KOREAN BAMBOO ENGLISH

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THE ARMISTICE which put an end to the Korean 'police action' was signed in July, 1953. Although some seven years have elapsed since then, little attention has been paid to the language of the American soldier who served during the Korean hostilities. The only study of post-Korean army language is that of Arthur Norman, who has published two articles about the Japanese influence on American speech in Japan.[1] The present account of the special vocabulary of the American GI in Korea is the product of random notes and remembered occurrences and consequently far from complete; perhaps others who have had experience in that part of the world will also record what they know of 'Korean' slang before this peculiar form of linguistic behavior is forgotten, even by those who once practiced it.

The slang of the Korean GI was time-honored army talk with a gilding of Japanese and Korean borrowings. This traditional army slang sometimes suffered a sea change in its transit across the Pacific and acquired new uses in its new environment. In addition, many of the GI's had had prior service in Japan and had there learned the elements of Bamboo English, a Japanese slang which was intelligible to the Koreans because of the long Japanese occupation of the peninsula. Korean Bamboo English was a form of oral communication; it had no proper written form. Consequently, in recording Korean and Japanese words I have generally used an impressionistic spelling; however, for the former I have occasionally employed the McCune-Reischauer romanization.

When the GI arrived in Korea, he found himself confronted by a number of cultural artifacts indigenous to the region. For these he borrowed or coined names. The normal Korean house, a *chibee*, consisted of a wooden frame, covered with straw mats and plastered with mud. In the refugee-crowded cities, however, a large percentage of the population lived in makeshift dwellings constructed of scrap lumber, sheet metal, or simply cardboard. To the GI these houses were *shacks*, a term first widely used in Japan but which quickly enlarged its meaning to include any building, public or private. This use of *shack* is not unknown in America, but was extremely common in the Far East. Inside the *chibee* or *shack*, the GI could find *tatami*, straw floor mats, and the *hibachi* or earthenware stove in which charcoal was burned. These

1. Arthur Norman, 'Bamboo English: the Japanese Influence upon American Speech in Japan,' *American Speech*, XXX (1955), 44–48; and 'Linguistic Aspects of the Mores of U.S. Occupation and Security Forces in Japan,' *American Speech*, XXIX (1954), 301–2.

two terms were Japanese importations. The latrine became a *benjo*, another item of Japanese origin. The *benjos* in the average army post were outdoor affairs and were normally constructed in sets of five, which gave rise to the expression 'full house and no flush' to designate a *benjo* which was completely occupied.

The army post was likely to be surrounded by rice paddies, to which ox-drawn carts hauled loads of fertilizer, the most common kind being human night soil. These conveyances were known as *honey-carts*, *honey-wagons*, or *honey-pots*. On the roads in both country and town, workmen could be seen carrying *jike* ['dʒiki] or 'A-frames.' The A-frame was a support used for carrying goods and strapped to a man's back. Seen from the side, it resembled a capital letter A. The military forces of South Korea were sometimes referred to as the 'A-frame army.' This common means of transport became the symbol of one branch of the military in Korea; the shoulder patch of the Korean Communications Zone, the organization chiefly responsible for supply and transportation, depicted an A-frame with two mountain peaks in the background. At the time it was being considered for adoption, this patch was described semiofficially as 'an A-frame rampant on a Marilyn Monroe bust.'

The national dish of Korea is *kimshi*, a pickled mixture of turnips, cabbage, and other vegetables, which is made by the Korean family in large quantities and stored in *tok*, huge earthen jars, frequently buried in the ground to age and for safekeeping. The GI also knew that the Korean was fond of *daikon*, or radishes, but never acquired much taste for the native cuisine. A strange example of linguistic borrowing is the word *biru*, beer, which the GI picked up from Korean, which had probably acquired it from Japanese, which had borrowed it from English.

As for currency, the soldier knew that the national unit was the *won*, or later the *hwan*. In pronunciation, however, the GI did not usually distinguish between the two words. He knew that the official rate of exchange was 6,000 won (60 hwan) to one MPC (Military Payment Certificate) dollar, but he was also keenly aware that the black-market value of MPC's might be as high as 45,000 won at the end of the month when there was a shortage of military currency on the Korean market. Many GI's preferred to eschew both Korean and U.S. army currency in financial dealings with the Koreans, and to trade in *presentos* instead. A *presento* was an item of merchandise from the PX which could be traded for whatever services might be desired of the Korean.

Korean has two sets of numerals, one native and one borrowed from Chinese. Both are in common use, though for different purposes; also, the Korean numerals require classifiers when they are used attributively. These complications may explain why the GI did not employ them freely. For the most part, his arithmetic accomplishments were limited to the words *ichi* and *hachi*, the

Japanese numerals for one and eight; the latter word, moreover, acquired highly specialized uses. In Korea there is a fully developed numerical lore, based on superstitions common to Japan and Korea regarding lucky and unlucky numbers. *Ichi-ban*, or 'number one,' indicates what was superlatively good; 'number nine' indicates what was worthless. The GI mistook the use of these two numbers as the extremes of a graded scale and proceeded to invent new terms by analogy. Thus, 'number two' meant second best; 'number eight' bad, but not quite the worst; and 'number five' suggested what was mediocre. This extended usage had no basis in the native system. Through extensive use, the phrase meaning 'number one' tended to lose its impact and to be used in the sense of merely 'good.' A new way of expressing excellence was then needed, and this lack was supplied by infixing the obscenity symbol between the two words of the phrase. Because of the phonology of Korean, which lacks a labial spirant, the native speaker, in imitating army language, substituted the glottal spirant for the initial sound of the word in question. This new form of the symbol, *huckin*, was then reborrowed by the GI and widely used as a euphemism by the squeamish.

The GI's acquaintance with native music seldom went beyond two songs: a Korean national folk song, the *Arirang*, and a very popular Japanese tune, *Shina no yoru*, which means 'China Night.' The title of *Shina no yoru* was folk-etymologized into 'She ain't got no yoyo,' the meaning of *yoyo* being left to the hearer's imagination.

It was perhaps in the field of personal relationships that the GI was most prolific in his use of new terms. *Ojo-san*, Japanese for 'young girl,' was borrowed in the form *jo-san* and was used as a general term for young woman. The Japanese honorific, *-san*, was freely suffixed to English words to produce such forms as *girl-san*, a female under the age of puberty; *mama-san*, a middle-aged or elderly woman (*mama-san* also had a more technical meaning: the madam of a brothel); *papa-san* was used for any elderly Korean male; and *boy-san* for any young male, though it was also used to designate a house servant of any age. *Yang-ban*, a 'retired scholarly gentleman,' was occasionally used to designate a shirker. *Aboji*, 'father,' was sometimes used to denote a person in authority in the army, such as the first sergeant or commanding officer. *Kim*, a common family name, became a generic term for a Korean male. To name a young woman, considered as the object of amatory interest, the GI usually employed some form of the Japanese *musume*. The various forms which this word took in the speech of the GI can probably be attributed to the fact that the second vowel is voiceless. In his attempts to approximate this phonetic 'oddity,' the American soldier produced such forms as ['musəˌmeɪ], ['musiˌmeɪ], and ['musˌmeɪ]. Usually, however, he preferred to shorten the word to *moose* [mus]. The normal plural was *mooses*, but occasionally a self-

conscious *meese* was heard. Other names for young women appear to be examples of folk etymology. Korean *saekssi*, 'young woman,' was interpreted as *sexy;* and *ttal*, 'daughter,' as *doll*.

The Korean prostitute was a *movie star* or a *sheeba-sheeba;* both these terms were more frequent among Korean pimps than among GI's. When the GI visited a *movie star*, it was usually for a *short-time*. *Short-time* was also used as a verb and had an agent noun, a *short-timer*. This new meaning of *short-timer* completely replaced the older use to designate a soldier nearing the end of his term of enlistment. If the GI maintained off-post quarters for a *moose*, he was *shacking up with* her. However, he might also *shack* her *up* or simply *shack* her. The transitive uses of the verb did not imply extended cohabitation, but might indicate no more than a short-time. *Shack-up* was also used as a noun, synonymous with *shack-job*. One who extensively engaged in such activities was a *shack-rat*, by analogy with the older *sack-rat*. *Butterfly*, noun and verb, designated the actor or action of indiscriminate shacking.

The GI was aware of the 'officialese' name for native Koreans, namely 'indigenous personnel,' but he generally called the inhabitants of *frozen Chosen* by an older word: *gooks*. *Gook* is at least fifty years old, but gained special currency in the Far East. Its extension in Korea may have been influenced by the GI's acquaintance with the Korean morpheme *guk*, which occurs in such words as *Han-guk*, 'Korea,' and *Mi-guk*, 'America.' The latter word, when used by Koreans, gave rise to some confusion on the part of the GI, who interpreted it as 'me Gook,' i.e., 'I am a Gook.' The enemy were sometimes *goons* or *goonies*, and their territory, north of the parallel, was *goonyland*. *Sahji*, sergeant, was a title freely bestowed by the Korean on all military personnel.

The Korean GI had his share of alphabet soup and preferred, when possible, to pronounce the abbreviations as acronyms. From *ROKA*, Republic of Korea Army, came the common noun *rok* [rɑk], a Korean soldier. Other acronyms were *EUSAK* ['juˌsæk], Eighth United States Army in Korea; *KMAG* ['keɪˌmæg], Korean Military Advisory Group; *KCAC* ['keɪˌkæk], Korea Civil Assistance Command; *KCOMZ* [ˌkeɪkɑm'zi], Korean Communications Zone; *USAFFE* [ju'sæfi], United States Army Forces, Far East; *CINCFE* ['sɪŋkfi], Commander in Chief, Far East; *CINCUNC* ['sɪŋˌkʌŋk], Commander in Chief, United Nations Command; *UNCACK* ['ʌŋˌkæk], United Nations Civil Assistance Command, Korea; *UNCURK* ['ʌŋˌkɝk], United Nations Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea; *UNKRA* ['ʌŋkrə], United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency; *UNCMAC* ['ʌŋkˌmæk], United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission—usually known as 'the MAC.' It was the MAC which arranged for the 'Little Switch' (exchange of wounded prisoners) and the 'Big Switch'

(exchange of all prisoners) through its conferences with the 'opposite members' or enemy representatives at the Peace Pagoda in Panmunjom. Other examples of alphabetese were *CCF*, Chinese Communist Forces; *MLR*, Main Line of Resistance; and *Ascom City*, a holding area at Inchon, the port of Seoul, commonly renamed *Ashcan City*. At the southern port of Puson, there was an area named 'Hialeah' because it had been the site of a race track during the Japanese occupation.

Periodically the Korean GI could expect to be sent to Japan for *R&R*, the official abbreviation for 'rest and rehabilitation,' popularly reinterpreted as 'rape and restitution,' and frequently renamed *I&I*, 'intercourse and intoxication.' *R&R* was also called the *little r* to distinguish it from the *big r*, or rotation to the States. A GI who had been officially notified of the date of his *big R* was said to be *FIGMO* or to have a *FIGMO* attitude. *FIGMO* was an acronym for a phrase which is unrepeatable in its entirety, but the last words of which are 'I've got my orders.'

A number of everyday phrases were formed from English roots by reduplication and suffixing the ending [-i]. The latter device was perhaps influenced by Korean, in which the noun is invariable but indicates syntactical relations by means of suffixed particles. The particle [-i], used to indicate subject relationship, is of frequent occurrence. However, most of these phrases have their prototypes in the popular idea of pidgin English. The American soldier brought with him to Korea an abiding conviction that to make an English word comprehensible to a native, it is necessary only to make it end in [-i] and say it twice. Some of the results of this pidginizing process were: *Washee-washee* (n. and v.), 'laundry' and 'to launder'; *samee-samee* (adj. and adv.), 'identical,' 'alike'; *punchee-punchee* (n. and v.), 'fight' and 'to fight'; *changee-changee* and *switchee-switchee* (v.), 'to exchange money,' usually on the black-market; *chop-chop* (n. and v.), 'food' and 'to eat'; *catchee*, a filler verb, used somewhat like the English *get*, *take*, or *have*.

Japanese loan words were perhaps the backbone of GI slang: *watashee*, 'I'; *mushee-mushee*, a phrase of greeting used on the telephone, and hence a verb denoting to communicate by means of telephone; *chotto-matte*, 'just a minute' or 'right away'; *ah-so* or *ah so deska*, an exclamation of surprise or interest; *sayonada*, 'good-bye'; *to speak sayonada*, 'to go away'; *taksan*, 'much', 'many,' or 'large'; *skoshi* or *skosh*, 'few' or 'little'; *morskosh*, 'shortly'; *skoshi-timer*, 'one nearing the end of his term of enlistment'; *dai-jobee* or *dai-job*, 'all right,' 'O.K.'; *suckahachi* or *I've got your hachi*, 'go to hell'; *nevah hachi*, or more emphatically, *nevah huckin hachi*, 'impossible' or 'nevah-hoppen.'

Korean contributions to the GI's small talk included *bali-bali* (adj., adv., and v.), 'quick,' 'quickly,' 'to go quickly'; *ipsumida*, 'full,' 'replete,' 'fed up'; *opsumida*, 'empty,' 'deprived of,' 'exhausted.' The GI may have known the

Korean words *ye* and *ani*, 'yes' and 'no,' but he usually preferred periphrastic constructions involving the phrase *hava-yes* and *hava-no*. His etiquette comprehended such expressions as *komapsumida*, 'thank you'; *anyang hashimika*, which means 'How are you?' but was folk-etymologized into 'on your hoss, amigo.' He also knew *mian amida*, 'excuse me,' but usually employed the Japanese *gomen nasai*. *Chogi*, 'to go,' probably has its origin in a Korean place-word, indicating location remote from both speaker and hearer. Both of the verbs *bali-bali* and *chogi* were usually transitive; that is, one did not merely 'bali-bali' somewhere, rather he bali-balied a portion of his anatomy there. *Cutta chogi*, 'to depart suddenly or hastily,' hence to 'bug out,' 'retreat,' may reflect the Korean verb forms *kada* or *katta* from the root *ka*, 'go'; but it was certainly influenced by the English *cut out*, with similar meanings.

Finally, it is necessary to mention two phrases which were certainly not of Korean origin, but which were so widely used in Korea, and which exemplify so perfectly the Korean GI's attitude to his life, that it hardly seems possible to ignore them. The first is *no sweat*, the GI's reaction to an unpleasant, but necessary task; the second is *to get the shaft*, his reaction to an unpleasant, and unnecessary, task or punishment. The latter phrase was the source of innumerable variations, such as 'to get the purple shaft' or the 'splintered shaft.' The ultimate in disagreeability was 'to get the order of the purple shaft, with barbed wire cluster,' although one was equally bad off if 'they screwed it in and broke it off.'

By the end of the Korean war, the language with which the GI communicated with the native Korean had begun to move in the direction of a genuine pidgin English. In addition to the common vocabulary items, a fixed syntax showed signs of emerging from the Korean babel. If large-scale contact between Americans and Koreans had continued for an extensive period, we should undoubtedly have seen the birth of a new English dialect. I am appending a few examples of this germinal Korean pidgin:

Switchee-switchee hava-yes. 'I can change your money.'
Boy-san, you number ten speak. 'That's a ridiculous offer.'
How much you speak, Papa-san. 'Name your price.'
You number one washee-washee catchee; number one presento hava-yes. 'If you do my washing satisfactorily, I'll pay you well.'
Taksan dai-jobee with ol' watashi. 'It's perfectly all right with me.'
Watashi's ipsumida with aboji's SOP's. 'I'm fed up with the first sergeant's regulations.'

The question which naturally comes to mind is whether or not Korean slang has any future outside the area of its origin. So far as I am aware, no appreciable number of slang phrases have achieved widespread dissemination. There are, I think, a number of factors working against an extensive adoption of Korean slang. In the first place, this form of linguistic behavior arose to

meet a very special situation. Once the situation was left behind, there was little incentive for the rotated GI to transfer the linguistic forms. Second, there is an emotional connotation to Korean slang which most GI's were eager to dissociate themselves from. And finally, the slang in its most developed form would be a secret language unintelligible to most Americans. In fact, the only use of Korean slang I have observed in America was as a secret language, a kind of Masonic password used among Korean veterans to distinguish themselves from the uninitiated masses.