Defamiliarizing to Familiarize:
Using Country and Hip Hop to Explore Language in Developmental English

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Pedagogical Objectives: What I hope to do

- Defamiliarize: Put language in historical and cultural perspective through music
- Familiarize: Examine techniques in music to show they are the same as in literature and most other forms of writing (formal and informal)
The Role of Slang in Student Discourse

A student’s view of Informal English, or slang:

“Informal language is often used in rural areas. It was created by rappers and gangsters as a way of communicating. It is used today by mostly everyone. They use it to talk to friends and even in text messaging. Young African Americans have made this form of language very popular. So popular they came up with another name for it. It is now called ‘slang.’”

“Slang is here to stay.”
Pedagogical Objectives: What I hope to show students

- There is no “slang” vs. Standard English dichotomy.
- Slang isn’t new and it isn’t being threatened.
- They’re not the “slang experts” they perceive themselves to be.
- They don’t have to trade one type of language for another.
Defamiliarizing Slang: Classic Country

- Seeing it before hearing it
  - Students recognize familiar themes
  - Students connect to message/speaker
  - But see the difficulty of getting through the language to the message (Language = barrier between writer and unfamiliar audience)
Defamiliarizing Slang: Classic Country

“What does it mean when you carry on in your sleep like that? Somebody said it means you’ve got something on your mind. I said, ‘I know that.’ I ain’t got much education, but I got some sense.”
On writing a book: “We’re gonna have us a hardback book. Doggone right, it’s gonna be a good book. Anything I go at, I go at it hard, because I only do what I want. It’s gonna be the best book about country music, because I don’t take no seconds.”

“The first thing I insisted was that it sound like me. When all those city folks try to fix up my talking, all they do is mess me up. Like the way I pronounce the word ‘holler.’ That’s our word for the low space between two mountains. City people pronounce it ‘hollow’ but that ain’t the way I pronounce it. This is my book. Instead of using Webster’s Dictionary, we’re using Webb’s Dictionary—Webb was my maiden name.”
Defamiliarizing Slang: Classic Country

“\textbf{I} actually married a man whose real name I didn’t even know until ten minutes after we was man and wife.”

“I said they could stay awhile for free. Until they got on their feet.”

“\textbf{That’s another reason me and Doo fought.”}

“I got off with just a bruise or two, but I had to admit she bested me until I got that knife in my hand.”
Defamiliarizing Slang: Classic Country

“When you look back over your life and see how much you’ve had to face, and how you’ve dealt with it, it’s interesting to try and pinpoint the first time you faced something that might tear you apart. The first time you had to reach inside yourself and pull out strength you didn’t know you had, strength that hadn’t even been needed up until then. Strength that was ‘a hidin’ somewhere waiting for the time it was needed.”
Defamiliarizing Slang: Classic Country

Student Responses:
Mary:

- Had to read the story several times to understand the language
- Example: “I had to admit she bested me until I got the knife in my hand.”
- “It’s hard to read someone’s writing when you can’t understand what they are talking about. That’s why we should use formal writing.”
Defamiliarizing Slang: Classic Country

Deshaun:

- “By her not completing school, she just used words that she picked up from other people.”
- Her use of slang reflects her lack of education.
Toya:

“Loretta Lynn does not sound educated because she is using slang and words she had made up herself.”
Lynn does not sound educated.

“She has her moments when she can’t spell nor read and write.”

Hollow / “holler”

“There were some corrections that needed to be made.”
Katherine:

- Focuses on Lynn’s “informal writing”
- “Lynn’s story would have been better if she wrote in formal writing because it would have gave me a better understanding.”
Defamiliarizing Slang: Classic Country

- Students realize that when they write in slang, LANGUAGE creates a barrier.
- Get past the barrier, and they will discover familiar themes.
You’ve come to tell me somethin’
You say I ought to know,
That he don’t love me anymore,
And I’ll have to let him go.
You say you’re gonna take him.
Oh, but I don’t think you can,
Cause you ain’t woman enough to take my man.

Women like you, they’re a dime a dozen,
You can buy ‘em anywhere.
For you to get to him, I’d have to move over, and I’m gonna stand right here.
It’ll be over my dead body, so get out while you can.
Cause you ain’t woman enough to take my man.
Krystal:

- Listened to “You Ain’t Woman Enough (To Take My Man)”
- At first, thought the song sounded “horrible”
- Then, listened to the words and said, “I can really relate to it.”
- “No other woman can ever take her man from her . . . She knows where she stands and she will always be number one.”
Defamiliarizing Slang: Classic Country

- Students discover the role of *audience* in choosing how to speak or write.
- They realize there is so much slang in the world that it is no one person’s responsibility to learn ALL of it.
- Instead, if we communicate with unfamiliar audiences in formal written English, they are more likely to get our message.
Familiarizing: Hip Hop

- Familiar music/artist
  - Students are excited
  - They’re the “experts”
  - Students realize if they can analyze Eminem’s “Lose Yourself,” they can also analyze literary works (including Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” which we did later in the semester)
Familiarizing: Hip Hop

“New world order
A normal life is boring
But superstardom’s close to postmortem
It only grows harder
Only grows hotter”
“A normal life is boring, but superstardom’s close to postmortem.”

- Unfamiliar terms
  - Difficult language doesn’t make a text “stupid”
- Real-life application/examples
  - Good literature’s got it
- Literary terms/concepts
  - Metaphor, oxymoron, etc.
- Using lines to support themes
Familiarizing: Hip Hop

“A normal life is boring, but superstardom’s close to postmortem.”

- Writing improvement
  - Sentence structure (compound sentence)
  - Translation into formal English
- Paraphrasing a text
Familiarizing: Hip Hop

- Shared ignorance = shared discovery
  - I don’t know the music; they don’t know the grammar
  - Discovery theory: We all know we have a lot to learn and come in **expecting** to give and receive knowledge—generates excitement, questions, discussion, and growth
  - “Pockets” of discovery from person to person and group to group
Outcomes: Student Responses

“An informal way of talking would be, ‘I on know where I’m going this weekend.’ A formal way of talking would be, ‘I’m going to the movies.’ There are so many different ways to speak English. Throughout your life you will be introduced to new things and new ways of speaking English. It is ok to use different types of English but it is also important to use them at the right time due to the situation.”

“It is important to learn to separate your street talk with your formal language.”


