

Konglish: A Korean-American Phenomenon

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I. Introduction

Growing up in America and learning English as a first language, it can be easy to overlook the instances of other languages that are used around us every day. With English becoming more common throughout the world and more people moving from their native homes to America, bilingualism, consisting of English and a person's native language, is becoming widespread. This bilingualism often leads to a new mixed code in which a person frequently utilizes both language sets in some combination. Studying the reason for such mixed codes – focusing here specifically on Konglish – can help us to not only appreciate other cultures, but also help us to understand our bilingual companions and the unique situation they find themselves in. Learning to not dismiss their code-mixing as a lack of proficiency but instead appreciate it as a legitimate, unique code of language is of crucial importance in making bilingual and multilingual people feel comfortable in whichever society they find themselves in.

It will be beneficial to define some key terms that relate to the topic of bilingualism and mixed languages. According to Crystal (1987), code-switching is where two bilingual individuals interact with each other in more than one language (as cited in Pagano, 2010: 23). Kim (2006: 45) is a bit more specific in her definition of code-switching, saying it is “the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent” and that it can occur within a sentence or between sentences. According to various definitions cited by Kim (2006: 45), code-mixing is the intrasentential mixing of lexical items, grammatical features, and various linguistic units from two languages.

Finally, a definition for Konglish is needed. When discussing bilingual dialogue, Celik (2003) said, “...it is not always the case where each distinct language is exclusively used in one particular domain. Instead, what tends to happen is that a mixture of the two languages in question is used” (as cited in Kim, 2006: 44). I want to expand this definition to the perspective of Korean Americans who are either fluent in English or even have English as

their first language, but find themselves borrowing Korean or inserting it into their conversations. I define Konglish as any form of code-mixing or code-switching done by a person who is proficient or familiar with both the Korean and English languages. This paper will focus on Korean Americans, and therefore those who are likely to be more proficient in English than Korean.

In order to go about studying how, why and when Korean Americans borrow from Korean in their day-to-day conversations, I had to observe Korean Americans speaking and interacting. Conveniently, I participated in an Asian cultural event at the University of Notre Dame called “Asian Allure,” in which I participated with our campus’ Korean Student Association to put on a performance. The week before the performance was rehearsal week, and I utilized this time to take note of instances in which my Korean American friends used Korean when speaking English. Whenever I heard a relevant example of borrowing or insertion, I would write the quote down without interrupting the natural flow of conversation.

To develop a conclusion for the motivation for Konglish code-mixing, I will look at eight very brief interactions among and between my Korean American friends (Section II). I will analyze the situation in which Korean was inserted or used by a native English speaker to try and discern the reason for borrowing. In Section III, I will look at reasons for borrowing (Korean or not) that I did not discover from personally observing my friends, but rather the reasons that other linguistic anthropologists have suggested.

I also interviewed two of the Korean Americans whom I observed during the week with a few simple questions about their perspective on when they use Korean versus English.

II. Observations

The motivation of using Konglish to produce a cultural gesture was discovered during two different situations. In the first situation, my friend Jaewon and I were sitting at a booth. We each had to go to the restroom, but neither of us wanted to leave all of our belongings unattended in a public space. In order to determine who got to go to the

bathroom first, Jaewon put up a fist and said, “가위 바위 보 (ga-wi ba-wi bo)?” This is the Korean version of rock, paper, scissors, and is thus not a strictly Korean cultural game. I would never use rock, paper, scissors with an American friend in that instance, but it is much more commonly used in Korean for small competitions or decisions. Jaewon could have chosen to do this for a number of reasons. She could have grown up playing Ga-wi ba-wi bo with her sister, she could have wanted to make a light-hearted competition that was easier in Korean, or she could have wanted to use Ga-wi ba-wi bo because she knows I am a Korean minor. Either way, she felt that this Korean cultural hand gesture conveyed her point easier than English.

The second situation occurred with my friend Natalie during an Asian Allure rehearsal. In Korea, there is a hand gesture in which a person presses their thumb and pointer finger together to form a small heart shape. I first discovered this just days before this interaction, and I was with Jaewon during the first situation. When Jaewon first showed it to me, no words accompanied the gesture, but rather the other person is expected to grab the “heart” and pretend to eat it as if they are getting love from the sender. When Natalie made this gesture to me, she also said, “쟁반 받쳐줄게요 (jaeng-ban bat-chyeo-jul-ge-yo).” This roughly translates to “I’ll fix a plate [of hearts] for you!” In this case, Natalie felt that the hand gesture must be accompanied by words, but because the gesture is one she knows from her Korean background, she used Korean. This is also particularly emphasized as Konglish because I am a native English speaker and know Natalie in an almost strictly English environment, yet she spoke Korean in this gesture. Natalie apparently wanted to express a certain form of approval or positive affection towards me – perhaps regarding my performance in Asian Allure – that she could not have otherwise gotten across in English. If she had said “I’ll fix a plate of hearts for you!” in English it would have come off as awkward out of context, but if she had just said “Good job!” or “I loved it!” it would not carry the same meaning.

Another important aspect of Korean culture is the hierarchy that stems from a history of Buddhism dating back to the 4th century Goguryeo Dynasty. This hierarchy stretches out to various facets such as gender, age, social status, etc. The Konglish situation

I observed related to this hierarchy occurred between Theresa (a first year) and Jeanie (a sophomore), both of whom regularly and fluently speak in English. In this situation, we were stuck in a rehearsal for many hours and apparently Theresa had grown hungry. Jeanie had previously given Theresa a bite of her sandwich, but later Theresa turned to Jeanie and said, “언니 다 주세요 (eon-ni da ju-se-yo)! Thank you!” “Eon-ni” is an expression that technically means “a girl’s older sister,” but is also used between girls when close in age but one is older. “Da ju-se-yo” is a polite version of saying “Please give me more.”

The combination of Theresa’s use of the formal request form and the endearing and respectful older sister term is her way of showing humility and placing herself below her older friend, Jeanie. This same level of respect and humility could not be shown in the same way in English, and thus Theresa felt compelled to use Korean (followed by English) to relate to Korea’s hierarchical culture. The display of hierarchy was necessary in this situation because Theresa could be seen as inconveniencing Jeanie by asking her for food. This situation could be viewed from a different perspective as well. It could be that because Jeanie and Theresa are in a mostly English-speaking relationship, Theresa was trying to appeal to their Korean bond in order to seem close with Jeanie or build up their friendship.

Due to certain cultural or linguistic implications, certain things would only be considered funny in one language or another. Bilingual interlocutors can also play on the very fact that they share two common languages and the cultural clashes or combinations that can come with this. The next situation involves Kevin and Paul, both sophomores, Lydia, a junior, and Jaewon, a senior. Yet again relating to food, Paul turned to Jaewon and said “Make me food 선배 (seon-be)!” Kevin responded to this by turning to Jaewon and complaining “배고파 (be-go-pa)!” This means, “I’m hungry!” Lydia overheard this conversation and interjected, “Hey! I’m your 선배 (seon-be) too!” The term “seon-be” is related to Korea’s hierarchical structure again and refers to senior colleagues or mentor figures. While this interaction is related to hierarchy, it was carried out in a very sarcastic manner in which Paul and Kevin were putting on a façade of the utmost respect for Jaewon in order to get her to do what they wanted. When Lydia felt a lack of respect or acknowledgment of her older age from Paul and Kevin, she felt a need to chime in by

reminding them that she is also “seon-be” to them. Apparently the main idea of the initial sentence could be conveyed in English (that is, being asked to make food), but to add a lighthearted joke, the sarcastic use of a Korean honorific term was injected into the request.

Often times there are words or phrases that simply cannot be expressed as easily in English versus Korean. Jimmy was the leader of our performance for Asian Allure, and he would very frequently begin a sentence with “근데 (geun-de)” and proceed with the rest of his sentence in English. This short phrase means “but” and is used to transition between sentences. It was clear that Jimmy would begin to address the group in Korean or be thinking in Korean and then have to change to address the group. It was easier for Jimmy to transition between sentences in a Korean fashion either because we were doing a Korean performance or because he feels more comfortable using Korean.

Similarly, during a casual group conversation during one of our rehearsals, our friend Eunice turned to Paul and said, “Oh, like, 진짜 (jin-jja), can you rap or something?” It seems that when Eunice was struggling to think of how to phrase her English question, she used a filler jin-jja, meaning “really” or “seriously.”

If a Korean American person was either born in Korea and moved to the states in early childhood or grew up speaking Korean at home, they will frequently use Korean in situations where something catches them off guard or they are frustrated.

During one of our rehearsals for Asian Allure, my friend Emily was trying to get one of our dance moves correct and was finding it very difficult. After practicing multiple times she suddenly exclaimed, “Ah this is so hard! 어떡해 (eo-tteok-ae)!? 미치겠나 (mi-chi-gen-na)!” This roughly translates to “Ah this is so hard! How do you do it/What am I supposed to do!? This is driving me crazy!” Clearly, once Emily was frustrated with not knowing how to do our routine, she reacted emotionally and went from English to Korean.

The second situation involved Jimmy sneaking up behind Theresa and scaring her. After he did this, Theresa said, “아 갑자기 (ah gap-ja-gi)! 왜 (weh)!?” This translates to “Ah, that was so sudden! Why!?” Once again, this seems to be an emotional, gut reaction to Jimmy’s action that caused Theresa (who normally speaks English to Jimmy) to switch into Korean.

From these interactions, it seems possible that growing up in an environment surrounded by Korean (either parents or in Korea) leads these people who are fluent in English and living in America to still almost instinctively revert to Korean in times of initial reaction.

III. Discussion

Linguistic anthropologists have proposed several reasons for the use of borrowing and code-mixing in language. Lo (1999) suggested that code-switching is used to establish ethnic identity between Asian-Americans (as cited in Pagano, 2010: 23). In other words, Korean Americans may use Korean phrases or words to try and establish intersubjectivity with whomever they are speaking with. An attempt to build a relationship with someone who shares the same two languages as you is integral in bilingual or multilingual interactions.

Another reason for code-mixing that is frequently found in academic articles is that it shows a person's lack of skill at a language. According to Byeol (2013: 269), Koreans may "use Konglish when they don't know enough 'standard' English, in private or informal conversations, and when they face emergency situations. For example, if a Korean doesn't know the exact English word and he/she is around foreigners and needs to explain or say something, he/she can use Konglish to express his idea at the least."

This proficiency motivation can also be looked at in a positive light. Borrowing and code-mixing may be used as an opportunity to improve upon one's proficiency in both the languages they speak. As opposed to being seen as mixing up languages, a speaker can practice their second language by inserting words from that language into their native one to grasp concepts and vocabulary. In my interview with Jaewon, she stated, "I feel like people who move to the US at about the same age tend to hang out together because the level of English skills or Korean skills are about the same." This would also suggest they use similar amounts of each language or mixing of each language. That being said, Konglish was most likely not used during my observations for the sake of improved proficiency as

everyone I observed goes to a college where a certain level of English would be required to do well.

Kim (2006: 47-49) compiles a list of other motivations frequently found for code-mixing. The first factor is participant roles and relationships. My Korean American friends are more likely to use Konglish with other ethnic Koreans than with me, and similarly more likely to use Konglish with me than other non-Korean friends. The second factor is the speaker's situational or cultural environment. This relates to the speaker's age, gender, social status, etc. For example, my Korean American friends are more likely to use Korean or insert Korean phrases when speaking to someone older, when speaking to males, or when speaking to someone of a higher social class in order to respect the culture and show respect for the person.

The last reason for code-mixing deals with message-intrinsic factors of language. That is, when the message being conveyed is related to a topic related to Korea or generally discussed in Korean, the Korean language is more likely to be used or inserted. Konglish may be used depending on the topic of conversation, if the dialogue is a direct quote, used for hedging, or an interjection. In my interview with Jaewon, she said, "I think we inject Korean when we're talking about Korean things like music or like dramas or TV shows, and also when there aren't like expressions or words in English."

IV. Conclusion

After observing the code-mixing that took place amongst my friends and reading about motivations put forth by other linguists, some broad trends of code-mixing can be concluded. Firstly, it is apparent that the the use of both languages for bilinguals – if they are proficient in both already – is very natural and instinctive. Some of the motivations such as humor or cultural gestures may necessitate some more thought, but the conversation still flows naturally and it doesn't require great effort on the part of the bilingual speaker to change languages in these cases.

Besides just being easier or more natural, each language a bilingual person speaks can carry a unique sense of what the speaker is trying to portray in that moment. When I

asked my friend Lydia about when she thinks she uses Korean, she thought a bit and couldn't seem to articulate her reasoning. She eventually replied, "I don't know it just, like, feels more right I guess, as opposed to not knowing [an English word]." One example Lydia gave is that she uses Korean when trying to be cuter. What makes a Korean word or phrase cuter is hard to say, but Lydia identifies Korean as being able to convey her cuteness better so she uses it. In this way, code-mixing can be used to express oneself more accurately.

Another broad trend I discovered through my observations and readings is that bilingual interlocutors code-mix in order to build relationships. Khnert, Yim, Nett, Kan and Duran (2005) suggest that "an alternative view [rather than a lack of proficiency] is to recognize the cultural, social, and communicative validity of the mixing of two traditionally isolated linguistic codes as a third legitimate code" (as cited in Kim, 2006: 56). People who speak Korean and English with some form of fluency share a common, unique bond with other speakers of those two languages. This is in part because language is in essence tied to culture, and bilinguals sharing the same two languages share a common background or knowledge of the two cultures related to those languages.

Khnert et al. (2005) calls this common code-switching an "effective communication mode," and this is what leads to an ease in building relationships because each person interacting does not have to worry about whether the other person understands their cultural or linguistic background (as cited in Kim, 2006: 56). Rather than spend time explaining culture or language, the two speakers already share that commonality and can continue to build their relationship beyond those facets. While interviewing Jaewon about her linguistic background, she added, "I don't think I'd be able to date or marry someone who can't relate to Korean culture or speak the language or understand it." If I were to guess, she also wouldn't be able to marry someone who doesn't speak English. In this way, she expressed that her ability to share a common bilingualism with another person builds up their relationship in a way other aspects cannot.

In addition, the concept of identity is closely tied to one's languages and cultural background. One obvious aspect of identity in relation to Konglish would be identification of Korean, American or Korean American in terms of language, birthplace, nationality,

heritage, race, etc. That being said, Kroskrity (1999: 111) defines identity as “the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories.” In this way, one can change their identity in different situations depending on the language they use. As we’ve seen, there are numerous motivations for changing one’s language use, and it changes on a case by case basis. That said, a person can choose to emphasize or display their Korean identity by choosing to use the Korean language in order to connect with other Koreans, appear more diverse, etc. Kroskrity (1999: 112) further mentions that “individuals, as social actors, experience the multiplicity and interactivity of these [identity] levels, in their repertoires of identity.” Rather than choosing a singular identity to portray, a Korean American can never escape entirely their Korean or their American identity. Thus the two end up interacting with others in a way that forms an entirely new identity. This occurs with all sorts of identities and these interactions and combinations are what make us unique.

Because of the constant interaction with others that comes with code-mixing and bilingualism, face comes into play. Not only can a Korean American seeking to show more of their Korean identity be seen as putting on a face, but this face can be accepted or rejected by the person’s fellow interlocutors. A person can choose to initiate what Goffman (1967: 294-295) calls an “aggressive” face act if the speaker chooses to speak in one language and the interlocutor either speaks in the other language or just ignores the attempt at discourse entirely. Brown and Levinson (1987: 301) would consider this a “face threatening act,” and it would result in the initial speaker losing face.

In other, more formal interactions there might be more clear conditions in which Korean should be used. Face could be threatened if one were to use English when Korean was the norm for that situation or if Korean was used incorrectly (like Konglish is often considered). Zerubavel (2006: 17-23) says that we as humans are socialized about what to notice and what to ignore. This could mean that Korean American children learn while growing up when it is appropriate to use Korean or English based on when they see their parents, teachers, friends, etc. using one or the other.

Similar to identity, Pavlenko (2006) discusses how bilingual and multilingual speakers can often experience a perception of different selves. The feeling of being torn between multiple languages and cultures can cause an internal schism that leads to questions of who one's true self is. According to Grosjean (1982), a bilingual is not just two monolinguals in one body, and monolinguals thinking this way can lead to a feeling of exclusion by bilinguals or code-mixers (as cited in Pavlenko, 2006: 29). As bilingualism becomes more widely accepted, the less it will cause a split in the identification of self and the more accepted bilinguals will feel. Pavlenko sums this up by saying "the notion of dialogue, in this view, points to the simultaneous connection and tension between the present and the past that shapes individual voices."

There were some challenges that accompanied this research into Konglish. The first challenge was just the logistics of meeting with Korean Americans to observe their linguistic patterns. Although Asian Allure was a good opportunity to observe, I was unable to record any one on one or small group conversations because of the chaos of rehearsals. Additionally, since the event we were practicing for and performing in was an Asian cultural one, it might have biased conversations to use more Korean than is normal.

Another challenge comes with defining Korean American. My ethnically Korean friends will often talk about "how Korean" someone is. It seems that there is a spectrum between purely Korean and purely Americanized. This spectrum ranges from people who live in Korea but just go to school here (international students – usually not considered Korean American), to people who were born in Korea but moved to the U.S. as babies, to people who moved to the U.S. later in childhood or adolescence, and finally to ethnically Korean people who were born in the U.S. This creates challenges in observing the code-mixing of Korean Americans when it is obviously more likely for someone who lived in Korea for ten years to use Korean than someone who has lived in the U.S. their entire life. It was also challenging as a Caucasian observer to see genuine conversations where Korean is used, because it could be that this group of people would feel obligated to use more English because I am present.

Bilingual individuals view the world through a unique and complicated lens. As America continues to blend ethnicities, cultures and languages, bilingualism and code-mixing will become ever-more ubiquitous. Americans growing up between cultures will joke, be frustrated, establish their identity, convey their cultures, and ultimately build bonds with other bilingual individuals who understand what it means to have two or more languages constantly going in their minds. This continued hybridization will not only introduce monolingual speakers to new languages, but will help them understand and appreciate cultural differences from all over the globe while normalizing the phenomenon of bilingualism.

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