

Rock Rhymes in Japanese Hip-Hop Rhymes

As is well known, Japanese poetry is largely based on mora count. For example, Haiku consists of three lines with 5, 7, and 5 moras in each line. Thus, there does not seem to be anything like the notion of rhyme in Haiku and other Japanese poetry forms. It is interesting to note then that Japanese Hip-Hop music instantiates the metrical notion of rhyme, specifically what Zwicky (1976) calls “rock rhymes”.

Kawahara (2002) mentions that two principles involved in Japanese Hip-Hop rhyme are a bimoraic requirement and extrametricality. For instance, the bimoraic requirement states that at least two moras must rhyme, illustrated in (1), where the underlined moraic elements in (1a) and (1b) are pronounced identically. The principle of extrametricality allows for a rhyming domain to contain an “extra” element at a line’s end, as in (2). Our investigations suggest that there is much freedom in rhyming patterns, and crucially, rappers, in performing songs, modify their pronunciation of lyrics in such a way that rhyming is achieved. In several rap songs by Dragon Ash, lyrics that would not appear to rhyme do so in performance so that rhyme is achieved in production. In (3), for instance, the underlined portion of each of the words is pronounced identically in performance though they are not normally pronounced as such. In (3-4) the intended rhyming unit extends beyond 2 moras to the entire underlined portion. In (5), the vowel sequences of the underlined rhyming domain in the first three lines are identical, but the English phrase in the last line, “don’t stop”, is modified in pronunciation so that it rhymes with the first three lines: in fact, “don’t stop” sounds exactly like “dooshita”.

Our findings, together with Kawahara’s preliminary observations, are surprisingly reminiscent of what Zwicky (1976) calls “rock rhymes” in his investigations of rhyming in English rock music. For example, extrametricality in (2) is captured by Zwicky’s “subsequent rhyme”, illustrated by *go-load*, in which extra phonemes are added after the rhyming part of one of the words. The rhymes in (1) where non-moraic consonants do not have to be identical in the rhyme portion of the word constitute the Japanese version of what Zwicky calls “feature rhymes” (illustrated by *stop-rock*) in which sounds that should be identical differ by one feature. The rhyming portion in (1) (e.g., *taba* vs. *kara*) could be interpreted as such. Zwicky further discusses perceptual similarity and similarity in production based on rock rhymes like those in (6-8). What Japanese Hip-Hop rhymes show is that what is perceptually similar may differ between Japanese and English, and that most critical in Japanese is the mora. It is the moraic element that cannot vary in Japanese rhyme whereas non-moraic elements can freely vary in the rhyme domain. Thus, while Japanese Hip-Hop rhyme may fall outside of Japanese metrical traditions, they show resemblances to principles underlying rock rhymes, but still reflect the importance of the mora in Japanese phonology.

Examples

- (1) a. soshite te ni ireyooze satsutaba
mitero ore no sokojikara
- b. kyoomo T-shatsu ni shibumeno goorudo cheeN
shanpan banban akete sooru tureeN (Kawahara 2002)
- (2) a. Ittuno doori no aarii mooni<n>
yume kara samereba uso no yooni
- b. hadani karamu nurui kaze
toroketeru karada wo hurui tate<ru> (Kawahara 2002)
< >: extrametrical
- (3) zENjido de kotoba no kENjuu o
ENjin'on hibikasete sENjin o
- (4) ima da ho o agero yoAkE no
umi ni to o akero dondAkE no
- (5) saa kakenukeyooze dooshita
yuri no moto tudotta dooshitachi
yo ima dakara koso tooshi dashi
don't stop tomo ni mezasu eekoo e ikoo
- (6) My experience was limited and underfed,
You were talking while I hid,
To the one who was the father of your kid.
(Dylan, 'Love is Just a Four Letter Word')
- (7) Well, the technical manual's busy
She's not going to fix it up too easy
(Joni Mitchell, 'Electricity')
- (8) Old Reilly stole a stallion
But they caught him and brought him back
And they laid him down on the jail house ground
With an iron chain around his neck.
(Dylan, 'Seven Curses')

References

- Kawahara, S. (2002) "Aspects of Japanese hip-hop rhymes: what they reveal about the structure of Japanese," In proceedings of language study workshop.
- Zwicky, A. (1976) "Well, this rock and roll has got to stop. Junior's head is hard as a rock." *CLS* 12, 676-697.