

The Significance of English in Japanese Popular Music: English as a Means of Message, Play, and Character

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1. Introduction

Every December, Oricon Research Inc., a Japanese data research company, releases a list of the year's 100 best-selling CD singles in Japan. Among the 100 songs which made it to the list in 2013 (Oricon, 2013), 72 songs contained English words, phrases, or clauses¹. This implies that English is frequently used in Japanese popular (J-pop) music. Indeed, the use of English in popular music has recently been a widely observed phenomenon across Asia both in ESL and EFL contexts (e.g., Benson, 2013; Chan, 2009; Chik, 2010; Kachru, 2006; Lee, 2004; Likhithongsathorn & Sappapan, 2013; Moody & Matsumoto, 2003). For example, Chan (2009) analyzed how English was used in Cantonese popular songs and observed that code-switching between Cantonese and English could achieve multiple functions including rhyme marking, putting emphasis on the lyrics, and projecting identities. Kachru (2006) looked at some lyrics in Bollywood movie songs and showed that English was used along Hindustani for language play in the lyrics.

J-pop songs have also integrated English in their lyrics (see, e.g., Matter, 2008; Moody & Matsumoto, 2003; Moody, 2006; Pennycook, 2003; Stanlaw, 2004; Zaborowski, 2012). Moody (2006), for instance, found that J-pop lyrics often included English not only at the word and phrase level but also at the clause level and that code-ambiguation between Japanese and English was observed in some songs (p. 219). He claimed that the use of English in J-pop music might reflect global or cosmopolitan attitudes of the songwriters and singers (p. 220). With recent industry changes such that idol songs now dominate the chart (see, Oricon, 2013), the present study aims to investigate the latest trend in the use of English in J-pop music based on the Oricon Top 100 songs of 2013. Specifically, the present study aims to address the following research questions: 1) To what extent is English used in J-pop songs? 2) Why is English used in J-pop music? 3) How is English used in J-pop lyrics?

2. Methodology

First of all, we identified the 100 songs which sold the most in 2013 based on the Oricon annual chart (Oricon, 2013). We then wrote down the lyrics of each song in the format of text files based on J-Lyric.net (<http://j-lyric.net/>). We next divided the lyrics into morphemes by using MeCab (<http://mecab.googlecode.com/svn/trunk/mecab/dod/index.html>). We checked the results manually to correct errors². We then used the word list function of AntConc (Anthony, 2011) to count the tokens and types of words³ that appeared in each song. We noted all English and other foreign words along with their frequency. We also subjected all the files to the analyzer together to develop a list of English and foreign words used in the 100 songs. We used Stata (Version 13.1) for statistical analysis.

3. Results and Analysis

Among the 100 songs subjected to the analysis, 73 songs contained foreign words. Fifty of the song titles and 56 of the band names had words written in romanized characters. One song contained German words, 1 song contained English and Chinese words, 2 songs contained English and Spanish words, and the other 69 songs contained English words in their lyrics. There were 27509 tokens (4329 types) in total. Among these, 4250 tokens (513 types) were foreign words. Only 114 tokens (18 types) were foreign words other than English, and this indicates that English is by far the most common foreign language used in J-pop lyrics. Indeed, 15.0% of the word tokens and 11.4% of the word types observed in the lyrics were English. The proportion of English in each song varied from 0% to 69.5%.

The 20 most frequently used English words were 'oh' (170 tokens), 'go' (145), 'you' (143), 'my' (114), 'hey' (83), 'I' (80), 'love' (75), 'up' (68), 'and' (60), 'beep' (60), 'the' (60), 'baby' (55), 'yeah' (55), 'on' (54), 'so' (48), 'come' (44), 'jump' (44), 'it' (42), 'now' (42), and 'we' (42). The distribution of the English

words approximated a Zipf distribution. Fifty-eight songs contained English phrases or clauses, while 14 songs only contained independent English words. There were seven songs with more than 50% of the lyrics written in English⁴: HEY WHAT'S UP by Jin Akanishi (69.5%), HOT SHOT by GENERATIONS from EXILE TRIBE (60.2%), SURVIVORS feat.DJ MAKIDAI from EXILE by THE SECOND from EXILE (55.9%), Boys Meet U by SHINee (55.7%), WINNER by Choshinsei (54.8%), BURING UP by EXILE TRIBE (53.1%), and No Limit by EXILE (50.3%). This seems to indicate that some singers include English in their lyrics more frequently than other singers. In order to see if gender of the performer plays a role in using English, we tested the frequency of English words based on the performer's gender.

Of the top 100 singles, 62 were performed by male singers as leads. Using an ordinary least squares linear regression analysis, with gender as an indicator variable, male-performed songs were found to use significantly more English. A male-led song on average had 51.8 more English tokens than a female-led song ($p < .01$). Indeed, all of the songs with more than 50% of the lyrics written in English were performed by male singers. Also, female performers were significantly more likely not to use English words. 42.1% of the female songs did not use any English, while 19.4% of the male songs did not use any English ($p < .05$).

After separating the albums into male and female groups, the regression was then run to determine the correlation between English usage and performer age. Age was defined as the age upon the single's official release. In the case of groups, the performers' ages were averaged. Female performers were on average 7.8 years younger than their male counterparts. The average age of the top 100 female performers was 21.2. The average age of the top male performers was 29.0. For female performers, there was no significant correlation between age and English usage. However, for male performers, there was a small significant correlation, where older male performers used fewer English tokens. A 10 year age difference was correlated with having 30.5 fewer English tokens in the song ($p < .01$).

There were 45 songs whose lyrics contained English clauses, or sentences. However, all the sentences were simple sentences as in "I'm standing

here now and forever" and (EXILE PRIDE~Konna Sekai o Aisurutame~ by EXILE) "You're so cool!" (Kamonegix by NMB48). Compound and complex sentences were not observed in the data. This indicates that J-pop lyrics do not have complicated English structures in them. Instead, they tend to use structures that can be easily understood by a general audience. English phrases and clauses in the lyrics tended to be grammatical.

Besides pronouns and fillers, verbs of motion (e.g., go, jump, dance, come, get), romance related words (e.g., love, like, baby, girl, believe, heart), a variety of descriptive adjectives (e.g., hot, happy, sweet, merry, crazy) were also frequently observed. This indicates that English is actually used to express feelings and emotions in J-pop music.

Some songs used English phrases and clauses repetitively as in "Oh Baby, My angel [...] Oh Baby, My angel" (Heart Ereki by AKB48) and "Come On A My House 'Kare ga suki?'" (JUMP! JUMP!)/ "Come On A My House 'Boku ga suki?'" (JUMP! JUMP!) (Come On A My House by Hey! Say! JUMP). This repetition was also used as a rhyming scheme. There were songs which used English for rhyming with Japanese as in "Sansei kawaii! Sunshine furisotosogu" (Sansei Kawaii! by SKE48). Code ambiguation between English and Japanese (see, e.g., Moody & Matsumoto, 2003) was also observed. For example, "Kiss Your Mind" in Kis-My-Ft2's "Kiss Umai~ Kiss Your Mind" was pronounced as "Kiss umai (good at kissing)" as the song title shows. "Coming! Coming!" from the same song was pronounced as "Kamu kamu (chew chew)" probably because the song was written as an advertisement song for a new line of chewing gums. These examples indicate that English has a variety of functions in J-pop songs.

4. Discussion

The results have shown that English is the most frequently used foreign language in J-pop lyrics. Code-switching and code-mixing are not commonly observed phenomena in daily conversations in Japan (Moody, 2006, p. 211). It is noteworthy then that more than 70% of the analyzed songs contained English in their lyrics. The actual proportion of English in each song varied from 0% to 69.5%, and a diversity of English words, phrases, and clauses were identified.

Although certain types of words (i.e., verbs of motion, romance related words, descriptive adjectives) were frequently observed as analyzed above, the distribution of English words used in the lyrics approximated to a Zipf distribution. This implies that English is naturally integrated in J-pop lyrics. Admittedly, the Oricon chart does not necessarily represent all types of J-pop songs released in Japan. However, the present study indicates that there is an ongoing trend of integrating English in J-pop music.

Some singers use English in their lyrics more frequently than other singers, and male performers use English significantly more frequently than female performers. For female performers, age was not a significant factor in using English in the lyrics. This might imply that the performed image of youth and cuteness matters more than the actual age although the data put to the analysis tended to feature younger female performers. Conversely, older male performers did tend to use English somewhat less frequently than younger male performers. As will be discussed below, English in J-pop music is often associated with images, such as being “modern” and “cool,” and this might be a reason why younger male performers include English more frequently in their lyrics compared to older performers.

The use of simple structures enables the audience to understand the English parts of the lyrics relatively easily. In Japan, most people have at least six years of experience of learning English. This means that English is a foreign language which is supposed to be understood at least to a certain extent by the Japanese audience. In other words, English in J-pop lyrics can fulfill the referential function (conveying information and meaning), which is one of the two essential functions of languages (see, Holmes, 2008). This is likely to be one of the reasons why English is the most preferred foreign language to use in J-pop lyrics. As English is used across Asia (see, e.g., Benson, 2013), including English in the lyrics might attract listeners from outside of Japan as well.

English in J-pop songs can also fulfill the affective function (expressing how someone is feeling), which is the other function of the two main functions of languages (see, Holmes, 2008). In Japan, there is “the intense fascination that is shown toward English” (Seargeant, 2009, p.3). English is considered as a tool

for international communication, and English tends to be socio-culturally associated with American culture and British culture although this is not without controversy.

In J-Pop songs, English is used to create a certain image, such as a “modern,” “cool,” or “sophisticated” image, to the song by using it symbolically or indexically in association with American and British cultures (see, e.g., Loveday, 1996; Lee, 2004). For instance, the chorus part of “HOT SHOT” sung by the youngest group of EXILE (GENERATIONS from EXILE TRIBE) might be one of such examples: “HOT SHOT/ Ready to Go! Tobashite iko/ Shippai o bane ni shite aiming for the stars in space now come on!/ HOT SHOT/ Ready to Go! Ue o mezaso/ We’re going up up away and aratana sekai e.” Phrases, such as “hot shot,” do not make sense literally and so must convey an alternative meaning. “Hot shot” in particular appears to emulate American slang in an attempt to create a cool image. English is sometimes used also for intertextual and mimetic purposes (e.g., Pennycook, 2003). For instance, “Ladies and gentlemen boys and girls everybody/ saiko no ima o/ Ladies and gentlemen boys and girls everybody/ say oh oh oh oh” (HEY WHAT’S UP by Jin Akanishi) seems to directly mimic American popular music, and thus English here can project a Western identity. In addition, some songs use English to express feelings that sound too direct for Japanese people if it were in Japanese (e.g., Stanlaw, 2004, pp.104-105). Conveying feelings can sometimes be more important than information, and thus, it is essential for the languages used in J-pop lyrics to be capable of performing this affective function as well. As such, English is an ideal foreign language to use in J-pop lyrics because it can play both referential and affective functions.

As English fulfills these two functions, it can be used for “language play” in the songs. According to Beard (2007), “[h]aving fun, then, is integral to our daily lives and sense of well-being, and playing with language is an intrinsic part of that” (p. 84). In J-pop music, for example, some songs use English to play with the rhythm. The following lyrics alternate Japanese and English in the chorus: “Dance My Generation/ omae ni misetai no wa/ Dance My Generation/ kakko tsuketa ore dake/ Dance My Generation/ Sandoriyon o Tonight mitsuketa” (Dance

My Generation by Golden Bomber). English here is also used to make parts of the lyrics distinct. Repeating English phrases and using English for rhyming, as briefly shown above, are other strategies to create rhythm patterns.

Another type of language play seen in J-pop music is code ambiguation. Code ambiguation means that parts of the lyrics are written in such a way as could be interpreted both as Japanese and English (e.g., Moody & Matsumoto, 2003). An example of code ambiguation was given above in Section 3. It is different from giving special kana reading to Japanese words written in kanji in the sense that the lyrics sound both as English and Japanese.

5. Conclusion

This paper has shown that English is the most commonly used foreign language in J-pop music. Although English is a foreign language in Japan, 15.0% of the words in the lyrics on average were English. Performers are able to convey messages in English due to the general knowledge of English by the Japanese public. However, Japanese performers, especially younger male performers, are also able to convey a unique performative image through their use of English. The diverse set of applications, including expression of emotions, language play, and code ambiguation, further emphasize the attractiveness of English for Japanese performers. Admittedly, lyrics do not by themselves project the whole image of the song. The data analyzed in this study was also limited in the sense that the Oricon Top 100 songs were dominated by idol groups. However, the use of English is, and seems likely to continue to be, a significant feature in J-pop music.

Notes

¹ In this study, we defined foreign words in the lyrics as those written in romanized characters. In other words, loan words written in katakana were not included.

² Nearly 95% of the output by MeCab was correct. Most errors were due to sentence fragments or unique use of vocabulary due to the nature of lyrics.

³ In this paper, we regarded morphemes as equivalents to words in order to count both independent words and ancillary words.

⁴ See Oricon (2013) for the full discography.

Discography

Akanishi, J. (2013). *HEY WHAT'S UP*. Warner Music Japan.

AKB48. (2013). *Heart Ereki*. You, Be Cool!/KING RECORDS

EXILE. (2013). *EXILE PRIDE ~Konna Sekai o Aisurutame~*. rhythm zone.

GENERATIONS from EXILE TRIBE. (2013). *HOT SHOT*. rhythm zone.

Golden Bomber (2013). *Dance My Generation*. Zany Zap.

Kis-My-Ft2. (2013). *Kiss Umai ~Kiss Your Mind~*. avex trax.

NMB48. (2013). *Kamonegix*. laugh out loud! records.

SKE48. (2013). *Sansei Kawaii!* avex trax

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