Loanwords in the Lyrics: English in J-Pop Music

Matthew T. Davis (Dr. Glenn W. Scott) School of Communications

This research is based on a qualitative study exploring Japanese university-aged students’ interpretations of Japanese pop (J-pop) music in which a few lines of lyrics contain English loanwords. The use of English loanwords, words or phrases borrowed from the English language and incorporated into the Japanese writing system, permeates contemporary J-pop lyrics. In “Japanese English: Language and Culture Contact,” Dr. James Stanlaw (2004) identifies various effects that the use of these loanwords achieves. Stanlaw posits that English can serve as a tool to serve an audacious or euphemistic purpose, fill a lexical gap by addressing concepts absent from the native Japanese language, or create poetic, symbolic or exotic meaning. While Stanlaw and other scholars such as Rebuck and Seargeant have analyzed the sociolinguistic messages carried in J-pop lyrics, none of these scholars examined an audience’s interpretation of these messages.

This study explores audience responses through the use of focus groups. The research was carried out in May 2008 in Osaka. Nine English-speaking Japanese university-aged students were queried through open-ended prompts to discuss how they perceived the use of English in J-pop music. Data was collected through a digital audio recorder, and the recordings were transcribed, coded and analyzed, focusing on students’ audience/consumer opinions as compared to existing sender/producer-oriented theories.

Findings based upon the rich data collected from focus group participants echoed Stanlaw’s aforementioned theories, which were viewed for applicability and validated. Furthermore, students supplemented existing literature by raising concerns about stereotypes perpetuated by the incorrect pronunciation or grammatical use of English in certain contemporary J-pop lyrics. The study’s results point to possible additions to theory relating to artists’ aptitude in their use of English and its effect on outside perception of Japan as a whole. The study also notes that loanwords, even though posed as a form of English, can sometimes be decoded otherwise. In raising these points, the paper furthers the study of English usage in J-pop music and, more broadly, in the Japanese language.