

Excuse My Konglish

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Abstract

This paper is about “Korean English (Konglish)”. The impression that Koreans have of Konglish is that it is ‘bad’ or ‘incorrect’ English because of how it is used among Koreans. Foreigners cannot understand it unless they learn it but Koreans understand it when spoken among themselves. A major concern is that unlike American English, British English or other varieties of English, Konglish does not have a definition that is really agreed upon by researchers and Koreans themselves. The second chapter talks about how English was probably first introduced and used in Korea and how it has developed in various ways. It also explains how English played a huge role in the Korean society in the past and how it continues to influence or affect social interaction in the present. The next chapter discusses the deeper elements of Konglish including its definitions, examples, and meanings. Since there are no exact definitions of Konglish and since the origin and explanation of some of the examples and its meanings are not clear, there are issues and concerns that arise. It raises questions such as, “Is it okay to use it or not?” Finally in the conclusion, questions and concerns about Konglish remain open to further discussion and debate. Thus, for the recommendations, it is suggested that there should be further and improved studies about Konglish most especially by Koreans because papers on Konglish written by foreigners look at it from a different angle or perspective.

I. Introduction

“Let’s go eye-shopping!” I said to my Filipino friends, when I asked them to go to a department store. Everyone looked at me quizzically. They retorted, “What are you talking about? Do you mean window-shopping?” I was very ashamed. I thought I used an English expression but I found out that except for Koreans, it is not used by native speakers or any other speakers of English like the Filipinos.

After this experience, I searched for the meaning of *eye-shopping*, and I found out that it is considered a Korean-English word/expression or Konglish. Aside from the Konglish word that I already used, I found out that there are a lot more. Most of them mean something to Koreans, but they would not make sense to other speakers of English. A list of other examples is provided in another chapter. I then thought of Konglish as ‘bad’ English or the ‘wrong usage’ of English words. And I think most Koreans think of Konglish the same way but still use them out of habit and because it is understood by almost everyone.

However, when Koreans use these words or expressions when talking to other speakers of English, that is usually the time that they realize, and find out that others do not understand them. Koreans think of Konglish as ‘misused’ English when they are corrected and advised of the appropriate Konglish words and expressions by speakers of English. For other Koreans though, they think it is not ‘bad’ English, taking the perspective of the social function of language. The argument is that being able to put your point across is what matters, regardless of grammar and other considerations.

English is not our first language. It is mostly the second language or foreign languages to Koreans. Koreans start studying English at a young age, and we mostly learn vocabulary, common expressions, and grammar. There is not much focus on phonology and conversational usage of the language. We actually do not use it in daily activities plus there is not much opportunity to do so.

These are only some among other concerns and issues about Konglish. There are also issues and concerns about its definition and categorization, which will be discussed further in the following chapters.

My study focuses on the definitions of Konglish from different sources, examples, categories and meanings. Issues on these definitions and categories, the local opinion and attitude towards Konglish, and personal reflections on the study of Konglish in general are to be discussed as well.

II. English in Korea

Before defining Konglish and giving more specifics, I would first like to discuss how the use of English started and spread in Korea: from its history to its development, with a discussion on its importance in the Korean society today.

Though there are no documentations of the exact date or time when it was first used, I have found articles about when Koreans probably first encountered it, and eventually used it.

In a web log written by Moon (2012), English was first used in Korea in the 16th century. Due to an accident, the vessel of Hendrick Hamel from Netherlands was got wrecked at Jeju Island in Korea in 1653. A carpenter from Scotland was with Hamel, and their interaction with the local people was an opportunity for Koreans to get exposed to English.

According to Collins (2005), “Koreans were wary of the English language because Korea was the last East Asian country to get in contact with the West. However, by 1882, Koreans had signed a treaty with the United States, fostering the arrival of missionaries, advisors, traders, and teachers who brought the English language with them, and who soon began teaching it to Korean children via English-only classes.”

In 1883, English language education was first introduced when the Joseon government opened English language schools. The purpose was to train interpreters for trade and commerce (Kim, 2008).

However, as Collins noted, in the face of the then increasing Japanese expansion, English became a site of resistance for Korean intellectuals hoping to further associate themselves with the Americans. For that reason, in 1896, a group called Independence Club founded the first English language newspaper. English was still taught as a mandatory subject during the period of Japanese rule in Korea which began in 1910, and Japanese colonizers published annual reports in English on the ways they contributed to “Korean life.”

Moreover, according to the article, “After the Korean War, use of English developed in South Korea due to international trade, especially trade with the US. And in the 1960’s, South Korean teachers were being trained to teach English and by the 1970’s and 80’s, the language was already associated with middle class and cosmopolitan values.”

The government intentionally associated English with globalization, both culturally and economically after the 1988 Seoul Olympics, and began to promote the English language education to foster international competitiveness. The Kim, Young Sam administration sponsored this by initiating a program known as *Segyehwa*, a major component of which was the development of English instruction according to Yoo (2006) in Flattery’s paper (2007).

Within the following decades, with aims for a more developed country, more and more people have gradually become interested in learning English as it has hugely influenced trade and commerce.

At present, we can see how English plays a huge role in our globalizing society, not just in terms of trade and commerce. It also plays a very important part in diplomatic and international relations, education, career-making or choosing a profession, and it basically affects all aspects of the globalizing society.

Korea has gradually embraced and continues to embrace globalization. We can see how it is being affected and how it is affecting the rest of the world through entertainment, media, music, and other means. The Korean society has become more open to accepting and exploring other cultures. Koreans have become more curious of what is happening around the world so more Koreans are travelling, studying and even living in other countries.

An article from *The Korea Times* (dated February 5, 2008) was written about how English plays

a huge role in the Korean society:

“According to a report by the Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI), Koreans spend about 15 trillion won (\$15.8 billion) on English learning per year. Koreans also topped the applicant list of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) between 2004 and 2005 as about 102,340 out of the 554,942 applicants were Koreans. They also paid 700 billion won toward English examination fees. Enthusiasm for English study has also seen a large number of children, teenagers and even adults going to English-speaking countries like the United States, Australia and Britain to study. Last year some 250,000 under 29 years old went abroad for studying. The English frenzy saw the coining of the term ‘goose father,’ referring to a father who lives alone in Korea having sent his spouse and children to a foreign country to study English or some other form of advanced study. The goose fathers are estimated to be about 200,000 goose daddies nationwide. Most Koreans start to learn English from middle or elementary school. By the time they graduate, they have already spent about 100,000 hours on English studying, according to the SERI report.”

We have to remember that language evolves, and the evolution of language involves cultural dynamics, especially for a foreign language used in a foreign country. Since Koreans started learning English, and as Koreans continue learning and using English, some of the English words or expressions they learned and continue to learn have advanced and continuously evolve into what is called Korean English or Konglish, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

III. Konglish: Definitions, Examples, and Meanings

Now, let me discuss Korean English or Konglish through some definitions, examples, and meanings.

Definitions

Konglish has been defined and viewed in different ways. Aside from the definitions provided by Kosofsky and Miller, some people have also made their own definition of Konglish.

One such definition was made by an anonymous person, “English words that Korean people use in a manner that is not correct English. Usually this is by combining two words or modifying words incorrectly.”

Another definition on the internet by an anonymous person is that “Konglish is a word used to describe Korean pronounced English.”

Three other definitions by another unknown source define Konglish as: first, these are “words or phrases that have been taken from English (and other European languages) which are commonly used within the South Korean vernacular. This includes words that have maintained correct phonetical pronunciation, or words that have been phonetically modified in order to fit the

pronunciative governing structure of the Korean language. In other words direct loan word adaption.”

The second definition is, “Konglish can also be described as a combination of Korean and English (as well as some European) words used to portray a meaning similar to that found in either or both language. It can also be where English words are used to portray an ideological structure differing from the original term. This leads Koreans to incorrectly identify some terms as English, whereas, in essence, the terms have been coined by the Koreans themselves.”

The last definition is, “Konglish is the direct translation of Korean to English language. Thus allowing for the creation of pseudo loan-words.”

According to Kosofsky (1986), Konglish is the English which is spoken and written by native speakers of Korean.

Miller (2003), in his article, wrote that Konglish is “the mixture of Korean and English words to form words independent to the base of the Korean language but originating from English (in some cases from other European languages).”

We can sense from these definitions taken from various sources that there are similarities on its components, but there seems to be no single definition that can account for all Konglish words. This concern will be discussed further in the following chapters.

Examples

Below is a list of examples of Konglish words and categorization of some Konglish words and expressions, which is subject to further discussion.

List of Konglish

Konglish	English	Konglish	English
<i>hand phone</i>	cellular phone	<i>back mirror</i>	rear-view mirror
<i>handle</i>	steering wheel	<i>autobi</i>	motorcycle/motorbike
<i>remocon</i>	remote control	<i>sign</i>	signature/autograph
<i>morning call</i>	wake-up call	<i>back number</i>	uniform number
<i>arbeit</i>	part-time job	<i>fighting</i>	go/come on/cheer up
<i>eye shopping</i>	window shopping	<i>vinylhouse</i>	greenhouse
<i>Hotchkiss</i>	Stapler	<i>sunglass</i>	sunglasses
<i>Y-shirt</i>	white shirt/shirt	<i>cassette</i>	cassette player
<i>meeting</i>	blind date	<i>sharp</i>	mechanical pencil
<i>stand</i>	desk lamp	<i>cunning</i>	cheating
<i>driver</i>	screw driver	<i>note</i>	notebook
<i>sun cream</i>	sun block cream	<i>apart</i>	apartment

<i>perma</i>	Perm	<i>maker</i>	brand-name
<i>audio</i>	stereo/audio system	<i>consent</i>	outlet / socket
<i>accel</i>	accelerator	<i>CF</i>	commercial
<i>ball pen</i>	ball-point pen/pen	<i>prime</i> (for coffee)	creamer
<i>lens</i>	contact lenses	<i>health</i>	health club/gym
<i>old miss</i>	single/unmarried woman	<i>notebook</i>	laptop
<i>backpack</i>	travel backpacking	<i>mishin</i>	sewing machine
<i>gagman</i>	comedian	<i>one room</i>	studio apartment
<i>overeat</i>	vomit/throw up	<i>cutline</i>	cut-off line
<i>rotary</i>	intersection	<i>service</i>	free
<i>coating</i>	Laminating	<i>white</i>	correction pen
<i>aircon</i>	air-conditioner	<i>panties</i>	underwear
<i>A/S(after service)</i>	warrantee service	<i>rearcar</i>	pushcart
<i>one shot</i>	bottoms up/cheers	<i>skinship</i>	physical contact
<i>D.C</i>	discount	<i>bond</i>	glue
<i>wrap</i>	plastic wrap	<i>panty</i>	underpants
<i>vinyl</i>	plastic bag	<i>sunting</i>	window tinting
<i>talent</i>	actor/actress	<i>Klaxon</i>	horn
<i>circle</i>	club/student group	<i>pro (%)</i>	percent
<i>golden time</i>	prime time	<i>dica</i>	digital camera
<i>two-piece</i>	suit/business suit	<i>self camera</i>	taking a picture of oneself/myself using a camera
<i>self</i>	self-service	<i>magic pen</i>	marker
<i>super</i>	supermarket	<i>manicure</i>	nail polish
<i>cider</i>	7-Up/Sprite	<i>diary</i>	schedule book
<i>gas range</i>	gas stove	<i>rinse</i>	hair conditioner
<i>PD</i>	producer	<i>FD</i>	floor director
<i>cray-pas</i>	crayon-pastel	<i>one piece</i>	dress
<i>terevi</i>	television	<i>SF</i>	science fiction
<i>hairpin</i>	hair clip	<i>bed town</i>	suburb

According to Tranter (2000), Konglish words were borrowed directly from Japanese English, and examples of such are the truncated vocabulary items such as *televi* (television), *autobai* (motorcycle), *self* (self-service) and *remocon* (remote control). These words are commonly used in Korea and in Japan.

Another class that is common in Konglish is acronym. A few examples of these are *SF* (science fiction), *D.C* (discount), and *PD* (producer).

Hotchkiss, *Klaxon* and *Burberry* are brand names of products, and Koreans use brand names to specify each product like Hotchkiss for stapler in English.

There are other classifications of Konglish words, and one of such categorization was done by Everest (2002).

In his research, the first category consists of direct loanwords from English or Japanese with the same meaning but simplified form. Examples cited are *driver* (screwdriver), *self* (self-service) and *D.C* (Discount). Many words occupy particular lexical gaps or are used in semantic fields in which Korean language may lack appropriate terminology. For example, culinary terminologies like *ice cream* (English) and *baguette* (French), or more technical words like *allergy*, *computer* and *virus* (all English), fit into this category.

The second category consists of words that may be direct loanwords with a broader or narrower meaning. Broader terms include *lover* (whether intimate or not, meaning boyfriend or girlfriend), *cologne* (after-bath splash for men or women), and brand names such as *Burberry* (meaning overcoat). On the other hand, there are words that have become more specific in their meaning. Examples are *bond* (glue), *cunning* (cheating on tests) or *arbeit* (part-time job), the latter, which is undoubtedly German in origin, has entered Konglish via ‘Janplish’ or ‘Japanese-English’.

The third category consists of words shift extenders which are loanwords with quite altered meanings (and sometimes parts of speech). These may require some leaps of logic to figure out such as *cream sands* (cream-filled cookies or crackers), *overeate* (vomit), make a *promise* (appointment), and *gargle* (mouthwash).

The fourth category is fabrications, which contain English-like elements but are not (yet) considered standard English. Some are direct translations, such as time teacher (part-time lecturer), *name card*, and possibly *one-sided love*. More imaginative are blended words like *spolex* (sports complex), or compound words like *free-talking* (chit-chat), *eye-shopping* (window shopping), and *campus-couple* (a couple who met and dated steadily at a university).

As Everest noted, when used in English, communication may break down. In Korean, however, Konglish words are perfectly acceptable words to be used such as loan words.

This categorization possesses concern, as there are criticisms against it, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Here are more examples which were not discussed by Everest.

According to Song (1998), the meanings of loanwords such as *panties* and *talent* diverge from those of the original English words, but are found in Korean. Let us look at a few more examples: *stand* (desk lamp), *rinse* (conditional), *manicure* (nail polish), *accessory* (jewelry), *service* (free charge) and *handle* (steering wheel). All of these Konglish words are somehow related to the meaning of their counterparts in the English language.

In addition, there are terms wherein its Korean meaning is different from its English counterpart, such as *one shot* (cheers or bottoms up), *punk* (flat tire or broken promise or disaster), *back number* (numbers on an athlete's uniform) and *hiking* (done on a bicycle).

Another characteristic is the formation and use of terms or expressions that are not normally used in British or American English at all, such as *skinship*, which has been in the East for years but has finally broken into western English as the title of a psychology journal. Other examples are *all back* (swept back hair), *one piece* (dress), *bed town* (suburb) and *golden time* (prime time).

Aside from Konglish words, there are also some expressions that are used in certain cases. “*Have you eaten?*” is a form of greeting each other. Instead of saying hi or using formal greetings, Koreans say this question to people who are close to them like their family and friends. Another expression, *so so*, is a kind of feeling which is neither good nor bad. Another expression is “*Did you sleep well?*”. Unlike English greetings such as good morning, good afternoon, good evening, and so on, Korean greetings like *annyunghaseyo* are fewer than English. When we wake up, we greet each other by asking, “*Did you sleep well?*” instead of the normal Korean way of greeting.

IV. Issues and Concerns

There are some issues or concerns that we have pointed out in the previous chapters. These include concerns about definitions, as well as differing opinions about whether Konglish is ‘bad’ or ‘incorrect’ English, or if it is okay to use it as long as the language used is understood by the receiver. It also includes concerns about the categorization made by Everest.

In one study by Hadikin (2005), he wrote about the local attitude of Koreans towards Konglish. About sixteen respondents among twenty had negative impression toward Konglish. The words they gave are wrong, incorrect or improperly formed. However, there are positive responses such as “Konglish is a kind of culture in Korean lifestyle.” Only about four respondents gave a neutral definition. However, even if there are only a few respondents who looked at Konglish in a positive way, more people are now more accepting of the fact that there are appropriate contexts for Konglish.

Most respondents of his study agreed to 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.

As for the issue on definitions and categorization, in another study by Hadikin, he wrote that Kosofsky's definition is too broad because any variety of English spoken by a native Korean speaker is Konglish. He also mentioned that Everest's categorizations are loan words from Korean that are regularly used in English conversation such as food items and unique cultural concepts.

In a study by Thorkelson (2005), he criticized Kosofsky's and Everest's definition of Konglish. He says that that these are more concerned with identifying selective misuses of standard (i.e. common) English words or parts of speech, loaned or borrowed words purportedly from English, and neologisms that are not English at all rather than looking at Konglish per se.

Personally, I do not agree with just one of the definitions because I think there is no single definition that encompasses all the components and nature of Konglish. However, I also think I

would need to conduct a more in-depth study or research to see if I can come up with a single definition that can cover the nature and components of Konglish. And only when an appropriate definition is made can there be proper categorization. Regarding the concern whether it's 'bad' and 'incorrect' English or not, I take both perspectives. As a Korean, I also look at it from the perspective that it has a cultural context, though I understand that these are grammatically and syntactically incorrect. I have the same views or attitude as the respondents in Hadikin's research except that I take both perspectives. There are specific situations when it is okay to use it, but there are also situations when it is inappropriate.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

After doing this paper, I realized that the questions about Konglish still remain unanswered, and so understanding the full nature of Konglish is still elusive.

1. With varying definitions, to fully understand it, should Konglish then have just one definition that can contain or fully explain its nature? Or, is there even one definition for it that can account for what Konglish is in the first place?
2. For having a definition of Konglish, should it be systematized or properly categorized?
3. If it is going to be systematized, who are the people authorized to do it? Are Korean linguists, foreign linguists, or a combination of both competent enough to do so?
4. Should there be rules about its usage?
5. And more importantly, is it even necessary to have one definition for it, categorize it, and codify it?
6. Or just leave Konglish in its present state, which is without any system or code and accept that it is alright to use it in a Korean setting and with Koreans?

I may have personal views or answers to these questions, but other people who use Konglish may not share the same views.

As I have mentioned earlier, I look at Konglish from two perspectives. For me, it is okay to use Konglish in Korea, with Korean people, and in a 'Korean' context. However, because many Koreans nowadays are going abroad to study English, for travel, for business and for other reasons, then I believe Koreans should be more careful in using English. Koreans abroad should avoid using Konglish since the foreigners may or will misunderstand them. This is not only due to the fact that the foreigners may think of Konglish as 'incorrect', but also because they are not aware of the context of Konglish. Aside from this, I also think that a Standard Korean English can be developed in the future.

Another realization I had after doing this paper is that I had very limited resources, especially books and academic papers. One probable reason for this has to do with the fact that Korea has fairly recently become more interested in the importance of learning English. Koreans have always been interested in English, of course, but the interest has increased as mentioned earlier, due to globalization. Since the interest has peaked only fairly recently, not many Koreans have really become interested in fully analyzing it yet.

Another probable reason is that it is not as popular as other varieties of English. It is almost always, commonly used by Koreans only. Thus they are most probably the ones more concerned about how it is being used, and not the other speakers of the English language.

Even though I found some readings, they are from the Internet in the form of blogs and articles, and only a few were from academic researches and papers.

With this concern, as a Korean, I hope there would be more studies about Konglish by Koreans. Definitions and categories are found in some foreign researches, but I think their perspective is lacking, and a Korean perspective would be different. Some foreign researches tend to look at the picture from the outside, and not from within. At times, they focus only on some specific areas rather than the entire study. My resolution is to be able to conduct further research and studies about Konglish in the future and for the future.

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