote di quell'auto
 La stessa gente, stesso quartiere malandato
 Palazzi che c'han visto diventare grandi
 Le loro mura che hanno visto troppi pianti
 Troppi sogni infranti, troppi pochi contanti
 Urla litigi e sfratti, no che non li ho mai dimenticati
 Qui ognuno aveva il proprio dramma
 Chi senza un padre oppure chi senza mamma
 Chi ha i genitori alcolizzati e schiavi della bamba
 Chi non li ha proprio e piange sulla loro salma
 Qualcuno indebitato deve tanti soldi agli strozzini
 Altri che non sanno con cosa sfamare i bambini
 Come mia madre che suonava dai nostri vicini
 Chiedendo qualcosa da mettere sotto i canini
 Dentro questi cortili ho fatto i primi passi
 Primi amori, prime amicizie, primi scazzi
 Le prime botte prese dai più grandi, per quanto possa odiarti
 Un po' mi manchi [...]

Itagliano

Signore e signori
 Date il benvenuto al vostro nuovo concittadino
 Sono italiano vero
 Come la pizza al kiwi
 Mischio la mayo il ketchup
 Assieme ai tortellini
 I miei amici tutti veri itagliani
 C'è chi è arrivato in barca altri con pulmini

Italiano sono italiano
 Proprio come la pizza fatta dal kebabbaro
 Italiano vero perché l'ho scelto
 Mangio come giù a Bari, e bevo come su a Trento
 Non sono nato in Italia, sono nato italiano
 Se ho finito la pasta vado dal pakistano
 Lui me la vende a poco, non mi fa mai scontrini
 Lo fa per le foreste, gli orsi, panda e delfini
 Esco con la ciabatta, macchia di sugo, canotta bianca
 Un po' di semi dentro la tasca, mi piglio il coffee quello dei China [...]

Quartieri del sonno presents a highly specific social snapshot of the claustrophobic experience of life in working-class, peripheral neighborhoods. The introductory verse—sung in Russian—functions as an antithetical interpretative key (leaving the neighborhood versus remaining in the neighborhood). However, this interpretative layer is accessible only to Russian-speaking listeners or those who make use of translation tools, and is thus not immediately comprehensible to an Italian-speaking audience.

Lyricaly, the song falls within the street subgenre of rap, narrating the often harsh dynamics of urban life in disadvantaged environments. Yet this narrative is marked by an additional layer: a portrayal of poverty shaped in part by wartime tension (“And how many tears has my land shed (So many!)/First for hunger, now because of war/Mothers cry while their sons go to the frontier/They have no choice: either go to the barracks or go to jail/We were lucky enough to escape” (*our translation*)).

The register is strongly characterized by features of orality: pronominal redundancy and dysphemisms (“a cui non gliene frega un cazzo”), the presentative use of *ci* (“non c’hai i soldi”), and slang vocabulary (“bamba,” “scazzi”), all of which sharply contrast with the lyrical tone of the opening verse. Syntactically, the text provides rich material for analysis, with the use of complex hypotactic constructions, including conditional, exclamatory, relative, object, concessive, and causal clauses.

By contrast, *Itagliano* presents a humorous reinterpretation—through the lens of the second-generation experience—of the clichés of Italian identity made famous by Toto Cutugno in his 1983 hit *L’italiano*. The parodic dimension is already evident in the intentionally incorrect spelling of the title, although a sincere expressive need is maintained throughout, never entirely descending into farce (“I wasn’t born in Italy, I was born Italian”). The vocabulary is simple but highly mimetic of spontaneous spoken language (e.g., “la mayo,” “il coffee,” “la ciabatta”—the latter used in the singular in place of the plural), as are the references to the nationalities of immigrant communities (“il kebabbaro,” “i China”). Syntactic features are less numerous here but include the use of the imperative and causal constructions.

From an educational perspective, it’s clear that these two songs offer authentic materials well suited for exploring the cultural and linguistic dimensions of new Italians. They lend themselves to critical educational readings, especially in light of

the advantages discussed earlier—namely, increased learner motivation and the potential for identification on the part of certain Italian L2 learners, both in terms of themes and language. The latter is living, spoken, and useful for everyday communication—far removed from the often artificially constructed language of traditional Italian song (cf. Coveri 2011).

The music videos for both songs also serve as valuable didactic tools, as is often the case when using music in language teaching. In particular, the video for *Itagliano* includes a number of illustrative images that correspond directly to the lyrics, facilitating multimodal decoding. Similarly, the evocative visual rendering of *Quartieri del sonno* provides an essential interpretive framework for understanding the song's meaning.

It is also worth noting that in other songs by the same artist, multilingual expression is marked by code mixing, as in *Soviet Squat* (2017), for example.

Abbiamo il rispetto di tutta l'Europa orientale
 Perché siamo cresciuti tutti sulle stesse strade (все)
 (tr. En.: everyone)
 Questi quartieri sono sabbie mobili
 Più ci stai dentro meno possibilità avrai di scappare (Беги братан) (tr. En.: run, brother)

Let us now read a few excerpts from songs by other artists and offer some observations regarding certain significant linguistic forms.

Baby Gang (*Karma* 2024)

Sono orgoglioso, non tornavo a casa finché, wAllah, non le ho date
 Non mi apriva la porta di casa mia madre
 Dormivo lì sopra il tetto di un ALER, guardavo la calle [...]
 Ma quello che faccio che mi preoccupa un poquito
 Voglio andare in paradiso
 Non mi serve la Visa né il viso da pentito
 'Sta vita anche da ricco con i soldi farà schifo
 Da quando sono entrato fino a quando sono uscito
 Non mi ha scritto un amico, non mi ha scritto mai un'amica
 Non ho mai avuto una tipa, sono un tipo strano, chiedilo, my nigga

Maruego (*Sulla stessa barca* 2015):

Ahmed figlio del blad
 Nike Air, jeans e casquette
 Gira per i quartier
 Sogna Benz, vuole flus
 Flûte pieni e un flusso di kheb
 Vuole giusto provare
 Il gusto del cash
 E non ha niente in tasca
 Uno zanza a zonzo a Casablanca [...]

Mudimbi (*Il mago* 2017):

Mi godo la vita
Come un bimbo con una matita
Come Rambo con un mitra
Come Cita una Ciquita
Vincerò questa partita
Ci scommetto la colita [...]

Rancore (*Arakno* 2100 2022):

Dalla fine di quel diciottesimo secolo all'alba del mille ottocento
Nuova classe operaia in un mondo di industrie viveva in un certo fermento
Produzione di calzamaglia, uomini schiavi di macchine tessili
Primo campo di concentramento, il futuro accettava pronostici pessimi [...]

Chadia Rodriguez (*Bella così* 2020):

Senza fare la ladra né la puttana
Ho fatto una corazza, un'armatura
Che mi protegge dalla gente, dalla paura
Io non avevo il seno grosso né la statura
Il corridoio della scuola era una tortura
Mi hanno chiamato 'povera' e fischiando
In branco [...]

Hell Raton (*Peper street* 2014):

Ora ammiro il paesaggio insieme a Marla
Godo mentre tutto salta in aria
Non salvate il soldato Ryan
Stronzi, salvate la classe operaia
Soy la voz del pueblo, tieniti lo scettro
Allo scoccar del tempo di me vedrai solo lo spettro [...]

Tommi Kuti (*#Afroitaliano* 2018):

Sono Afroitaliano, Afroitaliano
Questi che ne sanno di file in questura
Delle mille facce della mia cultura
È la melanina ciò che li cattura
Io non ho dei dubbi sulla mia natura
Quando io rappo è in italiano
E anche se parto resto un italiano
La prima volta che ho detto 'ti amo', ti giuro, l'ho fatto in italiano [...]

Simba La Rue (*Dettaglio* 2022)

Metà della mia faccia è contenta
L'altra metà, poto, sembra spenta
Per diciott'anni ho visto solo merda
La faccia di mia madre alla sentenza
Non ci credevo, lei non ci credeva, colloqui in galera

L'affetto mancava, pensavo la sera, pensavo di sera
 Pensieri brutti, l'umore scendeva, l'umore scendeva
 Non c'è un cazzo di bello, o fai gli abusi, o ti abusano in galera
 (Amm'a fa 'e tarantelle?)

Ghali (*Wallah* 2022):

A7lef?

Wallah.

Je te le jure

Sur la tête de ma mère

Sur mon passeport rouge

Sur la tour eiffel

Su quest ultimo grammo di kush

Sono solo un ka7louch

Che balla sulla misère

My slime my slatt l' a7nech

Mahmood (*Soldi* 2019):

Waladi waladi habibi ta'aleena

Mi dicevi giocando giocando con aria fiera

Waladi waladi habibi sembrava vera

La voglia la voglia di tornare come prima

Io da te non ho voluto soldi

Reading the contents of these verses, the first notable observation is the varying degree of explicitness with which these authors express the importance of cultural and linguistic contact. For some of them, cultural contact constitutes the central theme, and this focus is occasionally conveyed through a markedly multilingual textual register. For others, however, the theme of contact is less prominent or entirely absent, as is the plurilingual component. Based on the excerpts cited, we may, somewhat schematically, identify the following typologies:

- Themes of integration are addressed in a general and explicit manner (Tommi Kuti) or in a more specific yet explicit way (Mudimbi and Maruego), functioning as the overarching topic of the entire song.
- Themes of integration are treated merely as a backdrop to personal or introspective matters (Mahmood, Ghali, Simba La Rue, Baby Gang), at times marked by a high degree of plurilingualism (particularly in Ghali).
- Themes of integration are approached implicitly, through multilingual textual features (Hell Raton) and/or the celebration of diverse cultural identities (Slava).
- There is no explicit reference—neither thematically nor linguistically—to cultural contact (Rancore and Chadia Rodriguez).

From a linguistic standpoint, all of these artists come from multicultural families and multilingual environments, although, as in the case of the widely popular Mahmood—an Italophone native monolingual—this does not necessarily imply

bilingual proficiency. In fact, the use of Arabic in one of Mahmood's most well-known songs constitutes clear evidence of the lack of a direct correlation between multilingualism in linguistic productions (i.e., in lyrics) and the authors' actual linguistic competence. In other words, it is possible for highly bilingual authors to choose to write exclusively in Italian, while non-bilingual authors may incorporate words or phrases from other languages into their lyrics (as occurs, for instance, in *Soldi*). Only in rare cases does the multicultural dimension emerge through interlinguistic markers in Italian; when it does, it mainly consists of realia—for instance, phrases quoted from family members—that serve to construct a sociocultural context of immigration. This can often take the form of benevolent mockery regarding weak integration, thereby constituting an expressive mode that is cited rather than authentically owned by the author (as exemplified in Baby Gang's *No parla tanto* [2021] (English translation: “No speak much”): “Mamma mi diceva: ‘No parla tanto’ / Mio padre mi diceva: ‘No parla tanto’ / Per quello che mio fra’ no parla tanto / Ti giuro parli troppo, no parla tanto”).

Most strikingly, however, the range of phenomena outlined above should be appreciated for the vast stylistic, thematic, and varietal diversity found in the texts, often positioned along sharply contrasting poles: from elevated to colloquial lexicons, from hypotactic to nearly holophrastic constructions, and from monolingual (proudly and ostentatiously so) to truly plurilingual pastiches (equally proud and ostentatious). Consequently, educators should recognize in this corpus an extraordinarily rich resource for language teaching, offering a multitude of linguistic phenomena, communicative contexts, and registers.

Despite such thematic and linguistic diversity, some shared elements may be identified. One common thematic denominator is the portrayal of music and songwriting as avenues for opportunity, redemption, and even as models of equity and social justice—as illustrated by the ius music proposed in the eponymous song by rapper Amir Issaa (2014). This also extends to the aspiration (if not attainment) of gender equality, a central motif in the work of Chadia Rodriguez and a few other female rap artists (Cristalli 2020).

The principal linguistic denominator is undoubtedly the use of vocabulary and syntax characterized by numerous elements, yet fundamentally shaped by spoken language and everyday youth communication (with a few exceptions where the language is notably refined, such as in the lyrics of Rancore, a representative example of which was cited above).

5. *A Focus on Italian Rap Lyrics Vocabulary*

We now turn to a particularly relevant analytical level for language teaching through song: the vocabulary of rap lyrics. To do so, we briefly report on a study conducted jointly by CRDI – Centre for Research in Italian Language Teaching at the University of Bologna and the University for Foreigners of Perugia.

The study entailed the creation of a corpus of rap song lyrics, compiled in 2023, and analyzed from lexical and pragmatic perspectives. The corpus was subsequently employed in certain pedagogical settings with university students at B2–C1 proficiency levels. Regarding this second, pedagogically focused phase, the data are still limited, and for further observations, reference is made to the contribution by Samu (2024).

The corpus, still relatively small in scale, comprises the lyrics of three rappers representing three pivotal generations (thus not limited to second-generation authors): Marracash, Salmo, and Ghali. The selection included the most recent album of original songs by each artist released at the time of compilation, yielding a total of approximately 15,000 words. This initial collection constitutes a preliminary phase, for which future expansion is envisioned. The corpus was uploaded to Sketch Engine (Rap 2023 Marrasalmoghali) and later manually annotated with regard to lexical composition and salient pragma-linguistic features.

This contribution focuses solely on the lexical analysis. Two research questions guided the investigation:

Lexical Composition: From the perspective of an Italian language teacher, how many and which words in these texts are pedagogically significant?

Lexical Representativeness: In what ways do these words characterize the texts, and why do they make them didactically ‘effective’?

Given the limited size of the corpus, the analysis was primarily qualitative and conducted from an educational perspective. It should also be noted that vocabulary analysis within such a complex textual form as song lyrics is inherently interrelated with other linguistic levels—chief among them, textuality, followed by morphology, and also phonetic and graphic features. These last two dimensions are often crucial for elucidating wordplay or—as in Ghali’s case—for adding connotative depth. However, for the purposes of this discussion, we shall limit ourselves to a concise lexical analysis in the strict sense.

In the educational context, using Sketch Engine to explore the corpus enables access to core tools typical of corpus-based language pedagogy: frequency lists (to determine which words are more or less common and in what types of texts), collocations (to identify frequent lexical patterns), and semantic profiles (to discover word meanings and nuances). Nevertheless, from an educational-linguistic standpoint, the primary and most distinctive characteristic of rap/trap lyrics vocabulary is, unsurprisingly, lexical density.

Sample comparisons between corpus songs and pop song lyrics clearly reveal a higher lexical density in rap texts. For example, comparing the song *Dubbi* by Marracash (2021) and *L’infinito più o meno* (a very popular Italian pop song by Renga and Nek, 2023) —using the automated analysis tool READ-IT (see Dell’Orletta et al. 2011), —we obtain two lexical profiles with respective lexical densities of 0.607 and 0.507.

As previously mentioned, the corpus was manually annotated with respect to several lexical categories considered significant for Italian rap lyrics, namely:

- foreignisms (including code-mixing)
- proper names from news, politics, entertainment, and culture
- intertextual quotations
- references to cinema, music, opera, television, literature, comics, videogames, and advertising
- commercial and technological technical terms
- slang and youth language
- cultisms/high-register lexicon/Latinisms
- dysphemisms
- phraseology
- regionalisms and dialectisms
- neologisms

In connection with our second research question (the representativeness of this lexicon within the context of language education), the relevance of these categories lies not only in their status as stylistic hallmarks almost ubiquitously present in rap discourse, but also in their potential functions for language teaching. These functions can be briefly outlined as follows.

Foreignisms contribute to the construction of a plurilingual and multicultural universe, potentially enabling—albeit partially—the comprehension of lyrics by non-native speakers of Italian.

Slang, colloquialisms, and phraseological expressions delineate a specific communicative context, engaging particular interlocutors and showcasing a diaphasic variety closer to younger listeners.

Technical terms and contemporary references establish the authenticity and topicality of the text, orienting the lexicon toward applicability in everyday communication.

These elements anchor the language of rap within a dual tension: primarily identity-based and secondarily expressive. The words always convey something about the performer/speaker, just as they convey something about the intended audience. This is a defining trait of rap—an often radical authenticity in the creation of a dialogic universe and an ideal audience. In textual semiotics, this mechanism may be interpreted as an *embrayage* (engagement), and we consider this the key to the linguistic efficacy of the genre. From a pedagogical perspective, such a mechanism supports access to a lexical repertoire that is potentially motivating for a particular category of learners.

Turning now to the results of our annotation, the most represented category is that of foreignisms, with 277 instances, of which 124 are found in Ghali's album alone. Rap in Italy is undeniably a vehicle for plurilingual cultural representation, particularly among second-generation immigrants (of which, as previously noted, Ghali is a paradigmatic figure). Nevertheless, the data from Salmo and Marracash also align with this plurilingual orientation. Following are slang and youth language

(60), commercial and technological technical terms (51), proper names from current events (50), citations from cinema, music, etc. (44), and cultisms (42).

Dysphemisms—the dreaded (pedagogically speaking) swear words—amount to 29 occurrences in total. Possibly due to the selected artists, regional and dialectal features appear only 4 times, while neologisms are limited to just two instances.

Conversely, a fundamental characteristic of the lexicon in question is one that borders on textual dynamics: citations are extremely frequent (106 in total—summing 50 proper names, 44 cultural citations, and 12 intertextual references). There is a high number of proper names—both real and fictional—from news and entertainment (e.g., M456, Sorrentino, Colin Farrell, Cucchi, Biden, Helena Bonham Carter). Intertextuality also manifests through idioms (“fifteen minutes of fame”) and wordplay, often drawn from film, television, and serial formats (e.g., Scarface, Rain Man, Dogman, Squid Game, LoL, “so Lillo,” —a quote from a catchphrase by a Roman comedian (whose name is Lillo), “se preghi per la pioggia metti in conto il fango” (tr. En.; “if you pray for rain, prepare for the mud”), as well as from opera (“Nessun dorma,” “Ridi, pagliaccio”) and other Italian singers and songs (“Non sono Ultimo” (a well-known Italian singer) “sti bambini fanno: ooh,” “il circo nella stanza” (two lines paraphrased from two well-known Italian songs: *I bambini fanno Oh*, Povia 2005 and *Il cielo in una stanza*, Gino Paoli, 1960).

These data may offer a preliminary—albeit entirely provisional—response to our first research question. Regarding the second question, which is even more central to this study, we now attempt to identify some positive and negative aspects of employing Italian rap lyrics in lexical teaching, not in order to propose a prescriptive framework but rather to outline the inherently complex and contradictory nature of this pedagogical approach.

Among the didactically advantageous aspects of the lexicon described, we highlight first and foremost its density: rap constructs highly verbal texts, thus offering learners the opportunity to encounter a wide range of vocabulary. These words typically do not (except in rare cases) belong to a lyrical or abstract semantic field; instead, they are anchored in a highly realistic and concrete domain—especially when resulting from a mimetic representation of youth spoken language, continuously referencing cultural (technological, political, and sociological) dimensions of contemporary life.

Conversely, the disadvantages of using rap lyrics in pedagogical contexts are, in a sense, the flip side of the advantages. High verbal density often corresponds—especially for certain artists—with a delivery speed that is extremely fast and not easily comprehensible, even for native Italian native speakers. Moreover, the realistic nature of the language frequently serves to describe actions and social contexts (particularly those tied to hypersexualized narratives, substance use, and occasionally the glorification of criminal behavior), which—though they undoubtedly warrant critical mediation and contextualization—can pose significant challenges in educational settings. Given such contexts, the lexical choices tend to be overly skewed toward diastatic and diaphasic varieties of marginal and youth slang, and the other-

wise valuable references to current events may at times be too fleeting to be reliably incorporated into a structured teaching process.

In summary, the lexicon examined is closely tied—often helpfully so—to the realities of youth and popular culture, yet at times too intensively and too challenging for effective pedagogical mediation. It is a lexicon that is insistently contemporary, usable, and rooted in everyday language, but for that very reason, it becomes old-fashioned quickly.

6. *Language Education Rap and Playful Language Teaching*

As previously noted, the use of rap lyrics in educational contexts presents a range of challenges—linguistically, thematically, and particularly with regard to lexical content. This complexity makes their integration into language instruction neither self-evident nor universally appropriate. It is equally important to stress that engaging with the themes or vocabulary of subgenres such as trap or drill is by no means a pedagogical obligation for educators.

Nevertheless, two key considerations emerge from the limited corpus examined in this discussion, both of which are worth highlighting in conclusion.

The first concerns the didactic potential of rap as a form of authentic, predominantly verbal textual material, whose pedagogical value is amplified by the motivational force of musical rhythm. The term “authentic” should be understood here not only in the technical sense used in language pedagogy—that is, referring to materials not specifically created for instructional purposes—but also in a broader sociolinguistic sense: as texts that approximate the spoken varieties of contemporary language, particularly as shaped by youth culture and popular contexts. In this light, language educators may, in accordance with the specific variables of their teaching environments (including students’ age, background, linguistic competence, and cultural orientation), as well as their own pedagogical orientations, select texts that best suit their educational objectives. This process enables the construction of a meaningful bridge between the language encountered and analyzed in the classroom and the language used in everyday lived experience. On a pragmatic level, such considerations alone might suffice to justify the educational use of rap lyrics.

Yet a second, more foundational dimension must also be addressed—one that touches on the broader ethical and interpretive responsibilities of language education. If education is to serve as a critical lens through which learners interpret and engage with society, then it becomes imperative to consider whether schools should not only be permitted, but indeed called upon, to provide learners with interpretive tools for engaging with widely consumed cultural products. In the specific case of rap music, one must ask whether even its most controversial or problematic forms—precisely because they are part of learners’ linguistic environments—deserve a place within a courageous and socially conscious pedagogical framework. That is, a framework wherein every word, including those drawn from marginal-

ized, stigmatized, or violent contexts, is treated as a bearer of meaning—something to be understood critically, even if ultimately rejected.

Such an approach recognizes that learners routinely encounter a wide spectrum of language in their daily lives—language they speak, admire, criticize, or simply absorb. If the objective of language education is to equip learners with the capacity to understand the world through language, then it must not delegate the interpretation of complex or controversial discourses solely to family structures or peer networks. Rather, it should actively confront difficult topics, dismantle harmful mythologies (e.g., those surrounding materialism or criminality), and challenge taboos. In doing so, language education fulfills its essential function as a space in which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and rendered accessible through language (Martari, Albasini 2024).

Within this dynamic, it is necessary to ask, in conclusion, what role the ludic dimension plays—namely, to what extent a pedagogy centered on the learner's full engagement through *play* can also serve the broad and crucial function of cultural mediation we have just described. It may indeed be the case that the most profound form of participation is that which brings into play the learners' deepest identities, expressed through a repertoire of words, expressions, and linguistic varieties, and that the very workshop of creativity offered by playful pedagogy enables learners to articulate, employ, and critically examine them. In this sense, the didactic universe of *play* thus becomes the privileged space in which to engage critically with the many expressive nuances of language, including those conveyed through rap music. In the end all of this is, in essence, language education.

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