

Protecting the Korean Language: Hangul in South Korea During Globalization

Yuri Na

A few years ago, back in my home country, South Korea, my brother and I decided to go get burgers for lunch. We were starving, so we rushed to the nearby fast-food restaurant. At the restaurant, the lady at the counter annoyingly told us that we could only place our order at the kiosk machine. It was the time when the kiosk was still a new thing in Korea, so she must be tired of explaining to every customer that now they have to use kiosk machines. My brother told me that he prefers to use kiosks because it is easier and faster. I agreed and we rushed over to the machine. There was a long line in front of the kiosks. We did not worry because we thought even if the line is long, it will be our turn to order soon.

However, despite our expectations, the line did not seem to get any shorter, no matter how long we waited in line. People in front of us started to scratch their heads, tilt their bodies to see who was using the machine, and sigh loudly. We were getting frustrated too. The kiosk should be faster and easier to use! Finally, the person who was at the very front stopped using the kiosk. I glanced at him. He had some gray hairs and wrinkles on his face. He reminded me of my grandpa when he was alive. I saw him walking out the door instead of waiting for his food. I said to my brother, “Why was he spending so much time at the kiosk if he was not even going to eat anything?” My brother shrugged his shoulders.

Shortly after he left, it was our turn to order. I looked at the screen and touched it to place my order. I could understand the reason why he just left as soon as I started to use the kiosk. “ORDER,” “MENU,” “RETURN,” “EXTRA CHEESE” ... Everything was in English and there were no other language options. It was not hard to think that he was taking so long to order because he was not familiar with English, and he left without food because he could not order. I felt my face turning red from complaining without even knowing what was going on. “If we knew, we could have helped him.” my brother said. It seemed like he was also feeling bad for the man. “He probably felt embarrassed to ask for help,” he added. He was right about it. People easily look down on someone if that person does not know English. I did not say anything, but I remember thinking to myself that it was bizarre. The kiosk machine being in English was not something I felt off about. I think it is desirable to have different language options, and English is a global language spoken by around 1.5 billion people as their first language or as a second language (Statista, 2022). The fact that the machine was not available in Korean and only provided English was what made me feel upset. How come people cannot order their food in Korean when we are in Korea?

South Korea’s official language is Korean and Korean sign language. However, as I experienced a few years ago, it is easy to find English in Korean society such as in instructions, signs, songs, and even in everyday conversation. Imagine being in a country where you do not speak the language. An unfamiliar language may be interesting and intriguing at first, but it will be extremely inconvenient to live everyday life. It must be anxious and stressful to be in a place

where one cannot understand almost anything including conversations between people and signs on the street. Now imagine experiencing this in your home country. It sounds ridiculous, but that is what is happening in South Korea. The usage of English in South Korea is becoming more and more common, and many Koreans must experience inconveniences for not knowing English in Korea. The problem is that English words are not used with Korean words, but it is used as a replacement. It can be an obstacle in communication between generations and classes, as well as discrimination against those who do not speak English. The message is that it is important to acknowledge the problem of excessive use of English in Korean society, and the Korean government and people's attention to protecting the Korean language are necessary.

Truly, excessive abuse of English has become one of the biggest social conflicts in South Korea. There are a plethora of news reports and interviews showing how much inconvenience English replacement words have caused to Korean society. The clip in South Korean news emphasized the importance of protecting the Korean language, because nowadays English is abused, while the Korean language is ignored (MBN News, 2020). For instance, one apartment complex in Seoul was a big issue a few years ago. Inside an apartment complex, there was a building called "Seniors Club" (MBN News, 2020). It is a place where elders can gather around to hang out and spend time together. It became a problem because the people who mainly use the facility, elders, are not familiar with English. It prevented elders from even realizing there is a place for them to use, which makes the place useless. There is a Korean word 경로당 (gyeonglodang) for such places. The apartment management got countless backlashes from the media, such as personal blogs and journals, for using the English word instead of the Korean word. Also, The Seoul Express Bus Terminal, which recently completed its remodeling, only marked the ticket office as "TICKETS," but belatedly added the Korean word 매표소 (maepyoso) due to complaints from users (MBN News, 2020). Not only 경로당 (gyeonglodang) and 매표소 (maepyoso) but also numerous different Korean words have been substituted with English. 경비실 (gyeongbisil) became a "service center," 독서실 (dogseosil) became a "study center" or "study cafe," and 휴게실 (hyugesil) became "Heymish Garden" or "lounge" (MBN News, 2020).

Public places should be welcoming to everyone, but if English is written instead of Korean, this will make Koreans feel not welcome in public facilities in their very home country, especially the generations who are not familiar with English. Many of them complain about its discomfort. Even though there is a law regulating the sole usage of English in Korea, it is not practical:

제12조(일반적 표시방법) ② 광고물의 문자는 원칙적으로 한글맞춤법, 국어의 로마자표기법 및 외래어표기법 등에 맞추어 한글로 표시하여야 하며, 외국문자로 표시할 경우에는 특별한 사유가 없으면 한글과 병기(併記)하여야 한다. (Order for Enforcement of the Outdoor Advertising Act of 2011)

Under the current law (Order for Enforcement of the Outdoor Advertising Act) in Korea, outdoor advertisements, referring to those that remain exposed to the public at all times or for a certain period of time and are seen in public, such as signboards, banners, posters, flyers, and more, must be displayed in Korean. It should follow Korean grammar, and foreign language should be displayed in Korean with Romanization and foreign language notation. In the case of displaying

them in foreign characters, there must be a special reason. However, the range of “special reason” is unclear, making it virtually difficult to regulate the excessive usage of English.

Moreover, English is abused and replaces Korean words officially. For instance, the new Korean Army's military anthem “Army, We Army,” announced in 2021, includes a number of English words such as “Go Warrior,” “Army Tiger,” and “Warrior Platform” (Republic of Korea Army, 2021). According to the video that analyzed people’s reaction to the new army’s anthem, the majority of people did not like the lyrics and made fun of it. People say the Army should accept the criticism and consider revising the lyrics even now (Videomug, 2021). Even Korean-language organizations have argued that the new military anthem is a violation of the current Basic Korean language usage Act:

제14조(공문서등의 작성·평가) ① 공공기관등은 공문서등을 일반 국민이 알기 쉬운 용어와 문장으로 써야 하며, 어문규범에 맞추어 한글로 작성하여야 한다. 다만, 대통령령으로 정하는 경우에는 괄호 안에 한자 또는 다른 외국 글자를 쓸 수 있다. (Basic Korean language usage Act of 2021)

The law (Basic Korean language usage Act) explicitly indicates that public institutions and official documents should be written in terms and sentences that are easy for the general public to understand and written, stipulated in Korean. However, Chinese characters or other foreign characters may be used in parentheses, in the case prescribed by Presidential Decree. Despite the current law, at the National Institute of Korean Studies and Korean-language organizations, more than 100 cases of misuse and abuse of English are received every year by citizens (KBS News, 2019). It is a significant problem that English is used in public organizations and media platforms since it limits access to people who cannot speak the language.

A researcher at the National Institute of Korean Studies, Lee Dae-Sung, shared his opinion on this English-favoring phenomenon. He argued that it started because of 사대주의 (Sadae juui) (KBS News, 2019). 사대주의 (Sadae Juui) is a negative evaluation of one's own culture by considering the culture of other societies as high-level, valuable, and superior. Lee Dae-Sung added that people think using foreign languages, especially English, sounds more lavish and educated. Therefore, it leads Korean society to abuse English and overlook the Korean language (KBS News, 2019). This 사대주의 (Sadae juui) is not new to Korean culture. The concept first appeared back in the Joseon dynasty, the last dynastic kingdom of Korea. The difference is in the Joseon dynasty era and now is that Joseon Dynasty praised the Ming dynasty, while now it is a Western culture, especially American culture. Chung Yong-Hwa, who is a Research Professor of Political Science at the Institute of Korean Studies, Yonsei University asserted that the Orientalism of the West (as well as Japan, during colonization), had a significant impact on how modern Korean identity developed. As a result, Korea still has an inferiority complex against Western cultures (Chung, 2006, pg2). Examples of 사대주의 (Sadae Juui) include unconditional admiration for foreign cultures, unconditionally liking foreign products and ignoring traditional Korean products, and using names made in English rather than Hangul frequently. 사대주의 (Sadae Juui) has the advantage of being able to easily accept the good elements of foreign cultures because it has a weak sense of rejection of other cultures. However, if 사대주의 (Sadae Juui) deepens, it can lead to uncritically worshiping foreign cultures.

Even though many people experience inconvenience with the replacement of Korean words with English, many people are still eager to use more English on a daily basis. It is not only because of 사대주의 (Sadae juui) but also the advantages that English gives. It is hard to ignore the advantage English gives as a global language, a lingua franca. It is a great strength to speak English fluently nowadays. Most of the information available on the internet is in English. Being able to search English and comprehend the information that is written in English holds advantages that cannot be ignored. Also, there will be more opportunities, such as jobs and education. For instance, “Cyworld” came out first in Korea as a social media platform. It was launched in 1999, while Facebook was launched in 2004. However, Facebook dominated the global market. The reason for it was Cyworld did not provide English service. The ability to use English contributes to the competitiveness of the nation and individuals. For that reason, some people even argue that all citizens should learn English as a second official language from an early age. Korea is highly dependent on exports and imports, because it is a country where self-sufficiency is difficult due to a lack of natural resources. In a modern society where science and technology change rapidly and information must be processed in real time, information is power and money. While high-quality information is written in English, interpretation and translation are limited. Furthermore, most technical jargon is written in English which is why some argue that the “publicization of English” can enhance Korea’s national power.

However, it is not right to use English words recklessly and ignorantly. There is a difference between learning English to be competitive in global society and abusing English words inappropriately. The majority of people are against such a mixture of Korean and English words. As a result, a new sarcastic term about this phenomenon has also been created by Koreans on the internet, and that is 보그체 (voguechae). It means writing or speaking by overusing random English words. It may sound or look like code-switching, but normally 보그체 (voguechae) hardly makes any sense. This is what it looks like in sentences: “심플 (simple) 하고 디테일 (detail) 이 업 (up) 되어 있네요,” or “타이트 (tight) 하게 릴렉스 (relax) 하는 게 니즈 (needs) 입니다.” There are quite a few media platforms that have written in such a style, but the fashion magazine *Vogue Korea* was known for using an absurd amount of English words in their article, so people have named it 보그체 (voguechae) after the magazine. The biggest problem of media platforms using 보그체 (voguechae) is that there is a high possibility that the meaning of the sentence itself is completely reversed or distorted due to the miswritten English word as the example sentences show. Countless unnecessary English words in the sentence make the article hard to comprehend. It leads to disconnecting people who do not know English from society and discriminating against them from accessing information.

To sum up, the use of English in Korea is extremely unnatural. Not only in everyday conversation but public facilities and public institutions also abuse English, which causes discrimination toward people who do not speak English. Even though globalization accelerates and the advantages of using English cannot be ignored, it is a big problem that abuse of English causes conflicts between generations and alienates certain groups of people. In the era of globalization, the phenomenon of other countries’ languages coming in and mixing is extremely natural, but it should not be abused to the point it puts their mother language in danger. The phenomenon requires an understanding of the culture of Korean society in consideration of its special environment, circumstances, and historical context. As a member of a society who enjoys culture, people should look at culture from the standpoint of society and should not evaluate it by

any absolute standard. There is no “superior” or “inferior” culture. The Korean government and people should pay attention to the problem that the abuse of English is causing Korean society. Also, efforts to find the balance between learning and using English and protecting the Korean language are required.

References

Basic Korean language usage Act (2021). Article 14, clause 1 (Kor).

Chung, Y. (2006). The Modern Transformation of Korean Identity: Enlightenment and Orientalism. *Korea Journal*, 46(1), 109-138.

KBS News. (2019, Oct. 9). “외국어가 멋있다?...공공기관이 오남용 앞장 /KBS뉴스(News). [A foreign language is cool? Public institutions take the lead in misuse/KBS News]” [Video]. YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dgix5YUWPwc&t=9s&ab_channel=KBSNews. Accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

MBN News. (2020, May 18). “노인정은 시니어스클럽...영어 남용에 설 자리 잃어가는 한글 / MBN 종합뉴스.” [“Seniors' Club...Hangul Losing Its Place in Abuse of English / MBN News”] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kW5u1BqvCZ0&t=3s>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

Order for Enforcement of the Outdoor Advertising Act (2011). Article 12, clause 2 (Kor)

Statista. (2022). “Most Spoken Languages in the World.” In *Statista*, www.statista.com/statistics/266808/the-most-spoken-languages-worldwide/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20there%20were%20around.

Republic of Korea Army, The. (2021, Apr. 22). “육군, We 육군 [Army, We army]” Official M/V. | by Republic of Korea Army | Facebook.” [Video] Facebook, <https://ko-kr.facebook.com/DaehanmingugYuggun/videos/%EC%9C%A1%EA%B5%B0-we-%20EC%9C%A1%EA%B5%B0-official-mv-feat-%EC%A4%91%EB%8F%85%EC%84%B%201-%EC%A3%BC%EC%9D%98%EC%9C%A1%EA%B5%B0-%EA%B5%B0%EA%B%200%80-%EC%A4%91%EB%8F%85%EC%84%B1-%EA%B5%B0%EA%B0%80%EB%%20AE%A4%EB%B9%84/162361872465909/>

Videomug. (2021, Apr. 30), “새 군가 공개한 육군...댓글 반응을 살펴봤습니다 / 비디오머그. [Army revealed the new military anthem...We looked at the comments / Video mug]” [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8Zbgv98sHM>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

