

Globalization and Japanese Creativity: Adaptations of Japanese Language to Rap

Noriko Manabe, CUNY Graduate Center, nmanabe@yahoo.com

Version presented at SEM Conference, November 20, 2005

As a genre without a melody but with a well-defined beat, rap isolates and exploits the rhythmic aspects of a language, offering scholars an opportunity for musical and linguistic study. An interesting case is rap in Japanese.

In American rap, the rhythms are punctuated by rhymes, which have long been a tradition of the verbal arts, and stress accents, which are inherent in the English language. On the other hand, the Japanese poetic tradition has not emphasized rhyming, and the language is spoken without stress accents. Furthermore, the Japanese language is unrelated to English, with different syntax, phonemes, and vocabulary. Therefore, Japanese rappers have to find ways of exploiting the resources of their own language to create flow for their raps.

Given these differences, Japanese rap offers an interesting case study in the role of language in adapting a global genre. It poses several questions. What processes are involved in adaptation? Where does imitation end and innovation begin? What is the model for rap: the rhythm of English, speech over a beat, or an ideology?

This paper explores the problems that Japanese rappers initially faced in rhyming and rhythm, the solutions they have applied, and the innovations they have made. First, I will describe how Japanese rappers formed rhymes by capitalizing on their vocabulary, enriched from Chinese, Japanese, and Western sources. Second, I will demonstrate how Japanese rappers have created flow by

exploiting the pitch accents of the Japanese language, and by using certain syllables to vary the rhythm.

History of Rap in Japan

Hip-hop came to Japan in 1983 through the film *Wild Style* (Condry 1999). The first Japanese rap records were released in the mid-1980s by Chikada Haruo, Ito Seiko, and Takagi Kan. Japanese rap achieved its first commercial flourish in the mid-1990s, as Scha Dara Parr and East End with Yuri scored million sellers. Other groups active since the 1990s include King Giddra, Rhymester, and RIP Slyme, whom we will hear in this presentation.

Rap comprises a smaller part of the music market in Japan than in the United States, at 13% of top-selling album titles vs. 22% in the United States (Oricon, Billboard). Nonetheless, rap has been gaining popularity, partly due to artists that mix pop with rapping. In 2005, albums by Orange Range and Ketsumeishi sold over a million copies, while RIP Slyme, Rhymester, and Scha Dara Parr performed in festivals attracting 50,000 people a day.

Rhymes traditionally not emphasized in Japanese poetry and song

Many Japanese rap pioneers learned to rap by using American rappers as their model, just as the Japanese had learned other Western genres. However, they started by rapping in English, believing that they couldn't rhyme in Japanese. The difficulty is syntax: while English sentences can end with nouns or verbs, which are unlimited in number, Japanese sentences must end with auxiliary verbs, such as *-desu* and *-masu*. As there are only a handful of these endings, end-rhymes are trivial. As K

Dub Shine put it, “I thought rapping in Japanese was a lost cause, because the rhymes would just end up being suffixes.” (p.c.)

Given this syntax, Japanese poetry has traditionally not been built on rhymes, but on syllable count, such as the alternating lines of five and seven syllables in *haiku*. It has also highlighted word painting through associating images with certain sounds. In the following example of *too-in*, or initial repetition, the repeated “a” evokes the increasing light of dawn through words that refer to morning:

ariake for moonlit night and *akatsuki* for dawn:

Ariake no tsurenaku mieshi wakareyori I stayed with you throughout that night, and
at dawn, I bid you a reluctant goodbye.

Akatsuki bakari ukimono wa nashi. Since then, the dawn has been very difficult.
(Mibu no Tadamine, Kokinshuu)

Similarly, Japanese songs are often built on text repetition rather than rhymes, as in this familiar song:

Haru ga kita,/ Haru ga kita,/ Doko ni kita?/ Spring has come,/Where has it come?
Yama ni kita/Sato ni kita/No ni mo kita. It has come to the mountain,/ village,/ and field.

Despite this lack of a rhyming tradition, Japanese rappers feel the need to rhyme. Not only are rhymes a prominent feature of American rap, but more importantly, Japanese rappers have no melody and must rely on the rhythm of the lyrics to build momentum. They think rhymes punctuate and drive the rhythm, making them essential.

Forming rhymes in Japanese rap

When K Dub Shine of King Giddra first started rapping in Japanese, he noted that rhymes in English were built on key words being placed at the end of the line. Realizing that he could form

interesting rhymes in Japanese this way, he began to break the rules of syntax, omitting auxiliary verbs to place key words at the end of the line. (p.c.)

Take as an example these lines from “Birth of a Star” (King Giddra, in *Sora kara no chikara*).

K Dub takes the statements:

Shoujo no *yume* to hanashi ga chigau-ne.
Kamera no mukou de *mune* o itame-teru.

Breaking the rules of syntax, he moves the words *yume* and *mune* to the end of the line, forming a rhyme.

Hanashi ga chigaune, shoujo no *yume* It’s different from the girlhood dream, isn’t it?
Kamera no mukou de itameteru *mune* On the other side of the camera, her heart is
breaking.

In doing so, he also contrasts *yume*, or the subject’s girlhood dream of being a pop star, with *mune*, her troubled conscience at having become a porn star.

Having found a mechanism with which to make rhymes, Japanese rappers found that their vocabulary was rich with rhyming possibilities, as the language had absorbed words from many different cultures over the centuries. About half of the Japanese vocabulary consists of compound words derived from Chinese characters, with Japanese pronunciation, called Sino-Japanese compounds or *kango*. As *kango* end in [i] or [u], they are a rich source of rhymes. K Dub Shine started to use *kango* in his raps because “they sound like multi-syllable words in English, like ‘Fri-day’ and ‘high-way.’” In Figure 1, K Dub Shine lines up three such rhymes on the syllables *-oukai*.¹

¹ References to the discography for figures are given in the title of the figures.

As English is required in Japanese middle schools, and most young Japanese are constantly exposed to American popular culture, most Japanese have some knowledge of English. Japanese rappers frequently use such stock hip-hop interjections as “Yes, yes, y’all” and “Say, ho!” in performance. In addition, rappers use English words to rhyme, sometimes basing the rhyme on the Japanese pronunciation of English. In this example, RIP Slyme makes *arrow* rhyme with *hello*:

Nantsutte oite kotoba no *Arrow* (Having made a previous comment), I take an
 arrow of words,
 Atama neratte hadatte atatte *HELLO*. Aim at the head, shoot, bull’s eye, hello! (RIP
 Slyme, “R-I-P Slyme”)

Japanese has fewer phonemes than English, having five vowels, vs. fifteen for English, and no final consonants. Perhaps as a consequence, Japanese contains an abundance of homonyms. Rappers use them as substitutes for rhymes, and more poetically, to connect or contrast ideas. In “Birth of a Star,” K Dub Shine contrasts *yume* (dream) with *yuumei* (fame), followed by the *too-in* rhyme of *konnan* (difficult) and *konran* (confusion):

Yume to yuumei, konnan na konran.

Rappers often combine matching auxiliary verbs with rhyming Sino-Japanese compounds, to form a rhyme of three or more syllables. In “Truth of the Rumor” (Fig. 2), Mummy-D of Rhymester uses the construction *__ ga aru* (there is) to form a series of rhymes. He attaches this ending to the Sino-Japanese compounds *imi* (meaning), *muri* (impossible), and *iji* (pride), to form the three-syllable rhymes *imigaruru*, *muriagaruru*, and *ijigaruru*. He also mixes in English words in Japanese pronunciation – *orijinaruru* (original), *gyaruru* (gal), *kuriminaruru* (criminal), and *bi riaruru* (be real), as well as the Japanese

words *shirigaru*, *sabishigaru*, and *tsuminaru*. By using words of Chinese, English, and Japanese origins, this example serves as a summary of the way Japanese rappers use their rich, multi-sourced vocabulary to form rhymes.

Rhythmic challenges in Japanese

A second set of difficulties that Japanese rap pioneers faced was rhythmical. Unlike English, which has stress accents based on volume, duration, and pitch, Japanese is spoken without stress accents. Each mora, or shortest prosodic unit or syllable, is spoken with the same duration. What accents that do exist are distinguished by pitch (Haraguchi 1999). Hence, spoken Japanese sounds like an even stream of sound, rather than the alternating stressed and unstressed syllables of English. As Kohei Japan recounted, “Because Japanese lacks accents, it is harder to put rhythm into our raps.”

(p.c.)

Exacerbating these rhythmic issues is the polysyllabic Japanese vocabulary. Unlike English, with its wealth of monosyllabic words, Japanese contains few one-syllable words. In addition, particles and auxiliary verbs are often needed to modify words. The lack of short words makes it difficult to fit a message into a sixteen-pulse measure. As Mummy-D puts it, “The hardest thing about rapping in Japanese is that it takes so many syllables to get a message across.” (p.c.) Darth Reider agrees: “It is hard to pack as much information in Japanese as Chuck D does in ‘Fight the Power.’”

(p.c.)

As an illustration of how the stress accents and monosyllabic vocabulary of the English

language lend rhythm to rap, let us examine “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy (Fig. 3). Here, I have taken Robert Walser’s transcription and reformatted it to highlight the linguistic aspects (Walser 1995). Each row represents one measure in 4/4, with four boxes representing four beats. Each box has four *x*’s or dashes, where *x* is a spoken pulse. Triplets and other irregular rhythms are in parentheses. Accents in the spoken language are in capital letters. Rhymes are in red italics, and repeated text is underlined, in blue.

Even without a track, the stresses of normal speech already spell out the rhythm to the well-known refrain: “**FIGHT** the POW-ers that **BE.**” Chuck D highlights its message by placing the words “fight” and “be” on the strong beats of one and three. In contrast, the verse features rhymes falling on different beats: “Listen,” on beat 1, rhymes with “missin’,” on 2; and “knowin’,” on beat 2, with “rollin’,” on 4. Similarly, the opening lines start on different beats, with “Listen if you’re missin’ y’all” starting on beat 1, “Swingin’ while I’m singin’” on 4, and “Givin’ watcha gettin’” on 3, putting them out of alignment from the 4/4 meter. Nonetheless, these lines flow smoothly, as they repeat the same stress pattern, *Xxxx/XxX-*, which is built around the trochaic foot. This pattern can be picked up by listeners, lending coherence to the rap despite its irregular rhythms and rhymes. Hence, the stress patterns in the English language, and the trochaic foot they form, provide the aural glue allowing Chuck D to rap displaced from the meter, creating a polyrhythmic effect.

Chuck D also repeats phrases to hammer home his message. However, he changes the meaning of the repeated phrase by a single word substitution, as in “Got to give us what we *want*; got

to give us what we *need*,” and “Freedom of *speech* is freedom or *death*.”

In summary, Chuck D makes use of two aspects of the English language to create a cohesive but varied flow: 1) the stress patterns of the trochaic foot, which lend coherence to the flow, and 2) the substitution of one-syllable words to add new meaning to his repeated phrases. Japanese rappers lack these linguistic tools; their language does not have stresses, poetic feet, or a wealth of one-syllable words. Therefore, Japanese rappers need to find different strategies to lend rhythm and variety to their flow.

Creating flow in Japanese

One way for Japanese rappers to create flow is to capitalize on the pitch accents of the Japanese language. Mummy-D consciously exaggerates the pitch of natural speech, in a practice often followed by Japanese songwriters. In contrast, his fellow MC Utamaru sometimes goes against natural intonation to emphasize a rhyme or offbeat.

In “Standby Tune” (Fig. 4), Utamaru emphasizes the end-rhymes on the vowels *-an-ai-uu* by grossly exaggerating intonation. The pitches, C4-Ab3-F4, span a major sixth--an interval a Japanese would not span in normal speech. As the verse progresses, the pitches go against natural intonation. For example, he raises the last syllable of *naisu*, in contrast with normal speech (as “*naisu*” is the Japanese pronunciation of “nice”). The melodious flow adds drollness and absurdity to the rhymes.

A few Japanese mora have rhythmic qualities that rappers can exploit. For example, the double consonant places a pause of one mora between two moras, as in “It’s hot **to**day.” It is a natural source

of dotted rhythms. In “Nai” (Fig. 5), RIP Slyme creates a syncopated pattern from the double consonants, in bolded green, in *pocchi* and *socchi*. This rhythm contrasts with the smooth delivery of the ensuing repeated phrase *Kiga tsuka-nai noka*, building up to the final rhyme, *docchi*.

Another source of syncopated rhythms is the nasal N. When spoken, it carries the same duration as any other mora. In rap, it can help break up the rhythm. In “Bullet of Truth” (Fig. 6), the N retains its one-mora duration in “an” (in “an-i”) and “kan” (in “kan-ga-e”), but here, two moras are heard as one longer syllable. Furthermore, Zebra elides the N in “an-ga-i” to avoid downbeat, giving the word, which means “unexpected,” an off-kilter feel.

In traditional Japanese songs and *enka*, each mora is generally given one note. On the other hand, some moras, such as double vowels formed with [u] or [i] as the second vowel, are spoken as one syllable. Rappers usually opt for this shorter duration. In Bullet of Truth, Zebra times the three-mora word “sha-ka-i” in two syllables: “sha.kai.”

As Chuck D illustrated in “Fight the Power,” variable rhyme placement can make a rhyme on a strong beat stick out, underlining its message. In “Bullet of Truth,” Zebra places rhymes irregularly, with *shakai* on beat 3 and *takai* on 1; and *shuushoku* on 4, *yuushoku* on 3, and *chuushoku* on 1, or meals taken at different times of day, separated by the repeated phrase *maeni kutta*. In this context of such irregular rhymes, the end rhymes *kawatte kiterunjanai* and *damatte miterunjanai* are emphasized, spotlighting the target of his rap, the education mama, who devotes her energies to her children’s education. In these questions, Zebra mocks her by using her mode of speech, or a feminine

construction. In addition, he imitates her standard line, “*Umaku dekitakai?*” or “How did you do?”

The cumulative effect of these devices—avoided downbeats, irregularly placed rhymes, and a few strong-beat rhymes-- is an unstable feeling that serves as a metaphor for Zeebra’s message: that the educational system, designed to train obedient workers in a permanent employment system, was no longer serving its purpose in the recession-blighted Japan of the 1990s, and that the society was in an uncomfortable state of change.

In “Bullet of Truth,” the sparse background track gave Zeebra the space to shift rhythms. Conversely, rappers can use an unusual track to impose a distinct rhythm. Indeed, Japanese rap sports a wide variety of tracks, from jazz in Takatsuki to electronica in Origami to Japanese *matsuri* in Infumiai Kumiai.

In “Welcome 2 My Room” (Fig. 7), Rhymester uses a John Klemmer track in 12/8 and raps in triplets. Each box in this figure has six sixteenth notes. The parentheses show dotted rhythms in the triplet framework. The relentless use of this ternary rhythm, so rarely heard in rap, seems as maniacal as the subject --a single man, in a tiny apartment, taken up by his record collection, from which he insists he will produce a masterpiece. By matching an unusual track with a suitable topic, Rhymester creates a humorous and unusual rap.

Mummy-D also lengthens the vowels in *rouka* by one mora. This leaves *rekoodo* hanging at the end of a measure, leading to its dizzying repetition. In the loan word *raboratorii*, he lengthens “to” and shortens “i-i,” while in *rekobakoni*, he lengthens “ko.” This manipulation makes these words

rhyme and mimic the rhythm of the word *rekoodo*.

Mummy-D is hence exploiting the rhythmic flexibility of Japanese. He can stretch or shorten moras without losing semantics because Japanese lacks stress accents. In English, words would be hard to recognize if a syllable were stretched opposite to its accent pattern.

Possible areas for further study

I believe that the study of the interaction of language and rap remain neglected. As the rhythm of a language is more starkly exposed in rap than in other musical genres, rap provides both music and language scholars with a testing ground on the rhythm and intonation of a language.

For example, in Mandarin rap, some artists, such as Taiwanese pop star Jay Chou, convert other tones to the declining fourth-tone, which can sound more aggressive. Other artists increase their use of fourth-tone words when nearing a conclusion, as Cui Jian does in “Slackers” (Cui Jian, in *The Power of the Powerless*)

African rappers often use several languages simultaneously. Senegalese group Pee Froiss alternates between Wolof, featuring rap in interlocking rhythms, with slowly delivered rhymes in English (In *The Rough Guide to African Rap*). Just as Japanese rappers intersperse English for rhymes, African rappers may be choosing languages for aesthetic reasons in addition to sociopolitical ones.

Conclusion

The rappers I interviewed followed the same model of other Japanese musicians who adopted Western forms: they had learned to rap over American rap tracks. However, unlike jazz musicians,

who played the same instruments as their Western counterparts, Japanese rappers had to fit the beats of American rap to the Japanese language – an instrument completely different in pitch patterns, rhythms, and timbres from English. As Japanese rappers had neither stresses in their language nor a rhyming tradition, they adopted techniques that capitalized on aspects of their language—the pitch accents, the rhythms of certain moras, and a vocabulary of Japanese, Chinese, and Western-sourced words. Some of these techniques had existed previously in literature or comedy, but not with the same intensity as in rap. Hence, the rappers showed that Japanese was “unsuitable” for rap only when viewed with the restrictive notion that the sound of the English language itself was the model, rather than the hip-hop sound. Furthermore, many raps employ the image-painting and subtle turns of phrase often associated with Japanese communication style and would lose their sensibility in translation. These factors, in my opinion, confirm Japanese rap as an adaptation that has grown to be an art of its own; it is beyond imitation.

Selected Bibliography

Billboard. <http://www.billboard.biz>.

Condry, Ian. 1999. "Japanese Rap Music: An Ethnography of Globalization in Popular Culture." Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, May.

Haraguchi, Shosuke. [1999] 2002. "Accent." In *The Handbook of Japanese Linguistics*, edited by Natsuko Tsujimura, 1-30. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Oricon. <http://www.oricon.co.jp>

Record Industry Association of Japan. <http://www.riaj.or.jp>

Saeki, Umetomo, ed. 2001. *Kokinshuu*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

Walser, Robert. 1995. "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy." *Ethnomusicology* 39(2):193-217.

Discography

Cui Jian. 1999. *The Power of the Powerless*. With lyrics translated by Ben Moger Williams and Rachel DeWoskin. World Beat Records.

King Giddra. 1995. *Sora kara no chikara*. P -Vine Records, PCD-4768.

Public Enemy. 1990. *Fears of a Black Planet*. Def Jam Recordings, CT-45413.

Rhymester. 2001. *Uwasa no shinsou*. Ki/oon Records (Sony Music Entertainment Japan), KSCL-430.

-----2004. *Grey Zone*. Ki/oon Records, KSCL-644.

RIP Slyme. 1995. *Lip's Rhyme*. File Records, TGCS-237.20FR-043D

World Music Network. 2004. *The Rough Guide to African Rap*. Rough Guides, RGNET 1126-CD.