I Like Korean, but I’m not Sure it Likes Me!

Russell G. Schuh

1. Introduction

English is my first language and the only language that I learned natively. I grew up in southern Oregon, where English was the only language spoken in my milieu. My aunts and uncles on my father’s side all spoke German as their first language, and they would teach me little phrases when I was young, but I never learned the language. The only language I studied before university was two years of Latin in high school. As an undergraduate, I became interested in languages. I studied Russian and French and ended up with both a BA and an MA in French.

With this background in French, I could read it and understand the spoken language very well, and I had reasonably good writing and speaking skills. The latter skills improved massively during two years in the Peace Corps in Niger, West Africa, where French was the national language and where I had to use it all the time. It was also during this time that I began learning Hausa, the largest indigenous language in Niger. I did my doctoral research in Nigeria, where I used Hausa as the contact language, and I have been back to Nigeria many times since. Hausa is, today, by far my best second language.

During the 2003-2004 academic year, I had a full year of sabbatical leave. I had, for a long time, wanted to study an Asian language, partly out of a linguist’s interest in languages in general, partly because so many of my students at UCLA since at least the 1980’s have been of Asian background, either as immigrants or by heritage. As one of my sabbatical projects, I therefore took Korean 1-3 as a student, doing all the assignments, exams, and oral classwork. I picked Korean, first, because I wanted to learn a “head-final” language, and second, because the alphabetic writing system of Korean
makes it possible to get reading and writing ability without spending a huge amount of
time memorizing characters as would be required for Chinese or Japanese.

Korean classes were tough! The classes had a balance between reading, writing,
listening, and speaking. We were drilled in a rather traditional way in memorizing
vocabulary and learning rules of grammar, but there were also active speaking projects
such as preparing and presenting oral skits with other students and putting our rather
minimal knowledge of Korean to practical use by, for example, getting information about
shopping in Seoul from internet sites. After this year of Korean class plus a year and a
half of weekly tutoring sessions, my skills are still at a regrettably low level, partly
because Korean itself is so unlike any language I have had experience with and partly, I
fear, because age is taking its toll on brain flexibility. Nonetheless, the preparation I got
in UCLA Korean classes in both grammatical knowledge and practical skills has given
me confidence to pursue the language for the long term.

2. Comparison of Sounds

In this section, I will describe the vowels of Korean and present some of the
difficulties that I have found as an English speaker. The Korean writing system, called
*hankul* (or *han’gul*), is an alphabetic system developed in the 15th century under the
direction of King Sejong. For the most part, *hankul* meets the ideal of a one-to-one
relationship of written symbol to sound. Korean has seven or eight vowel sounds, each
represented by its own written symbol. Some of the vowel symbols are vertical and
written to the right of the consonant symbols, some are horizontal and written under the
consonant symbols. The table below shows the phonetic vowels found in the speech of
most younger speakers of Seoul Korean.
<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>기</td>
<td>ki</td>
<td>‘flag’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>개</td>
<td>ke</td>
<td>‘crab’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>꾸</td>
<td>꾸</td>
<td>ku</td>
<td>‘he, she; that’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>꾸</td>
<td>ku</td>
<td>‘nine’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>꾸</td>
<td>ko</td>
<td>‘plaster’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ə</td>
<td>꾸</td>
<td>ko</td>
<td>‘carriage’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>가</td>
<td>ka</td>
<td>‘go!’ (familiar)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are two symbols for the front mid vowel [e], and some speakers do distinguish two vowels, [e] as in 개 ‘crab’ and [e] or [æ] as in 개 ‘dog’, but younger speakers of Seoul Korean do not make this distinction. The only vowel of the Korean system that looks “un-English” is the high back unrounded vowel [u]. I have not found this vowel difficult (I just say “u” and smile!), but I have noticed that some Korean students whose native language is English tend to pronounce this as [u], making the words for ‘he’ and ‘nine’ sound alike, probably because the only high back vowels of English are rounded.

For me, the biggest problem is between the vowels represented as [o] and [ə] in the table. Books describing Korean usually call the vowel in 개 ‘well!’ a back or central mid unrounded vowel something like the [a] in English but (though they usually represent it as [ə]). However, all the Korean speakers that I know pronounce this vowel with strong lip rounding, which is why I represent it as [ə]. Probably because my native English lacks the vowel [ə] (I pronounce both cot and caught as [kat]), I tend to hear Korean words such as 영어 [yŏŋo] ‘English’ as “yongo”. Moreover, the [o] of Korean tends to be pronounced higher and more “tense” than English /o/, and it lacks the “diphthongization” that tends to accompany English /o/ as in toe, which is pronounced [tow], at least in California. I therefore often hear Korean words such as 고도 [kodo] ‘height’ as “kudu”,
whereas 구두 [kudu] in Korean is an entirely different word, meaning ’(dress) shoes’. Conversely, I probably substitute the American English pronunciation of “o” in Korean words with the [o] vowel, producing an American accent, though it would not cause confusion for a Korean listener, since it would not sound like some other Korean vowel.

3. Comparison of Grammar

In English, locational prepositions usually express not only location but also a positional relation. For example, the preposition in includes not only the idea of a location but also “at the interior” of that location, such as in the house, as opposed to behind the house, which expresses a different locational relation. In Korean, the concept of location and the physical relation to the location are separated. Korean makes phrases which might be translated X’s-top, X’s-side, X’s-back, then adds a general postposition 에 -e, which might be translated “at”. In locative phrases, Korean makes yet another distinction not found in English. If an activity is taking place at the location, Korean adds 에서 -e-스로 rather than just 에 -e. The table below illustrates these structures, using 집 착 ‘house’ as the location and 새 se ‘bird’ as the thing that is being localized. In Korean, the verb is at the end. The verb 있어요 is’ayo in the middle column means ‘exist (in a place)’, the verb 자요 čayo in the right column means ‘sleep’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location+relation</th>
<th>Statically at location</th>
<th>Action taking place at location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>집위 착-wi house’s top</td>
<td>새가 집위에 있어요 se-ka 착-wi-e is’ayo the bird is on the house</td>
<td>새가 집위에서 자요 se-ka 착-wi-e-스로 čayo the bird is sleeping on the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>집옆 착-yap house’s side</td>
<td>새가 집옆에 있어요 se-ka 착-yap-e is’ayo the bird is beside the house</td>
<td>새가 집옆에서 자요 se-ka 착-yap-e-스로 čayo the bird is sleeping beside the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>집뒤 착-twí house’s back</td>
<td>새가 집뒤에 있어요 se-ka 착-twí-e is’ayo the bird is behind the house</td>
<td>새가 집뒤에서 자요 se-ka 착-twí-e-스로 čayo the bird is sleeping behind the house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Language and Thought

In one of lessons in the UCLA Korean class, a person driving a car asks his friend to turn on the radio because he is getting sleepy. After a minute he says,

이제 잠이 좀 꺼는 것 같아
ije čam-i čom k’ē-nun kos katʰa
now sleep-subject well wakeup-“that” thing resembles

Fairly literally translated, with English word order, this sentence says, “Now the thing that sleep has woken up from appears (to be the case).” The sentence means, “I seem to be waking up now.” Such a sentence (and such sentences are common in Korean) tempts an English speaker to believe that expressing oneself like this must indicate that the Korean language is causing Koreans to view events in a different way from the way someone expressing them in English views them. For example, the use of the word kos ‘thing’ here makes it seem that Korean is viewing “waking up” as type of concrete object rather than as a transitional stage that an animate being goes through, as expressed by English, “I am waking up”, with an animate subject. So maybe the structural properties of the Korean language makes its speakers see events or states as “things”.

But what independent evidence do we have about the relation of the Korean language to the way Korean speakers think? I know of none. In fact, the only evidence for claiming that Korean language causes its speakers to view the world in a way different from that of English speakers is the fact that the linguistic characterization of a particular event in the two languages is so different. This is using the very data that we are trying to explain as evidence for the claim that Korean speakers and English speakers view the world in different ways. In short, the grammatical properties of Korean and English differ in striking ways, but the behaviors of the speakers do not provide independent evidence that the languages force their speakers along different mental paths.
5. Acquisition

Having acquired English before the critical age, I construct sentences without pondering grammatical rules at all. Even though linguistics has taught me a lot about analyzing sentences, I often have no analytical explanation for why one way of saying something is correct and another is not—why are *at my home* and *at home* both OK whereas *at my house* is OK but *at house* is not? Surprisingly, although I learned both French and Hausa after the critical age, repeated exposure and use, especially of Hausa, for over three decades has provided me with a certain amount of instinctual ability in those languages, though certainly nothing like that for English.

On the other hand, I despair of ever developing any instinctual ability in Korean at all. Forget sentences like that in section 4! Even for short utterances, the best I can do is mechanically apply rules that I have memorized and fall back on principles of English where those fail. Here is a phrase that I produced on a composition in Korean class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My version</th>
<th>Correct version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>야녁 시 밤에 즐</td>
<td>밤 야녁 시 즐예</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yoltu shi</strong> <strong>pam-e c’um</strong></td>
<td><strong>pam yoltu shi c’um-e</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>twelve o’clock night-at approximately</td>
<td>night twelve o’clock approximately-at</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intended meaning: ‘at approximately twelve o’clock at night’

I knew enough to put the number before the noun and to use the postposition *-e* ‘at’. I had also learned that adverbs like ‘approximately’ go after the thing they modify. On the other hand, I used English order for the placement of *밤* **pam** ‘night’, putting it after **yoltu shi** ‘twelve o’clock’, and I incorrectly thought of **كرم** ‘approximately’ as modifying the postpositional phrase as a whole rather than being inside it (even though it is inside the prepositional phrase in the English translation). Sigh!