

The art of Konglish

Niamh Mulholland, winner of our young writers' competition, explains why Konglish – a fusion of English and Korean – is more than the sum of its parts.

Loanwords in languages are by no means a recent phenomenon. The English language was in fact one of the biggest culprits for such lexical adaptations, with many words being 'borrowed' from French, Spanish, Italian and German (see Philip Durkin's account of English borrowing on pages 10–13 of this issue!). Whilst English continues to borrow words from other languages, the tables have turned, as it seems English has become the 'lender' of words especially in Asia. The rapid development of technology has meant related vocabulary is adopted internationally due to the strong recognition of certain concepts in the origin country, in this case the US or the UK. The Korean language is the ideal host for these words given the flexibility of the Korean alphabet, hangeul (한글) – an alphabet dating back to the Joseon Dynasty, 1443. It was created by King Sejon with the purpose of educating the common people as many were illiterate due to the reliance on the complicated Chinese script which did not sufficiently express the meanings of words and concepts in the Korean language. Thus was born a very simple, yet beautiful phonetic alphabet consisting of 24 consonant and vowels. It is due to the phonological nature of this alphabet that English can be transliterated



King Sejon, creator of the Korean alphabet

accurately into hangeul (한글) and as this became a common practice the loanwords became more than loanwords and the words found themselves integrated into the Korean lexicon with a meaning often completely different to that of the word from which it originated. One example of this is the Korean word 'shapeu' (샤프/sa-ya-p-eu) which reads eerily similar to the English word 'sharp' whilst in fact 'shapeu' (샤프) refers specifically to a mechanical pencil.

It is important to note the fine line between the idea of broken English, which over a period of time morphs into a sub language or a pidgin language, and this concept of 'Konglish' words. Such is one of the controversies surrounding the integration of these words into the Korean language. Language has never been static and the continuous flux

and variation of stylistics and vernacular in language becomes increasingly obvious in the age of social media. Not only in relation to these changes in Korean, but in English also, there exists the opinion that the abbreviation or replacement for the simplification of words or phrases is a detriment to the language as a whole. Undoubtedly social media has accelerated the otherwise natural flux of language with sites such as twitter prompting users to share their thoughts in 140 characters or less. It can be argued that what this brings to the language of this generation and future generations is a conciseness, an admonishment to the rhetoric that so often clouds the essential message. The creation of words such as 'selfie' – the Korean equivalent of which is 'selca' (셀카) an abbreviation of 'self-camera' – provide us with a way of expressing very specific ideas, something which will aid us in a society that is becoming increasingly fast paced.

However, in the case of Korean this detriment refers more to a loss of culture and tradition, the 'westernisation' of the language. For many objects or concepts in Korean there exists more than one word; the original Korean word, an abbreviation or amalgamation of Korean words or the Konglish, the latter it seems is more commonly used in Seoul, the capital of South Korea. The Seoul dialect is used outside of Seoul and is the most commonly used dialect in South Korea. There exists a significant difference in the Seoul dialect and the dialect commonly used in North Korea, the munhwao dialect. The use of Konglish words is not only thought by some to be detrimental to the Korean tradition and culture but it

has contributed to the divide between both the North and South. There are two systems for romanising hangeul (한글), originally both the North and South used the McCune-Reischauer romanisation system (MCRR) which was created in 1937 yet today South Korea use the Revised Romanisation (RR) system. The use of the former system places a great emphasis on the pronunciation of Korean words whilst the latter was put in place due to the ease in which it can be typed. North Korea are adamant in not adopting words that are not purely Korean into their vernacular which of course poses a major problem in the communication between the countries. South Korea has a wealth of adopted vocabulary that continues to expand and with this expansion comes the shifting of meaning of native words so whilst a Korean word may mean one thing in the Seoul dialect it may hold a different nuance in the munhwao dialect. A commonly used example to demonstrate the difference is the feelings expressed by the word 'ilupsopneda' (일없습니다) which to those in North Korea translates roughly to 'I'm fine, thanks' in response to 'How are you?' however in South Korea 'ilupsopneda' (일없습니다) means 'mind your own business'. Clearly the change in nuance over time can lead to misunderstandings.

Aside from the political and cultural implications in this evolution of language one might consider the effects this will have on native Korean speakers and those learning Korean. In both respects there is often some confusion as to which words are Korean words and which are merely bad use of English. Apart from this Konglish words along with the increasing popularity



South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak and footballer Ji So Yun taking a 'selfie'

and fascination of western pop culture in Korea seem to aid learning English as a foreign language and in a sense places an emphasis on the perceived importance of learning English. For those learning from English to Korean, Konglish can be helpful in that it provides the learner with familiar words with only slight variations amidst the disparity in grammar between the two languages.

Konglish, rather than catalysing the decline of rich culture and tradition, adds something new to the Korean culture. The evolution of the Konglish in the Korean language speaks volumes to the rapid and continuing modernisation of the country. Konglish is Korean-Western fusion at its best, it is the smell galbi (갈비) and chicken on the streets of cosmopolitan Seoul, it is visiting Gyeongbokgung palace (경복궁) and then Shinsegae (신세계) Department Store. The linguistic flux is a fine blend between the traditional and the contemporary. It is an art. ¶

Find out more

Books

The Prodigal Tongue: Dispatches from the Future of English by Mark Abley (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

Writing competition winner



The winner of our writing competition for 16-18 year olds is **Niamh Mulholland**, aged 17, from the border of the Republic and Northern Ireland. Her article on the rising hybrid of South Korean and English, Konglish, astounded us for her depth of linguistic understanding, originality of content and vivacious writing style.

Babel's Assistant Editor, Jane Lugea, interviews the winning author, whose article is published in this issue of Babel.

What school do you go to and what do you study?

I attend Thornhill College in Derry, Northern Ireland and am currently doing my A-Levels. I'm studying Maths, Physics, Further Maths, Spanish and English Literature. This year I had the opportunity to take enrichment classes in Chinese as well as computer programming classes.

What else do you get involved in at school?

I'm on the school public speaking and debating team. My friends and I really love engineering and building things, I've done quite a few science projects over the last few years, including building a real time motion sensor device and plant sensor for monitoring water levels in plants. At the minute my friends and I are working on building our own 3D printer.

What would you like to do after school?

I really love mathematics and hope to study it at university alongside a language. I'd love to pick up German or a Scandinavian language. I am also very interested in linguistics

as it's a way for me to combine mathematics and language.

I believe you came top ten in the All Ireland Linguistics Olympiad. How did you enjoy the ALLO?

I really enjoy the Olympiad problems! They can be really difficult but they're also fun. It's really cool to be able to translate sentences in a language you have never even heard of before, with only a few clues. It definitely gave me a better understanding of the practical applications of linguistics, as it's an area that is not often touched on in school. I really hope to participate in the Olympiad again next year.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I am a voracious green tea drinker and I love reading. My favourite author is Douglas Adams. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is my favourite book series. Adams has such a quirky writing style that just fits so well with the bizarreness of the storyline. Speaking of which, is Babel called Babel after the babel fish in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy?

No, it is named after the biblical story of the tower of Babel!

In summary, humans built a tower of Babel to get closer to the heavens and God punished them by toppling the tower and giving people different languages to confound communication. I understand you are doing your bit to improve your communication, though?

Yes, as well as studying Spanish in school, in my spare time I study Korean, Japanese and Latin. I watch foreign films online, which I occasionally write subtitles for. My favourite movie is Makoto Shinkai's Five Centimetres Per Second.

Thank you so much for choosing my article. I'm so excited to have it published! ¶