

Honors Thesis Proposal

25 September 2013

Accepting Konglish: Emerging Conceptions of Korean Linguistic Identity

Statement of Intent

My thesis will examine recent changes in Koreans' attitudes toward Koreanized English (Konglish). I will argue that prevailing negative attitudes about Konglish are very recently beginning to change; that Konglish deserves and is beginning to gain social and international legitimacy; and that acceptance of Konglish signifies a novel shift in Koreans' fundamental linguistic identity. I will support these claims in part by compiling recent opinion editorials in major Korean- and English-language newspapers and analyzing emerging rhetorical trends.

Background and Significance

Despite increasing prevalence and growing acceptance of World English varieties in commercial, colloquial, and governmental settings, Koreans still do not view Konglish, the Korean-English hybrid, as a valid vehicle for linguistic expression. As the international community actively expands the traditional definition of the English language, varieties of English generated in Braj Kachru's Expanding Circle, such as Malaysian English (Manglish) and Indian English (Hindish), are gaining professional, commercial, and academic ground: their quirks revealing provincial twists on syntax, pronunciation, and vocabulary that are recently seen as a source of pride for locals. John Platt quotes a proud Singaporean English (Singlish) speaker who asserts, "I should hope that when I'm speaking abroad my countrymen will have no problem recognizing that I am a Singaporean" (171).

Before the mid-1980s, scholars considered local varieties of English to be no more than sets of fossilized solecisms. However, since Platt and Kachru pioneered the study of such interlanguages as world varieties of English, scholars have recognized the “need to pay heed to the seeming paradox that globalisation [sic] cannot exist out of local contexts” (Collins 427). Currently, Hindish, Singlish, and Manglish are receiving ever-increasing amounts of positive international recognition and, by association, international legitimacy. Worldwide, the current perception of what it means to share English as a lingua franca is undergoing a major makeover. However, South Koreans remain statistically far less likely than other populations to accept their own local English variety, Konglish, as a legitimate form of expression (Tokumoto 401).

Even though the hybrid language is widely used in advertising and mass media, Koreans overwhelmingly shun Konglish, decrying their local variant in popular opinion editorials and attempting to ban its use in schools. Scholars like Joseph Sung-Yul Park postulate that the reason Koreans have such a difficult time accepting Konglish is because the centuries-isolated, monocultural Korean identity is so deeply and intrinsically linked to the singular Korean language (74). However, Korean identity is undergoing dramatic globalization, and as modernity overruns traditionalism, Koreans will eventually accept Konglish as a legitimate variety of World English. In fact, they are already beginning to do so. Acceptance of Konglish demonstrates a groundbreaking shift in the Korean identity from monocultural isolationism toward globalization and modernity, and optimism toward the hybrid language will only grow in years to come.

Methodology and Procedures

Drawing from material published by the three major English-language newspapers in Korea (*Korea Times*, *Korea Herald*, *Joongang Daily*) as well as the five major Korean-language

newspapers (*Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, *Jung-Ang Ilbo*, *Hankook Ilbo*, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*), I will compile major opinion editorials written about Konglish over the past three years and compare and contrast rhetorical trends. I will incorporate my study of editorial rhetoric concerning Konglish into the body of existing research on Korean linguistic identity and argue that (1) recent trends toward acceptance of Konglish will increase in years to come and (2) such acceptance demonstrates a fundamental and necessary shift in Korean linguistic identity as the language makes its first major transition into a wider global community.

Prospectus

My thesis will be organized as follows: introduction, featuring a scholarly definition of Konglish and justification for its recent linguistic significance; review of literature, with discussion of the historical relationship between Korean and other languages, the role English plays in Korea today, and the ideologies proposed to describe Korean linguistic identity; justification for use of opinion editorials to gauge current attitudes toward Konglish; explanation of research methods; discussion of results, centering on analysis of the way recent attitudes toward Konglish conform to or break established paradigms for Korean linguistic identity; discussion of what an altered perception of Konglish means for the future of the Korean language; conclusion.

Preliminary Research (Literature Review)

Konglish is a battleground for warring linguistic ideologies that, in common defense of Korean identity, rally under radically different banners. The most historically dominant theory is Park's "essentialist" model of language ideology, which asserts that any Korean communication that has been tainted by English is regarded as inherently disingenuous to the traditional Korean identity (74). Park's argument is fundamentally nationalistic, claiming that for centuries Korea

has been a homogenous, monolingual entity and as such ideas of allegiance, competence, and authenticity are inherently tied to the Korean identity through language. Therefore, preferential treatment of English or Konglish by Koreans makes speakers “more vulnerable to accusations of losing their identity, or of being incompetent and inauthentic speakers of the Other’s language” (72). Konglish is an abhorrence to Park, for whom English is inherently the language of the Other, and has “no place in expressions of a Korean identity” (74). A 2000 *Korea Times* opinion editorial by Jae-hee Lee appeals to this model; after terming Konglish a “serious social problem,” Lee quotes novelist Ahn Jung-hyo, saying, “I think Koreans should speak Korean to Koreans. If they want to speak English, they should learn it properly” (“Koreans Use Own Version of English”). Thus, by patriotic appeal to the essentialist model, Park, Lee and Ahn highlight a seemingly unreconcilable chasm between Korean and English.

Table 1
Common Konglish Words

에어콘 aircon	air conditioner
아파트 apart	apartment building
사이더 cider	7 Up-like clear soda
커닝 cunning	cheating
원피스 one piece	dress
마니큐어 manicure	nail polish
사인 sign	signature
셀프 self	self-service
서비스 service	free of charge
샤프 sharp	mechanical pencil

Source: Xue-bo Cui, “An Analysis of Lexical Borrowing From Languages: Konglish,” *Sino-US English Teaching* (2012): 9.2, Web, 2 June 2013.

processing that examines Konglish words alongside Korean words. His work proves that English is so deeply integrated into Koreans’ linguistic consciousness that Konglish words (see table 1) are mentally accessed as L1 entries, essentially rendering them equivalent to Korean words (Nam

However, among a generation raised speaking Konglish, such a chasm can no longer be confidently defined. Rather, in an equally powerful assertion of national identity, Koreans have claimed and bent English to fit local constructions, and words so manipulated deserve to be considered part of the current Korean lexicon. Scientist Hyunjeong Nam supports this theory, presenting a study of response-time word

305). Essentially, for young speakers, Konglish is now so deeply ingrained in the Korean linguistic consciousness that English words absorbed into the Korean language can no longer be called L2 items. Ines Min agrees, asserting that in some cases, “[an] original Korean or Chinese-derived word is less emphasized, or not even taught to Korean-language students” in favor of a popular Konglish equivalent (“Konglish Proves to be Double Edged Sword”). Thus, as young Koreans grow up learning and using Konglish interchangeably with Korean, L2 physiologically becomes L1.

Widespread recognition, acceptance, and publicization of Konglish is already visible in Korean mass media, where strategic use of the hybrid language by savvy marketers illustrates a precocious understanding of Korea’s newly emerging linguistic identity. Scholars who disapprove of the unprecedented prevalence of Konglish in media publicly agonize over what they see as English errors being perpetuated on a national scale. *Korea Times* columnist Jon Huer laments, “Poor English is enforced and legitimized among Koreans when it is used by Koreans



Figure 1. Promotional favor designed for the 2010 World Cup, featuring the Konglish expression, “Fighting;” *Coffee Helps*; coffee-helps.com, 22 June 2010; Web; 2 June 2013.

among themselves.” Elizabeth Pyon agrees, commenting on the case of the Konglish word “fighting,” which Koreans use not in the standard English sense, but as a “go-fight-win” cry (see figure 1). Condemning the disparity between Konglish and Standard English, Pyon pleads, “How many people must decry the usage of the word ‘fighting’ before the Korean media finally recognize the word for what it

is?” Advertisers, on the other hand, celebrate and manipulate this phenomenon, as Korean

English in media is marketed to not to native English speakers, but exclusively to Koreans, who “are happy as long as their English is understood by other Koreans” (Huer par. 13). Thus, media Konglish is not a blind perpetuation of English usage errors but a strategic manipulation of the English language to achieve Korean ends. Such manipulation embodies the newly emerging Korean linguistic identity, which is characterized by both physiological and psychological ownership and manipulation of English.

Increasing acceptance of Konglish is most recently evidenced by changes toward the treatment of the hybrid language in prominent opinion editorials. Ironically, public treatment of Konglish by the mass media sources primarily responsible for its proliferation has been scathingly negative. English-language newspapers feature opinion editorials titled “Media Spreads Phony English” and “Korean Language Suffers As Konglish Takes Hold” are the norm, not the exception (J. Lee; Ruffin). Such public criticisms of Konglish are often penned by prominent university professors and as such carry intellectual weight with a Korean audience. In 2011 and 2012, seven opinion editorials concerning Konglish were published in the *Korea Times* and the *Korea Herald*. Five of these were, as is typical, intensely critical. However, for the first time ever, two were relatively positive, one even titled “The Joy of Konglish” (Salmon). Mild sarcasm aside, the article unapologetically explained common Konglish words for the benefit of native English speakers, who would be unfamiliar with such vocabulary.

The other positive editorial, a guest column written by Indian economics professor M. M. Goel, demands more specific action, going so far as to claim that “Konglish in Korea and Hinglish in India deserve to be recognized in English dictionaries of the world.” Though the editorial does not reflect the opinion of a native Korean, the fact that the *Korea Times* agreed to publish such an article is a novel step forward for Konglish. Such study of recent editorials

reveals that Korean newspapers, the main generators of negative press for Konglish, are very recently beginning to entertain the fact that Konglish may not be anathema. The fact that the debate surrounding Konglish is beginning to emerge as an issue—an argument with two sides—in prominent papers is a positive step in the right direction and evidence that Koreans are beginning to publicly recognize the emerging change in their linguistic identity.

Qualifications of the Investigator

I am a Linguistics major and a Korean minor. I studied the Korean language as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, living and working in various parts of South Korea from October 2011 to March 2013. In Korea, I taught English as part of an integrated study program and became familiar with and curious about Koreans' relationship with the language. As a Korean language learner I became intimately familiar with Konglish; the way Koreans reshaped English to fit existing cultural and linguistic patterns fascinated me and I am thrilled to submit these patterns to intellectual analysis.

Qualifications of the Faculty Advisor

Dr. Julie Damron is a professor of Korean in the Asian and Near Eastern Languages department at Brigham Young University. She holds a M.A.T. in TESOL from The School for International Teaching and a Ph.D in Linguistics from Purdue University. Her background in both Korean and Linguistics, as well as her experience in teaching Korean as a second language to English speakers, qualify her to advise the composition of my thesis.

Schedule

I am planning to graduate in April 2014, so I am aware of and will have my thesis submitted before the mid-January deadline. I have already completed the portion of the research that deals with English-language editorials, as well as the background and preliminary research

required to approach this project. I plan to have data and analysis of Korean-language editorials completed by the end of October, and will work on the body of the paper from now until late November. I will have the thesis reviewed no later than early December so any revisions can be made before mid-January submission.

Expenses/Budget

I will not require outside funding for this project.

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