
Linguistic Hybridization Between Korean and English by Global Phenomenon BTS

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The Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, is the global spread of South Korean culture that can be traced back to the 1990s. Jumpstarted by new cultural departments in South Korean colleges that developed their own arts and humanities representative of the country, the Korean government followed with policies encouraging corporate investment and financial support for creative innovation (Gibson, 2020).¹ This propelled the rise of K-dramas, closely followed by K-Pop, and the phenomenon was subsequently driven by the widespread popularity of K-dramas and K-pop music across East, South, and Southeast Asia (Cho, 2017).² As the influence of the internet and social media skyrocketed, viral K-Pop music videos such as “Gangnam Style” transformed the cultural sensation into a worldwide phenomenon. Beginning with Big Bang in 2012, one of the leading K-Pop boy groups at the time, K-Pop groups continue to successfully tour worldwide and have received global recognition for the emergence of the K-Pop genre (Cho, 2017).³ This

¹ Gibson, “How South Korean pop culture can be a source of soft power”.

² Cho, “A study on English teaching strategy through the analysis of lexical and grammatical structures in K-Pop”.

³ Ibid.

recognition was facilitated by the hybridization of musical genres in K-Pop, including African American influences as well as Northern European electronic and dance genres. Most importantly, the removal of regulation limiting the amount of foreign lyrics permitted in Korean music in 1996 by the Korea Public Performance Ethics Committee (KPPEC) allowed for the instrumental adoption of English words and phrases in K-Pop (Cho, 2017).⁴

As a result of striking down this regulation and the economic advancement that *Hallyu* brought to South Korea, the practice of code-switching—when there is a switch from one language to the other in a single utterance or conversation (Gunawan, 2013)—escalated in K-Pop music.⁵ Lee (2004) probed the question of intentional functions code-switching served in musical expression that can be seen in K-Pop.⁶ Following the analysis of K-Pop lyrics in the Top 50 Gayo Charts (a renowned Korean music chart system), videotaped music programs, newspaper articles regarding K-Pop, and other sources, she narrowed down the functions of code-switching in K-Pop to the assertion of sensuality, assertion of struggle with unsettled identities, and assertion of execration or resistance. Lee (2005) later analyzed the impact of K-Pop music as a sociolinguistic sphere that created a space for youths to develop their own identities and voices,⁷ revealing other salient functions of code-switching including encouragement to overcome obstacles, mockery, and stylistic purposes. However, recent research on code-switching functions in K-Pop music by Cho (2017) analyzed the top 100 songs on two of the top Korean

⁴ Cho, “A study on English teaching strategy through the analysis of lexical and grammatical structures in K-Pop”.

⁵ Gunawan, “Analysis of code mixing and code switching in Korean song lyric Angel by Super Junior”.

⁶ Lee, “Linguistic hybridization in K-Pop: discourse of self-assertion and resistance”.

⁷ Lee, “Discourses of fusion and crossing: Pop culture in Korea and Japan”.

music charts, Gaon and Melon, and found a rise in function of English as a medium to convey emotion,⁸ emphasis, intimate behavior, and develop solidarity within the younger generation.

Despite research on code-switching in K-Pop dating back to 2004, the literature largely consists of studies on popular songs in the Korean music industry as a whole, rather than focusing on one particular artist. Narrowing down lyrical analyses to a single artist can shed light on code-switching functions with far more nuance by incorporating an artist or songwriter's own career and life story. In addition, a recent spectacle in Korean music has arguably stretched beyond the scope of *Hallyu* and ingrained their position as their own individual global phenomenon. The K-Pop group, BTS, has reached remarkable heights across borders, not only making waves for K-Pop music and Asian representation alike, but rising above globally renowned Western artists as the "top-selling act in the world" in 2021 (Savage, 2022).⁹ The present study sought to analyze this success through the messages that BTS sends in their code-switching and to identify the reasons why people across different backgrounds and contexts unite as a result of their music.

Moreover, Korean music has been analyzed dominantly in the contexts of hip-hop, R&B, and idol music separately, including how English is used with distinctly different intentions across these genres. Saavedra (2021) discussed the stark contrast between code-switching in K-Hip Hop and K-Pop in that hip-hop artists do not feel as compelled to assert resistance against Korean authority or societal norms because they have less constraints in their musical expression compared to the confined rules of K-Pop that serve to uphold the 'idol image'.¹⁰ Similarly, K-

⁸ Cho, "A study on English teaching strategy through the analysis of lexical and grammatical structures in K-Pop".

⁹ Savage, "BTS were the top-selling act in the world last year".

¹⁰ Saavedra, "English in Korean Hip Hop".

Pop idols often lack the motivation to chase after authenticity as it relates to a subculture (like hip-hop), as the industry encourages them to follow trends and release mainstream music to appeal to the general public (Saavedra, 2021).¹¹ However, BTS built their foundation on hip-hop music and features members who began their musical journey as underground rappers. As such, they create music across a wide range of genres, combining their expertise in hip-hop with R&B and pop music. Despite their unorthodox beginnings, BTS is still an active idol group in the Korean entertainment industry—reflecting the rigorous training system, synchronized choreographies, and idealized beauty and moral standards that K-pop is known for.

Simultaneously, the group is also renowned for going against the ‘flow’, creating a unique paradox that has been discouraged in the industry for years. The group’s unique position and unprecedented success generates questions as to how BTS combines their code-switching genres across genres, and as their global popularity propels to new heights, how BTS’s usage of English compares to code-switching in K-Pop music of the past. To explore these topics, the research study addressed the following questions: 1) To what extent is English used in BTS songs? 2) What functions does English serve in BTS songs and how are they expressed?

Materials and Methods

Data was collected through the Spotify Chart, a prominent music streaming platform that is currently available in 178 countries, in order to account for BTS’s global fame. 10 of BTS’ most streamed songs on Spotify were analyzed for their underlying messages and the role that English played in delivering those messages, including in songs written in both English and English-Korean hybridization. In 2020, to adjust to the isolation that the COVID pandemic

¹¹ Ibid.

induced, BTS strategized to record songs fully in English in order to expand their influence beyond Asian borders during a time when the internet was crucial. In consideration of this, 20 of BTS's most streamed songs on Spotify prior to the pandemic were also analyzed to compare how BTS utilized code-switching. The frequency (%) of English in the songs were calculated using a word-counting tool, and in this study, frequency was defined by the percentage of English words out of the total number of words in the song. A song is determined to possess code-switching if there is a switch from one language to the other in a single utterance, or within line-to-line transition. Code-switching functions were determined primarily through distinguishing the general theme, or message, in the song as well as further evaluating the purpose of each code-switch within the individual song. In total, 30 songs were categorized by year, the frequency (%) of English, and the code-switching function in the lyrics.

Results

As initially hypothesized, the frequency of English in songs increased with time, driven by the rapid globalization of BTS's music, marked by the song "DNA" released in 2017. The frequency rates show a gradual increase in English lyrics of BTS songs that closely follow the upward trend of their global success, as well as a spike in English usage in 2020 as a result of the emergence of all-English songs released during the pandemic. The following table shows a summary of the escalation of English frequency in BTS's most streamed music from the year 2015 to 2021.

Table 1

Average Frequency of English in BTS Songs

Year of Release	Proportion of English Words (%)	No. of Songs
2020-2021	64.7	10
2018-2019	35.4	14
2016-2017	29.7	4
2014-2015	25.3	2

Following extensive lyrical analyses, the four main code-switching functions were observed in BTS' music: 1) Challenging Authority/Societal Norms, 2) Reinforcing Self-Love, 3) Conveying Emotion, and 4) Stylistic Purposes. Songs with the second function, reinforcing self-love, were seen to hold most popularity among fans, followed by the function of challenging authority/societal norms. Table 2 illustrates the frequency of each code-switching function as seen in the lyrics in BTS's most streamed songs.

Table 2

Functions of English in BTS Songs

Function	No. of Songs	Percentage (%)
Stylistic Purposes	3	10.0
Convey Emotion	7	23.3
Challenging Authority/Societal Norms	8	26.7
Reinforcing Self Love	12	40.0

Discussion

The role of English in BTS's music was observed to be intensely deliberate both in their placement and the choice of words to deliver the intended function. The code-switching in BTS's songs hold sociolinguistic functions applicable to a wide audience, addressing issues and emotions with a range that allows the songs to resonate with people regardless of their race, age, and gender. Examples of these functions are included below with detailed analyses of lyrics expressing each code-switching function, as well as original lyrics in the left column and the English translation on the right.

1. Stylistic Purposes

<i>Oh my, my, my (uh) oh my, my, my</i>	<i>Oh my, my, my, (uh) oh my, my, my</i>
<i>I've waited all my life</i>	<i>I've waited all my life</i>
Ne jeonbureul hamkkehago sipeo	I want to be with you through everything
<i>Oh my, my, my (yeah), oh my, my, my</i>	<i>Oh my, my, my, (yeah) oh my, my, my</i>
<i>Looking for something right</i>	<i>Looking for something right</i>
Ije jogeumeun na algesseo	Okay, now, I kinda get it
Neol alge doen ihu ya (<i>Oh</i>)	From the moment I met you, ya (<i>Oh</i>)
Nae saleun ontong neo ya (<i>Ya, ya</i>)	My life was all you, ya (<i>Ya, ya</i>)
Sasohan ge sasohaji anke mandeureobeorin	You're the star that turns ordinaries into
neoraneun byeol (<i>Alright</i>)	extraordinaries (<i>Alright</i>)
hanabuteo yeolkkaji <i>ay, ay</i>	one after another <i>ay, ay</i>
Modeun ge teukbyeolhaji <i>ay, ay</i>	Everything is special <i>ay, ay</i>
Neoui gwansimsa georeumgeori maltuwa	The things you're interested in, the way you
sasohan jageun seupgwandeulkkaji,	walk or talk, and every little trivial habit of

*ay*yours, *ay*

In “Boy With Luv”, BTS uses “Oh my, my, my” as the hook for its catchy prosodic element and abundant open vowels, carrying it throughout the chorus to create a bright tone that falls easily on the ears. The artist continues the rhyme of English words with open, back vowel, [ɑ], followed by close, front vowel, [ɪ], in “life” and “right” to close each line with an assonant, jovial finish. Evidence of translanguaging, the process where bilinguals employ their linguistic abilities as a means to make sense of the world around them, can also be found in the subsequent verse, when they include “ya” for stylistic effect. “Ya”, in English, is phonologically identical to the informal sentence ending, “ya”, in Korean. In the lines, “neol algaedoen ihu ya/ nae saleun ontong neo ya (ya, ya)”, BTS creates a synergy between wrapping up the Korean lyric with its sentence ending while incorporating a common stylistic technique in Western hip-hop and music with “ya” in English. Lastly, “ay” and “alright” are utilized in between lines as well to aid the flow and transition from line to line.

2. *Convey Emotions*

simjang-i jijjgyeojyeo chalali bul taewojwo
gotong-gwa milyeon

My heart is torn, please burn it instead
So that pain and regret

geu mueosdo namji anhgkkeum	None of that would be left
<i>You're my tear</i>	<i>You're my tear</i>
<i>You're my you're my tear</i>	<i>You're my you're my tear</i>
<i>You're my tear</i>	<i>You're my tear</i>
<i>You're my you're my tear</i>	<i>You're my you're my tear</i>
<i>You're my fear, you're my, you're my fear</i>	<i>You're my fear, you're my, you're my fear</i>
<i>What more can I say? You're my...</i>	<i>What more can I say? You're my...</i>

In “Outro: Tear”, BTS code-switches to convey the emotion of anguish after a break-up. In a strategic use of homonyms for the words “tear” for crying and “tear” for ripping apart, they skillfully navigate the English language as a tool for expressing the feeling of being heartbroken and torn apart by their lover by switching between these two definitions. They follow this by rhyming “tear” with “fear,” articulating the emotion of being afraid after the end of a relationship that one will be unable to open their heart to another again. The emotional vulnerability displayed in their English lyricism reflects a clear departure from the English used to convey emotions of sensuality in Lee’s study (2005) and is a factor that distinguishes BTS’ code-switching from past usages of English in K-Pop.¹²

nan geunyang salam, salam, salam	I'm just a human, human, human
neon nau modeun moseolil jamsig	You erode all my corners
naleul salang, salang, salang eulo mandeul-eo mandeul-eo	And make me into love, love, love
ulin salam, salam, salam	We're humans, humans, humans
jeo musuhi manh-eun jigseondeul sog	In that myriad of straight lines
nae salang, salang, salang	My love, love, love
geu wie saljjag anj-eum	When you sit on top of it and you become

¹² Lee, “Discourses of fusion and crossing: Pop culture in Korea and Japan”.

hateuga dwae

I live so I love, I live so I love

(Live & love, live & love)

You make I to an O

I to an O

neo ttaem-e al-ass-eo

wae salamgwa salang-i biseushan soliga naneunji

You make live to a love

my heart

I live so I love, I live so I love

(Live & love, live & love)

You make I to an O

I to an O

Because of you

I know why human and love sound similar

You make live to a love

“Trivia: Love” is a song written and performed by RM, the leader of BTS and the only member fluent in both English and Korean. In this song, RM demonstrates a mastery of both languages as well as a fresh perspective on linguistic thought by not only code-switching between Korean and English, but by also forming a connection between them to convey the emotion of love. “Salam,” or human, in Hangeul, the writing system of Korean, is nearly identical to the word “salang,” or love, differing only by the final consonant. The final consonant in “salam” resembles a square, and in “salang”, a circle. RM sings of love “eroding” his “corners” to illustrate an imagery of the final consonant in “salam”, a square with sharp corners, eroding into the final consonant in “salang”, a full, round circle. He follows this with “I live so I love,” expressing his one desire in his life to love simply and wholeheartedly without the pretense or rigidity of “straight lines”. In addition, RM further develops his Hangeul metaphor in English by comparing the straight line that composes the letter “I” in “live” to the roundness in the letter “O” in “love,” conveying how his lover turns his life into the epitome of love using imagery of both English and Korean orthography. This song is an admirable illustration of how bilingual member, RM, exhibits translanguaging in his lyricism in order to demonstrate how he

uses both languages to navigate the world around him and better his understanding of his personal experiences and emotions.

3. *Challenging Authority/Societal Norms*

Rul bakkwo <i>change change</i>	Change the rules, <i>change change</i> .
Hwangsaeureun wonhae wonhae <i>maintain</i>	The ones who came before us want to, want to <i>maintain</i> .
Geureogeneun an doeji <i>BANG BANG</i>	But we can't do that, <i>BANG BANG</i>
Igeon jeongsangi anya	This ain't normal.
Igeon jeongsangi anya	This ain't normal.
Nae tasirani neo nongdamiji	It's my fault? You're joking, right?
Gongpyeonghadani, <i>oh, are you crazy</i>	This is fair? <i>Oh, are you crazy?</i>
Ige jeonguirani? <i>You must be kiddin' me!</i>	This is right? <i>You must be kiddin' me!</i>
<i>You must be kiddin' me,</i>	<i>You must be kiddin' me,</i>
<i>You, you must be kiddin' me</i>	<i>You, you must be kiddin' me!</i>

This song, titled “Baepsae” or “Silver Spoon”, is an expression of resistance against the rigid socioeconomic system in South Korea. The word “maintain” is used to communicate how the upper class and older generations in South Korea strictly uphold the socioeconomic class division, and how the system is largely biased toward those who were born with a “silver spoon” in their mouth. BTS utilizes repetition of the words “change” and “BANG” to garner support and call for change that they believe needs to happen immediately. As the song escalates in rhythm and tempo, BTS repeats the phrase, “You must be kiddin’ me,” directly challenging authority. This use of English in the song functions to rile up youths, an age group that may identify more

closely with their increased use of English compared to older generations, as well as the overarching theme.

<i>You worth it you perfect</i>	<i>You worth it you perfect</i>
<i>Deserve it just work it</i>	<i>Deserve it just work it</i>
neon gwitina gwiti tto <i>prettyya pretty</i>	You look elegant, elegant, also you're <i>pretty, pretty</i>
bich-ina bich-i neon jinliija ichi	You shine, shine, you're the truth and the reason
hoksi nuga neoleul jakku yoghae (yoghae)	If anyone keeps insulting you, insulting you
<i>Tell em you're my lady</i> gaseo jeonhae (jeonhae)	<i>Tell em you're my lady</i> , go tell them, tell them
ttan nomdeul-i mwolageon	Whatever other people say
i sesang-i mwolageon	Whatever this world tells you
neon naege choego neo geudaelo	You're the best to me, just the way you are
jeoldae jjolji mal-a	Don't ever be scared
nuga mwolaedo neon gwaenchanh-a (<i>Alright</i>)	Whatever people say, you're okay (<i>Alright</i>)
ganghae neoneun mal-ya	You are strong
<i>You say yes or no yes or no</i>	<i>You say yes or no yes or no</i>
<i>All my ladies put your hands up</i>	<i>All my ladies put your hands up</i>
21segi sonyeo <i>hands up</i>	21st century girl, <i>hands up</i>
<i>All my ladies put your hands up</i>	<i>All my ladies put your hands up</i>
<i>Now scream</i>	<i>Now scream</i>

The lyrics above are from “21st Century Girls”, in which BTS took a stand against the objectification of women and the stigma around feminism in South Korean society. The phrases: “You worth it you perfect/ deserve it just work it,” sought to encourage their female audience of their worth and beauty, while “you say yes or no,” reassured women that they hold the power of making their own decisions despite society’s impositions. Then, BTS actively cheers for women to unite and resist societal norms silencing their voices by code-switching in the chorus with “all my ladies put your hands up/ now scream.” The usage of English is especially significant in the

context of challenging gender roles because of the contrast in the progression toward supporting feminism between the United States and South Korea. Though sexism is nevertheless prominent in the United States and other Western nations, feminism is becoming a destigmatized movement that is regularly discussed within society as more women take on positions of greater authority in the workplace. South Korea, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in Confucian values that strictly discourage the fluidity of gender roles, making the topic of feminism still highly controversial in the country. BTS repeatedly code-switches to English in this song to express their support towards the contemporary values that Western society is working to uphold. These lyrics may also be interpreted in the context of the Gangnam murder case that occurred in May of 2016, five months before the release of the song. This incident was seen by many as an act of misogyny, where a man stabbed a random woman in her twenties in a public restroom. A quote from the man included, “I did it because women have always ignored me”, and the event was one of numerous instances of innocent women targeted in violent crimes, and in 2012 and 2014, murdered, in South Korea, triggering waves of public response.¹³ In light of recent events that provoked severe fear and alarm in the women of South Korea, BTS, in recognition of the weight of their influence, made use of their position as a means to empower women once more.

4. Reinforcing Self-Love

¹³ Park Suji. “Gangnam murderer says he killed “because women have always ignored me””.

<i>You've shown me I have reasons</i>	<i>You've shown me I have reasons</i>
<i>I should love myself</i>	<i>I should love myself</i>
nae sum nae geol-eoon gil jeonbulo dabhae	I'll answer with my breath, my path
eoje-ui na oneul-ui na	The me of yesterday, the me of today
naeil-ui na	The me of tomorrow
<i>(I'm learning how to love myself)</i>	<i>(I'm learning how to love myself)</i>
ppajim-eobs-i namgim-eobs-i modu da na	With no exceptions, it's all me

One of BTS's key messages in their song, "Answer: Love Myself," emphasizes the significance of self love and not looking for peace and happiness in materialistic, momentary objects or the validation of others. Rather, they reinforce the idea that true serenity and stability comes from forgiving oneself, and consequently, finding harmonious love within oneself. This code-switching function was never observed in previous studies of code-switching in K-Pop, and uniquely, continues as the group's central theme across their albums. After expressing comparably complex ideas in Korean such as the acceptance of one's past, present, and future self, BTS code-switches to English for the concepts that they seek to drive home the most. As the final song in their album series titled Love Yourself, BTS responds to the fans' gratitude toward them for teaching them to love themselves with "you've shown me I have reasons/ I should love myself," delivering the message that the fans have taught them to love themselves as well. By singing this, they simultaneously console those who still struggle with loving themselves by reassuring that they are not alone, and that the group members themselves are on the same journey with them.

Wholistically examining BTS' discography from 2015 to present, their progression from feelings of frustration from being belittled as well as of battles with depression and anxiety has flourished into music about self-love and forgiving oneself and others as the members maneuver

through their twenties. Their lyrical testimonies of being poorly disrespected by the Korean music industry included, “a medium-sized, ordinary idol was my second name, countless people get cut from broadcast/ They say some of these kids can't make it cuz their agency is too small, praying that this isn't truly our reality”, their past full of resentment and indignation. As the group openly shares these struggles as well as journey with mental health, not only is the audience seeing their unfiltered trials and growth as people individually, but as listeners, there is empathy and comfort felt from the group’s transparency and messages. Now, BTS sing of “bright lights, going forward,” and addressing those who doubted their career by code-switching with “Talkin’, talkin’, talkin’, I do what I do/ You can’t stop me loving myself,” boasting a gradual, healthy growth into the artists who inspire millions around the world.

Conclusion

BTS have demonstrated skillful use of English as both a global marketing strategy for effective literal communication as well as a device to send specific messages through their songs in relation to national values, target age groups, and other underlying purposes. The functions with the highest streams—challenging authority/societal norms and reinforcing self-love—emphasize the hallmark themes in BTS’s music that are uncommon in K-Pop idol music and sets them apart from other idols, attracting numerous fans to listen to their music. Fans are not only consoled musically, but also emotionally through their personal experiences, viewing BTS as a voice that speaks for them on issues such as depression, anxiety, and the pressure to succeed in society despite the lack of socioeconomic mobility. Not only does BTS code-switch to convey their positions on these necessary, stigmatized topics, but they code-switch to raise curiosity about the study of the Korean language. By connecting both content and linguistic themes

between English and Korean, many fans have begun to learn Hangeul, as basic understanding of Hangeul is required to comprehend the meaning of songs like “Trivia: Love”. This spread of appreciation for Korean culture and language as well as awareness of Korean social values are instrumental factors that have propelled BTS into the honored position of representatives of not only Korea, but Asia, today.

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