



The Peking Opera or the Beijing Opera? An International Usage Frequency Analysis Based on the Corpus of Global Web-based English (GLoWbE)

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ABSTRACT

The regional differences in the frequency of synonym use reflect the social cognition of various speech groups. Both Peking opera and Beijing opera refer to an identical Chinese cultural entity but they differ considerably in international usage frequency in the GLoWbE where disparity can be manifested among 20 English-speaking communities. Beijing opera enjoys a slightly higher frequency than Peking opera in total and several Asian and African countries even have no relevant data concerning this art. Besides we explore some potential reasons for interpreting these phenomena.

Keywords: Peking opera; Beijing opera; corpus; GLoWbE

1. Introduction

Recently, with the establishment of the Confucius Institutes overseas and the implementation of the “One Belt and One Road” initiative, as well as other foreign exchange activities, Chinese culture has spread rapidly and widely through the international community. From these, the *Peking/Beijing opera* (Chinese: 京剧; pinyin: Jīngjù) is an important manifestation of Chinese traditional culture. Various artistic elements are used as symbols of the culture. The Peking/Beijing opera is the most dominant and influential form of Chinese opera, which combines music, vocal performance, mime, dance, and acrobatics. It arose in Beijing during the mid-Qing Dynasty (1636–1912) and was fully developed and recognized by the mid-19th century. Peking/Beijing opera features four main roles types: *sheng* (gentlemen), *dan* (women), *jing* (rough men), and *chou* (clowns). With their elaborate and colourful costumes, performers are the focal point of Peking/Beijing opera’s characteristically sparse stage. The Peking/Beijing opera is broadcasted through the country, and it is known as the “National Opera of China,” which is one of the three major performance systems in the world. In May 2006, the Peking/Beijing opera was approved by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China to be included in the first batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List. In 2010, it was included in UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Roster).

However, for “京剧,” there are currently two English translations, namely, the “Peking opera” and the “Beijing opera.” They both appear on the official website of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China,¹ while Peking opera is adopted on the official UNESCO website.² The present study aims to explore what the usage frequency of the Peking opera and the Beijing opera is, across different international communities, and how the usage differs among various countries or regions. In the following sections, we first introduce the research instrument of this study. We then discuss the transliteration system. Finally, we explore the international usage and reasons related to the usage variability.

2. Research Instrument

With the rapid development of the corpus, we have far greater access to frequency distributions of certain words and expressions. Hence, we can investigate them from the perspective of large data quantities. Therefore, in the present study, a corpus-based survey was reported through the Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE). Its most valuable feature is that it enables users to track the frequencies of any of the approximate 1.9 billion words, phrases, or grammatical constructions on its database, in each of the 20 different countries or regions (Liang & Xu, 2015). Since GloWbE’s size makes it about 100 times larger than other corpora, such as the International Corpus of English, it allows for many types of searches that could not have been otherwise possible.³

¹For more details, please see <http://english.www.gov.cn/>

²For more details, please see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/peking-opera-00418>

³For more details, please see <http://corpus.byu.edu/glowbe/>

On GloWbE's website, the corpus can be searched by means of an online form, which allows for searches using a wide range of options, such as hits, keyword in context (KWIC), group by, display, and save lists (see Figure 1). Therefore, a thorough study of the frequency data is helpful in understanding the preferences of users for the Peking opera and the Beijing opera, in 20 different countries or regions.

Figure 1. GloWbEonline search form

3. Discussion and Implications

3.1 Transliteration system

Inconsistencies within English transliteration are predominantly attributed to the two most prominent systems: Wade-Giles and Pinyin (Zhou, 2019). Peking belongs to the Chinese postal romanization, which is a system of transliterating Chinese place names that were developed by postal authorities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, based on the Latin alphabet spelling used in *A Chinese-English Dictionary*, compiled by Herbert Allen Giles, such as Tientsin (Chinese: 天津, pinyin: TiānJīn) and Tsinan (Chinese: 济南, pinyin: JǐNán) (Kaske, 2008). Beijing comes from the Scheme of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1958. It is the official romanization system for Standard Chinese in mainland China. It is often used to teach Standard Mandarin Chinese (Chen, 1999).

The Peking opera and Beijing opera hail from two different transliteration systems. Although Wade-Giles is still used by many libraries in the West, Pinyin is used not only in the People's Republic of China's elementary schools as a pronunciation aid but has recently been adopted by the Western media and certain departments of the American government (Tao and Cole, 2008). Therefore, it is difficult to find the users' preferences through only these two transliteration systems. In this case, a follow-up, corpus-based survey was carried out to gain further insights.

3.2 International usage

By using GloWbE to search for the terms Peking opera and Beijing opera, we obtained an overview of their international usage. The search results from across 20 different countries or regions are listed in Table 1. The first line of Peking opera and Beijing opera represents the raw frequency, while the second line indicates raw frequency+, referring to frequency per million words. US stands for the United States, CA for Canada, GB for Great Britain, IE for Ireland, AU for Australia, NZ for New Zealand, IN for India, LK for Sri Lanka, PK for Pakistan, BD for Bangladesh, SG for Singapore, MY for Malaysia, PH for the Philippines, HK for Hong Kong, ZA for South Africa, NG for Nigeria, GH for Ghana, KE for Kenya, TZ for Tanzania, and JM for Jamaica.

No.	Words and phrases	All	US	CA	GB	IE	AU	NZ	IN	LK	PK	BD	SG	MY	PH	HK	ZA	NG	GH	KE	TZ	JM
1	Peking opera	122	12	1	4	0	7	1	0	1	0	2	22	5	6	60	0	0	0	0	0	1
			0.03	0.01	0.01		0.05	0.01		0.02		0.05	0.51	0.12	0.14	1.48						0.03
2	Beijing opera	132	2	0	1	2	56	4	0	0	0	0	9	0	3	49	4	0	0	1	0	1
			0.01		0.00	0.02	0.38	0.05					0.21		0.07	1.21	0.09			0.02		0.03

Table 1. The raw frequency (+) of Peking opera and Beijing opera across 20 countries or regions

According to Table 1, we can understand the degree of acceptance, general trends, and influence of culture after observing usage frequency in these countries or regions. Results from Table 1 indicate, first, that the raw frequency of the Peking opera is 122, while Beijing opera's raw frequency reached 132. Among the data, the highest frequency for the Peking opera reached 60 in Hong Kong, followed by 22 in Singapore, and 12 in the United States. The lowest frequency was 0, in eight countries or regions, including Ireland, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania. For the Beijing opera, Australia showed the highest frequency, being 56, followed by 49 in Hong Kong, and nine in Singapore. In terms of overall frequency, the usage frequency of the Beijing opera is higher than that of the Peking opera.

The data regarding usage frequency point to certain key findings. First, in terms of the highest frequency, the top three countries or regions, after Hong Kong (109), are Australia (63), Singapore (31), and the United States (14). Hong Kong is an inherent part of China. Since Chinese culture is deeply rooted there, its frequency ranks the highest. Singapore is also a Chinese-speaking community, with a wide distribution of Chinese people and a deep influence on Chinese culture. Therefore, its frequency ranks among the top three. The United States, a large country of English dialect, is also greatly influenced by Chinese traditional culture because of its historical and social realities. The United States has the largest number of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in the world. Thus, according to the data retrieved, the United States ranks third in the list of usage frequency for Peking opera. As we mentioned, Peking opera is derived from Chinese postal romanization, while Beijing opera is rooted in the Scheme of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet. The former was born more than half a century earlier than the latter. Hong Kong, Singapore, and the United States use Peking opera more often, indicate that they have been exposed to the Peking opera culture earlier. With the development of cross-cultural communication with China, the use of the term Beijing opera gradually increased. This is probably the reason why Australia ranks first in the list of usage frequency for Beijing opera. These comparative rankings indicate that the culture of Peking/Beijing opera can attain higher recognition in these countries or regions, and as a result, they also have a greater impact on their societies and cultures. Second, the countries or regions with zero frequency are India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ghana, and Tanzania, revealing that the culture of Peking/Beijing opera has a very low recognition and impact in these countries or regions. Third, through further analysis of usage frequency distribution within the three main English-speaking countries or regions (Australia, Singapore, and the United States), we can observe that Singapore and the United States prefer Peking opera to Beijing opera, while Australia prefers to use the term Beijing opera.

The differences in usage frequency between Peking opera and Beijing opera have been discussed. However, in a sense, there is no significant difference between Peking opera and Beijing opera in terms of the total usage frequency. Therefore, we make a comparison between Peking and Beijing. It is also of interest to observe the frequency difference through GloWbE (Table 2).

No.	Words and phrases	All	US	CA	GB	IE	AU	NZ	IN	LK	PK	BD	SG	MY	PH	HK	ZA	NG	GH	KE	TZ	JM
1	Peking	1972	212	55	170	43	176	55	94	34	24	29	159	108	76	638	15	16	23	16	10	9
			0.55	0.41	0.44	0.43	1.19	0.68	0.97	0.73	0.47	0.73	3.70	2.59	1.76	15.7	0.33	0.38	0.59	0.39	0.28	0.48
															7							
2	Beijing	3720	3256	1216	5378	793	2195	899	2469	843	1030	833	2233	1245	1086	1004	560	439	411	645	338	1286
		2														7						
			8.42	9.02	13.8	7.85	14.8	11.0	25.6	18.1	20.0	21.1	51.9	29.9	25.1	248.	12.3	10.2	10.6	15.7	9.61	32.5
					7		1	5	0	0	5	0	6	0	1	38	4	9	0	1		0

Table 2. The raw frequency (+) of Peking and Beijing across 20 countries or regions

Table 2 compares the retrieval data of Peking and Beijing in 20 English-speaking countries or regions. By relying on the data shown in Table 2, we find that the highest frequency of Peking (638) appears in Hong Kong, followed by 212 in the United States, and 176 in Australia. The lowest frequency is 9 from Jamaica. For Beijing, we see the highest frequency (10047) in Hong Kong, followed by 5378 in Great Britain, and 3256 in the United States. In Tanzania, the frequency is the lowest, at only 338. Despite this, we find that the total frequency is 37202 for Beijing and 1972 for Peking, which indicates that Beijing has a higher frequency in 20 English-speaking countries or regions.

In general, Tables 1 and 2 indicate that there are statistical differences in the usage distribution among these 20 countries or regions, reflecting uneven levels of recognition for the Peking opera or Beijing opera, and Peking or Beijing. These differences may help us seek more effective methods to introduce China and its culture to the international community, with a better understanding and recognition.

4. Conclusion

This study focuses on the international usage frequency of the terms *Peking opera* and *Beijing opera*. Through a comparative study of the corpus for the Peking opera and the Beijing opera in 20 English-speaking countries or regions, we found that Beijing opera is used more frequently than Peking opera, although there is no obvious gap in the total usage frequency. However, there is a significant difference in the usage frequency of Peking and Beijing. In addition, there are five countries that do not have any usage frequency, namely, India and Pakistan in South Asia, and Nigeria, Ghana, and Tanzania in Africa. This indicates that the influence of Chinese opera culture on South Asia and Africa is not high; hence recognition and impact are lower than in Western countries or regions.

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