

## **I Like Korean, but I'm not Sure it Likes Me!**

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### **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'gŭl*), is an alphabetic system developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> 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.

<b>i</b>	as in	기	<b>ki</b>	‘flag’
<b>e</b>	as in	개 개	<b>ke</b>	‘crab’ ‘dog’
<b>u</b>	as in	그	<b>ku</b>	‘he, she; that’
<b>u</b>	as in	구	<b>ku</b>	‘nine’
<b>o</b>	as in	고	<b>ko</b>	‘plaster’
<b>ɔ</b>	as in	거	<b>kɔ</b>	‘carriage’
<b>a</b>	as in	가	<b>ka</b>	‘go!’ (familiar)

There are two symbols for the front mid vowel [e], and some speakers do distinguish two vowels, [e] as in 개 ‘crab’ and [ɛ] 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 [ɔ] in the table. Books describing Korean usually call the vowel in 거 ‘well!’ a back or central mid unrounded vowel something like the [ʌ] in English *but* (though they usually represent it as [ɚ]). However, all the Korean speakers that I know pronounce this vowel with strong lip rounding, which is why I represent it as [ɔ]. Probably because my native English lacks the vowel [ɔ] (I pronounce both *cot* and *caught* as [kat]), I tend to hear Korean words such as 영어 [yɔŋɔ] ‘English’ as “yoŋo”. 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 [tɔw], 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-sə** rather than just 에 **-e**. The table below illustrates these structures, using 집 **čip** ‘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’əyo** in the middle column means ‘exist (in a place)’, the verb 자요 **čayo** in the right column means ‘sleep’.

Location+relation	Statically at location	Action taking place at location
집위 <b>čip-wi</b> house’s top	새가 집위에 있어요 <b>se-ka čip-wi-e is’əyo</b> the bird is <u>on the house</u>	새가 집위에서 자요 <b>se-ka čip-wi-e-sə čayo</b> the bird is sleeping <u>on the house</u>
집옆 <b>čip-yəp</b> house’s side	새가 집옆에 있어요 <b>se-ka čip-yəp-e is’əyo</b> the bird is <u>beside the house</u>	새가 집옆에서 자요 <b>se-ka čip-yəp-e-sə čayo</b> the bird is sleeping <u>beside the house</u>
집뒤 <b>čip-twi</b> house’s back	새가 집뒤에 있어요 <b>se-ka čip-twi-e is’əyo</b> the bird is <u>behind the house</u>	새가 집뒤에서 자요 <b>se-ka čip-twi-e-sə čayo</b> the bird is sleeping <u>behind the house</u>

#### 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	깨는	것	같아
<b>ije</b>	<b>čam-i</b>	<b>čom</b>	<b>k'e-nun</b>	<b>kos</b>	<b>kat<sup>h</sup>a</b>
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.

My version

Correct version

열두 시 밤에 쯔 <b>yɔltu ši pam-e č'um</b> twelve o'clock night-at approximately	밤 열두 시 쯔 에 <b>pam yɔltu ši č'um-e</b> night twelve o'clock approximately-at
Intended meaning: 'at approximately twelve o'clock at night'	

I knew enough to put the number before the noun and to use the POSTposition 에 –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 열두 시 **yɔltu ši** 'twelve o'clock', and I incorrectly thought of 쯔 **č'um** '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!