

## LIMITATIONS OF RHYME IN STANDARD KOREAN RAP

### 1. Abstract

It is generally accepted that rap is distinguished from other song forms by its emphasis on rhythm (stress patterns) and rhyme (phonological similarities). Furthermore this musical form of poetic verse lends itself to a wide range of creative license concerning both the former and the latter. Rap in Standard Korean (SK) shows limitations in the area of rhyme due to the fact that it relies heavily on matching vowel stems within verbal conjugations. SK's constraints on phrasal structure are such that sentences are always verb final. There are several verb conjugations, which vary in levels of politeness: from base, or dictionary form, to the highest level used when addressing elders. The most commonly used in rap is 반말 or *panmal*, which literally translates to 'half speech' and is used when addressing close friends. The phonological form this conjugation takes is either, -ㅁ [a] or -ㅓ [ʌ] depending on the final vowel of the verb stem. This study looks at the various strategies used by rappers to go beyond the limitations on rhyming in SK by examining language-specific constraints at the syllable and morpho-syntactic interface levels. The findings show that there are a variety of methods rappers use in violation of these language specific constraints, which include the use of English words, the reduction of syllables, and the manipulation of final vowel sounds phrase finally.

### 2. Introduction

Rap is a song form unique to other types mainly due to its heavy emphasis on rhythm and rhyme; this paper uses the terms rhythm and rhyme to mean stress patterns and phonological similarities respectively. Rap in SK tends to rely heavily on matching vowel

sounds in the last word of the line. SK is an SOV language with a limited amount of verbal conjugations varying in levels of formality. The form almost always employed in SK rap is 반말 or *panmal*. The limited phonological surface forms SK verbs are subject to when conjugated, restricts rappers to rely very heavily on the final vowel sounds. There are various other methods rappers will employ in order to enrich rhyme potential in their songs, which is the primary focus of this paper; strategies rappers will use in their lyrics to permit more rhyming license. This study proposes that these techniques are applied at the syllabic, phrasal and syntactic levels. Each of which will be examined in the following order. The first section will give a brief background on rap, discussing cross-linguistic traits this song form. Next, the level of syntax will be addressed looking specifically at verbs and their conjugation forms. The next section will focus on the syllabic structure of SK and how a proposed left branching structure may affect the outcome of rhyme in rap. In each section, lyrics from several rap songs will be given to discuss the specific strategies rappers will use to violate these language specific constraints to create different rhyme schemes.

## 2.1 Literature Review

This study cites several studies in order to explore the proposed levels to be discussed. The main source referenced, are several portions of Jae Jung Song's The Korean Language (2005). First, when discussing the verbal conjugations in SK, this paper cites various examples back to Song. The issue of syllabic structure is examined in two parts in this paper. One section will discuss the formations of syllables and their branching direction, which primarily cites Yoon (2001) in terms of SK being a proposed right branching language. This paper also examines the constraints in regards to phonemes in

syllable building. Another portion of Song’s work is used to provide examples supporting both Yoon’s research and the strategies examined by this paper. Both Yoon and Song provide in depth support to help this paper’s claim in these proposed strategies. Also cited, is Bradley, when describing the history and emphasis rap in a general sense. Other citations include samples of lyrics from artists including: Beenzino, P-type, and Yoon Mi-Rae.

### 3. Rap Music

#### 3.1 Defining Characteristics

Rap is a song form unique to its own, characterized by lyric poetry, which is delivered in rhythmic time to a steady beat. The lyrics of a rap song are intertwined with the beat of the music to create a fuller impact of the song. When not handled properly, rap lyrics can “confuse meaning to find rhyme and strain syntax to satisfy rhythm” (Bradley 2010 xxxiii). The following example Bradley uses to demonstrate a good rhyme scheme and compare it with one which is considered bad in the rap world.

- (1) a. Will it ever stop? Yo, I don’t know  
           Turn off the lights and I’ll glow  
                                   Vanilla Ice, Ice Ice Baby
- b. Dead in the middle of Little Italy little did we know  
           That we riddled some middleman who didn’t do diddly  
                                   Big Punisher, Twinz (Deep Cover ’98)

Example (1) displays two sets of lyrics from Vanilla Ice and Big Punisher. In both, there are drastically different rhyme schemes. (1a) is using a perfect rhyme between the words ‘know’ and ‘glow’ at the end of each of its lines. However, (1b) does not use any such perfect rhyme scheme as in (1a), but rather, the repetitive use of the [r] in the words

‘little, Italy, middleman, riddled, diddly’ is where the rhyme is produced. When these two portions of lyrics are compared to one another, it is clear to see which of the artists has incorporated a better rhyme scheme in his lyrics. (1a) is seen as considerably weaker in terms of rhyme due to the fact that it is very much a straightforward rhyme and very simple. (1b) uses a much more creative literary device, alliteration of the [r], which is why it is considered to be a better rhyme technique. Rhyme has been an essential aspect to lyrics in rap since its creation. Notable rappers will rhyme words throughout each line in the stanza. This feature is crucial to a rap lyric because of its history as a poetic device. Mention rhythm briefly general background

### **3.2 Korean Rap**

In SK rap, there is a heavy emphasis on final vowel matching phrase final words. Most lines in rap will generally end in a verb due to the fact that SK is an SOV language. There are several verb conjugations that need to be applied to the verb, but have a limited amount of variation between them. Due to its reliance on the final vowel sounds, to create a rhyme, all SK rappers need to do while creating their lyrics is to write using the same verb conjugations throughout their song, or write with conjugations that will allow each word at the end of the line to sound the same. SK rappers will try and expand their range of rhyme throughout their lyrics by applying several methods including: the interspersed use of English words, breaking language specific constraints on the syllabic level, and trying to enhance the underlying reliance on these final vowel sounds.

## **4. Language Specific Constraints of Standard Korean**

### **4.1 Morphological Constraints**

SK is an SOV language, which accounts for the limitation in rhyming features. This section

will discuss the syntactic features of SK in regards to its structure, verbal conjugations and the specific constraints, which must be applied at the syntactic levels to formulate grammatical sentences.

#### 4.1.1 SOV Order

SK is observed to be a strict SOV language. Because of the rich morphemic index SK incorporates, this SOV structure can be moved altered but it is rare. The motivation behind this is due to the fact that SK is a micro to macro language in that a speaker begins with the littlest parts, which carry small amounts of information (noun phrases) to the largest, which carry the most (the verb): which include, tense, politeness value, sentence conjunctions, and several grammatical sentence endings. SK puts emphasis on the verb of all sentences because it gives the listener the most detail. Although it is possible to alter the SOV order, it is not preferred due to this rationale.

#### 4.1.2 V-conjugations

Verbs in SK undergo several forms of conjugations which carry with them a level of politeness needed for different social interactions. The following table illustrates various verbs in declarative present tense<sup>1</sup> and their applied forms in several levels of politeness important to this study:

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<sup>1</sup> Past tense forms will have the -ㅆ morpheme to indicate its tense, and interrogative forms only differ in morphology in the formal high level and plain wherein -습니다 becomes -습니까 [sum.ni.ta] and -다 becomes -니 [ni]. The other two just have higher inflection at the end of a sentence to indicate the speaker is asking a question.

<b>Declarative Present</b>	있다 'to be (location)/to have' [itt'a]	없다 'to not have' [ʌpt'a]	가다 'to go' [kata]	하다 'to do/make'* [hata]
'Plain[Dictionary]' -다 [-ta]	있다 [itt'a]	없다 [ʌp.t'a]	가다 [kata]	하다 [ha.ta]
'Informal-low' -어,아 [-ʌ, -a]	있어 [is'ʌ]	없어 [ʌp.sʌ]	가 ∅ [ka ∅]	해 ∅ [hɛ ∅]
'Informal-high' -어,아 요 [-ʌjo, -ajɔ]	있어요 [is'ʌjo]	없어요 [ʌpsʌjo]	가요 [kajɔ]	해요 [hɛ.jɔ]
'Formal-high' -습니다 [-sumnita]	있습니다 [is'umnita]	없습니다 [ʌps'umnunita]	갑니다 [ka.sum.ni.ta]	합니다 [hasumnita]

Table 1 Verbal Conjugations

The conjugations on the left-most column range from plain to formal-hi, corresponding from least to most polite forms. Plain politeness would be used when speaking to a child, informal-low<sup>2</sup> while addressing peers or close friends. This form is also known as, *panmal* and it is this level which is most often used in the rap songs. Informal-high is the most commonly politeness form used in SK. It is a mid-range of politeness and is the safest way to address someone when a speaker is not sure which style to use. The last level is formal-high is used when addressing a listener who is significantly older than the speaker or is in a higher power position. This form is the highest politeness level a speaker can use. The use of this politeness level also may also require a change in the vocabulary of various NP. A few examples below will provide a demonstration of these politeness levels in use:

- (2) a. 민지는 학교에 가다.  
[min.dʒi- nun ha.k<sup>h</sup>jo- ɛ ka - ta]<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Either /ʌ/ or /a/ are applied when the final vowel in verb stem is either a /ʌ, u, ʉ, i/ or /a, o/ respectively. Further assimilation rules are applied to some of these vowels, but this is the basic rule. 'To do,' /ha.ta/, as shown in table one, is an exception to this rule where /a/ in the final verb stem changes to /ɛ/ when the /a/ or /ajo/ is added.

<sup>3</sup> All transcriptions provided are broad and are derived from the chart in appendix.

- Minji- nom school- loc go - plain<sup>4</sup>  
 ‘Minji goes to school.’
- b. 민지는 학교에 가.  
 [min.dʒi nun ha.kʰjo ε ka - Ø]  
 Minji- nom school- loc go - inflo  
 ‘Minji goes to school.’
- c. 민지는 학교에 가요.  
 [min.dʒi nun ha.kʰjo ε ka - jo]  
 Minji- nom school- loc go - infhi  
 ‘Minji goes to school.’
- d. 박 선생님, 우리 어머니는 학교에 갑니다.  
 [pak sʌŋ.seŋ.nim u.ri ʌ.mə.ni nun ha.kʰjo ε ka - mnita]  
 Park teacher our mother- nom school loc go -formhi  
 ‘Mr. Park, my mother goes to school.’

As example (2) illustrates, (1a, b, & c) use the same subject regardless of who is being addressed. Example (2d), the speaker is addressing Mr. Park, a teacher, about his or her mother, so the speaker must change his or her politeness value to equate for a ‘higher’ listener.

#### 4.1.3 Verb Conjugations in Rap

Rap lyrics in SK primarily use either the plain or the informal low politeness levels.

There can be variation of these conjugations in any given song, but the informal low and plain levels are specifically used because they lack excess politeness. These conjugations create the idea that rhyming in SK should be rather easy due to the fact that most strings in SK will be in SOV order, and after the VPs are conjugated, the surface of these VPs are very limited in terms of their phonological outcome. This limits the rapper’s ability to have a stronger more creative rhyme scheme because rhyming in SK rap is based on

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<sup>4</sup> Politeness levels are marked as plain, infilo, infhi, and formhi to indicate politeness levels marked in (Table 1), plain, informal-low, informal-high and formal-high respectively.

matching final vowel sounds between the final words in each line. To demonstrate this feature examples (3) and (4) will show two sets of lyrics wherein rhyme is only produced after applying these verb conjugations to phrase final VPs.

- (3)
- |       |                                  |                         |
|-------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. i. | 다시 만나 달라 하며 음악과 <u>작별해</u>       | <u>[dʒak.pjəl.hɛ-Ø]</u> |
|       |                                  | ‘to say goodbye’        |
|       | ii. 열세 살은 열아홉 난 거짓말을 <u>해야 해</u> | <u>[hɛ.ja.hɛ-Ø]</u>     |
|       |                                  | ‘to have to do’         |
|       | iii. 내 얼굴엔 하얀 화장 가면을 써 <u>달래</u> | <u>[tal.lɛ-Ø]</u>       |
|       |                                  | ‘to wear’               |
|       | iv. 엄마 핏줄은 ok 하지만 아빠는 <u>안 돼</u> | <u>[an.dwɛ-Ø]</u>       |
|       |                                  | ‘not’                   |

윤미래 ‘검은 행복’/Yoon Mi Rae ‘Black Happiness’

The underlined segments, and their corresponding IPA transcriptions in (3a.) show that there is a repetitive [ɛ] sound repeated phrase finally. In this example, all underlined portions of the lyric are verbs in the informal-low conjugation. After each of these verbs is conjugated into the *panmal* form, they have the same phonological surface structure in terms of final vowel sound.

- (4)
- |       |                                     |                           |
|-------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. i. | 그 뿐이다 난 가리라 내 부폰 이상의 끝으로 <u>가리라</u> | <u>[ka.li.la-Ø]</u>       |
|       |                                     | ‘will go’                 |
|       | ii. 한숨 섞인 이 한 불꽃을 <u>좃으리라</u>       | <u>[dʒ'o.tɕu.li.la-Ø]</u> |
|       |                                     | ‘will pursue’             |
|       | iii. 내가 벨은 시 한편에 어둠이 <u>걸히리라</u>    | <u>[kʌ.tɕi.li.la-Ø]</u>   |
|       |                                     | ‘to clear’                |
|       | iv. 거친 한마디 파도를 <u>일으킨다</u>          | <u>[il.u.kʰin.ta]</u>     |
|       |                                     | ‘to raise’                |
|       | v. 한 송이 불꽃이 되어 세상 위에 <u>핀다</u>      | <u>[pʰin.ta]</u>          |
|       |                                     | ‘to bloom’                |

피타입 ‘돈키호테’/P-type ‘Don Quixote’

The rapper has followed suit with the final vowel rhyme scheme by conjugating the phrase final VPs to a politeness level in which they all end in the [a] sound.



#### 4.1.4 Final Vowel Sound Dependence

There are cases in the lyrics of SK rap, where the final word in a line is not a verb. In these cases, the matching of the final vowel sound is still followed.

- |     |                                   |   |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---|
| (5) | a. i. 이걸 원래 먹는 거야 니가 더 <u>불순해</u> | [pul.sun.hɛ-Ø]<br>'to be impure'                      |
|     | ii. 난 공공의적 금지곡을 <u>쓰네</u>         | [s'ʉ.ne]<br>'to write'                                |
|     | iii. 스티치기만 해도 널 사로잡을 <u>스네어</u>   | [su.ne.ə]<br>'snare'                                  |
|     | iv. 우리들이 95 년 <u>시카고 불스네</u>      | [si.k <sup>h</sup> a.go pul.su.ne]<br>'Chicago Bulls' |
- 피타입 '뿔'/P-type 'Ppul'

In the lines underlined in (5) show an interesting strategy used by the artist to create a rhyme scheme. The first two lines end in the verbs 'to say goodbye' 불순해 and 'to write' (쓰) [s'ʉ] and the last two are the SK pronunciation of two English words, 'snare' (스네어) [su.ne.ə] and 'Chicago Bulls' (시카구 불스) [si.k<sup>h</sup>a.go pul.su]. The rapper has added the 'dummy syllable' '네' [ne] to the verb 'to write' and the noun 'Chicago Bulls'. The [ne] that is added, does not change any meaning of either word, it is just an extra syllable to pronounce, which is why the term 'dummy syllable' as been coined. What it does do however, is twofold: first, it creates a rhyme scheme between the underlined portions in example (5) with each word now ending in a combination of [n] 'ㄴ' with either [ɛ] '애' or [e] '에'<sup>5</sup>. It should also be noted that the verb 'to write' has not been conjugated into grammatical surface form as depicted in (Table 1). The other verb, 'to be impure' is in the *panmal* form. If 'to write' was also conjugated into the *panmal* form, the surface form would be '썩' [sʌ]. This verb was purposely made ungrammatical in order

<sup>5</sup> These two phonemes lost their distinction in modern SK.

to prevent a breakage in rhyme scheme. This also is the motivation for the rapper to introduce this dummy syllable. The [ne] which is added onto ‘to write’ and ‘Chigago Bulls,’ creates the rhyme scheme of final vowel sound [nɛ] or just [ɛ] between all four of these lines. The dummy syllable will also create an second rhyme scheme between lines (i) and (iv) and between lines (ii) and (iii). With the addition of [nɛ], [pul.sun.hɛ] (‘to be impure’) much more closely resembles [pul.suu.ne] (‘bulls), as does [s’u.ne] (‘write’) resembles [suu.ne.ə] (‘snare’). This strategy, although seemingly simple, is much more complex than just rhyming final vowel sounds in the line final VPs.

## 4.2 Syllable structure

Syllable structure in SK is highly debated amongst phonologists. The discrepancy lies in whether or not SK is a moraic language, like Japanese, or showing a left-branching syllable structure, which is preferred.

### 4.2.1 Phoneme Combination

Song’s claim that phonemes in SK are not articulated individually, but rather as a combination (Song, 2001 32). The two processes, which are involved in the phoneme combination rules, are: 1.) if in a bisyllabic word, the coda of the first syllable will be re-syllabified into the onset of the second syllable, if that syllable’s onset is already open. 2.) If the second syllable has the consonant body position filled, the consonant in the first syllable’s coda, will strengthen the consonant in body position in the second syllable.

This phoneme combination rule is not unique to SK, but rather, highlights the preference most languages have in regard to onset and coda. SK has specific syllable building restrictions in terms of several phonemes, which are manipulated in rapper’s strategies.

An example of these rules is the following:

- (6) a. 음악 ‘music’  
/um.ak/ → [u.mak]
- b. 학교 ‘school’  
/hak.kjo/ → [ha.k<sup>h</sup>jo]

(6a) illustrates part (1) of the combination rule and (6b) shows part (2). In example (6a), the [m] carries over from the coda position to also fill the empty body position in the second syllable. However, (6b) shows that the [k] in the coda of the first syllable will strengthen the second [k] to an aspirated version of itself in the second syllable. This strengthens the argument that SK syllables prefer to have a filled onset than it to just contain the vowel. Certain consonants in specific environments also affect the pronunciation and the re-creation of the second syllable onset. Example (7) will show a particular effect of the [s] fricative re-syllabifying to second syllable position.

- (7) a. 있다 ‘to be (location)/to have’  
/it.ta/ → [i.t’a]
- b. 있어 ‘to be (location)/to have’  
/it.ə/ → [i.s’ə-Ø]

If a ㅅ [s] or ㅆ [s’] is in the coda position of the initial syllable, it is produced as a [t]. When the combination rule needs to be implemented in a bisyllabic rule, the [s’] will either continue surface as a [t] and strengthen the onset of the second syllable or become the [s’] onset if the syllable is open. This rule is also applied to the other stops and affricates in the SK inventory.

#### 4.2.3 Restrictions

SK has several restrictions on phoneme position within the syllable. SK does not allow consonant clusters in either onset or coda position. In orthography, what appears to be a

consonant cluster (CC) can appear in coda position, but in speech the rules of combination are applied to the C<sub>2</sub> of the cluster. For example:

- (8) a. 읽어요 ‘read (informal high)’  
/ilk.ə.jo/ → [il.kə.jo]
- b. 없다 ‘to not have’  
/ʌbt.ta/ → [ʌb.t’a]

Example (8) displays two types of CC in SK. The [lk] (ㄹㄱ) and [bs] (ㅂㅅ) combinations. CC are allowed to be shown in coda position of the syllable block, but cannot be co-articulated. In order to articulate these words then, the speaker will conduct the combination rules as discussed in section 5.1.1 in order to have a grammatical surface structure for words with these types of phonemes.

#### 4.2.4 Breaking Syllable Restrictions in Rap

Although SK has two affricates in its inventory, voiced [dʒ] (ㄷㅈ), ejective [dʒʰ] (ㄷㅈʰ)<sup>6</sup> and voiceless [tʃ]<sup>7</sup> (ㄷㅈ), the phonemes will only articulated as [dʒ] and [tʃ] in surface form while in a body position of a syllable. If either of these consonant is in coda position, the phoneme will reduce to a voiceless stop as described in example (7).

- (9) a. i. 맞다 ‘to be correct’  
/madʒ.ta/ → [ma.t’a]
- ii. 맞아 ‘to be correct (informal low)’  
/madʒ.a/ → [ma.dʒa-Ø]
- b. i. 꽃 ‘flower’  
/k’otʃ/ → [k’ot]
- ii. 꽃은 ‘flower-nom’  
/k’otʃ.uən/ → [k’o.tʃuən]

<sup>6</sup> Ejective /dʒʰ/ is only allowed in coda position in syllables so no example is provided in (9).

<sup>7</sup> /tʃ/ will also be in surface level when /tʰ/ (ㄷㅌ) comes before /i/ (ㅣ), as in 같이 /kat.i/ → [kat.tʃi].





an SK word to English, in that, this artist articulates the SK word with phonemes not in its inventory. SK has very few fricatives in its inventory; none of which are voiced. In (12d), the SK ‘given’ ([dʒu.ə.dʒin]), the artist reduces the affricate to the voiced fricative [ʒ] to match with the English [ð] fricative. The reduction of this affricate is a violation of SK’s language specific constraints, but was used in his lyrics to create the slant rhyme between [dʒu.ə.ʒin] and [ðɪs].

## 7. Conclusion

The term ‘restriction’ in SK rhyme in terms of rap lyrics, is defined as the heavy reliance on matching vowel sounds in line-ending words. In order to increase their rhyme potential, the artist must find new ways to manipulate this reliance. To create a more in-depth rhyme scheme, the artist will use strategies on the morpho-syntactic and syllabic levels of SK. Also found is the use of matching the sounds of English words to that with SK words. These strategies an artist will implement in his or her lyrics will allow himself or herself new outlets for rhyme.

## 8. Further areas of research

Due to the fact that SK has no lexical stress may also add to this restrictive nature of rhyme in both rap and the language itself. If further research were to be done on this issue, SK stress rules and a more in depth examination of syllabic structure would be done. The syllabic structure of SK is also highly debated in terms of what branching style it should be considered. Yoon’s study (2001) argues for a left-branching (L-B) configuration by presenting examples of syllable related word games and other experiments. The following figure is a representation of this L-B structure.

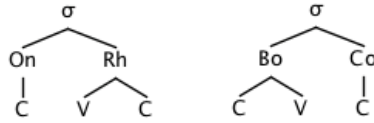


Figure 1 LEFT-BRANCHING VS RIGHT-BRANCHING

There are arguments for the L-B structures as well as a moraic system. This may also affect the linguistic feature of rhyme in SK in terms of how syllables are formed and how they carry weight. Continuing with this research would include a in depth look at syllabic structures in SK and how that may affect rhyme.



## 9. Appendix

The following figure is the vowel inventory this paper has referred to in regards to IPA transcriptions.

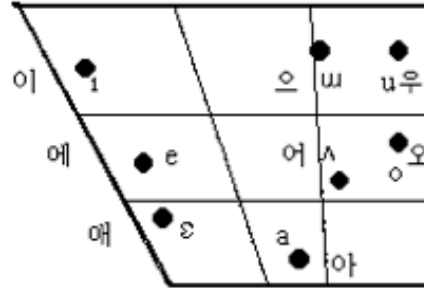


Figure Two: VOWEL INVENTORY (KIM 1999)

The table below is a table the author has created in order to create IPA transcriptions for all examples used in this study.

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Palato-Alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Stop	p, p', p <sup>h</sup> ㅍ, ㅑ, ㅑ <sup>h</sup>	t, t', t <sup>h</sup> ㄷ, ㄱ, ㄱ <sup>h</sup>		k, k', k <sup>h</sup> ㅋ, ㆁ, ㆁ <sup>h</sup>	
Affricate			dz, dz', tʃ ㅈ, ㅊ, ㅊ <sup>h</sup>		
Fricative		s, s' ㅅ, ㅆ			
Nasal	m ㅁ	n ㄴ		ŋ ㅇ	
Approximate		l-r ㄹ			h ㅎ

Table Two: CONSONANT INVENTORY

## 10. References

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