

Nova Miller

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Satomi Saito

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Cultural and Linguistic Hybridization in a Globalized K-pop Industry

K-pop, or Korean pop music, has risen to an unexpected level of international popularity over the last several decades. No other non-Western music industry has come close to achieving the level of globalized interest that K-pop has, even with the popularity of Japanese music. However, the reasons for this popularity are complicated and go beyond the initial fascination with the attractive idols and extravagant performances; it involves a complex process of cultural and linguistic mixing that many academics refer to as cultural or linguistic hybridization. This concept alone cannot explain K-pop's popularity either, though, as other hybridized industries like the Hindi music industry have not experienced the same growth. Examining the evolution of modern K-pop from its inception in the 1990s to how we know it today, it becomes apparent that cultural and linguistic hybridization in this industry have increased exponentially over time through multiple methods, such as the combination of both Korean and non-Korean cultural and musical concepts, the outsourcing of music production, the utilization of social media by companies and fans, and the strategic usage of other languages in K-pop songs. These unique characteristics of K-pop have greatly contributed to its development over time and rapid growth outside of South Korea.

When discussing the effects of cultural and linguistic hybridization on K-pop's popularity, it is important to understand the meaning of these terms. For the purposes of this paper, cultural hybridization can be defined as the continuous and deliberate mixing of a local

culture, in this case Korean culture, with influences from other cultures. Linguistic hybridization, similarly, is the combination of a local language with other languages. Hybridization of culture and language appears in K-pop a variety of ways that will be discussed in later sections, but in outside of just Korean music, it can involve anything from people creating hybrid “creole” languages like Haitian Creole to how Native Americans combine dance traditions from different tribes in gatherings called pow wows. It is important to note that hybridization does not mean that one culture or language is dominating another, but it instead entails a mixture of traditions and characteristics from two or more cultures or languages. So, when discussing this concept in K-pop, it is essential to remember that hybridization does not mean that K-pop is being completely Westernized or that it is no longer authentically Korean; hybridization simply involves aspects of other cultures or languages being incorporated into K-pop music alongside Korean culture and language.

Before Korean pop evolved into the hybridized industry it is today, it consisted mostly of trot, a genre rooted in traditional Korean music that did not have much popularity outside of Korea. Trot songs typically have romantic themes, poetic lyrics, little to no inclusion of other languages, and are closely tied to Korean culture, contributing to its distinct musical style (Jin and Ryoo 117). However, beginning in the early 1990s, Western genres such as hip-hop, rock, R&B, reggaeton, and EDM have been introduced to the Korean music industry and combined with existing Korean music to create a unique hybridized genre. Songs in this hybridized style are typically constructed with a focus on creating repetitive and memorable choruses rather than complex ones and emphasizing the “danceability” of the instrumentals to match the idols’ choreography (Jin and Ryoo 118; Yoo, Ju and Sohn 6). Similarly, the topics discussed in Korean pop songs have changed due to outside cultural influences, transitioning from discussing

innocent, emotional love and nature to more sexual, physical love, which is considered more Western and therefore more appealing (Lee 13-14). Mixing cultural influences together and constructing songs differently has created an interesting dichotomy in K-pop, as it has both diversified the industry and brought international interest to it because of its similarity to Western pop. Outside of Western influences, another major change in Korean pop music was caused by the introduction of the Japanese idol system, which completely transformed how K-pop groups are trained and formed (Jin and Ryoo 117). The impact of this system shows how utilizing non-Korean influences has significantly changed K-pop and that not every defining characteristic of modern K-pop is taken from Western societies.

These changes caused by foreign influences are not accidental, either – it is often an intentional combination of Korean and non-Korean cultures and music done for a specific purpose. Compared to American pop and many other pop industries, K-pop is more diverse and marketable long-term, as there is something for everyone under the K-pop umbrella due to its wide variety of musical influences (Park 17). One process that truly differentiates K-pop and contributes to its success is the outsourcing and re-processing of musical material. Many studies have examined how entertainment companies outsource their music; they'll directly outsource the songwriting or production process of a song to a non-Korean musician, internally process the material and "localize" it to be more Korean by refining the lyrics and personalizing it to their artists, and then distribute the music back to an international audience (Oh 403; Park 24). Through this process, companies take advantage of the globalized music community while putting their own twists on the material to separate it from Western pop. They also frequently utilize their global connections by having their artists collaborate with Western artists (ex. TOMORROW X TOGETHER collaborating with the Jonas Brothers), which connects other

communities to the K-pop fandom and targets new markets. Not only do these processes explain a major component of K-pop's popularity overseas, but they also demonstrate how the Korean music industry utilizes Westernization for its own benefit and resists total cultural domination through hybridization.

Outside of hybridization appearing in K-pop music, cultural hybridization also appears in communities of K-pop fans on social media. When studying K-pop, it is easy to see that increased online communication has transformed it from something only Koreans could consume to something anyone could enjoy online, resulting in increased exposure and popularity. Beyond expanding K-pop's reach, social media has created a culturally hybridized space for K-pop fans from different backgrounds to interact with one another and their favorite idols. For example, fans might interact by discussing their shared interests in K-pop, posting live reactions to events and performances, or publicly sharing K-pop dance covers and album unboxing videos for others to comment on (Sinsomboonthong 76). Fans may also translate songs or idol's posts into other languages so that people who can't speak Korean can still consume K-pop content (Jie 680). Because any fan can participate in these actions, it creates strong cross-cultural connections between people and maintains a loyal, engaged fanbase, which is essential to the genre's continued popularity. Fans can, and are encouraged to by K-pop companies, also use social media to interact with their favorite groups directly by replying to their posts, promoting & streaming their releases, participating in online voting, watching idols' livestreams, etc. These abilities further contribute to cultural hybridization in K-pop by encouraging constant cross-cultural interaction, therefore allowing K-pop to continue expanding beyond South Korean borders.

A notable subset of cultural hybridization takes place in linguistic hybridization, a process that has been instrumental in the development of K-pop music. In nearly every style of music, language is arguably the most important method of communicating ideas, feelings, and stories to listeners, meaning that writing lyrics often requires serious knowledge, creativity, and time to convey the desired feelings and ideas. In modern K-pop, this process involves an extra element – strategically combining multiple languages. Although Korean is still the primary language in most K-pop songs, other languages such as English, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Thai, French, and Spanish are often weaved in between the Korean lyrics. This inclusion of other languages ranges in form and level of complexity, encompassing a spectrum of songs from those written exclusively in Korean to those entirely in another language. And while the inclusion of foreign words may contribute little to a song's success in other music industries, in the K-pop industry, linguistic hybridization is typically used as a strategy for international marketing, resisting against dominant Western cultures, or expressing musical ideas in a unique way, and has a noticeable impact on a song's success overseas.

Languages other than Korean can appear in every part of a K-pop song, from the song's title to the lyrics or even the artist's name. In older Korean pop music, the use of other languages, especially English, was scarce outside of the occasional Romanized Korean artist name (Lee 429). In contrast, it is unusual for a K-pop song released today to have no lyrics written in another language, and it has become increasingly common for groups to either re-release Korean songs in English, Japanese, or Chinese or release new songs or even full albums written in other languages; some recent examples include LE SSERAFIM's English song "Perfect Night", ITZY's latest Japanese release "RINGO", or Jungkook of BTS' fully English album "GOLDEN". The use of English specifically is very common and comes in many forms,

whether it is Konglish (a subset of Korean vocabulary that combines English and Korean words), AAVE (African American Vernacular English), formal English, or English colloquialisms (Lee 430). The places in a song that English words or sentences appear also vary; English might be used to discuss feelings of being crazy or sexy, to use a term of endearment like “baby” or “darling”, to make an exclamation, or to mark the end of a line in the musical structure and is used in any amount from a few words to an entire song (Lawrence 49, 57; Yoo, Ju and Sohn 5). While to some listeners, the inclusion of another language in a K-pop song may feel random or unnecessary, linguistic hybridization in K-pop is often a strategic method of achieving a specific musical goal.

Although most research on linguistic hybridization in K-pop agrees that it is done for a purpose, there doesn't appear to be a universal explanation that applies to every K-pop song. The most prevalent purpose is marketing to international audiences, which has proven to be successful, primarily because Korean is not widely spoken and making songs in other languages allows millions of new people to at least partially understand the music. Even songs in Japanese, another language that isn't widely spoken, attract a vital demographic of listeners and are a central part of many K-pop groups' discographies, demonstrating that Korean entertainment companies understand the usefulness of creating music in other languages. Additionally, a common reason for using English in particular is to both embrace globalization and resist Western domination. Though these actions are inherently contradictory, it is also seen in other hybrid genres, and expresses a desire to engage in global culture and music while also resisting Westernization. Artists often express resistance through subtly characterizing English as simple by using it to express simple ideas, using language from marginalized communities (ex. AAVE), or using English to challenge Western stereotypes about Korean culture (Lee 446; Jie 675).

Other examples of English in K-pop show it being used to work around the limitations of the Korean language and express feelings or concepts that cannot be explained well in Korean, displaying a more utilitarian reason for linguistic hybridization (Lawrence 54). These vastly different intentions behind writing hybrid lyrics disprove the assumption that English is beginning to forcibly dominate K-pop, instead indicating that although English usage has increased, it is voluntarily and strategically included for various reasons rather than forced.

Despite extensive evidence supporting the significance of cultural and linguistic hybridization in K-pop and the widespread popularity of the K-pop industry, there are some arguments against the connection. For example, while there is evidence demonstrating the exponential increase of hybridization in K-pop music, it is difficult to prove that this has caused its international success. There are many other factors to consider, such as the globalization of the music industry through technology or the use of K-pop as a method of attracting people to Korean culture through soft power (Nye and Kim 34). Regardless, it would be negligent to ignore the importance of hybridization in K-pop's evolution, as there is a clear correlation between hybridization and international interest in K-pop, shown by how the increase in these phenomena have closely mirrored each another since the 1990s and how linguistic hybridization has allowed other cultures to consume K-pop. Some also question whether K-pop is truly internationally popular, especially if they aren't familiar with any songs or groups themselves. However, K-pop has a consistent presence on American music charts on Billboard, Apple Music, and Spotify, K-pop songs have high amounts of streams on music streaming services, and groups frequently appear in American and other international media (ex. Stray Kids performing at the VMAs or BTS' repeated appearances on American talk shows). Based on this information, it is

clear that K-pop has successfully solidified its place in the international music sphere as a powerful and popular industry.

Another important consideration when discussing the growth of K-pop is the extent to which it has been Westernized. Many critics of K-pop argue that it is unoriginal, lacks internal diversity, and is becoming a copy of American pop music rather than developing a unique style (Jin and Ryoo 126). To some extent, this is true – Westernization and cultural hybridization have caused many K-pop songs to be written in the style of American pop music to induce popularity, and those songs tend to be more well-known outside the K-pop fanbase. On the other hand, when you look deeper into different groups and their stylistic influences, it is easy to see beyond their dance pop inspired title tracks and notice the true diversity in their discographies. As discussed previously, artists take inspiration from more than just American pop, often incorporating Latin, African, electronic, metal, and other elements to enhance their music and appeal to different audiences. It is also crucial to remember that Korean culture is still a key factor in creating music, with artists sometimes structuring their songs or writing lyrics in the style of traditional Korean music (ex. “LUNA” by ONEUS), wearing traditional Korean clothing, or incorporating Korean slang and cultural references into their songs. Even though K-pop artists may use Western cultures and languages as a basis for their music, we should not ignore the existing stylistic and linguistic diversity in K-pop or assume that hybridization equals Western domination.

In academic literature on K-pop music, there is a distinct lack of research conducted in the last five to ten years on cultural and linguistic hybridization and how K-pop has built a reputation internationally. Most of the research instead discusses fan behavior or provides a general summary of K-pop’s evolution. This creates an issue primarily because K-pop is a

constantly evolving industry where companies are always developing new strategies for marketing to fans and expanding their reach, which can be utilized by other music industries for their own growth. Understanding hybridity in K-pop, especially linguistically, also leads to understanding of how music is used to communicate across cultural borders and attract people to other aspects of culture. Future research should focus more on examining the perspective of K-pop artists and companies and how outsourcing and hybridization are used when creating K-pop songs rather than adding to the already extensive amount of literature on K-pop fan culture. Additionally, there should be a heavier focus on incorporating current examples and studying both earlier generations of K-pop and modern K-pop to gain a complete understanding of K-pop's development as a hybrid industry.

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