

집(*Jib*): Where *Seulpeum* is Sadness

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“All nations must provide universal health insurance. Whether it be surgery, medication, or simply an appointment at a doctor’s office, access to the benefits of modern medicine is a basic human right, a precondition to an individual’s pursuit of happiness.” I stood before the audience with confidence I had never possessed before. The icy, firm surface of the glass podium felt perfect. My shoulders were relaxed, my hands moved naturally as I spoke, and my voice rang clearly and loudly. My eyes were fixed on the grey marble wall across the auditorium, yet I still did not forget to make meaningful eye contact with my audience. I could hear the fiery passion in my own voice. Each rising and falling, each pause, and even each slight tremble was precalculated and under my absolute control. My words glided with strength. I felt my tongue touching the right spots in my mouth to produce the smoothest, glossiest sounds of English. I felt a sense of satisfaction as I pronounced the word “world”: wur-l-d. My tongue curled and straightened at the perfect moments. There was a complete balance between the “r” and “l”. My voice continued to fill the space like flooding water. Every word, chosen and revised meticulously, cut through the sensitive topic like a skilled surgeon’s blade, which reached its sharpest, boldest moment at the climax of the speech. Suturing the incision was easier. As I slowed down, I became more aware of the way my mouth was moving. The “th” sounds softened, and the “s” sounds were elongated. I finished my last sentence calmly, creating a concrete, logical conclusion.

The next moment, gazing at the applauding audience, I thought, ‘that was not me’. The words I had spoken were too perfect, too English. There had not been a hint of Korean accent. The flow of the speech was completely that of standard American English, and even the ideas and emotions behind my words were designed to appeal to the English-speaking audience, not speakers of Korean. For a second, I felt proud of myself. I had worked so hard to achieve such fluency in English, the standard American accent that all Koreans desire; and there I was, standing in front

of hundreds of English-speaking people, saying “Thank you” instead of *gamsahabnida* (감사합니다). Yet, with the sense of accomplishment also came an unwanted feeling, a strange feeling that made me feel somehow empty and confused. I suddenly felt like a different person from the person who had just been speaking so fervently about healthcare system. Everything about my speech was great, except it was too English. Where was “I,” the Korean-speaking Son Haeun, in that speech? Was that really me, or my partial, English-speaking self?

This is what I recall as my first encounter with my own English. It was the first time I ever looked at my English from an objective perspective, and the first time it felt so incomplete. The imperfection roots not from my inability to speak English with proper grammar or pronunciation, but from the lack of psychological and emotional connection between me and English. The more I observe the distance between me and English, the more I see how special Korean is to me and how English will never be able to replace Korean in who I am. No matter how good or fluent my English is, it cannot stop me from saying “*Ah, Jinjja* (아, 진짜)” out of frustration or from doing multiplications in Korean numbers (when I see a math problem in English, I need to translate the numbers to Korean, do the calculation in my head, and translate the answer back to English). While I need to actually pay attention to English to comprehend the words, my ears sense Korean so effortlessly that I don’t even have to think about “understanding” it. The familiar vibrations in the air enter my brain and somehow form thoughts, and the whole process is automatic.

It’s always a small detail—such as the difference between the English “s” and the Korean *siot* (시옷) or the Korean *riel* (리을) that is closer to the Spanish “r” than the English “r” —that sets Korean apart from English. The sensation of relief and joy that comes from hearing the sounds of Korean makes it my home, my linguistic shelter. Korean is such a fundamental part of my

identity that I cannot even imagine forming such an instinctive connection with another language, not even the English that I am so fluent in.

Sometimes, though, I find it frustrating that English will never become as special as Korean to me. Despite all the time and effort I have invested in improving my English, it just never will be as good as my Korean, not in a grammatical or academic sense, but in a psychological sense. I can always express the same idea in both English and Korean: if I can say *seulpeum* (슬픔), for instance, I can also say “sadness”. However, the two words have different meanings to me. The English word is a combination of sounds that means “sadness,” whereas *seulpeum* is just sadness itself. It almost seems like Korean gives my feelings definitions, and those definitions are then used to define English words in my mind. It is no wonder that *seulpeum* comes directly to my heart, while the English word “sadness” has to be processed once in my brain.

Chinese-American author Amy Tan, in “Mother Tongue,” describes her mother’s Chinglish in terms that resonate with how I view my own English: “It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than ‘broken,’ as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness” (Tan 141). While she was bothered that she was forced to describe her mother’s English as “broken,” I was thrilled to discover, at last, the perfect words to capture my feelings towards my English—“broken,” “damaged,” and “lacking a certain wholeness and soundness”. It is not because my grammar is incorrect or because I have a heavy Korean accent. It is not because I am not intelligent enough to speak what people would view as the perfect English. My English is “broken” because it does not allow me to convey the full meaning of my thoughts. No matter how familiar with the language I am and no matter how American I may sound, an indescribable yet persistent sense of distance between me and the

English language continues to bother me. It is a language that I speak fluently, but it has never been “my” language, the language that I can speak my soul through.

Being bilingual is, in a way, painful: I cherish the connection I have with Korean, but it is troubling that I will never achieve that same emotional linkage with the English language. Yet, the lifelong process of becoming bilingual and the realization of the insufficiency in my English has also allowed me to see the beauty of Korean, my mother tongue. I now understand how amazing it is that I can say *bulgeuseureumhada* (불그스름하다), *bbalgata* (빨갳다), or *bulgda* (붉다) instead of just “red”. The three words do not refer to different shades of red (such as crimson, burgundy or ruby) but to one’s different perceptions of that particular shade of red: The word *bulgeuseureumhada* describes a reddish color, but with a hint of uncertainty, in that the color is not perfectly red but is closer to red than other colors. *Bbalgata* is more direct and vivid and is used to describe a color that is clearly red. *Bulgda* is used to depict a deeper, more intense hue of red. It is perhaps the most emotionally charged among these three words: it paints a tragic, violent color, just like that of blood. There are over forty words in Korean that are dedicated to the sole purpose of describing red, and the ability to distinguish those words and use them in different ways is a linguistic power I treasure.

I also now know how amazing Korean is at expressing uniquely Korean concepts: *jung* (정) and *han* (한), for instance, are only two of the many words that cannot be translated into any other language. *Jung* is a type of warm affection, but the word “affection” is too superficial to capture the full concept of it. *Jung* is more philosophical than emotional—it’s not necessarily love, but it can be a deeper feeling than love. There can be *jung* between husband and wife, between neighbors, or even between a person and an object. It is an integral part of Korean culture as the shared experience of feeling *jung* binds us Koreans together. *Han* is an even more complicated, more

culturally important concept. It can be explained as a strong sense of longing, but it is different from nostalgia. It may be anger, resentment, grief, frustration, regret, or hope, or even a combination of all these feelings. Interestingly, however, the effects of *han* can be positive. It is what drove us Koreans to stand firm and fight against our Japanese oppressors; it empowered us to rebuild our country so quickly after the devastating civil war; it enabled us to move forward despite the pain of division by the US and Soviet Union; and it continues to make us strive for perfection in everything—even in foreign languages like English, which divides me internally. Just like *jung*, *han* is an emotional element that all Koreans share, and is so deeply rooted in our painful history of colonization and division that the entire Korean history can be summarized by that one word. Ko Un, a famed Korean poet, even described *han* as the “womb of modern Korean culture”. Without *han*, our unique sense of brokenness and sorrow, Korea cannot be itself. Concepts like *jung* and *han* exist only in Korea, and Korean is the only language that can bear their full weights.

While I know how much Korean means to me, I still do not know exactly how I feel towards my English. Sometimes I feel that it is a crucial part of me, but sometimes I feel it is just an accessory. I have a love-hate relationship with English: I love how the language flows like water, but I also hate how incomplete it feels. Perhaps *han* is the most accurate description of how I feel towards my own English: It empowers me, but at the same time, it is broken. Despite everything, however, I understand that I would not have been able to see the magnificence of Korean if learning English had not forced me to see the world beyond Korean. Seeing the world outside my home, ironically, has made me appreciate my home more. It is a blessing and a privilege to have a language that one can call “home,” and I am grateful that it is Korean for me.

I remember feeling perplexed as I left the stage after delivering the speech. And the same confusion has always existed ever since then. Who was that person on the stage, whose English was so flawless? I have yet to discover the answer to that question. It may have been the English-speaking fraction of myself, or it could have really been me, but too far away from home to feel like myself. Now, however, I can at least say that I face the confusion with more optimism and openness, because I know that it makes my bilingualism more meaningful. I am, again, grateful for what the encounter with my English has taught me: the lesson that I have a *jib*, a home.

Works Cited

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