Rap and hip hop, while originating in African American culture, have entered the mainstream music scenes of many countries (Pennycook 2007). Researchers have begun to address how international artists, in the process of localizing hip hop, use language to maintain authenticity with respect to both American hip hop culture and the local community (Alim 2011, Lin 2009, a.o.). The present study of Korean mainstream hip hop examines how Anglicized pronunciation and other sociolinguistic resources, including features of African American English, are drawn upon by artists to construct authentic styles. In these performances, Anglicization becomes a manifestation of the negotiation of local and global hip hop identity, allowing artists to construct a style that is both authentically hip hop and authentically Korean.

This research focuses on artists in the YG Entertainment group, a major entertainment company in Korea known for incorporating hip hop into mainstream music. YG artists engage in Anglicization, meaning the use of English phonology in non-English languages, using features such as diphthongized vowels ([o, e, u] → [ow, ey, uw]) and non-flap variants of laterals ([ɾ] → [d, r]). Quantitative analysis reveals a contrast between rappers and vocalists, with rappers producing significantly more Anglicized Korean variants (p = .007). Artists who use more Anglicized Korean features are also significantly more likely to use African American English phonology in their English lyrics (p = .0003). These findings suggest a connection between Anglicization and hip hop identity, and illustrate how performers make use of features in multiple languages to construct cohesive styles.

Meta-commentary by YG performers on their linguistic practices uncovers an ideological framework in which Anglicization is viewed as an alternative to English code-switching as a means to achieve a desired level of “Englishness.” Artists frame the hip hop genre as requiring a certain degree of Englishness to sound authentic, but also prefer to use Korean to appeal to local audiences; Anglicized Korean is a compromise that achieves these two goals. Anglicization is also presented as a stylistic and musical resource, and specifically as a means of making voices sound interesting and exotic.

Finally, an analysis of YG artists with different backgrounds reveals that Anglicization is a complex undertaking for performers who have spent time abroad. Rappers who have grown up in English-speaking countries are found to be less likely to Anglicize than their counterparts from Korea. This phenomenon underscores the stylistic nature of Anglicization, and also reflects its social meaning; artists with apparent American connections have less need to establish hip hop authenticity through their language use. Moreover, artists who have lived abroad may feel pressure to demonstrate their Korean identity through more standard pronunciation of Korean.

This study illustrates how mainstream music performers negotiate their identity strategically in the local but highly globalized music scene of South Korea. The adoption of English phonology in Korean allows artists to index a dual authenticity that licenses non-American hip hop performances. The role of Anglicized Korean in hip hop exemplifies how foreign linguistic features can contribute to the construction of performed styles.