

# **English in Asian Popular Culture**

**Edited by**  
**Jamie Shinhee Lee and Andrew Moody**



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## *Sociolinguistics and the study of English in Asian popular culture*

Jamie Shinhee Lee and Andrew Moody

Popular culture is something with which we ‘feel’ we are all familiar and ‘think’ we know quite well. However, defining it is not as straightforward as it appears to be. Popular culture is more than entertainment and leisure (Storey, 2006). A truly popular culture is, as Storey (2003) puts it, ‘an insistence on seeing difference within the context of a shared community: in effect, to live in both the local and the global and share a “glocalized” culture’ (2003: 120). This is precisely the popular culture we have sought to observe, describe and explain from the inception of this project. This book presents a collection of analyses of popular culture texts in Asia. The common theme is English, but we are not interested in creating a single homogeneous profile of the English language in Asia. Rather, our goal is to describe heterogeneous uses and multiple identities of Englishes as represented in various pop culture texts created and appropriated by different peoples in Asia.

A brief discussion of culture in general may serve as a springboard to further explore issues specific to popular culture. Williams (1983: 90) proposes three senses of culture: (1) a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; (2) a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group; and (3) the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. However, Williams’ senses have frequently been criticized because they privilege a sort of ‘high culture’ in a way that does not encourage examination of more ordinary expressions of culture (see Gans 1999; Tomlinson 1999; Williams 1989). Working from a sociolinguistic understanding of language, Kramsch (1998: 10) defines culture as ‘membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings’. She lists several observations about culture:

1. Culture is always the result of human intervention in the biological processes of nature.
2. Culture both liberates and constrains. It liberates by investing the randomness of nature with meaning, order, and rationality and by providing

- safeguards against chaos; it constrains by imposing a structure on nature and by limiting the range of possible meanings created by the individual.
- 3. Culture is the product of socially and historically situated discourse communities, that are to a large extent imagined communities, created and shaped by language.
  - 4. A community's language and its material achievements represent a social patrimony and a symbolic capital that serve to perpetuate relationships of power and domination; they distinguish insiders from outsiders.
  - 5. But because cultures are fundamentally heterogeneous and changing, they are a constant site of struggle for recognition and legitimization.
- (Kramsch 1998: 10)

As explained in detail in Kramsch (1998), there is clearly a place for language, a sense of community and a social element in the conceptualization of culture. It is neither reasonable nor possible to deny the existence of a relationship between language and culture. However, when it comes to the nature of that relationship, the debate continues. For example, scholars disagree about how flexible or inflexible the relationship is, or the extent to which an individual has power to resist 'norms'. Halliday (1993: 11) articulates one insightful conceptualization of the relationship between language and culture:

Language neither drives culture nor is driven by it; the old question about which determines which can be set aside as irrelevant, because the relation is not one of cause and effect but rather (as Firth saw it, though not in these words) one of realization; that is, culture and language co-evolve in the same relationship as that in which, within language, meaning and expression co-evolve.

Without attempting to answer questions about the nature of the relationship between language and culture, we can acknowledge that the two are inextricably related. As popular cultures begin to grow and develop across Asia, therefore, the language used to express those cultures is doubtlessly related to pop culture.

Academic discussions undoubtedly provide useful insights, but the main audiences of these scholarly discourses are academics and trained professionals in the field, not members of the general public. Thus, in order for us to tap into the general public's understanding of pop culture, we need to include 'popular' discussions in 'popular' sources that matter to the 'populace'. The legitimacy of Wikipedia as an academic source is contested, but its perceived usefulness as a convenient web-based encyclopaedia is difficult to dismiss, since it is arguably one of the most frequented websites by the average information-gatherer. The very nature of Wikipedia is

'popular' in the sense that any user may add, delete or edit information in entries. Considering that our object of investigation—popular culture—is a topic that matters greatly to the general public, it seems appropriate to note how Wikipedia introduces 'popular culture':

Popular culture, sometimes abbreviated to pop culture, consists of widespread cultural elements in any given society. Such elements are perpetuated through that *society's vernacular language* or an established *lingua franca*. It comprises the *daily interactions, needs and desires and cultural 'moments'* that *make up the everyday lives of the mainstream* ... Popular culture often contrasts with a more exclusive, even elitist 'high culture', that is, the culture of ruling social groups. (Wikipedia, emphasis added)

A more academically oriented understanding of the term 'popular culture' is offered by Storey (2006), who views Williams' (1983) third sense of culture as 'signifying practices', and this seems to be quite a relevant and useful perspective to take when it comes to 'talking about' texts in pop culture. Below are summarized various contested definitions of pop culture as presented in Storey (2006: 4–11):

1. culture widely favoured and well liked by many people
2. the culture left over when we have decided what is high culture
3. mass-produced commercial culture
4. culture originating from the people
5. a site of struggle between the resistance of subordinate groups and the forces of incorporation operating in the interests of dominant groups in society
6. postmodern culture not recognizing the distinction between high and popular culture.

Both 'folk' and 'academic' definitions of pop culture point to the notion of a non-elitist culture that has general appeal to and is consumed by wide audiences. In fact, Fiske (2002: 3) argues that culture can be made popular 'if it offers meanings that are relevant to the everyday lives of subordinate people'. In terms of a sociolinguistic understanding of pop culture, therefore, analyses should not focus solely upon the products of the culture, but also on those who produce and especially on the consumers of the products.

Another informative description comes from the website of *The Journal of Popular Culture*, which is 'the official publication of the Popular Culture Association':

The popular culture movement was founded on the principle that *the perspectives and experiences of common folk offer compelling insights into the social world*. The fabric of human social life is not merely the art deemed worthy to hang in museums, the books that have won literary prizes or been named 'classics', or the religious and social ceremonies carried out by societies' [sic] elite. *The Journal of Popular Culture* continues to break down the barriers

between so-called ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture and focuses on filling in the gaps that a neglect of popular culture has left in our understanding of the workings of society. (*The Journal of Popular Culture*, emphasis added)

This is a clear articulation that the journal envisions to be a space in which the neglected ‘perspectives and experiences of common folk’ are treated as worthy insights and valuable pieces of information necessary to understand a society. Fiske (2002) seems to concur. He argues that pop culture ‘is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests’ and ‘made from within and below, not imposed from without or above’. He continues that pop culture ‘is always a culture of conflict’ and ‘involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate’ (2002: 2). It is not uncommon that pop culture is criticized for improper or vulgar language. Fiske (1996) explains why that may be the impression many people have about pop culture by noting that a popular text such as the tabloid press offers ‘a form of language that enables various oral cultures to find resonances between it and their own speech patterns’ and ‘there is a tone of disrespect’ as it departs and deviates from ‘official, correct language’ (1996: 106).

In understanding pop culture, Fairclough’s (1992: 62) idea of ‘discourse in a three-dimensional framework as text, discursive practice, and social practice’ is appropriate. He argues that ‘discourse is a mode of action’ and ‘a mode of representation’ (1992: 63) and that ‘there is a dialectal relationship between discourse and social structure: the latter is both a condition for, and an effect of, the former’ (1992: 64). What seems to be particularly relevant to popular culture is Fairclough’s characterization of discursive practices as ‘processes of text production, distribution, and consumption’ (1992: 78). It is hard to imagine pop culture commodities that do not involve all three processes of discursive practices.

So far we have surveyed important ideas in defining pop culture mainly as abstract concepts. Now we would like to move on to something more practical and concrete. In order for us to specify the scope of this project, the next reasonable question to ask is what types of texts are considered pop culture discourses. The American Studies Program at Washington State University lists various resources for popular culture analysis. ‘Music, film, television, advertising, sports, fashion, toys, magazines and comic books, and cyberculture’ are identified as forms of popular culture. As for key issues in the study of pop culture, ‘race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, cultural imperialism and censorship’ are mentioned. In addition, the following ‘types or elements of popular culture analysis’ are briefly discussed: ‘production analysis, textual analysis, audience analysis, and historical analysis (of the first three dimensions as they change over time)’.

Interpretive textual analysis goes beyond denotative meanings and investigates connotative meanings, whereas content analysis is based less

on subjective observations and more on quantitative approaches that focus on frequencies and instances. Audience analysis is made possible through surveys, opinion polls, focus groups or participant observations in a fan subculture. Production analysis draws our attention to the belief that no analysis of popular culture is complete without considering wider contexts such as political economy because ‘popular culture is deeply embedded in capitalist, for-profit mass production’ (American Studies Program, Washington State University). As a discipline, linguistics does not have a long history in treating pop culture as a legitimate object for academic investigation. This contrasts with cultural studies, communication studies and anthropology, each of which have produced a good amount of research on pop culture over the years (see G. Lee, 1995, 1998a, 1998b). There is little literature on pop culture available in so-called theoretical linguistics. Individual specific language use or performance is not on this field’s research agenda. What is not immediately apparent, however, is why sociolinguistics has not done much better. If the relationship between language and society—to be specific, language variation, either regional or social—is the ‘bread and butter’ of sociolinguistics, we will be hard pressed to suggest a topic as potentially illuminating as popular culture. Popular culture cannot exist without people in society, and a society without some form of pop culture is unthinkable. It is equally inconceivable to argue that an individual living in isolation creates pop culture, since mass consumption and distribution, and expected or real economic gains, are essential components of pop culture. This inherent connection between cultural artefacts and ‘people in society’ makes pop culture all the more a research worthy topic for sociolinguists.

Only recently, some sociolinguistic studies have turned our attention to pop culture (Lee and Kachru 2006). These studies present a focused discussion of a particular area of pop culture, including music (see Cutler 1999; G. Lee 1995; J. Lee 2004, 2006b, 2007b, 2010b; Moody 2000, 2001; Moody and Matsumoto 2003; Pennycook 2003, 2007; Simpson 1999; Stanlaw 2000), broadcast media and film (see G. Lee 1998b; J. Lee 2007a; Mesthrie 2002; Moody 2006; Taylor 2004; Thompson 2003; Thornborrow and Morris 2004), advertising (see Bhatia 1992, 2001; J. Lee 2006a, 2010a; Luna, Lerman and Peracchio 2005; Strauss 2005; van Mulken, van Enschot-van Dijk and Hoekken 2005) and computer-mediated communication (see Gao 2006; Herring 2004; G. Lee 1998a; Thurlow 2003). These recent studies demonstrate the significance and the relevance of data from mass media and popular culture to linguistics—particularly sociolinguistics (Moody 2009).

Although these data sources were once regarded as beyond the scope of linguistics, newer theoretical orientations and methodological developments have made popular culture an accepted and justifiably useful resource for analyses in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. Nowhere are these

approaches more enlightening with regard to sociolinguistic contexts than in the burgeoning popular cultures of East, South and South-East Asia. Recent years have seen the development of entertainment media across Asia and the Pacific, in environments where English frequently plays a role as a language of cultural transmission or as a language in contact with the major languages of the region. While some Asian cultures (e.g. Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines) have adopted English as a result of colonial history, others (such as Japan, Korea and China) treat English as a link to global modes of communication. Some of these cultures (e.g. India, Malaysia and Singapore) stress the importance of English as a language for intra-ethnic and national communication, while others (e.g. Taiwan and Thailand) use English mainly in inter-ethnic and international communication. Despite the differences across Asia, and Asian countries' diverse responses to English, each of these countries has to some extent adopted English as a language of popular culture.

In specific reference to the relationship between English and pop culture, 'globalization' is often mentioned. Pennycook (1994) concurs with Flaitz (1988), arguing that 'English is closely connected to the global spread of popular culture through music and films', and therefore it is not 'ideologically encumbered' (Flaitz 1988: 201, cited in Pennycook 1994: 20). Globalization is sometimes discussed in negative terms and frequently treated as synonymous with Americanization. Storey (2003: 111) raises an issue in relation to this idea, pointing out the limitations of the 'extremely simplified notion of consumption' that presupposes a powerless position for audiences as 'passive consumers of the cultural meanings which supposedly flow directly and unproblematically from the goods they consume'. He makes a case for the global success of hip hop, and asserts that viewing non-American rappers as 'the victims of American imperialism' is not accurate, since they 'appropriate' hip hop to address 'local needs and desires' (2003: 111). Storey further argues that 'globalization is producing two contradictory effects, sameness and differences—that is, a sense that the world is becoming similar as it shrinks under the pressure of time-space compression, but also that it is characterized by an increasing awareness of difference' (2003: 114–15). We hope that our project adequately captures and clearly embodies the very nature of 'contradictory effects' of sameness and differences in Asian pop culture texts in a globalizing world.

Among the sub-texts in pop culture, perhaps music has generated the most scholarly discussions in relation to the English language (see Kachru 2006; Kirkpatrick and Moody 2009; J. Lee 2004, 2006b, 2007b; Moody 2000, 2001; Moody and Matsumoto 2003; Omoniyi 2006; Pennycook 2003, 2007; Stanlaw 2000, 2004). Pennycook's (2007) discussion of global Englishes specifically touches on the issue of hip hop. He argues that the term 'global Englishes' is more appropriate than 'world Englishes'—or what he calls

'modernist states-centric models of imperialism'—because 'English is closely tied to processes of globalization: a language of threat, desire, destruction and opportunity' (2007: 5). The notion of global Englishes is argued to be closely intertwined with transcultural flows, which Pennycook (2007: 6) explains are 'the ways in which cultural forms move, change, and are reused to fashion new identities in diverse contexts'. He insists that by transcultural flows he does not simply refer to 'the spread of particular forms of culture across boundaries, or the existence of supercultural commonalities (cultural forms that transcend locality)', but 'the processes of borrowing, blending, remaking and returning to processes of alternative cultural production' (2007: 6).

This book discusses the roles and features of English in various forms of Asian popular culture. While popular culture has been examined from sociological, anthropological and cultural theory perspectives, the essays in this collection present a *linguistic* analysis of pop culture, focusing on the sociolinguistic importance of English within Asian popular culture by examining several ways in which global cultural influences from the English-using world are negotiated locally throughout Asian societies. For the purposes of this collection, Asia will be considered as comprising East Asian countries (e.g. China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea), South Asian countries (e.g. India) and South-East Asian countries (e.g. Singapore and the Philippines). This volume does not offer an exhaustive survey of popular cultures in Asia, but instead presents studies that represent sociolinguistic approaches to English in popular culture.

While the collection surveys a variety of popular cultures throughout Asia, as well as the sociolinguistic functions of English within the media, it is our belief that the collection should be organized around the examined popular media. The book explores a range of expressions of popular culture in music, TV and film, advertising and cyber-communication. Each of these forms of media represents an important site of contact between English and popular cultures throughout Asia. The eleven essays not only represent innovative approaches in the study of sociolinguistics, they are firmly grounded within the description of varieties of English in Asia. These areas are not in any sense a comprehensive list of popular media, but instead represent important work on the sociolinguistics of English in Asia and demonstrate that the role of language—in particular English—in contemporary Asian popular culture cannot be overlooked.

This volume is organized into three parts: Part I: Listening to Pop Culture; Part II: Watching Pop Culture; and Part III: Selling Pop Culture. Although all three chapters in Part I respond to English in Hong Kong pop music, the focus of each is decidedly different. Phil Benson and Alice Chik (Chapter 2) provide a diachronic overview of Hong Kong pop music since the 1950s from a linguistic perspective and analyse narratives from the

current Hong Kong alternative music scene. Brian Hok-Shing Chan (Chapter 3) offers a textual analysis of English in Cantopop and argues that Cantopop is a discursive site that may have a broad macro-sociolinguistic impact on Hong Kong's bilingual community. Similar to Chan's discussion, Angel Lin (Chapter 4) discusses bilingual practices of Hong Kong musicians, but she focuses specifically on the culturally and linguistically hybridized identities of hip-hop artists. It would be wrong to assume from a cursory glance at the papers in this section that Hong Kong has had such a singular importance in the use of English within popular music. Scholarship discussing the role of English in Korean, Japanese, Malaysian and Filipino is easy to find (much of which is discussed above). Instead, what is unique about Hong Kong is the relative scarcity of examination of English within other pop culture media, and this is what is represented in this collection of essays.

Part II contains four chapters and covers three media forms (TV shows, film and the internet) in four countries (the Philippines, Japan, Korea and China). Roger M. Thompson (Chapter 5) examines conflicting depictions of English and Filipino in TV broadcasting in the Philippines, and suggests that perceptual and attitudinal differences towards English versus Filipino programmes are related to a class distinction in Philippine society. Andrew Moody and Yuko Matsumoto (Chapter 6) investigate Lu-go, which is a language created by a Japanese TV personality Lou Oshiba, and look at how the creator of the language has popularized the insertion of English vocabulary into Japanese speech. Moody and Matsumoto observe that Lu-go does not function as a new language, but instead works to reduce the anxiety that many Japanese speakers feel about speaking English. Jamie S. Lee (Chapter 7) explores metalinguistic discourses about English featured in South Korean films. As a case study of narratives about South Koreans' love/hate relationship with the English language, Lee reviews the movie *Please Teach Me English* and demonstrates how film can offer a sociolinguistic space in which various dimensions of English learning, such as learners, attitudes and English language ideologies, can be showcased realistically. Liwei Gao (Chapter 8) argues that young educated Chinese netizens use English to construct unique and appealing identities in cyberspace.

Part III features four studies on advertising in four different countries: Singapore (Chapter 9), Taiwan (Chapter 10), India (Chapter 11) and Korea (Chapter 12). Although all four deal with advertising, each chapter focuses on a different type of advertising. Beng Soon Lim and Lu-Ann Ong (Chapter 9) investigate Singaporean print ads of women's beauty products published in English. Drawing upon a large corpus of 151 print ads, two TV commercials and interviews with copywriters, Jia-Ling Hsu (Chapter 10) presents an analysis of linguistic devices in residential real estate advertising in Taiwanese daily newspapers and consumer attitudes towards English mixing in advertising. Tej K. Bhatia (Chapter 11) examines a wide range of

advertisements covering what Bhatia terms ‘conventional’ (e.g. TV, radio, print and the internet), ‘unconventional’ (e.g. wall, video-van advertising, stencils, posters) and ‘new media’ (e.g. advertising on cell phones and audio messages) in India. Joseph S. Park (Chapter 12) analyses South Korean internet users’ reactions to a South Korean actress’s English pronunciation featured in a TV commercial about an American facial cleanser.

Last but not least, it is our sincere hope that this project challenges the ‘one size fits all’ approach to ‘non-native’ English speaking territories. We problematize the notion of pop culture as ‘a hopelessly commercial culture’ consumed by ‘brain-numbed’ passive audiences, as eloquently articulated in Storey (2006: 6). This book is intended to do some justice to this important, yet long dismissed, pop culture and ‘the people’ in it—the people living and ‘signifying’ it daily throughout Asia.

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