Article

Konglish as Cultural Practice: Reconsidering the English Language in South Korea

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Abstract

English in South Korea, where the language is highly emphasized as a necessary language for the age of globalization, continues to have limited use within the country's dominant Korean language monolingualism, despite the fact that localized forms of linguistic resources originating from English permeate everyday communication. This sociolinguistic characteristic has led to problems for concepts that aim to provide a typology of new Englishes by identifying them in terms of distinct varieties – including the notions of English as second language/English as foreign language, inner/outer/expanding circles, and English as lingua franca. In this paper, I argue that a proper understanding of English in South Korea requires that we move away from such variety-based approaches, instead viewing language as practice embedded in speakers' communicative activity in social context. For this purpose, I discuss the case of Konglish, a term that pejoratively refers to English as used by Koreans. While previous studies have rightly argued that expressions condemned as Konglish should be seen as legitimate localized uses of English, here I focus on how Konglish does not represent a variety but a cultural practice, in which Koreans draw upon whatever resource available to them in making communicative action, and through which Koreans conceptualize their position in the global world. Based on this discussion, I argue that research on English as a global language should move beyond the varieties-based approach that focuses on typologies of Englishes to ask more fundamental questions about the nature of language itself.

1 Introduction

English has had a clear presence in South Korea's modern history. Beginning with the US military's occupation of the country (1945-1948) following the end of Japanese colonial rule, English was firmly established as a language of power and privilege (Park, 2009). It also had a continuous influence on the Korean language, seeping into Koreans' vocabulary and expressions both in spoken language and written communication (Ahn, 2018; Baik, 1994). Since the 1990s, in particular, English was strongly promoted

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by the government, major corporations, and mainstream media as a necessary language for everyone in the age of globalization. While this emphasis on English as a global language is not unique to Korea, the intensity with which English has been pursued through state policy and individual practice over the past couple of decades is probably unsurpassed elsewhere among traditionally non-English-speaking countries (Park, 2009). Yet, South Korea is also a country that is dominated by language ideologies that treat English as a "foreign language", which restricts the domains in which English is actively used and presents monolingualism in Korean as the sociolinguistic norm.

This sociolinguistic situation has presented problems for efforts that attempt to categorize English in Korea in terms of typologies of different world Englishes. Approaches that consider English in Korea as a new variety of English face difficulties in identifying systematic characteristics across the whole spectrum of linguistic structure, while perspectives that emphasize specific functions of English in global communication, such as "English as a foreign language" or "English as a lingua franca", fail to account for the significant localization process that characterizes Koreans' use of English. As a result, even though South Korea is one of the countries where the English language is most intensely pursued and discussed, it is still treated as a frontier for English, nestled in the "expanding circle" far away from the emerging new centers of English as imagined by Kachru's (1985) model for World Englishes.

In this paper, I argue that English in South Korea challenges not only the framework of World Englishes, but any variety-based model for understanding English in the world or, in other words, any model for English that seeks to identify formally or functionally distinct varieties of English as the basis for recognizing them as a legitimate new way of using English. English in Korea — and my choice of this phrase represents a deliberate attempt to avoid presupposing a variety that might be named "Korean English" — not only poses a problem for such variety-based approaches, but more fundamentally presses us to reconsider the assumptions underlying such approaches. That is, it confronts us to view language not as an abstract entity with its delineable boundary and internal structure, but as practice embedded in speakers' communicative activity in social context (Reagan, 2004; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Park & Wee, 2012, among others). The Korean case thus offers a more general lesson that, in order to properly understand the place and meaning of English in the world, we need to reconsider not only what English is, but what constitutes language.

For this purpose, I discuss in this paper the case of *Konglish*, a term that is often used to pejoratively refer to English as used by Koreans (Hadikin, 2014; Kent, 1999; Nam, 2010; Lawrence, 2012). Konglish presents a problem for understanding English in Korea, for even though it clearly represents a site where Koreans' creative appropriation of English can be observed, it has been difficult to specifically point to what Konglish exactly is or to define it in terms of regular structural features. While previous studies have rightly argued that expressions condemned as Konglish should be seen as legitimate localized uses of English (Hadikin, 2014; Lee Hakyoon, 2019; Rüdiger, 2018), my point here is that the status of Konglish can be better accounted for if we understand it not as a variety but as cultural practice; not unlike other practices in which people engage in order to enact and reproduce their own understandings of the world around them, Konglish is better understood as what Koreans do with various linguistic and semiotic resources available to them as a way of making sense of their place in the world as Koreans. On this basis, I then argue that such a rethinking of what Konglish is not only helps us better understand English in Korea, but also challenges us to consider other new varieties of English from the perspective of language as culturally embedded practice.

2 Variety-based Approaches to English in the World

Regan (2004) points out that popular and scholarly conception of language often relies on a kind of positivism, where language is viewed as a scientifically discoverable abstract entity that exists out in the world. He argues:

> Such assumptions and presuppositions are embedded in our discourse, and in turn have important implications for applied language studies. We commonly make claims about English, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Navajo, on so on, just as we make claims about the nature of human language in more general terms. (Regan, 2004, p.43)

Research in applied linguistics (García & Li, 2014; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007), sociolinguistics (Blommaert, 2010; Park & Wee, 2012), and linguistic anthropology (Gal & Irvine, 2019), of course, has actively challenged these assumptions. Yet, those assumptions still persist in various ways, including what I will call the variety-based approaches to the study of English as a global language. By this, I mean approaches that understand the global spread of English in terms of the varying forms that it takes, based on identification of regular and systematic features that can distinguish between different varieties of English (Kachru, 1985; Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008). While such approaches are often motivated by the need to critique and problematize the hegemony that native speaker norms have over non-native speakers of English, their critique is often based on the assumption that new varieties of English deserve to be recognized as legitimate because they have their own abstract structure and systematicity as language varieties in their own right. The role of the researcher of those varieties of English, according to these frameworks, then, is to study and describe the regular and systematic structure of those varieties as abstract entities.

For example, Braj Kachru's (1985) framework of World Englishes has made major contributions to the study of English in the world by contesting the supposed authority of the UK, US and other white, settler colonial countries as the "center" of English. In Kachru's model of concentric circles of World Englishes, while those countries constitute the "inner circle", there are also many new emerging centers of English in the "outer circle", consisting of postcolonial countries in which English had an official and practical presence in everyday social life. Moreover, in the "expanding circle", there are many countries that actively engage with English as a language for international communication. The model's reimagination of English into the plural "Englishes", with multiple centers of authority and legitimacy, has brought about a significant challenge to the way we understand English as a global language, for English is now seen as no longer confined to norms of the inner circle, but continuously evolving and expanding.

It is worth noting, however, that the way in which the World Englishes framework sought legitimacy for local practices of English was largely rooted in the traditions of structural linguistics. In this framework, the global evolution of English is understood in terms of the new varieties of English that it gives rise to. That is, by recognizing the new ways of using English as constituting distinct, bounded, and enumerable varieties, the framework sought to establish them as being on par with those of the inner circle. At the same time, new varieties of English were seen as having its own legitimacy and authority on the grounds that they have their own internal systematic structure. Thus, one major endeavor of the world Englishes scholars was to describe and demonstrate the formal and functional systematicity of those varieties, so that the argument can be made that they should be seen as fully fledged and well-established varieties of English, rather than corrupted and mislearned copies of the English of inner circle speakers. A countless number of studies published in the journal World Englishes, for example, focus on identifying regular grammatical features and social functions of distinct, namable varieties of English, such as Singapore English (Alsagoff & Ho, 1998; Platt, 1982), Indian English (Balasubramanian, 2009; Bhatt, 1995), Philippines English (Bautista, 2004; Tayao, 2004), etc.

This focus on distinct varieties and their structural features is not limited to the World Englishes framework. The distinction between ENL (English as native language), ESL (English as second language) and EFL (English as foreign language), for instance, which the World Englishes framework is intended to replace, inherently focuses on the speaker, instead of varieties of English, in the sense that the key determinant for distinguishing English-speaking contexts into one of the three is whether the speaker of English can be seen as speaking English as a native language, second language, or foreign

language. However, in this case, too, the speaker's status as native speaker, second language speaker, or foreign language speaker of English is often implicated to be rooted in the systematicity of the variety of English spoken by that speaker. For instance, the notion of "learner English" (Swan & Smith, 2001) imagines non-native speakers of English as displaying specific phonological and morphosyntactic features in their use of English, shaped by the national language of the country where the speaker comes from, thus effectively establishing such learner English as a distinct variety. The approach of English as a lingua franca (ELF) similarly invests much effort in identifying features used by competent speakers who actively use English to communicate across ethnolinguistic boundaries (Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2004). This shows how the variety-based approach to English in the world has a much deeper root than that of the World Englishes framework itself, reflecting the enduring influence of structural linguistics on the study of English as a global language.

Even for cases where English in a particular context is widely perceived to be an easily recognizable, distinct variety (as in Singapore, India, the Philippines, etc.), it is important to recognize the multiple problems that have been pointed out with the variety-based approach to studying English as a global language. First, the orientation to distinct varieties of English has been critiqued as contributing to reproducing the very hegemony of inner circle standard varieties of English it set out to oppose. By identifying and establishing local varieties of English that stand on par with inner circle varieties of English, it reifies, rather than questions, the basis upon which the authority of those native varieties is reproduced. On the local level, it erases the local variability and diversity that exists within a given country, and selects one particular mode of using English as the national variety, typically that of well-educated speakers of English (Bruthiaux, 2003; Jenks & Lee, 2017; Parakrama, 1995; Park & Wee, 2012; among others). Second, the approach overlooks that legitimacy does not follow from demonstration of systematicity, but structural relations of power that position speakers of a variety in society (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015; Lee, 2017). While the variety-based approach hopes to counter negative evaluations of new varieties of English by revealing, through linguistic research, the systematic structure of those varieties, it fails to recognize the fact that the marginalized position of those varieties in the hierarchy of world Englishes does not come from lack of linguistic knowledge, but from historical conditions of inequality. For this reason, despite its purported goals of advocacy, it risks obscuring the raciolinguistic and colonial ideologies that serve as the foundation for the differentiation between native and non-native varieties of English in the first place (Lewis, 2018; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Finally, as pointed out by recent work on translanguaging, which highlights how speakers often flexibly adopt linguistic resources without regard to fixed linguistic boundaries dictated by prescriptive rules, the assumption of language as bounded entities does not always align well with the practices of multilingual speakers, who may actively negotiate such language boundaries through their practice. As these speakers draw from a wide range of linguistic resources that may come from different sources, they may not necessarily orient to distinct, bounded language varieties in their practice (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Li, 2014). In this sense, trying to understand the ways English is picked up and used in such contexts by identifying distinct varieties that they represent will fail to properly capture the underlying logic of such practices.

This paper suggests that the study of English as a global language needs to more explicitly problematize conceptual terms that presuppose a variety-based approach, such as *ESL, EFL, English as lingua franca*, or even *world Englishes*. In line with earlier work that has called for a consideration of global English as cultural and ideological practice (Pennycook, 2010; Park & Wee, 2012), this paper instead argues that we need to approach English as part of people's practices of meaning making, which cannot be understood as divergent language varieties, but as an integral aspect of people's social action. This would mean not only questioning the notion of homogeneous and bounded language varieties, but also asking more fundamental questions about the nature of language. As I will discuss through the rest of this paper, English in Korea, and in particular, the notion of Konglish, is a highly useful basis for considering those questions.

3 Understanding English in Korea

English in Korea provides a particularly challenging case for an effort that seeks a distinct variety that can be called "Korean English", or particular features that can characterize such a variety. This has to do with the complex status that English occupies in Korean society. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there is a widespread presence of English in Korea, in which the language has been continuously taught through the national education system and exerting an influence on everyday language use and social life, particularly in the current context of Korea's globalization. However, there is also a persistent ideology that treats English as an external language that is foreign to Korean society and any use of English by Koreans as un-Korean or as "bad English", thereby erasing the reality of Korean-English bilingualism and presenting Korean society as thoroughly monolingual (Park, 2008). In this section I will discuss these contradictory trends, and consider the problem this poses for a variety-based approach to understanding English in Korea.

The strong influence of English on Korean society can be traced back to the power the USA exerted on South Korea since 1945, when it occupied the southern half of the Korean peninsula at the end of World War II. As South Korea became heavily dependent on the USA for its economy and military security, English also came to play an important role, with English-speaking and US-educated elites occupying important positions in the government and society, thereby linking English with privilege and power. The national curriculum was also designed to foreground English as the most important foreign language, with the language serving as a compulsory subject. This position of English was strengthened over the years. Particularly since the 1990s, when the Korean state started to pursue an active globalization drive, English language skills became even more emphasized in both the national curriculum and the job market, to the extent that a full-blown "English fever" (*yeongeo yeolpung*) overtook the country (Park, 2009). Koreans were thus pressed to invest in English language learning, not only learning the language through their participation in national education, but also spending additional time and resources to improve their English language skills for survival in the neoliberal Korean society. This means that many Koreans today have significant familiarity with English, if not reasonable competence in English.

This, however, does not mean that English is actively and widely used throughout Korean society. South Korea has long been one of the most homogeneous countries culturally and linguistically, even though increasing number of migrants and greater degree of transnational interaction is quickly changing the picture. A relatively strong degree of monolingualism in the Korean language therefore still characterizes linguistic life in Korean society. It is such established monolingualism that leads Korea to be characterized as an EFL country (Lee, 2020). However, if we consider the notion of bi(multi)lingualism widely, it is certainly easy to notice the presence of English in everyday Korean life. For instance, a large number of linguistic landscape studies report on the widespread usage of English in public commercial signage (Chesnut & Curran, 2020; Fayzrahkmanova, 2016; Kim, 2020; Lawrence, 2012; Lee J., 2019; Tan & Tan, 2015). What these studies highlight is not simply the noticeable presence of English in the public linguistic landscape, but how English used in such signs frequently draws upon knowledge of both English and Korean, indicating that such use of English is not merely "symbolic". That is, the signs do not simply indicate a sense of being cool, modern, elegant without conveying any literal meaning (Haarmann, 1986). On the contrary, they presume an audience who has reasonable bilingual competence to appreciate the creative mixture between the two varieties. Similarly, everyday speech in Korean involves a large number of loanwords, a great majority from English (Rüdiger, 2018). Again, such lexical borrowing from English shows a complex pattern in which creative compounding and blending highlights Koreans' active appropriation of English vocabulary in their everyday language use (Ahn, 2017a, 2018). In this sense, English in Korea must be understood not simply as a foreign language, but as a language that is actively adopted and localized by Koreans.

Yet, such presence of English is rarely recognized as a manifestation of Koreans' agentive use of English in Korean society. Two dominant and hegemonic ideologies English in Korea are that of (1) externalization, in which English is pervasively seen as a language of the other, a language that stands at odds with Korean identity, and that of (2) self-deprecation, in which Koreans see themselves lacking any legitimate proficiency in English (Park, 2009). An important effect of these ideologies is an erasure of Koreans' active use of English in everyday life. That is, active use of English is either seen as un-Korean (i.e. a practice that only Koreans who overzealously identify with a western identity would adhere to, thus something that is not truly representative of Koreans' linguistic repertoire) or as not really English at all (i.e. since Koreans consider themselves incompetent and illegitimate speakers of English, their use of English does not really count as English), which causes Koreans' bilingual practices to be completely ignored from an imagination of Korea's sociolinguistic scenery (Park, 2008). All this shows how Korea's monolingualism in Korean, and the supposed status of English as a foreign language in the country, are ideological constructions, rather than an objective reflection of the realities of language use on the ground. This ideological construction of English as foreign, in turn, also feeds back into Koreans' language use as a constraint, further restricting the space for English in Korea. It results in an enduring sense of insecurity and anxiety that leads Koreans to refrain from claiming the status as English language users (Park, 2012).

This also makes it difficult for any attempt to discover formal or functional features that can point to a distinct variety of Korean English. That is, while the historical significance and widespread presence of English in Korea makes the country an important site for English as a global language, the lack of contexts in which English is used regularly and predominantly and Koreans' conscious self-distancing from English also means that it becomes difficult to identify any stable and systematic feature that can be used as a basis for characterizing a distinct "Korean English." It is even less likely that any features identified through such a process would be clearly enregistered among Korean users of English (and non-Koreans) as indeed representing a unique and distinct variety of English. This is in contrast to the situation in Kachruvian outer circle countries, where English is used systematically across a range of institutional and everyday contexts, and where a range of recurrent linguistic characteristics emerging in those contexts lead to their recognition as features of a distinct local way of using English.

Due to this problem, early efforts within the World Englishes paradigm that aimed to identify distinct features of English in Korea had to turn to highly specific institutional contexts where English is used exclusively. These studies then take differences between the English in these particular contexts and standard, inner circle varieties of English to be indicative of a distinct Korean variety of English. For instance, Shim (1999) studies the linguistic features of a teacher's guide for high school English that is based on the national curriculum for English language learning. She identifies various lexico-semantic and morpho-syntactic features that deviate from standard American English use as evidence of a "codified Korean English". Similarly, Jung and Min (1999) study a small corpus of texts from an English newspaper published in Korea and compare the use of modals and prepositions with that in corpora from inner circle English varieties, discussing the resulting difference in terms of "nativization of English in Korea" (p.36). However, in both cases, it is problematic to assume that such data, which are based on domain-specific written texts, would necessarily be indicative of a unique variety that distinguishes Koreans' English use from other countries.

More recent studies, in contrast, are based on systematically collected corpus data of English spoken by Koreans, which give us a better sense of the different ways in which English is used in Korea. Hadikin (2013, 2014), from a phraseological framework, compares frequency of selected lexical strings in corpora of English spoken by Koreans in Korea and in Liverpool, UK, with data from the British National Corpus and a corpus of local Liverpool English. For instance, he shows that strings such as *do you know* are used more frequently in the Korean data "to introduce topics

and/or confirm shared knowledge", while fixed strings like *do you know what I mean* are lacking compared to the British data (2013, p.76). Rüdiger (2019), similarly, using a corpus based on informal interviews with students and early professionals in Korea, studies various features such as the use of count nouns, plural marking, and prepositions, again comparing them with corpora from US and UK English. For example, she notes recurrent patterns such as reduction of redundancy in the use of plurals (e.g. *these card*), pronouns (e.g. *ø met him in the army*), and articles (*I know they changed ø lot of things*). These works provide a much more robust account of the possible differences between English as used by Koreans and by users elsewhere.

However, to what extent such difference evidences a distinct variety that is identifiable as "Korean English" may be questioned. For example, could the features identified by the studies be a reflection of common practices that Koreans adopt when they speak English, rather than reflection of a common variety of English they speak? Hadikin (2013), for instance, accounts for high frequency strings such as *but you know* as "an extended connective that 'buys more time' for online speech processing," and therefore something that can be attributed to cognitive and interaction constraints rather than different community norms (p.76). Rüdiger (2019) also considers that the specific features found in her data may not only be due to interference from Korean morphosyntactic patterns but also due to general second language acquisition processes or context effects that arise from a lingua franca communication setting (p.195). Thus, while these authors use these findings to rightly suggest that the English as used by Koreans should not be seen as illegitimate learner varieties that must be evaluated against native speaker standards, these studies also reveal the difficulty of understanding Koreans' use of English through a variety-based perspective. This does not mean that English as used by Koreans cannot be described in terms of certain features, particularly if we rely on corpus-based methods that are sensitive to sociolinguistic variation across speakers and contexts to identify such features. The point, rather, is whether it is helpful to speak of those sets of features in terms of a *variety*, when the complexity of English in Korea seems to suggest they represent a much more dynamic and ever-evolving outcome of communicative practice that cannot be reduced to a delineable linguistic system.

What can be an alternative way of understanding English in Korea, then? If English in Korea has obviously enormous cultural and political economic significance, but not widely and systematically used across domains of society enough to warrant recognition of a distinct variety that can be safely called "Korean English", how can we account for the apparently recurrent and regular features of Koreans' use of English that the above studies discovered without resorting to static and bounded notions of a variety? In the rest of this paper, I would like to suggest that English in Korea should be understood not as a variety but as cultural practice — that is, things that Koreans do with the ideologized resource of English to engage in communicative action, to negotiate boundaries between languages, and to make sense of their own position in the world. In order to demonstrate this, I find reflecting on the notion of Konglish useful: how the term is conceptualized, how the term is used, and the implications it carries for the way Koreans imagine themselves as users of English. In the next section I discuss this issue.

4 Konglish as Cultural Practice

Though Konglish, a term that comes from mixing of the words *Korean* and *English*, is a widely used metalinguistic label in Korea, it is very difficult to define what exactly it refers to. Indeed, Hadikin (2014, p.9) notes the looseness of the notion of Konglish by stating:

> The everyday understanding of the word *Konglish* seems to lie on a continuum between the view that it is everything a Korean person ever says or writes when they use English and the view that there is a set of lexical items that students of English can become aware of and choose to avoid if necessary.

This also makes it difficult to illustrate exactly what Konglish is. Reflecting Hadikin's statement above, most discussions of Konglish tend to highlight Koreanized vocabulary from English as representative of Konglish. Many popular media representations of Konglish in blog posts and YouTube videos, for instance, frequently focus on vocabulary. One illustrative genre of YouTube videos about English in Korea is one in which native speakers of English are made to guess the meaning of words that are typically considered to be Konglish. A video by YouTuber Aran (Aran TV, 2016), for example, presents words such as *leonningmeoshin* 'running machine' (treadmill), *taelleonteu* 'talent' (actor/actress), and *seukin* 'skin' (skin toner) as instances of Konglish, and tests whether an American English speaker can understand them, many of which the native speaker is unable to guess their meaning. Some academic studies also consider Konglish in terms of Koreanized English vocabulary. For example, Kent (1999) primarily identifies Konglish as vocabulary in the Korean language incorporated from English (and other European languages), although he includes not only loanwords whose meaning is non-transparent to non-Koreans, such as *obaiteu* 'overeat' (vomit), but also loanwords without semantic shift that are adapted to Korean phonology, such as *keopi* 'coffee'.

However, the term Konglish may also refer to not just localized vocabulary but other aspects of language. In Ahn's (2014, 2017b) study of the attitudes of English teachers in Korea (including both local Koreans and foreign teachers from inner circle countries) towards Korean English, the participants frequently identified the term "Korean English" with Konglish. Even though most typical examples they gave for it were vocabulary items such as those mentioned above, a model of a Konglish speaker frequently mentioned was Ban Ki Moon, the former UN Secretary General, on the basis that his English had a strong Korean accent. In other cases, collocations that may strike the non-Korean English user as odd may be labeled as Konglish. One newspaper report on the "global K-Food project" (Ko, 2013), in which the Korean government aimed to promote Korean culinary products overseas, criticizes English phrases used in the campaign's promotional material. The report points to phrases such as "fabulous seaweed", "romantic mushroom", and "pleasant paprika" as instances of Konglish, identifying them as awkward expressions that are likely to be puzzling to non-Koreans.

For this reason, researchers such as Nam (2010) define Konglish as not simply restricted to the domain of lexicon, but as a broader system that encompasses phonological, grammatical, intercultural, conceptual, metaphorical, collocational, pragmatic dimensions. For instance, Nam identifies some Koreans' tendency to use *grandmother* for *old lady* (due to the fact that Korean *halmeoni* 'grandmother' can be used as an affective term for senior women) as an illustration of the intercultural dimension of Konglish. Likewise, Lawrence (2012, p.73) defines Konglish as "a creative mix between English and the local language, which normally include[s] morphology, semantics and syntax but may also include pronunciation, pragmatics and discourse," presenting Konglish as a contact phenomenon impacting all levels of linguistic organization.

Yet, the most significant and definitive characteristic of Konglish may be its ideological evaluation. What is highlighted in the various conceptions of Konglish is that Konglish is incomprehensible, awkward, and strange to non-Korean users of English, particularly native speakers. Blog posts that list Konglish vocabulary items frequently present themselves as enlightening Korean English users about Koreanized English words, and warn Koreans not to use such words with native speakers of English. For example, one blog post titled *hangukini almyeon kkamjjak nollaneun konggeullisi seumugae* ('20 words that Koreans are surprised to learn are Konglish'; Sejonghakdangjaedan, 2017) provides a list of words that is characterized as *oegukineun mos aladeutneun konggeullisi* ('Konglish that foreigners do not understand'). The post's introduction states (translated from Korean) :

> Konglish is a compound of Korean + English. It refers to English mispronounced in Korean style, or using English in an ungrammatical way. We use it thinking it is English, but if you use it in an English-speaking country you would often not be understood.

Similarly, YouTube videos that show native English speakers' reactions to Konglish commonly

emphasize the affects of puzzlement and bewilderment that the native speaker supposedly experiences upon hearing the Konglish words. The video by Aran mentioned above, for instance, does not simply show the native speaker failing to guess what the Konglish words mean, but foregrounds his confusion and bafflement at what the Konglish words could possibly mean, through captions that attribute such affect to the native speaker (e.g., *danghwang* 'perplexed', *dabdab* 'frustrated', or series of question marks). Another video, by Korean Bros, titled *konggeullisi daneoleul bogo chunggyeok badeun migukindeul baneung?* ('Responses of Americans shocked by Konglish words?'; Korean Bros, 2019) seems to strategically elicit such bewilderment by specifically choosing Konglish words that could potentially be heard by American English speakers as having sexual connotations, such as *seukinship* 'skinship' (display of physical affection), *maentumaen* 'man to man' (crew neck sweater), or *seukeulyuba* 'screw bar' (type of popsicle). The native speakers are indeed seen highly amused as they imagine the possible meanings of the Konglish words and later discover their real meanings.

These examples suggest that essential to the perception of what defines Konglish is *not* specific linguistic features, but its metalinguistic positioning. Konglish appears to be whatever aspect of English used by Koreans that would cause it to not be understood by non-Koreans, particularly native speakers. Thus, potentially any dimension of language, be it phonology, lexis, morphosyntax, or discourse, can be characteristic of Konglish, although the more bizarre, awkward, or outlandish the deviation is from native English norms, the better it represents Konglish. This means that it is problematic to identify Konglish as a delineable linguistic variety. What constitutes Konglish is not a concrete set of linguistic features; anything can serve as an element of Konglish, as long as it has the potential of not being recognizable or understandable by a native speaker. Thus, while prototypical examples of Konglish would be those words or expressions that a native speaker would find bizarre, even relatively unmarked use of English characterizable by a Korean accent (without any salient semantic shift or grammatical deviation from native norms) may equally be considered Konglish. In this sense, Konglish cannot be defined by objective linguistic distance between English used by Koreans and English used by native speakers. Instead, labeling a particular use of English as Konglish must be understood as an act that creates and maximizes that very distance.

This metapragmatic nature of Konglish can be evidenced from the fact that the term is always invoked as part of a schema, or a mental model, which sketches out typical scenarios of where, when, and how the entity of 'Konglish' is used, including the interactional context and images of speakers that are commonly thought to be involved. The contexts for Konglish that we discussed above paint a picture of a social situation involving at least three figures of personhood (indexical signs that point to an identifiable and performable person type: Agha, 2007, 2011; Park, forthcoming). First is the figure of the Korean user of English, whose English is heavily distorted by their knowledge of Korean, and who is utterly oblivious to the fact that their English does not make sense to the native speaker. This inability to control the influence of Korean on one's English and the lack of awareness of such interference, in turn, frame the figure as an illegitimate user of English. The second figure is that of the native speaker, who interacts with the English of Koreans with puzzlement and amusement, and dictates, as an authorized speaker of English, the "correct" way in which English should be used. Finally, there is the figure of the overhearer of Konglish, who is, in many cases, but not exclusively, another Korean, with knowledge of both Korean and (native-speaker) English, and listens on to the interaction between the Konglish speaker and the native speaker with embarrassment, and claims the responsibility to enlighten the Korean English user of the native speaker's way of using English (as the YouTubers and bloggers cited above do). Any attempt to understand Konglish apart from such configurations of social positions and relationships will end up missing a crucial aspect of what the term refers to.

This makes clear that Konglish cannot be understood as a label for a specific *variety*. Instead, I would like to suggest that Konglish should be understood as a cultural practice. By this, I mean that the notion of Konglish captures what Koreans (and observers of Koreans as users of English) *do* as a way

of making sense of their place in the world (that is, a way of positioning themselves as Korean users of English in relation to others), thus a *practice* through which their sociocultural understanding of what it means to be Korean is enacted, reproduced, and negotiated. By using, identifying, and commenting on Konglish, Koreans come to be positioned within a relation of power, legitimacy, and authenticity, via the mediation of the sign of English and its concomitant ideologies of language. On the one hand, the act of labeling something as Konglish foregrounds how Koreans communicate by fusing resources associated with English and Korean in creative and flexible ways without regard to the native speaker norms. This positions Koreans as agentive language users in a globalizing Korean society, where they actively draw from myriad of semiotic resources (including English) that represent the specific material and cultural ecology of South Korean society. On the other hand, labeling such hybridized uses of English as Konglish constitutes an act of delegitimization, through which Koreans are subjected to feelings of anxiety and insecurity as illegitimate users of English in relation to the racialized figure of the native speaker. It thus performs and reproduces the historical and material structures of inequality that characterize Korea's relation with the West. In other words, Konglish as cultural practice is a site where the tensions in Korea's capitalist modernity, in which desire for the Western Other exists alongside colonial and racial ideologies that problematize Korea's belonging in the global, cosmopolitan world, is rearticulated, relived, and reproduced (Park, 2012).

This understanding of Konglish as cultural practice can be further supported by ethnographic research on English in Korea. Jo (2016), for example, studies how students attending an international school in Korea engaged in practices that mix elements of Korean and English. In Korea, such schools cater largely to students who are ethnically Korean, rather than non-Korean expatriate children. Since these schools use English as the medium of instruction, providing an English-immersion context for the students, such schools serve as a context for upper class children (who can afford the expensive school fees) to secure their class privilege in neoliberal Korean society, where English language skills function as highly valuable linguistic capital. At the school that Jo studied, the teachers, who were often native speakers of English, actively policed the students' language use, guiding them to use only (standard) English. Moreover, the students themselves were generally comfortable in speaking standard English, both through their experience of using English in the school and through their English language learning in Korea and abroad before they entered the school. However, even though the students rearticulated dominant discourses that viewed Konglish as incorrect English when Jo interviewed them about their thoughts about Konglish, in their everyday communication they often displayed a mixture of Korean and English, a practice which the students themselves characterized as Konglish.

The students Jo observed used Konglish playfully to carve out a space of informality and intimacy against the school's English-only regime and the image of global eliteness that the school ascribed to the students. For instance, in the following example (Jo 2016, p.140; my translation), Yeonu is tasked with making his classmates stand in line before they move out of the classroom, and uses various forms of hybridized English.

1. Yeonu: (gesturing to Yunje) You so busy!
2. Yunje: I have so many snacks. (stands in line)
3. Yeonu: (gives a thumbs up to Doyun) Bart[t'], good[t'], good[t']
4. Juwon: Bart, he said good.
5. Doyun: (after receiving a sign from teacher, leads students out of the classroom)
6. Yeonu: B[p']ye, teacher.

In line 1, as Yeonu urges another student to stand in line, he drops the copula in the utterance *you are so busy*. In line 3, while communicating with another student leader, Doyun (whose English name is Bart), he replaces the final stop consonants of *Bart* and *good* with tense (or fortis) consonants unique to Korean. Finally, in line 6, as he walks out of the classroom, he replaces the voiced stop of *bye* with a

tense consonant. Jo (2016, p.140-141) suggests that Yeonu purposefully adopts such forms of English as a way of negotiating between his position as a student leader as authorized by the teacher and his status as a fellow Korean student. That is, by mixing non-standard English features derived from Korean into his English utterances, he satisfies the school's institutional demand that students speak English at all times, while also eliciting other students' cooperation through his Koreanized English and its humorous stance.

It is worth noting that Yeonu's English in the example above can be identified as Konglish only in so far as that is how the students themselves characterized such hybridized forms of English. Jo's observation that what the students identified as Konglish typically emerged in such contexts of playful liminality suggests that, for the students, Konglish was significant for the particular figures of personhood it allowed the students to enact, not so much as a distinct variety. Konglish, in this case, is made up of whatever resources that the students can use to enact a local Korean personae, such as the figure of the *ajumma*, or an unsophisticated, unrefined middle-aged female (Jo 2016, p.148-149). By humorously enacting such figures, the students distance themselves from those older Koreans and their supposed incompetence in English, but at the same time, they also demonstrate their control over the range of linguistic resources available in Korean context and to appropriate them actively, thereby positioning themselves as Korean. In this case, Konglish is clearly not about speaking a particular variety defined by the intersection of English and Korean, but is in itself a social practice of students. It is a practice through which they negotiate their position in Korean society, between the school's official monolingual regime and the flexibility of youth culture, between the older generation's anxiety about English and the prevalence of English in the 21st century Korea where the students grew up, and between their aspirations for a global identity indexed through English and local belonging performed through Korean.

Of course, the significance of Konglish as cultural practice observed through the privileged international school students would be highly different from that experienced and enacted by Koreans from different social backgrounds. The fact that Konglish is cultural practice indeed leads us to anticipate this, and to seek the specific meaning that Konglish has for different groups of Koreans. The international school students, with their early exposure to English and transnational experience, do not necessarily show the same kind of anxiety and insecurity about English that other Koreans, especially those of the older generation, display; as noted above, the very fact that they are attending these elite, English-immersion schools presses them to adopt the subjectivity of a global elite. Yet, the way they orient to figures of personhood such as the figure of the incompetent Korean English speaker through the metapragmatic label of Konglish evidences a cultural and political understanding of English that they share with other Koreans. The students' Konglish, in this sense, is their practice of making sense of English as Koreans, articulated from the viewpoint of their own classed position, in which they draw from semiotic resources including English and Korean as well as the ideological values attributed to those resources. Future research on Konglish would benefit from such a perspective, moving away from a variety-based approach towards an ethnographically and metapragmatically grounded approach that attends to lived realities of English in Korea.

5 Beyond Konglish

In this paper, I argued that Konglish should be understood as cultural practice rather than a variety of English defined by a distinct set of features. However, if Konglish is better understood as cultural practice, this is not simply because Konglish is a unique phenomenon that does not make itself readily tractable for a variety-based approach. While I have discussed how Konglish highlights the problem of such an approach, I would like to suggest that the case of Konglish pushes us to ask more fundamental questions about how we understand English as a global language in general. That is, the nature of Konglish as cultural practice, which is highlighted by its fuzzy formal character and heavy ideological baggage, can serve as a reminder that all languages, in fact, are metadiscursive products

of sociocultural invention and imagination (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). Recent studies in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology, indeed, have emphasized how the understanding of language as an entity with a fixed internal structure should be reconsidered as a discursive and cultural practice of objectification (Reagan, 2004). That is, through such language ideologies, language comes to be imagined as an external object, rather than a range of practices that are ever changing and shifting as speakers engage in communicative action across different contexts and situations. This suggests that ultimately all languages, even those that appear to have regular and systematic structures, are better understood from the lens of cultural practice. That many language varieties have a well-defined structure unlike Konglish only underlines the cultural and institutional forces that guide speakers' linguistic practices towards a codified norm; it does not take away from the fact that such regularity of grammar only emerges as an outcome of speakers' practices as they navigate and negotiate those forces.

This perspective is particularly valuable for considering English as a global language. English is perhaps the most prominent language-as-entity, as its status as a global language makes it an object of pursuit by many around the world, and pervasive ideologies of standardness and codification reinforce the idea of a correct, legitimate variety of English. However, it is precisely such global status of English that highlights the problems with conceiving English as a structured entity, for the ongoing evolution of English as a global language defies any attempt to talk about English in terms of a single variety, or even in terms of multiple varieties. In light of this, various concepts and terms that are grounded on the variety-based approach, such as the ENL/ESL/EFL distinction, inner/outer/expanding circles of English, or English as lingua franca, become inadequate. Not only do they fail to account for the difficulty of conceptualizing English in Korea in terms of delineable variety, but they also miss the fact that ultimately all ways of using English are best understood in terms of cultural practice. Globalization of English does not mean that English becomes pluralized into multiple varieties. Rather, it means that English as cultural practice simply becomes increasingly diversified, as it becomes part of the new discursive and semiotic repertoire of a greater number of speakers and communities around the world, thus being taken up and refracted in new ways as it percolates through new social contexts. Just like the amorphous character of Konglish reminds us of how English in Korea is inseparable from Koreans' practices of making sense of their position in the world, the continuously evolving forms of English in the world should encourage us to step away from theoretical concepts that prioritize identifying systematic structural features of those forms of English, and to turn our attention to what speakers do with English as part of their practice of reproducing, remaking, and reflecting on their cultural selves.

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