
Spelling, accent and identity in computer-mediated communication

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An analysis of home page spellings in relation to the accents they evoke

Non-standard spelling and CMC

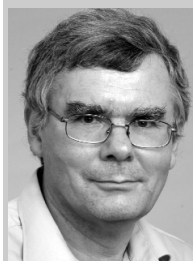
One of the most obvious developments connected with modern electronic communication is the opening up of an area of publicly visible language from what Sebba (2003a) calls the partially regulated zone of spelling. This zone appears in such synchronous media as instant messaging, chatrooms and ICQ ('I seek you') and asynchronous ones including SMS text messages, blogs, email and homepages. Unlike the most highly regulated zones of publishing, journalism, business and school, these partially regulated zones allow non-standard spelling although they do not require it. In this zone, both standard and non-standard spellings are available as resources for genre differentiation (Androtsopoulos, 2006) and individual identity construction. Some electronic genres, like reviews on hip-hop chat pages more or less demand standard spellings with their associations of seriousness, authority and maturity, while others, like chat interaction and comments on homepages, allow the strategic use of non-standard spellings, many of which connote humour, rebellion and adolescence.

Sebba (2003a) uses the term 'rebellion spelling' for orthography that deliberately rejects the norm. A spelling like *skool* is actually a more transparent spelling than *school*, and so it represents a justified protest against the conventions laid down by those in power like schools. Nevertheless, of course, it obeys the basic rules of sound-letter association of English and in that sense is a regularisation. One could call this kind of spelling 'post-

standardised' because it depends for its effect on both reader and writer knowing the norm and knowing what rejecting it means. Carrington (2005) quotes a subject who writes 'I hate skool (i know how to spell that)'.

Non-standard spelling and accent

There is a long tradition of non-standard spelling for comic purposes. Box 1 shows extracts from the nineteenth-century American comic writer Artemus Ward (published 1865) using many of the spellings and devices that have now become popular in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Some of the spellings seem unrelated to Ward's persona as an uneducated American. Words like *larst*, *orfully* and *larfable* have been regularised with *r* spellings, apparently representing the writing of an ignorant speaker of a non-rhotic variety like present-day English English. It is possible that Ward's persona is a non-rhotic New Englander but it is also possible that this is simply



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Artemus Ward, His Book, 1865

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- On larst Toosday nite I peared b4 a C of upturned faces in the Red Skool House...
- Sit down my fren, sed the man in black close...
- But this time I thot I'd go and see Ed...
- Mrs Iago cums in just as Otheller has finished the fowl deed and givs him fits right & left, showin him that he has bin orfully gulled by her miserable cuss of a husband...
- The men go becawz its poplar...
- She bust in 2 tears...
- My kangaroo is the most larfable little cuss...

some kind of convention copied from British humorous writing. But most of Ward's spellings make good sense. He regularises spellings, as in *nite*, *skool*, *cum*, *sed* and *thot*. He represents colloquial spoken forms like *fren*, *showin*, and uses letter and number names in *b4*, *a C*, in 2. We shall see that this mixture of motivated and apparently borrowed spellings is also a feature of CMC.

The spellings in modern CMC have been classified by Thurlow (2004) and Sa'adi and Hamdan (2005), and their classifications are summarised and adopted in the classes in Box 2.

The main innovation in this classification is in the last two categories. Here I take all respellings which appear to represent all the phonemes of the target word, and put those which represent a marked (usually non-standard or non-prestige, etc.) pronunciation in Category 6 and those which represent a pronunciation similar to a 'newsreading' version into Category 7. The effect of this is that Category 6 contains spellings indicating pronunciations that are sociolinguistic variables, while 7 contains regularisations that may vary across varieties but are not marker variables (Labov, 1972). Some forms (like *hav* for *HAVE*) are inherently ambiguous between categories (here 2 and 7), and others have features of two categories. An example of the second case is *cuz*, which has the 'spoken' characteristic (i.e. Category 6) of having dropped the initial unstressed syllable and the 'respelling' one (i.e. Category 7) of representing a sociolinguistically unmarked pronunciation (/kʌz/) more directly than the standard orthography. *Bekuz*

Types of non-standard spelling

2

1. Number/letter rebus (*2B or not 2B, c u l8r m8*).
2. Clipping (*HAVE = hav*, *FRIDAY = fri*)
3. Abbreviation (*GOOD = gd*, *FROM = frm*)
4. Initialisms (*btw, lol*)
5. Expressive respelling: orally (*looong*), or merely visually (*luvvvvv*) iconic, or just odd like *yhuu* 'you':
6. Representation of spoken forms (*BEING = bein*, *GOING TO = gonna*, *THE = da*, *THINK = fink*).
7. Regularisation of irregular spelling (*NIGHT = nite, nyt*, *BECAUSE = coz,,cuz*)

would be a 'pure' Category 7 representation, *cause* a 'pure' Category 6 one.

As noted, all informal spelling (apart from the few simple mistakes) represents a kind of rebellion against school's imposition of the standard (Sebba, 2003). Some representations of spoken forms in Category 6 (*BEING = bein*, *GOING TO = gonna*) also refer to very widespread sociolinguistic variables and only give 'stylistic' information about the persona being adopted. That is, they say that this person has adopted the low, covert-prestige version of the variable, and is hence tough, cool, warm, etc. (Labov, 1972) but do not say much about the local or ethnic identity referred to. Others (*THE = da*, *THINK = fink*) refer to variables which are different in different varieties and consequently show the accentual/dialectal persona which the writer chooses to present at this point.

Some regularisations of irregular spelling (Category 7) give no information beyond 'rebellion spelling' because they represent words with only one phonemic makeup in the accents examined (*NIGHT = nite' nyt*). Others (*BECAUSE = coz, cuz*) represent pronunciations which vary across varieties without being sociolinguistic variables within the variety. Since these are not used to give stylistic information and the writers may not be very conscious of the alternatives to what they write, the spelling can show the actual variant used by the speaker. In all non-standard spelling we can speak of self-presentation, and in this last type of regularisation we can add self-revelation. The writer not only shows us a persona but also reveals some assumptions about

pronunciation which give information about their actual speech.

CMC spelling and role-play

The partially regulated nature of CMC spelling thus affords the possibility of representing one's identity through 'accent'. This might be related to one's real accent and local sociolinguistic variables, or it might be the adoption of a ready-made persona, often based on African-American attributes via hip-hop lyrics (Buchholz, 1999). Old-skool, so spelled, is actually a style of hip-hop music. In Britain, it might be based on the variety used by Ali G (Sebba, 2003b), one of the personae of Sacha Baron-Cohen (who recently appeared in the film *Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* in the persona of Borat). He interviews well-known figures in the mock-naïve and provocative manner illustrated in Box 3, using a style with a mixture of 'black' (London Creole or African-American) features, and modern Southern English 'Estuary' (Rosewarne, 1994) ones.

This investigation

To examine the interrelation between borrowed features, those that are genuinely marker variables in the local context, and those that are characteristic of a variety but not sociolinguistic variables in it, I decided to examine comparable CMC texts from three countries. The aim was to assess the degree of variation on the national level between their registers. Texts from the US, England (not the UK), and Ireland were chosen for comparison.

The text type examined is the homepage (Facebook is the best-known provider), which seems to be a medium that includes a number of multimedia features (background music, background graphics, icons for different participants), and several textual genres. The form provided by the Bebo company, which is used by many very young people and was the one I examined, includes three genres included in the analysis. The first is personal details: age, gender, hometown, some comments on 'what I like' 'what I hate', etc. (often in non-standard spelling), and often quite extensive quotations in the form of quizzes, song lyrics, poetry or wise words (often in standard spelling). This is written/selected by the homepage owner and I assumed it to represent an individual or at

Ali G interviews the pop star Madonna

3

ALI: Selecta! I is ere wiv none uver dan da Queenie Mum of pop muzic, Madonna. Check it!

So Madge, is you really preppers or as you just got a spare tyre up your jumper?

MADONNA: No, I am five months pregnant, Ali.

ALI: Wicked. So you ain't bin frough da menaplaws yet den?

M: No, I thought I'd better have another baby before my time ran out, so to speak.

ALI: Aiiih, fer real. An who is da dad? Does you even know who da dad is?

M: Of course I know who the father is. It's my boyfriend, Guy.

ALI: An is e related to dat geezer who make all da fireworks for bonfire night?

http://www.boreme.com/boreme/funny-2002/ali_madonna-p1.php

least a persona/avatar representative of the location claimed under 'hometown'. The second genre comprises comments, short observations, greetings, invitations, and post-card like narratives from a variety of writers, some in standard orthography, some in varying degrees of non-standard. The third genre considered was the page owner's blog, usually fairly short.

Bebo homepages show asynchronous CMC with no particular time constraints. They allow attached pictures, movies, personal logos and music attached to comments and other genres, so the text is not always independent or even centrally important. They are stable and available to a wide range of readers, but nevertheless treated as personal, and the messages are often highly context-bound and opaque to outsiders.

I selected thirty homepages each from the US, England and Ireland by running Google searches on the domain bebo.com and the text extract *l8r* or *l8a*. This gave me long lists of homepages which included some non-standard spelling, from many countries. I opened each in turn and selected those which recognisably dealt with an individual and named a hometown in one of my three target areas. I continued selecting from all three until I had thirty home pages from one area, then I stopped selecting from that area and continued

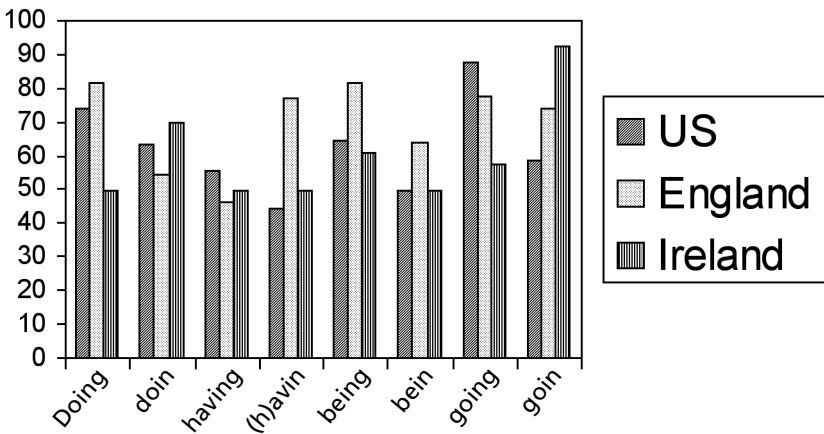


Figure 1: spelling of -ING

with the other two until I had thirty from all three areas.

The three sets of thirty texts were non-homogenous internally in a variety of ways. They were of different lengths, from some 200 words to more than 1,500. The writers (or their personae) varied in age, gender, maturity and ethnicity, and so did the numerous writers of comments on each page. Furthermore, the roles adopted by the writers/personae varied from expert to friend to mocker and their choice of register varied following this. Finally, one could assume considerable linguistic variation within the geographical areas, between North and South in each of the US, England and Ireland, for example, alongside commonalities.

The search method produced only texts predominantly in English and I did not investigate the fairly small quantities of Irish and Persian that I happened to find.

On the basis of the accounts of Thurlow (2004) and Sa'adi and Hamdan (2005), I decided to investigate the following limited set of features, which seemed to be related to sociolinguistic variables:

- Representations of *going to*, *-ing* and *you*.
- *Th*-fronting and stopping in /ð/-words like *the*, *this*, *that*, *together*, *with*
- *Th*-fronting and stopping in /θ/-words like *thing*, *think*, *thought*

In addition, I looked at patterns of regularisation in four words which might show differences not intended as identity markers by the writers: *laugh*, *thought*, *what* and *'cause*. The point is that in Southern England *laugh* has the same vowel as *farm*, so that *larf* is a plausible regularisation there but not elsewhere in the

areas examined (although the distinction between RP /a/ and Northern /æ/ is a sociolinguistic variable in Northern England). In the case of *thought* one would expect a different vowel from *cloth* in England and Southern Ireland, but the same vowel in both words in Northern Ireland and most of the US. In *what* and *'cause (=because)* rounded vowels are more common in England and Ireland and unrounded ones in the US (Wells, 1983).

Using the AntConc program (Anthony, 2006), I searched broadly to get an idea of the realisations of the target words that occurred in the texts. For example, I searched on f*t and t*t to find forms of *thought*. I then searched for all the forms together to find all representations of the target word in the corpus. I counted the numbers of texts using a particular spelling, rather than the numbers of cases of a spelling, because individual homepages are often highly repetitive, quoting one another, including repeated logos or song lyrics, etc. I noted the number of homepages using any representation of the target word, and then searched on each individual representation to find the number using it. This gave me statistics like: 26 homepages from England using some form of *what*; 24 of these using *what*, 10 using *wat*, 10 using *wot*. I could then express the number of texts with a given spelling (n) as percentages of the total number of texts with any instance of the word (N). In the tables and figures below N is given after the name of the area, and n is expressed as a percentage of this.

Results

Some spellings show a persona with a colloquial style but no particular local or ethnic

identity. We have seen that alveolar nasals in the morpheme *-ing* are stereotyped (and doubtless actual) features of many accents. Figure 1 shows texts with various spellings of the *-ing* forms of various common verbs, in each case as a percentage of the total number of texts with *-ing* forms for that verb in that national group. As in all the results, there are many texts including standard spellings, but here there are as many including non-standard ones. Of course many texts include both forms and are counted in both categories.

Numbers of *-in* and *-ing* spellings are similar for most national sets and there appears to be more or less random variation in the proportions of the two spellings across countries. Thus *-in* for *-ing* is an international feature of the homepage register, which does not vary much within the sensitivity of these measures. This reflects its status as a widespread marker variable of covert-prestige accents and colloquial styles.

The figures for spellings of *going to* as a future marker (i.e. excluding *I'm going to China* etc.) are comparable. Again all three national groups seem to use the same spellings, and this was in fact the only case I found where a non-standard spelling was most frequent.

The form *ya* for 'you' represents a colloquial reduced form in unstressed positions. Figure 2 shows that it occurs in about as many texts as *you* and *u* in all three areas. This means that the colloquial quality of *ya* – its potential as a style marker – is as important to the producers of the texts as the shortness and wittiness of *u*, and that both appear to be equally widespread and unaffected by regional taste. On the other hand, *ye*, also a spelling for /jə/ in this case, seems to be an Irish fashion.

These three features do not show strong differentiation among the national sets of homepages, or give much information about the persona adopted, but many others do. Words whose standard spoken forms have dental

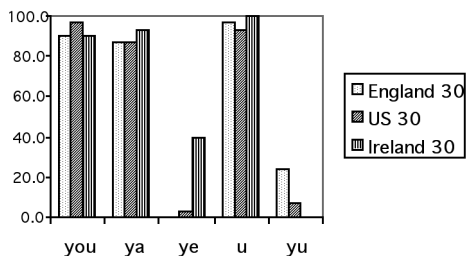


Figure 2: spelling of *you*

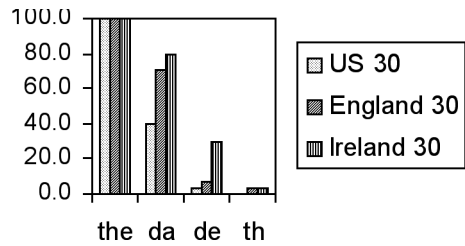


Figure 3: spellings of *the*

fricatives are spelled in a revealing variety of ways. Figure 3 shows the percentages of texts spelling *the* in various ways. All texts had the article spelled conventionally and around half also had the spelling *da*, which is generally taken (as in Ali G) to invoke a 'cool' and oppositional hip-hop, African-American or Jamaican identity (with a low back realisation of the vowel). Many texts from all three locations used this form, suggesting that the identity invoked is widely appreciated, but it is least common in the US, where there is anxiety about appropriating African-American speech (Ronkin & Karn, 1999) and most common in Ireland, where *da* and especially *de* could be taken to represent either or both of local covert-status pronunciation and the hip-hop connection. Figure 4 shows that there are similar patterns for the voiced fricative in *that* and *this*.

Table 1 shows the treatment of dental fricatives in the words *with* (either /θ/ or /ð/) (*any*) *thing*, and *think* (both /θ/). For *thing* and *think*, the US homepages basically only have *th* spellings, but for *with* they include many *t* forms. The stereotyped *wiv* or *wif* of AAVE is ignored or avoided. The English and Irish texts both have many *f* forms suggesting covert-prestige Estuary English use. While *t* spellings do occur in England and even in the US, they are much more common in Ireland, where they again presumably represent a common local covert-prestige pronunciation.

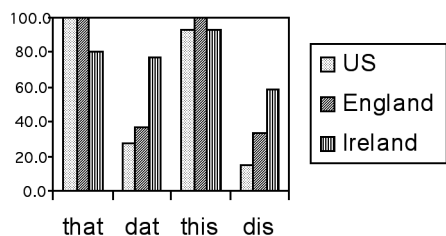


Figure 4: spellings of *that* and *this*

Table 1: Spellings of *th*-words with θ

Thing	US 25	England 23	Ireland 25
<i>thing</i>	100	78	84
<i>thingy/ie</i>	20	13	12
<i>fing</i>	0	22	4
<i>ting</i>	0	17	32
<i>fingy/ie</i>	0	4	0
Anything	US 15	England 18	Ireland 12
all <i>th</i> forms	100	100	75
all <i>f</i> forms	0	13	17
all <i>t</i> forms	0	0	42
Think	US 23	England 21	Ireland 25
<i>think*</i>	96	90	84
<i>fink*</i>	0	29	12
<i>tink*</i>	9	10	44
With	US 26	England 30	Ireland 29
<i>with</i>	96	83	86
<i>wid</i>	4	17	7
<i>wiv</i>	0	30	10
<i>wit</i>	42	27	62
<i>wif</i>	0	17	14

One could argue that there is some kind of hierarchy here. *t* spellings of / θ / words are most common in Ireland, and do not spread much to England, whereas English or Ali G *f* spellings tend to spread from England to Ireland. Correspondingly, spellings like *da* spread from the US to England and Ireland, but English *f* spellings do not spread to the US.

Up till now the focus has been on spellings which have long been used as stereotypes and employed in the representation of literary dialects where the regular spelling represents the standard phonology quite well. Hence the choice of an alternate spelling is likely to be a deliberate strategy to represent a certain realisation of a variable. But as noted above there are also words which are regularised because their school spelling is at variance with their phonology and thus provide an opportunity for 'rebellion spelling'. Where different groups have a different pronunciation the choice of spelling can reveal which pronunciation the writer uses.

Table 2 shows that all groups sometimes reg-

Table 2: Some regularized spellings

What	US 26	England 26	Ireland 23
<i>what</i>	85	65	70
<i>wat</i>	62	69	91
<i>wot</i>	4	65	43
<i>wt</i>	0	12	4
<i>wut</i>	35	0	0
Because	US 22	England 19	Ireland 25
<i>because</i>	32	32	24
<i>cause</i>	27	11	40
<i>(b)coz/cos</i>	9	89	40
<i>cuz/cus</i>	82	37	68
Laugh	US 12	England 12	Ireland 10
<i>laugh</i>	92	75	90
<i>laf*</i>	17	33	30
<i>larf</i>	0	25	0
Thought	US 20	England 14	Ireland 16
<i>thought</i>	90	93	81
<au>	0	0	6
<augh>	15	14	13
<ou>	0	7	13
<or>	0	29	0
<o>	0	0	31

ularise *what* by simply removing the *h* which reflects no pronunciation distinction for the vast majority of English speakers. One can further regularise by writing a vowel which reflects one's own pronunciation, and here US writers seem to agree on *u* and the English and Irish on *o*. This presumably reveals a genuine phonological difference, with an unrounded / Λ / in the US and a rounded / ɒ / in England and Ireland. A less clear result of the same sort is shown for *because*, where *o* spellings predominate in England and *u* in the US, while both versions are frequent in Ireland. Since *u* spelling is also quite frequent in England, where a rounded pronounced vowel is definitely the norm, one can suppose that both a spelling fashion originating in the US and genuine phonological difference play a role.

Most non-standard spellings of *laugh* use plan *a* (*laf*, *laff*), which could represent / æ / or / a /, but probably often stands for / æ /. The

spelling *ar* can only represent the word's form in a non-rhotic 'broad-A' variety like Southern English, and indeed it is only homepages apparently based there that use this form. However this is also a well-established rebellion spelling. Artemus Ward may have borrowed it in the 1860s and Len Deighton published a novel called *Only when I larf* in 1965. In general perhaps one should not think of these rebellion spellings as invented by the users, but as drawn from an existing pool where appropriate.

Non-standard spellings of the vowel of *thought* are capable of reflecting several details of a speaker's phonology. Where the vowel is spelled *o* (as in a US chatroom cited by Hering, 2004) it suggests identity between the vowel of *cloth* and that of *thought*, which is a feature of US and Northern Irish 'Ulster-Scots' varieties (Wells, 1983). In Southern Ireland and England *cloth* has the same vowel as *lot*, and *thought* has a different vowel. In England generally *thought* has the same vowel as *north* and *force*, so a spelling like *thort/fort* is possible. In fact, as Table 2 shows, there were five homepages with *o* spellings on them, all from Northern Ireland. There were four with *or* spellings, all from England. Again, these spellings may be selected rather than created: Artemus Ward has *thot* (Box 1) and *thort* occurs as a schoolboy spelling in Geoffrey Willans' *How to be Topp* (1956).

Discussion

The non-standard spellings discussed here fall into several groups.

First, a number of features representing colloquial style without no particular ethnic or local identity (*gonna*, *-in*, *ya*) have similar distributions in all three national groups.

Second, spellings which seem to refer to a sociolinguistic variable exhibit a hierarchy of attractiveness. If the variable is applicable in the US, such as stopped dental fricatives which suggest a 'cool' AAVE or hiphop identity (*da* 'the' *dat* 'that'), it occurs in all three samples, suggesting that an American voice of this kind has covert prestige everywhere. German and Swedish writers similarly mix features of American usage with local forms (Hård af Segerstad, 2002; Androtsopoulos, 2006). Features probably deriving from southern England and suggesting a covert-prestige 'Estuary English', perhaps Ali G, identity (fronted den-

tal fricatives) occur equally in England and Ireland. Features representing an Irish identity (*ye*, *de*, *tink*) seem to occur predominantly in Ireland. None of these spellings representing the covert-prestige versions of sociolinguistic variables need reflect the writers' real pronunciations at all – they just show which groups they want to claim affiliation with.

The issue is complicated by the documented inhibitions of Americans with respect to appropriating AAVE identity online (Pandey, 2005; Ronkin & Karn, 1999), which may account for the rather low scores in the US sample for spellings that look definitely AAVE, as opposed to generally colloquial. Furthermore, the popularity of a spelling may well come from two sources simultaneously. It is a reasonable guess that *da* spellings are popular in Ireland because they represent both a possible covert-prestige Irish realisation and an 'international hip-hop/creole/black' one.

Third, there are regularisations. While respellings which represent colloquial spoken forms only give access to the stereotype the writer wants to evoke, this group can reveal the genuine phonology of the writer's system. This seems to be quite convincingly demonstrated both for *what* and *'cause* and with smaller numbers of examples for *thought* and *laugh*.

The overall result can be skilled representations of local voices: from the south of England, *giv us bell or somink init m8 l8ron*; from Ireland, *So ne othercrc wit ya?* But more often there is an exciting mixture, as in this example from Northern Ireland: *just fot Id leave ya a wee message to say ave fun dis weekend*, where 'English' fronted dental fricatives and h-dropping meet 'Ulster' merger of the vowels in *cloth* and *thought* and the item *wee*, along with *dis* and *ya* from the international or American repertoire.

It is impossible to tell how far these kinds of spelling are informally institutionalised variants. The spelling *skool*, for example, is widely used and has clear implications which untested *scool* and Welsh-English *skwl* do not have. So one could write *da* or *thort* not because one wants the particular implications of that pronunciation or spelling but because that is how it is written in the genre in question. The wide variety of spellings found for most frequent words does, however, suggest a good deal of creativity. Thus *anything* can appear as *anything*, *nething*, *nethin*, *anyfing*, *anyfin*, *nefin*, *anyting*, *anytin* or *netin*.

The linguistic/orthographic resources used to represent identity in these home pages are well established and mostly traditional. But many of them are being used for radically new purposes: not humorous ‘othering’ but inclusive assertion of multiple identities. In so far as the spellings represent an alternative norm, that norm is inclusive. So the variable spellings reflect the tensions of global and local, the borrowed and mixed identities, and the freedom to choose one’s belongingness that are said to characterise the postmodern. One could apply to them the words Omoniyi (2006) uses of Nigerian hip-hop artists: they are performing ‘their glocal selves rather than “other”’.

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