

Globalized English and the Identity Crisis of the K-Pop ‘Idol Rapper’

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The global influence of American music on culture and language is well-examined, albeit largely within the Anglosphere. For example, the use of stereotypical ‘American’ phonetic variables like rhotic /r/ and the Southern American monophthongized /ai/ (Simpson, 1999) have been documented in mainstream music by British singers, such as Adele (Konert-Panek, 2017). At the same time, the use of local dialect features has been noted as marking an anti-mainstream musical identity, as exhibited, for example, by the Arctic Monkeys and their use of characteristic northern British English (Beal, 2009). Hip hop, a genre and culture rooted in the African American community and its resistance against mainstream white culture, has gained recent widespread attention, extending beyond national and ethnic boundaries (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015; Nguyen & Ferguson, 2019). The spread of hip hop music, vocally expressed in the form of rap, has been noted to transport phonological and phonetic features specifically characteristic of African American Language (AAL), as controversially exemplified by Australian rapper Iggy Azalea (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015). Such features have also been noted in Korean hip hop (K-Hip hop) (Lee, 2011), a genre that is distinct from the more globally recognized Korean Pop (K-Pop), though it too prominently incorporates both English and rap (Song, 2019).

This study explores how English phonetics, specifically of AAL, are used and adapted by K-Pop rappers to express musical identity. A case-study approach is adopted: the focus is one rapper, Kim Namjoon (aka RM), whose music contains both singing and rapping and includes both K-Pop and K-Hip hop. This diversity in his music career renders him an ideal subject for the goal of this study, which asks to what extent characteristic AAL features are realized by a Korean rapper according to musical mode (sung and rapped) and rap context (K-Pop and K-Hip hop).

This case-study consists of an auditory analysis of two well-known AAL features: post-vocalic r-lessness, (r), and /ai/ monophthongization, (ai) (Thomas, 2007). These features are also frequently observed in non-native adoptions of AAL, including among speakers who identify with hip hop beyond rap (e.g. Cutler, 2010; Reyes, 2005). Tokens of (r) and (ai) in the relevant phonological environments were extracted from sung and rapped verses by RM (total songs = 24), the latter further distinguished by song context. Raps representative of mainstream K-Pop were taken from his group (BTS) releases which charted in Korea’s Gaon Music Chart’s top 50, while those representing K-Hip hop were chosen from uncharted solo releases and mixtapes. A total of 151 tokens are included in the analyses (N (r) = 71; N (ai) = 80).

The results reveal that r-lessness was less frequent in RM’s singing (60%, n = 30) than in his rapping (88%, n = 41), while monophthongization was effectively stable across the two modes (singing: 83%, n = 18; rapping: 85%, n = 62). Variation in realizations of (r) supports work that suggests that r-lessness is affiliated with hip hop, unlike for singing, which is affiliated with the stereotypical ‘American’ English that is largely associated with pop (e.g. Simpson, 1999). Nonetheless, the rate of r-lessness is higher than might be expected, particularly considering the common association of the ‘American’ rhotic /r/ with pop singing (Simpson, 1999); more work is needed to explore underlying explanations for this result here. Furthermore,

the different patterns found for the two features may be indicative of the extent to which they mark AAL for this speaker, with r-lessness being a clearer marker of AAL than monophthongization, which has been documented as belonging to the stereotypical 'American' English as well (Simpson, 1999). Notably, however, use of neither feature is distinguished by rap context itself (i.e. K-Pop and K-Hip hop).

Altogether, this case study begins to shed light on the globalization of linguistic marking in music and the non-native use of AAL features in relation to hip hop. This work serves as a pilot study for further exploration of English in K-Pop and the strategic use of AAL features by artists within industries outside of the Anglosphere. Next steps would involve expanding the scope with regard to AAL features, musical subgenres, and including a broader range of performers. Continued research in this direction will allow for a deeper understanding of music's potential to carry complex sociolinguistic information in a foreign context.

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