Putting the K in K-Pop: Korean or Konglish Pop Music?

This article discusses the use of English in Korean popular music. First the author explored the motivations behind Korean music groups' use of English. Next the author looked semantically at Korean band names that incorporate English words and Korean songs that incorporate English lyrics. She discussed what makes this new practice of incorporating English successful or unsuccessful in Korean pop music. The article concludes that the use of English in Korean pop music is becoming increasingly popular, and that this may be a bad thing if extra care isn't taken to ensure accuracy.w

Korean popular music (known as K-Pop) is sweeping the globe. Korean pop artist PSY's "Gangnam Style" is currently the only video on YouTube to receive over one billion views. From Asia to Europe to South America, and yes, even to the United States, K-Pop has found millions of fans worldwide. K-Pop groups-like the boy bands of the nineties-dance and sing their way to fame with the help of sometimes carefully constructed good looks, outrageous clothing, catchy songs, and impressive choreography. Some companies start training their soon-to-be K-Pop stars, known as idols, as early as twelve years old. Idols are prepped for fame through years of lessons on all they need to become a hit, including learning to speak English. But native English speakers may not be able to understand the English in K-Pop songs, as it frequently doesn't make any sense. This type of English tends to reach into the area between English and Korean called Konglish. Konglish can be defined as "the use of English words (or words derived from English words) in Korea or the use of Korean dialect mixing with English loanwords" (Cui 2012, 954). This paper analyzes K-Pop's frequent use of Konglish by comparing phonology and semantics of both the names of disbanded and current groups and the song lyrics of older and contemporary songs.

Reasons Behind the Use of English in K-Pop Songs

The English in K-Pop is used in many different ways. Lee (2004, 429) noted that "English mixing in the song texts is not homogenous in its forms and functions." The way in which English is used varies from group to group, and even from song to song. Sometimes a single loanword is borrowed, and sometimes an entire song. But why is there such an abundance of English in K-Pop? Lee points out that the use of English in K-Pop is "preplanned, deliberate, [and] intentional...

with specific goals" (434). There is nothing spontaneous about the use of English, so what is its purpose? From Lee's work, seven different purposes for the use of English can be identified:

- Stylistic: Frequently, an English word rhymes better than a Korean word, but still conveys the same meaning.
- Assertion of sensuality: Artists frequently attempt to get around Korean censors (though they are not always successful) by writing the sexually suggestive lyrics in English.
- Assertion of unsettled identities: Some songs deliberately mismatch English and Korean lyrics in a single song to represent the battle between two inner selves.
- Assertion of resistance: English can be used to resist mainstream practices.
- Neutral medium: English in pop songs is not limited to South Korea, but is used by many Asian countries as a neutral way to communicate. Since English does not belong to any Asian country, it can be used by all.
- Image of modernity and internationalization: The use of English carries the connotation that the singer is "modern, Western, chic, or sophisticated" (432).

Why English was used in the following examples of group names and song lyrics can be explained by at least one of these purposes.

Group Names

The names of nearly all K-Pop groups are English, not Korean. This is not a new phenomenon. Lee (2004, 429) points out that the only English used in K-Pop during the 1970s and 1980s was in group names such as Onions or Pearl Sisters. What started out as a simple borrowing of English words for band names has turned into a convoluted way to make each K-Pop group more unique than previous groups. This section looks at six groups in turn, analyzing the phonology, semantics, and reasons behind each name. These band names show how complicated and perplexing K-Pop names can be.

Disbanded Groups

The following three groups are no longer active, but each one uses an English name. However, each group employs English differently.

H.O.T. In the 1990s, H.O.T was one of the most popular boy groups in Korea ("H.O.T"). The name is ambiguous to English speakers, as one doesn't know whether to pronounce the group name as *hot* or to spell the name out. Those that can read Hangul know that the name is supposed to be spelled out; in Hangul the name is written as $0||\bar{\Delta}E|$, which is /e-c'jo-t'i/. H.O.T is an acronym for **H**igh-five **o**f Teenagers.

M.I.L.K. Girl group M.I.L.K. struggled to become popular after a debut in 2001 and disbanded after two years ("M.I.L.K."). Familiarity with the group H.O.T's name might have encouraged the spelling out of M.I.L.K.'s name. The Hangul (밀크), however, shows that the name is pronounced just like the English word *milk*. The name M.I.L.K. is an acronym for Made in Lovely Kin. What exactly the name means or what the group was supposed to represent is unknown.

Fin.K.L. After debuting in 1998, girl group Fin.K.L. became incredibly popular, and a few of the group members even went on to pursue successful solo careers ("Fin.K.L."). Native English speakers might guess that the group name is pronounced as /finkl/ or even / fiŋl/, but they would most likely find the name's punctuation confusing. The name in Hangul is 핑클, as in /p'iŋkəl/. Since Korean lacks the /f/ sound, the /p'/ sound is substituted. If English speakers find the pronunciation bizarre, they would also be confused by the meaning of the name. Fin.K.L. is a sort of acronym that stands for **Fine Killing Liberty**. *Fin* comes from the French word for *end*, so the group is literally named End Killing Liberty. The purpose of the name was to imply that the group stood against "the oppression of all freedom" ("Fin.K.L.").

The reason the name is so difficult to understand is because the Korean name, 핑클, was chosen first by a poll of young people, and then the meaning was assigned to it ("Fin.K.L.").

These three examples of English in K-Pop show just how differently English is used. The punctuation in H.O.T is used differently than in Fin.K.L. and M.I.L.K.; note how the two girl groups end with a period and H.O.T does not. Even though H.O.T and M.I.L.K. both employ capital letters separated by periods, one name is pronounced as individual letters and the other name is pronounced as a single word. These three examples are all evidence of using English to appear sophisticated and modern.

Current Groups

The following groups are currently active and are quite popular. The group names further demonstrate the heterogeneous ways that English is used in K-Pop.

2NE1. First announced in 2008, 2NE1 debuted in May of 2009 and has quickly become one of the most popular K-Pop groups of today ("2NE1"). The four-member girl group has an ambiguous name. Sounding out the name, one comes up with *To Anyone*, but the use of numbers is confusing and possibly means the name is actually *Twentyone*. The Hangul spelling doesn't help either, as 투애니원 can be pronounced as both *To Anyone* and *Twenty-one*. Fans of the group are called Blackjacks, in reference to the *Twenty-one* meaning. The meaning behind the name is a combination of the phrases *twenty-first century* and *new evolution* ("2NE1").

BEAST. Before debuting in 2009, BEAST was known as B2ST. This led to some people making fun of the group and calling it /btust/. The 2 is actually pronounced as the Sino-Korean number two, 0|, as /i/. Just prior to debuting, the group changed the name to less-confusing BEAST. Both variations are pronounced the same way and use the same Hangul spelling, $\exists \Delta \sqsubseteq$. The first spelling, B2ST, stood for Boys to Search for Top. Since Top is not specified, it might be inferred that they were seeking to be like Korean rapper T.O.P. (whose name can be both spelled out and simply said as *top*). It is strange, however, that the 2 in the name stands for the word *to* but was pronounced as /i/. The second spelling, BEAST, stands for Boys of the East Standing Tall.

B1A4. By following the same logic used in B2ST/BEAST's name, B1A4 would be pronounced as B일A小, or /bilasa/. The name, however, is pronounced B-one-A-four, /bi-wən-e-for/. The letters represent blood types, and the numbers are how many of the group's members have each type; one member has type B blood and the other four have type A blood. The name also stands for "**Be** the **One A**ll **for** One."

Even though the English forms used in each group's name are different, they all serve the purpose of being neutral and Western. (They also serve the purpose of being confusing to native English speakers, but whether this is intentional is unknown.) These groups can branch out into different parts of Asia without hindering fans with Korean group names (which may be why B2ST was changed to BEAST—to make it more neutral).

Song Lyrics

Older Songs

Early K-pop songs, such as those from the 1990s and early 2000s, used little English. For the following three examples, neither the English translations nor the original Hangul lyrics could be found, so it is unknown what the context of the English is. Like Konglish band names, Konglish lyrics can be confusing to native English speakers.

We Are the Future. Of these three examples, H.O.T's song "We Are the Future" uses the most English. The song starts with "Hey everybody, look at me!" and includes the title phrase several times. Other English lines include "I don't need you/I don't want to help you/We want it/...let's go" and "one, two, and three, and four, and go!"

Crystal. Few English words are used in M.I.L.K.'s song "Crystal." The most used phrase is "follow me," which is used six times as part of a rap. The word "Crystal" is only used twice.

Ruby. Fin.K.L.'s song "Ruby" uses a total of four English words: "Ruby," used once, and "I can't cry," used six times.

The purpose of English in "We Are the Future" is unknown. However, the last two examples seem to use English lyrics as filler words, as none of the English words are inserted into a line in the song but are said at the end of a line.

Contemporary Songs

Beginning around 2008, English began being used in K-Pop more and more frequently. Instead of short phrases used for style or filler, entire choruses and even songs began to be written in English.

I Am the Best. 2NE1 is part of a company, YG Entertainment, that is famous for using English correctly in songs. 2NE1's song, "I Am the Best" (내가 제일 잘 나가), uses well pronounced and semantically significant English. One English line taken out of context might not make much sense, but when combined with the surrounding Korean, it does. One example is the line "I'm hot hot hot hot fire," which by itself seems strange to a native speaker. Coupled with the previous Korean line, 건드리면 감당 못해, meaning "If you touch me, you won't be able to handle it," the meaning of the English is clear ("[Lyric] I Am the Best – 2NE1 [Hangul, Romanization, English]").

The only issue an English speaker might take with the song is the use of nonsense words. Several times the line "Bam ratatata tatatata" is repeated, but it has no semantic significance in either English or Korean. 2NE1's use of English also falls under the assertion of sexuality. Each English word or phrase in the song ("player," "billion dollar baby," etc.) has sexual connotations. The meaning isn't provocative enough to alarm censors, but still conveys some sexual energy.

Beautiful Target. B1A4's song "Beautiful Target" is undoubtedly catchy, but the English in the song is less English and more Konglish. The main line of the chorus, "Oh my beautiful target, you zoom zoom heart like a rocket" is pronounced as "Oh /ma/ beautiful /takət/ you / jum/ /jum/ /hət/ like a /lakət/." Even more confusing is the next line, "/a/ /lakət/," which can either be interpreted as "I like it" or "a rocket."

Ignoring the fact that *my* is missing between *zoom* and *heart*, this line is almost semantically, if not syntactically, valid. However, it raises such questions as, "How exactly is the object of the group's affection a target?" and, "What does being a target have to do with rockets?" The line conjures up images of heart-like rockets exploding in the girl/target's face. Not a terribly pretty image for what is supposed to be a cute and romantic song. The purpose of B1A4's English lyrics seems to be, in part, to use the neutral medium abroad (anyone in Asia will most likely pick up on the chorus, even if the rest of the song is unintelligible to them) and also to present a modern image of South Korea.

Shock. It is unsurprising that a group with such a confusing name as B2ST/BEAST would have equally confusing lyrics. The song "Shock," released in 2010, is filled with bits and pieces of English, such as "Can't breathe, like freeze." The following excerpt is the chorus, with the Korean lyrics removed: "Every day I shock (shock) every night I shock (shock)/I'm sorry.../Every day I shock (shock) every night I shock (shock)/... oh/Come to me oh oh oh tonight so so crazy/ Come back back to me (I'm waiting you you)/Oh oh oh tonight so so crazy/...shock."

The Korean lyrics never explain who or what is being shocked or why. Instead, they implore for a girl to come back. Even the English apology "I'm sorry" is not for shocking her, but is simply a plea. The song ends with "This song is not over/Get shock," which is confusing to the listener, since the song is indeed over. Why put a warning that the song hasn't finished at the very end of the song?

The English of BEAST's song "Shock" is more for attention-getting purposes than anything else. Since the English doesn't semantically relate to the Korean of the song, it serves as little more than filler.

Konglish Done Right

Konglish in Korean songs isn't always to the detriment of the song, as evidenced by 2NE1's "I Am the Best." One idol writes many of his own songs, and he incorporates English in a way that is phonologically and semantically pleasing. Even his stage name, G-Dragon, is clever. It comes from his actual name, Ji-yong (지용). *Ji* sounds like just like the letter G and *yong* is Korean for *dragon*. G-Dragon is the leader of the internationally famous boy band Big Bang, and works with the same company as 2NE1, YG Entertainment. After watching a G-Dragon music video, one gets the sense that he is either afforded more freedom to do what he wants than other K-Pop idols, that he is more rebellious and expressive than others, or both.

One of G-Dragon's most recent songs, "One of a Kind," mixes English and Korean in a way that makes sense. The pronunciation is clear, so no English speaker is going to mistake English lyrics for Korean, such as "Yes sir, I'm one of a kind." The words make sense in the context they are used, as in "Young and rich, that's 나란 말야" or "Young and rich, that's just me" ("[Rom || Eng Lyrics] G-Dragon – One Of a Kind").

In another recent song, "Crayon," G-Dragon doesn't rely on Koreanized English that only Koreans will be able to understand. Instead, he uses Standard English and idioms, as well as terms from American subcultures, such as words likes *swag*. The titular word, *crayon*, is used in the phrase "Get your crayon." This is a pun, meaning both the object for coloring (as evidenced in the video) and a verb from the shortened form of the word *crazy*, which is *cray*. G-Dragon is essentially telling the listener to get their crazy on. The song even makes reference to American pop culture with the line "Why so serious?," a famous quote from the Joker in the 2008 film *The Dark Knight*.

G-Dragon's use of English clearly stems from a resistance of the mainstream. He has had problems with censors in the past over sexually suggestive material. The song "One of a Kind" is arrogant and discusses how G-Dragon is much better than his rivals. Neither song is about love, but rather about partying and having fun, which is markedly different from most mainstream Korean songs. Despite his resistance to the mainstream (or perhaps because of it), G-Dragon is incredibly popular and considered a trendsetter.

Conclusion

K-pop lyrics have certainly evolved over the past two decades as more English/Konglish has been utilized. This may not necessarily be a good thing, as much of the English is nonsensical and few artists can produce phonologically and semantically pleasing English lyrics. Some groups, such as 2NE1 and G-Dragon, have managed to use English to their advantage. The use of English in Korean group names warrants further study. As Korean pop groups try to become global stars, they must adapt to the English of the world. This may be different from the Standard English of America, but if K-Pop groups do not want to be mocked by anyone that speaks English, they will have to improve their English skills and stay away from Konglish.

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