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Englishization with an attitude: Cantonese-English lyrics in Hong Kong

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Hip-hop in Hong Kong has been known to both Hong Kong and other audiences mainly through the local band LMF (LazyMuthaFuckaz), which started in the mid-1990s and was disbanded in 2003. In recent years, the local hip-hop scene has been less animated than in the days of LMF. However, the Fama, a 2-emcee hip-hop group formed by MC Six-Wing and MC C-Kwan in 2000, which in 2002 came under the tutorage of DJ Tommy and joined his music production company (DJ Tommy is a former LMF member, the DJ in LMF), has strived to keep hip-hop music alive in the Hong Kong music scene. It is by far the most popular local hip-hop group since LMF and has enjoyed a certain degree of commercial success.

LMF rocked the local music and media scene by being the first local band to put slang into its lyrics in publicly released albums and live performances, and by adopting a strongly resistant, defiant, social- and media-critique stance (see Ma, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). LMF's lyrics are largely in Cantonese, and when English is used, it is mainly crude English slang, e.g. 'Do you know what the fuck I'm saying?!' LMF's sociolinguistic positioning can be said to be mostly that of the Hong Kong Cantonese working-class youth: the speaking style projects a powerful, defiant, angry, working-class Cantonese youth image, with lots of 'rage', called '*fó*' (which literally means 'fire') in Cantonese.

Fama, however, has its own distinct style. From the outset, it seemed to want to rectify the common notion in Hong Kong – largely due to LMF's influence – that hip-hop music must be related to slang or an 'angry young man' image: as Li (2006) pointed out in her study of hip-hop music in Hong Kong, Fama appeared to want to correct Hong Kong people's 'misconceptions' about hip-hop music. In one of its songs, called 'FAMA

Praise', the band rapped in the lyrics about these misconceptions (English translations are given in pointed brackets < > after the Cantonese lyrics):

要你條頭巾 <We don't want your turban>
 包勻全身 <Wrapping around your body>
 唔駛審你九成扮拉登 <There is no denying that you are imitating Laden>
 仲要係Hip Hop 嗰隻 <In a hip-hop style>
 我哋邊一樹有野講 <We have nothing to say (about this look)>

(Lyrics and translations from Li 2006, 51)

In these lines, Fama seems to be aiming to disassociate itself from the hip-hop image sometimes projected by MC Yan (a former LMF rapper and lyricist), who aligns himself with the Muslim cause and writes conscious raps that criticize the Bush government (e.g. in his song, 'War Crimes'; see also Figure 10.1).



Figure 10.1 MC Yan in his kaffiya (headwear) and anti-WTO (World Trade Organization) T-shirt

In another verse of 'FAMA Praise', the band rapped about how its own style is different from the commonly held view that hip-hop in Hong Kong is about profane language (mainly as a result of LMF's style in the late 1990s and early 2000s):

三百萬個唔正常唔聽廣東說唱 <Three million people are abnormal and they don't listen to 'Chinese Narrative Singing'> (referring to Canto-rap in the text)

佢哋以為Hip Hop 就係粗口 <They think that hip-hop is profane language>

點知聽到農夫幾首先至發覺 <However, there is a new discovery after listening to Fama's music>

等一等 咦 有啲野諗 <Wait, there's something to think about>

等 幾千萬個押韻從我口 <Wait, hundreds and thousands of rhymes coming from my mouth>

(Lyrics and translation from Li 2006, 51)

Although Fama's two emcees want to people's 'misconception' that hip-hop music must involve profane language or angry words, they do have an attitude of their own. For instance, they readily identify themselves as hip-hop artists who are more into fun-making than idol-making. In their lyrics they say they are more like '*siu-jeuhng*' (fun-making masters) than '*auh-jeuhng*' (idols). They also jeer at those 'pretend-to-be hip-hop' artists who know little about hip-hop music but only get themselves dressed up in hip-hop style clothes. In one of their songs they also critique the self-seeking, rude, pushy public manners of many Hong Kong people – for example, that they seldom greet strangers and fight to get seats on public transport. Fama thus represents the development of a new stance and attitude in Hong Kong's local hip-hop music scene. In many ways, unlike LMF, they seem to enjoy having fun and making jokes, while also putting forward some social and media critique; and all the time they stress their genuine friendship with their music fans, and address the loneliness of many Hong Kong adolescents (called '*yan-bai ching-nihn*' – 'hidden youth'). In short, they present themselves as genuine, caring friends of youths in Hong Kong, especially those who are struggling at school and don't know how to express themselves.

In the analysis of the Englishization of their lyrics in the following sections, I discuss how Fama crafts a comfortable Cantonese-English bilingual lyrical style along with a comfortable Hong Kong Cantonese-English bilingual

identity – which also stands in contrast to LMF's mainly Cantonese lyrical style. Fama is funny, humorous and thoughtful; the Fama emcees do not present an angry, defiant, or working-class image; nor are they anti-middle-class or anti-English (in Hong Kong, the middle-class is usually English-conversant whereas the working-class is usually limited in its English-language competence). Fama, in brief, projects the image of what many school adolescents seem to aspire to: being well-educated, thoughtful, humorous, intelligent, bilingual and fond of verbal play. The members of the band are not particularly good-looking and not particularly rich, but they do come across as caring, sincere and approachable friends of Hong Kong's young people, and perhaps as 'near-age', and 'near-peer' role models. They just look, and sound, like the 'next-door (school) boy' (see Figures 10.2 and 10.3) and, in their lyrics, they do seem to want to come across as sincere and close friends (like 'elder brothers') to many school adolescents.



Figure 10.2 Fama's 2 emcees: Six-wing and C-kwan



Figure 10.3 Fama performing at TVB's Live House Concert (local pay-TV music channel)

Crafting an Englishized art-name for a Cantonese-English bilingual identity of the two emcees

Fama's two emcees draw on Cantonese-English bilingual resources in both their lyrics and in the art-names that they have crafted for themselves. MC Six-wing (or '6-wing', 'Six-wing') is the art-name of Luhk Wihng-Kuehn (his real name in Cantonese). In Hong Kong, many young people have pet names or nicknames which are formed by playing on the bilingual features of their names, and Six-wing represents an example of this common cultural practice. The Cantonese word 'Luhk' (the family name of MC 6-wing) sounds the same as the word for number 'six' in Cantonese, and so MC 6/Six-wing has formed his English art-name by this process. In his lyrics, he raps his name proudly in this bilingual way. (Again English translations are given in pointed brackets < > after the Cantonese characters; and the original English lyrics are in bold type):

Example 1

俾支筆我寫歌詞 <Give me a pen to write lyrics>

我寫左幾萬字 <I've written several thousand words>

俾支咪我 <Give me a mike to> **Rap** 我好寫意! <I'm very happy!>

我叫做 <I'm called> **S-I-X-W-I-N-G, S-I-X-W-I-N-G,**

Sing!

(From the song: '456-wing')

One has to listen to the way he raps his name to notice the Englishized Cantonese verbal play that MC 6-wing has mobilized to form his English name in a fun, innovative, bilingual way. When he raps the English letters for his name in the song, '456-wing', which is basically a song about himself, he raps it in a characteristically Cantonese intonation, with the tones of the English letters of his name as follows:

S⁶-I⁶-X¹-W¹-I²-N⁶-G¹

Cantonese has six commonly used tones (marked 1–6) and each syllable must be marked with a tone as tones are morphemically differentiating. (Cantonese morphemes are mostly monosyllabic, and the same syllable spoken in different tones constitutes different morphemes.) By rapping the spelling of his 'English' name (Six-wing) in a Cantonese tonal way, he has crafted his bilingual identity in an innovative manner: in its segmental features, it is an English name, but in its suprasegmental features (tones and intonation) it sounds like a Cantonese name. Such clever Cantonese-English linguistic hybridity seems to be a feature of most of Fama's lyrics in their 2006 album, 'Music Tycoons' (*Yam-ngohk Daaih-hang*).

MC C-gwan (Si-gwan)¹ has a similarly interesting bilingual art name. His real name is Chehng Si-gwan. Since the Cantonese word 'Si' sounds like the English letter 'C' and 'gwan' is a polite address term (like the English address term, 'Mr/Ms'), C-gwan has been used commonly in Hong Kong to mean 'Mr/Ms C', along with 'A-gwan' (Mr/Ms A), 'B-gwan' (Mr/Ms B), for referring to someone anonymously in a polite way. In a sense, by forming his art name in this way, C-gwan seems to also imply some self-irony or

¹ C-kwan is the name used in the public media. In this paper, I also use C-gwan to be consistent with the Yale transcription system for transcribing Cantonese.

modesty: that he is just a ‘Mr C’, some anonymous nobody in this world. And when he raps it in his song, ‘ABC-gwan’ (which is essentially a song about himself), he has blended English into Cantonese almost seamlessly:

Example 2

OK 各位觀眾 <Okay, everyone of the audience>

我想問**ABC** 之後係個咩字呀? <I want to ask: after A-B-C, what is the next letter?>

(君!) <gwan!>

冇錯 咁我地大家一齊講一次「**ABC君EFG**」

<That’s right, let’s say it again together: ‘A-B-C-gwan-E-F-G’>

Come on

人人開開心心 個個興興奮奮 <Everybody very happy, everybody very lively>

跟我講下英文**ABC**君 <follow me to speak some English: A-B-C-gwan>

In Example 2 above, we can see that MC C-gwan blends English words and letters into his Cantonese lyrics which evolve around wordplay on his bilingual name: ‘C-gwan’. Also, instead of calling upon his audience to rap A-B-C-D-E-F-G (the normal English alphabetic order), he inserts his own name smoothly into this English alphabetic verse in the English alphabet song, which is familiar to many students in Hong Kong. The result is a clever bilingual wordplay that many Hong Kong students can readily recognize and enjoy.

Drawing on resources from three language varieties (Cantonese, English, Putonghua) to facilitate rhyming

Code-mixing and code-switching enhance the poetic resources available to the lyricist and facilitate rhyming in the verses. Fama has frequently mixed English letters, words or phrases into its Cantonese ‘matrix’ to enhance both internal and sentence-final rhymes. For instance, in the following example, the English word ‘seat’ is used to rhyme with the final Cantonese word ‘鐵’ (*‘tit’* in Yale transcription) in the previous line.

Example 3: The rhyming words are italicized, and their phonetic transcription in the Yale system is given in round brackets ():

你揸保時捷 (*jit*) 我司機揸地鐵 (*tit*) <You drive a Porsche; my driver drives an underground train>

你坐兩個人 我有二百個*seat* <You carry two people; I have 200 seats!>

(from the song 'The Whole City Rejoices')

In the next example, to enhance the rhyming resources in their lyrics, the emcees also draw on Putonghua (PTH), the spoken form of Mandarin Chinese, the standard spoken language of China. PTH is not a language spoken by most Hong Kong people as their native tongue – they mainly speak Cantonese as their L1 – but it has grown in importance as a political language in Hong Kong since its return to China in 1997.

Example 4: The rhyming bi-syllabic words are italicized and their phonetic transcription given in round brackets ():

別人笑我訓街邊 (*gaai-bin*) 我比他人更開心 (*kai xin*) {spoken in PTH}

<Other people laugh at my sleeping on the street; I'm actually more happy than many people!>

The Cantonese word '*gaai-bin*', meaning 'street-side', rhymes with the PTH-pronounced word '*Kai xin*', which means 'happy'. When this line is rapped, the word meaning 'happy' is pronounced in PTH to make it rhyme with '*gaai-bin*', which would not be the case in Cantonese where 'happy' is pronounced as '*hoi-sam*'.

By doing this verbal play with three languages, the rhyming resources are enhanced. This works because Fama's audience consists mainly of Hong Kong students and young adults who have been exposed to both English and PTH education in school and so are able to decode and recognize the rhyming fun of the trilingual lyrics.

Inserting English words with discourse marking functions

Sometimes, English words are inserted into an otherwise Cantonese 'matrix' to serve discourse marking functions. For instance, in the following example, the insertion of the English words not only serves rhyming

purposes (all the words rhyme: Go, no, oh, so, no), but also marks out the transitions of the different units in the stanza. The English words also serve as attention-getters: that is, the sudden switch to English in the otherwise largely Cantonese lyrics helps to draw the audience's attention to what is to follow; they help to demarcate and highlight boundaries of idea units.

Example 5: The English words serving as discourse markers are in bold.

GO! 大大步走上前大大步

<big, big steps, making my own big steps>

走屬於你自己既路, 唔好著人地對鞋, 走人地條路

<go your own way, don't walk in other people's shoes, don't follow other people's way>

NO! 我諗我搵到

<I think I've found it>

大大步走上前大大步 我有博大霧 featuring?

<big, big steps, making my own big steps, I haven't tried to gain by featuring (in big stars' songs)>

話我博大路 我淨係知道有狗仔隊跟我

<they say I'm trying to gain by going mainstream, but I only know that no paparazzi follow me>

冇靚妹仔跟我 仲憎我話我

<no young girls follow me, and they also hate me>

OH! 有人話我似阿 rain.

<someone says I look like 'Rain' - a Korean pop star>

SO! 又話我似祖名

<someone says I look like 'Jo-mihng' - another pop star in HK; Jacky Chan's son>

NO! 你話我似兩個巨星 我唔敢認

<you say I look like these two big stars, I dare not agree>

我淨係希望有一日你會話佢地兩個都幾似陸WING

<I only hope that one day you will say both of them quite look like Luhk-wing>

呢首歌我淨係要你識得 我Six-Wing 我有得逼你覺得我得

<with this song, I only hope you will get to know me Six-wing, I won't force you to think I'm great>.

但萬一你覺得我得 Throw Your Hands Up!
 <but if you do find me great, throw your hands up!>
 (from the song '456-wing')

In Example 5 above, we can see that the English words starting each sentence were all said in an exclamatory tone. They seem to be parallel interjection particles, which serve the function of expressing the emcee's strong feelings, upon hearing what others say about him, in a parallel, repeated, semantic and emotional pattern somewhat like this:

Go! (showing the emcee's strong determination to express his agency by finding and going his own way, and not by copying or following others)

<the emcee then urges the audience to go their own way too>

No! (to reinforce his strong feeling when he urges the audience not to follow others>

Oh! (to express his strong feelings of unhappiness and surprise at this: others say that he looks like 'Rain')

So! (to express his strong feeling about being repeatedly said to look like other big stars)

No! (to express his determination to reject these comparisons and his desire to be recognized on his own).

By using these English interjection particles in a systematic way (e.g. sentence-initial positions followed by a few lines providing the context of these emotions), the lines form a neat semantic and sound pattern.

There are other interesting instances of the two emcees switching between English and Cantonese. They do not seem to have any psychological hang-ups about using English for the local Hong Kong audience and they appear to project the image of their audience as similar to themselves: young people in Hong Kong with the bilingual resources to decode, recognize and enjoy their 'bilingual-ness' and bilingual (and sometimes trilingual) rhymes. In a sense, they rap/speak like the 'next-door (school) boy', and seem to assert a comfortable bilingual and bicultural identity.

This appears to contrast with the approach of their hip-hop predecessors, LMF. Davy Chan, an experienced music-maker and producer in the

Hong Kong music scene, and a former member of LMF, commented in an interview with the author that Fama's happy, humorous lyrical style is more suitable for the current social atmosphere (in the mid- and late-2000s) than in the late 1990s when the economic situation in Hong Kong was poor and people in general were very angry with the government and the ruling elite. At that time, LMF expressed rage in its lyrics, for instance using Cantonese slang, and this seemed to resonate well with the feelings of the public then. Phat Chan, another main LMF rapper/vocalist expressed similar sentiments about the changed circumstances and expressed his personal liking for Fama's lyrical style in an interview with the author, saying: 'There are not so many things in society to scold about now! Why not have fun?'²

Coda

This study represents a very preliminary analysis of Fama's bilingual lyrical style. Much more work needs to be done and future interviews with Fama's two emcees and their 'manager', DJ Tommy, will shed more light on their style and how Englishization of their lyrics contributes to their unique lyrical style and the kind of Englishized, bilingual identities they seem to be crafting for themselves and their audience.

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² I have been doing research on the lyrics of LMF and interviewed former LMF members, including M C Yan, Davy Chan and Phat Chan. Efforts are being made to conduct interviews with DJ Tommy as well as Fama's emcees, Six-Wing and C-Kwan.