Grime: London Subculture and Expression

Ana Piccirillo
Northeastern University
1 Introduction

Grime is a genre of music that many may compare to American-style rap; however, grime has drawn influence from not only American rap and R&B, but Jamaican dancehall, rave, and even punk (Barron, 2013; McKinnon, 2005), while also drawing from house or electronic dance (Ilan, 2012). The genre was born out of Bow, East London, in 2001 (Ilan, 2012; McKinnon, 2005) and for the most part has remained there throughout the course of its short existence, expanding only to South London, and in some rare cases, the United States. Grime artists are typically born and raised in these urban areas of London, and their work expresses a truly genuine and uncompromising struggle against oppression, inequality, and poverty in an environment that has often been unkind to them. Due to its gritty nature, it is not uncommon to find themes of gun and knife violence, drug use, and gang activity in its lyrics (Ilan, 2012). Grime has managed to remain, on the whole, untouched since its birth, preserving a sort of ethnography within itself, so authentic and thoroughly representative of its subculture that its anthropological and linguistic value is virtually unmatched by any other genre (Barron, 2013).

The following research paper was conducted using a variety of techniques, including transcription and analysis of grime music videos, literature review, and interviews with an informant. The informant is 25 years of age, male, and a native of South London, who is very familiar with the genre of grime, and has interacted with many of the artists themselves. Using these techniques, a comprehensive overview of various major facets of the subculture was compiled.
This paper will begin with a brief overview of the grime subculture itself, what it entails, and the type of demographics one may expect to find within it. It will then continue on to discuss a variety of subtopics that more clearly show the relationship between grime music and the subculture that created it; these topics include commercialization, dialect, education as a common theme, as well as a discussion of the women involved in grime. The various small comments on SAE throughout serve to give a more thorough and multifaceted perspective on how this dialect differs from both Standard BrE, and another one if its relatives. This paper’s ultimate intent is to give a more detailed, though by no means complete, look at this subculture and its relationship to expression through grime, and how these two entities may impact one another.

2 Grime Subculture and Emergence

The nature of grime, in that it draws heavily on the real-life experiences of its artists, implies that most of its artists were born and raised in East London, having experienced the disempowered and violent events that they later recount in their lyrics. Typically, they’ve come from residing in council housing provided by the government for the majority, if not all, of their lives, often with very poor sanitation and almost uninhabitable, cramped quarters. These individuals are most often of black English or Jamaican/Afro-Caribbean descent, similar to the demographics seen in early development of ‘urban’ genres in the UK in previous years (Henry, 2006). The informant noted that, while this is true, there are also occasionally caucasian English grime artists, but these are few and far between. In addition, he mentioned that grime artists are mostly men, although women in the genre are not necessarily marginalized (see Section 2.4).
According to McKinnon (2005), and supported by the informant, most grime artists begin at a fairly young age, even as early as their teen years. Many of them have been seeing violent crime and drug use on a consistent basis for years, and some have witnessed death first hand. Oppression and poverty, by their teen years, has become such an integral part of life that it goes mostly unacknowledged. However, with a variety of political and socioeconomic tensions rising in the early 2000s, the necessity arose for the emergence of a new form of communication and expression, exclusive to those within these East London communities.

Ilan (2012) claims that grime emerged from the streets of East London “organically and independently among a tightly connected cohort of inner-city artistes and audiences”, showing similarities to how American rap emerged many years before, but with more specificity in location and theme. While grime quickly gained popularity within the communities it served, British mainstream media, various political forces (Barron, 2013; Ilan, 2012), and the general public of London have remained starkly opposed to the existence of grime from soon after its emergence to present day (see Section 2.1).

2.1 Commercialization

Despite the growing need for a means of expression within the impoverished and under-appreciated communities of East London, grime has never been accepted as a commercializable resource, let alone a respectable form of music, by the majority of the British public, political and legal forces in London, or the British mainstream media. Notions of violence, drugs, crime, and gang activity are much less favorably looked upon by the general British public than one may find in America. In regards to the reaction of the general public to grime when it first
emerged, the informant said that, if he had not been so closely intertwined with the artists and the grime community, he most likely would not have known it existed. The general public seemed to all but disregard grime as a respectable form of entertainment, let alone an honest expression about the state of this struggling East London subculture.

While arrests and murders make mainstream US headlines and elevate the status and recognizability of artists within the American rap community, these same activities get largely suppressed and hidden by British mainstream media, and provide no means for recognition within the grime community (Ilan, 2012). This is likely due to the fact that the English general public has no interest in hearing about these activities (the murders of small-time grime artists, various drug and gun crimes) and therefore the mainstream media would not benefit from reporting on them. Without media exposure, especially in the early 2000s, before the days of Youtube and less expensive media platforms for self promotion, grime had very little chance of growing to mainstream status in the UK.

In addition to these media and publicity barriers, the political and legal forces of East London actively opposed the spread of its influence, for fear and misunderstanding of the music’s content. More affluent communities, such as central London, where frightened and appalled at the violent imagery and gang activity grime lyrics seemed to focus on, and were fearful that popularity of this genre may promote violence and gang behavior elsewhere, especially among younger listeners who may relate to the artists in some way. Ilan (2012) notes that “the response of institutional authorities in the UK has arguably been to interpret grime music as symbolic of danger and transgression”, and this viewpoint quickly lead to some more concrete actions on the part of these authorities. Early on, grime was barred from performing at
most local venues, both due to largely discriminatory legal codes upheld by the London Metropolitan Police Service and venue owners themselves (Ilan, 2012).

Due mainly to this lack of public interest and direct opposition and discrimination by authorities in the area, grime artists, to this day, exist mostly within inexpensive media platforms, remain popular only in underground scenes and, with few exceptions, have remained largely uncommercialized in the UK. Artists often produce inexpensive music videos, set in the streets of East London, which are then posted to public platforms such as Youtube or Link Up TV. An inability to commodify their music gives grime artists the freedom to express themselves lyrically however they see fit; they do not have to alter their dialect, content, or aggressiveness to satisfy the demands of the market. In fact, according to the informant, grime artists who have somehow found a way to commercialize their music and expand within the UK and even to the US, such as Wiley, Skepta, and Dizzee Rascal, are often not considered true grime artists within the grime subculture. He explained this further by claiming that individuals from East or South London feel as though commercialized artists such as Wiley are “sell-outs” who no longer represent the true purpose of the genre, or the true struggles of its artists.

2.2 Dialect

Because grime has largely not been commercialized within the UK (see Section 2.1), and artists have not had to adapt to please a wider audience, the very distinct dialects present within the subculture have been well preserved by grime music. In the following section, some of these various dialectal features of the subculture will be discussed, supported by examples from the music video *Pasta*, by AJ Tracey, a popular grime artist.
The first dialectal feature that stands out in this particular song is semantic, and has also been a topic of examination by linguists in the past (see Cheshire, 2013), is the use of /mɛn/ ‘man’, as a pronoun. Example (1) shows various instances of this, as used by Tracey in Pasta.

(1) a. Who can kick the rhythm like man? (line 21)
b. The papers said that you should come and watch man (line 31)
c. No, bitch, man are on the chase (line 69)

In examples (1a) and (1b), it can be seen that Tracey uses ‘man’ to refer to himself, replacing the word ‘me’, as may be seen in various other BrE dialects as well as SAE. Cheshire (2013) found that this usage of man is common in “young people’s speech in multicultural inner cities in the U.K.”, a description that fits right in line with the demographics of grime artists that may be utilizing this semantic feature. Cheshire (2013) also found that, in addition to this unambiguous usage of ‘man’ to represent the speaker, it can also be used as an indefinite pronoun, though not as frequently. This can be seen in example (1c), where Tracey uses ‘man’ to refer to an unidentified group which, through context seems to refer to the whole of East London men of his age, who take part in the grime subculture.

There were also a variety of lexical items found in the music video, that are not found in SAE, that were confirmed by the informant to be exclusive to certain dialects of BrE, to the best of his knowledge, including that of the grime subculture. Example (2) lists severe instances of these lexical items, each with their IPA transcription, followed by their orthography in this particular dialect, and then their meaning in SAE. Note that for all examples that appear over 5 times throughout the song, only the first 5 line numbers are referenced.
Based on many of the instances in (2), there is a clear pattern in the content of this song. Examples (2b), (2d), and (2e) all concern money (in this context the attainment of wealth), while examples (2c), (2g), (2h), and (2i) all have to do with police and violence.

Phonological dialectal features were common throughout this song, many of which one may expect from a BrE dialect, others one may not. One of the more well-known features that
does appear in this dialect is /ɹ/-deletion in syllable final positions, as well as any position before a consonant. Example (3) shows various instances of /ɹ/-deletion in this song.

(3)  
a. girls  
/ɡɛlz/  
(lines 1, 2, 9, 10, 39)  
b. quarter  
/kwɔ.ər/  
(lines 3, 11, 51, 59, 99)  
c. actor  
/æk.ta/  
(lines 8, 16, 56, 64, 104)  
d. papers  
/peɪ.əz/  
(line 31)  
e. manor  
/mæ.nɔ/  
(line 33)  
f. over  
/əʊ.və/  
(line 96)  

In examples (3a), (3b), and (3d), /ɹ/-deletion is occurring due to the presence of the following consonant. In examples (3b), (3c), (3e) and (3f), there appears to be /ɹ/-deletion due to the positioning of the /ɹ/ being syllable-final. This is a feature seen in many dialects of BrE; however, it seems to be significantly more pronounced in this particular dialect than in Standard BrE. Due to the prominence of this feature in the music video, the informant was needed to help decode much of what was being said. It would be considered fairly uncommon for a mainstream song to be released in such a conspicuously strong dialect, as it may not be mutually intelligible to all listeners. This suggests that examples such as (3) would only be likely to occur in a genre that receives little or no mainstream attention, such as grime, and this lack of attention seems to have allowed grime artists to preserve their true dialect to its fullest extent.

Another phonological feature found in the Pasta music video is /t/-deletion.
Based on the data seen in example (4), it appears that /t/-deletion occurs mostly in situations where the /t/ would otherwise follow a vowel, such as in (4a), where /t/ would follow /æ/, or in (4e), where /t/ would follow /ʌ/ or /ɔ/. This is another feature that is not found typically in SAE, but is found to some degree in many dialects of BrE. However, just like /ɹ/-deletion, it seems that /t/-deletion occurs in this dialect to an extent that makes the lyrics of this song difficult to understand for others outside the subculture, especially those not who do not speak BrE.

Also found frequently throughout the music video is a raising (and slight fronting) of /æ/ to /ɛ/ when followed by /n/. This is a similar phenomenon to the raising and fronting of /ɛ/ to /ɪ/ which can be seen in some Southern dialects of SAE, for example in the merger of ‘pin’ and ‘pen’ to /pɪn/. This feature does not seem to occur in every dialect of BrE. Example (5) lists a variety of instances in which this raising occurs in *Pasta*, by AJ Tracey.

(4) a. *flats*  
/flæs/  
(b. *that’s*  
/ðæs/  
(c. *hit*  
/hɪ/  
(d. *let*  
/le/  
(e. *got*  
/gɔt/  

(5) a. *man*  
/mæn/  
(b. *plan*  
/plæn/  
(c. *can*  
/kæn/
d. *Stan*  
/sten/  

(e. *Ray-Bans*  
/reɪ-bɛnz/  

In all of the above instances of example (5), it appears that what would otherwise be /æ/ in most dialects of BrE, as well as SAE, becomes raised and slightly fronted to /ɛ/. While this feature does not confound a listener’s ability to understand the lyrics of the song, it does seem as though this feature is more prevalent in this dialect than one may find in other dialects of BrE.

2.3 Education

In contrast to the more aggressive, dark, and gritty themes that make up most grime content, it is also not uncommon to find some more generally acceptable topics arising as themes within the genre. One of these such “respectable tropes”, as Ilan (2012) refers to them, is the theme of education. Grime artists are often still of school age, or have graduated just recently, when they begin creating music; these artists often express the importance they feel in completing their education, and becoming a successful, valuable part of society. Ilan (2012) explains, “an emphasis on education is linked to the acumen that grime artists feel is necessary for them to achieve financial and commercial success within an industry that has grown organically and independently out of their own ingenuity”. Through the lyrics of grime, one is able to see that the subculture places a certain amount of value on education as a way to rise up and become successful and wealthy through legitimate, legal means. In example (6), an excerpt is given from *Man Don’t Care*, by grime artist JME.
(6) How could a man with a uni degree
    Be bussing up mic and chatting his greaze?
    Cause the music originated
    And will always remain in the streets

    In example (6), JME seems to be taking a great deal of pride in his college degree, and placing value on it, which he expresses by claiming a man with a degree would not typically be in the profession that he chose. The underlying tone of this statement seems to be that JME believes having a university degree makes him slightly better, or more qualified than his fellow artists, even if he has chosen to remain in grime. This emphasis on education is a common thread throughout his lyrics. Example (7), taken from Ilan (2012), is from 123, on JME’s album Boy Better Know.

(7) I stayed in school and got my degree
    Even if I get a 2.2
    I’ve done it, time waste for no-one
    This year I was 2-2
    My dad wants me to do a masters
    And my mum wants me to too

    Example (7) further exemplifies the value that JME places on receiving his degree, and furthering his education. According to the informant, this emphasis on education is seen throughout grime, in both female and male artists, and is expressed as a possible means for achievement and success in an environment that often works to oppress and stifle them.

2.4 Women in Grime

According to Barron (2013), the “presence of a female viewpoint is significant” in regards to grime, and these viewpoints seem to be well-respected by male artists, as they share similar
experiences. However, women also seem to make up a separate, smaller section of the grime subculture, in that they have and express experiences through grime that are exclusive only to them, and are not easily related to by male artists or listeners. Topics such as sexual objectification and independence, female empowerment, and gender inequality (Barron, 2013) are all topics that prominent female grime artists discuss in their lyrics. Gender equality, within the grime community is typically addressed by female artists through statements showing “equality with male MCs” (Barron, 2013). Example (8) is an except from Lady Leshurr’s *Queen’s Speech Ep. 4*, in which she addresses her male artists counterparts.

8) And there's no debate on who's better  
   I'll turn a man to a girl like Bruce Jenner

In the above example, Lady Leshurr makes a claim that, when matched against a male MC, she is so far superior that she will leave him feeling emasculated, likening the encounter to the actual transition of Bruce Jenner to Caitlin Jenner in 2015. While the statement may be considered offensive, example (8) clearly shows Lady Leshurr calling out her fellow male grime artists, firmly making her claim that she is just as good, if not better, than they are. An interesting point to note here is that by equating the emasculation of her counterparts to being female, Lady Leshurr may actually be undoing her own point, almost implying that women are capable of transcending the boundaries of typical womanhood to participate in a male-dominated industry. While this excerpt seems to miss the point of true equality between men and women, it does appear that Lady Leshurr is attempting to show that women, herself in particular, are capable of standing next to the men in the genre. Example (9) shows another excerpt from the same artist, making a similar assertion in regards to female participation in grime.
(9) Every mic I’m on  
    Gets beat kinda like Michael’s song  
    I flex with the best now find a spot

Example (9), from Lady Leshurr’s F64, maintains a very similar claim to that in example (8), although this time refraining from involving the male artists directly, and instead asserting only that she is able to stand her ground in the presence of the best artists in the genre. These types of statements are common throughout the female grime scene, and provide some insight into the experiences of women in this subculture. It can be inferred, due to the consistency with which female grime artists include these sorts of reaffirming statements in their lyrics, that they may not always be as well-respected as the male artists by grime listeners within the community.

3 Conclusion

Since its emergence in 2001, grime has served as a means of expression for the subculture it was created to represent. It has been recognized by many researchers as a unique and valuable anthropological and linguistic resource, which provides an authentic look at the struggles and everyday lives of the largely disempowered, impoverished, and oppressed minorities of East London through stories of violence, aggression, and crime. Because the genre has been essentially barred from commercialization and profitability, most grime artists have been able to maintain their true identity through their music; they continue to use their true dialect, and discuss their life experience as they truly happened, without having to cater to a wider audience. The dialectal features present in the subculture show through clearly in its music, resulting in various semantic, lexical, and phonological features that are quite different Standard British
English and are oftentimes not even entirely intelligible to a Standard American English speaker. Despite the many misconceptions surrounding the subculture, grime artists also use their lyrics to represent the value they place in concepts they view as more generally respectable, such as education. Female artists use grime as a means for expressing a variety of different experiences exclusive to the women of East London, carving out a spot in the East London subculture specifically for them. All of these features of the grime genre combined help provide a more complete picture as to how the subculture and the experiences of its artists are authentically reflected and expressed in the lyrics of grime, and how we may gain insight into this subculture by examining it through its music.

4 References


Appendix A: List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BrE</td>
<td>British English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA</td>
<td>International Phonetic Alphabet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAE</td>
<td>Standard American English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK/U.K.</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B: Transcript

Source: Music video: *Pasta* by AJ Tracey, found on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIS8RhU8JQE
Length of recording: 3 minutes, 41 seconds
Length of transcript: 3 minutes, 17 seconds
Transcription begins: 0:15
Participants: AJ Tracey (artist)

[Hook]
1. Girls /ɡɛlz/ goin' wild /ˈwɪld/ in the /dʌ/ water /ˈwɔ.ə/
2. Girls /ɡɛlz/ goin' wild /ˈwɪld/ in the /dʌ/ water /ˈwɔ.ə/
3. Made a couple halves /ˈhɔs/ from a quarter /ˈkwɔ.ə/
4. Tryna turn /ˈtʌn/ a kid into a baller /ˈbo.la/  
5. Cookin’ up a jawn /ˈjɔn/ like pasta /ˈpæ.sta/
6. Cookin’ up a jawn /ˈjɔn/ like pasta /ˈpæ.sta/
7. All /əl/ these /dɪz/ broke /bros/ n***** need a BAFTA /ˈbæf.tə/  
8. You ain't in the field /ˈfiwd/, you're an actor /ˈæk.ə/
10. Girls /ɡɛlz/ goin' wild /ˈwɪld/ in the /dʌ/ water /ˈwɔ.ə/
11. Made a couple halves /ˈhɔs/ from a quarter /ˈkwɔ.ə/
12. Tryna turn /ˈtʌn/ a kid into a baller /ˈbo.la/  
13. Cookin’ up a jawn /ˈjɔn/ like pasta /ˈpæ.sta/
14. Cookin’ up a jawn /ˈjɔn/ like pasta /ˈpæ.sta/
15. All /əl/ these /dɪz/ broke /bros/ n***** need a BAFTA /ˈbæf.tə/  
16. You ain't in the field /ˈfiwd/, you're an actor /ˈæk.ə/

[Verse 1]
17. In and out /əʊ/ of /ʌ/ flats /flæs/ for the floos /flɔs/
18. You ain't with /wɪt/ the /dʌ/ dogs /dɒgz/, you're a puss /pɒs/
19. Tell 'em "domme jongens in je stad" [Dutch]
20. My Dutch brothas /brʌ.ðəz/ bun 'em like kush, ayy
21. Who can kick the /dʌ/ rhythm /rɪdəm/ like man /mɛn/?
22. Rich, livin' lavish, that's /dæz/ the /dʌ/ plan /plɛn/
23. Jakes see me winnin', they're /dɛər/ vexed
24. They just want a brotha /brʌ.ðəz/ in the /dʌ/ can /kɛn/, nope
25. You ain't cool if you ain't in a gang /ɡɛŋ/
26. Hours and them /dəm/ hours like Stan /stɛn/
27. Always /ul.werz/ got /ɡʌ/ my hood up like Kenny
28. No killin' me, though /dɔz/, I'm the man /mɛn/
29. Fader said I'm doin' up shows
30. Complex /kom.plɛks/ said I'm gonna blow
31. The papers /pɛə.ˈpɔz/ said that you should come and watch /wɔtʃ/ man /mɛn/
32. My mama said to leave my bro alone
33. Still up in the /dʌ/ manor /mæ.nə/, that's /dæs/ Grove
34. Cruisin' through /ˈfalu/ the /dʌ/ music, I drove
35. White up in the /dʌ/ tees like /lau/ Hov
36. All /ul/ my n***** whip it /ˈtu/ on the stove
37. No one ever /ˈɛvə/ helped in my zone
38. Bro, I had to do it /ˈtu/ on my own
39. Old girls /ˈɡɛlz/ didn't wanna f*** /fʌ/ me, now
40. I don't even f*** them /dəm/ and they /dɔ/ still moan
41. Hit /hɪ/ a bitch once, then /dɛn/ I skate
42. Never /ˈnevə/ let /le/ a Jezebel /dʒi.zə. bol/ stay
43. Drunk, seein' life through /ˈfalu/ my Ray-Bans /reɪ-bɛnz/
44. I don't even sleep till the /dʌ/ day
45. Tell a model /mɔɹ.ðəl/ bitch come play
46. Give a couple beats like Dre
47. Wettin' up the /dʌ/ p**** like /ˈlæt/ Klay, ayy
48. Now she's tryna call /ˈkʌl/ a n**** bae

[Hook]
49. Girls /ˈɡɛlz/ goin' wild /ˈwɪld/ in the /dʌ/ water /ˈwɔtər/
50. Girls /ˈɡɛlz/ goin' wild /ˈwɪld/ in the /dʌ/ water /ˈwɔtər/
51. Made a couple halves /hɔs/ from a quarter /kwɔ.ə/
52. Tryna turn /ˈtʌn/ a kid into a baller /bo.ˈlaʊ/
53. Cookin’ up a jawn /ˈdʒɔn/ like pasta /ˈpæ.ˈstə/
54. Cookin’ up a jawn /ˈdʒɔn/ like pasta /ˈpæ.ˈstə/
55. All /ul/ these /dɪz/ broke /brɔʊ/ n***** need a BAFTA /ˈbæf.tə/
56. You ain't in the field /ˈfɪwld/, you're an actor /ˈeɪk.tə/
57. Girls /ˈɡɛlz/ goin' wild /ˈwɪld/ in the /dʌ/ water /ˈwɔtər/
58. Girls /ˈɡɛlz/ goin' wild /ˈwɪld/ in the /dʌ/ water /ˈwɔtər/
59. Made a couple halves /hɔs/ from a quarter /kwɔ.ə/
Tryna turn a kid into a baller

Cookin' up a jawn like pasta

All these broke n***** need a BAFTA

You ain't in the field, you're an actor

Every time I step up in the place

Girls all tryna get up in my face

"Oh my god, it's AJ Trace"

No, bitch, man are on the chase

Chase for the guala and the papes

Bro fresh home from a case

Let him hold a badders called Stace

I just wanna make bare dough

Beg you give a young space, ayy

Cookin' up a jawn, get a plate

Eatin' I ain't even sayin' grace

Henney goin' straight to my face

Spillin' liquor when I'm onstage

Probably got my brothas in the cage

Couple opps out here all brave, yeah?

I'mma slide with the MAC on rage

Gat long like a twelve gauge

Catch a corn or you're gonna catch a shave

Get a n**** down for the brodies

Get a n**** down in the grave

Nike Air Max on my coat

Masked up when I do the roads

Girls can't stay up in my hotel

Give a couple rounds, then I'm gonna ghost

For the game, I'm tryna get the codes

You're broke but you wanna talk loads

When I see these guys, they're runnin', runnin'

Jumpin' over fences like a toad

Girls goin' wild in the water

Made a couple halves from a quarter

Tryna turn a kid into a baller!
101. Cookin’ up a jawn /jɔn/ like pasta /pæ.stə/
102. Cookin’ up a jawn /jɔn/ like pasta /pæ.stə/
103. All /ul/ these /diz/ broke /broʊs/ n***** need a BAFTA /bæf.tə/
104. You ain't in the field /fiwəd/, you're an actor /æk.tə/
105. Girls /gɛlz/ goin' wild /wil/ in the /dʌ/ water /wɔ.ə/
106. Girls /gɛlz/ goin' wild /wil/ in the /dʌ/ water /wɔ.ə/
107. Made a couple halves /hɔs/ from a quarter /kwə.ə/
108. Tryna turn /tʌn/ a kid into a baller /bɔ.lə/
109. Cookin’ up a jawn /jɔn/ like pasta /pæ.stə/
110. Cookin’ up a jawn /jɔn/ like pasta /pæ.stə/
111. All /ul/ these /diz/ broke /broʊs/ n***** need a BAFTA /bæf.tə/
112. You ain't in the field /fiwəd/, you're an actor /æk.tə/