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Firmly Living in Two Languages

Song Joong-Ki is 20 years old and a sophomore at Haverford College (1,2). He was born and raised in California and his family continues to live there (3). He knows three languages: English, Korean, and Spanish (4). Song Joong-Ki learned Korean at home, English when he began attending school and Spanish in high school for the language requirement (5).

When asked whether he has ever attempted to hide his bilingualism, Song Joong-Ki replied, when I was younger I used to think that “If I speak Korean to my mom they’re going to think I’m weird but at a certain age... I was like ‘whatever [chuckles] I don’t care. YOLO!’” (32) It was a classic response coming from Song Joong-Ki. Either candidly frank or beautifully eloquent but never without a touch of humor to lighten the mood, Song Joong-Ki enjoys writing poetry and aspires to go to medical school after he graduates from Haverford College. He can often be found at night with the “late night feels” to inspire his poem writing while he listens to Korean music with a friend.

Song Joong-Ki was born and raised in California, around one hour away from LA. He grew up with his parents who only spoke Korean to him (8, 9, 10). It was not until he started school when he began to learn and speak English (5). Song tends to speak English to his siblings unless he wishes to say something to them that he does not want other people around him to hear; then, he will speak in Korean (8, 9, 10). From 9th to 11th grade, Song Joong-Ki studied Spanish in order to fulfill the language requirement. He explained that his father is fluent in Spanish and then followed with a typical Song answer, “Sometimes I’d say random Spanish stuff to him and he’d be like LOLs you’re so bad.” As it became apparent that Song Joong-Ki’s

Spanish was pretty limited at this time in his life, we continued the interview with a focus more on English and Korean.

Song Joong-Ki would consider himself “pretty fluent” in English, citing his ability to write essays in the language. For Korean, Song is fluent conversationally in that he can ask for basic needs but lacks the mastery of Korean “to argue crazy, complex or specialized things like politics” (6). He would consider English as his dominant language but considers himself a native speaker of Korean (7). He added that “Korean is closer to my heart. That was the first language I learned so it is only natural... It is like the mother tongue you know. Speaking Korean to me is something I do with my family,” and naturally with other Korean people “essentially because it’s another way to bond with them.” He believes that “language is the root of a culture. In the same way, when you can share that language, it creates that natural bond” (8). In addition to speaking Korean at home, he attributes his proficiency to watching Korean dramas, listening to music and reading media (13).

Although he tends to speak Korean solely to his family and Korean friends, he appears to live firmly in both languages. Song Joong-Ki can seamlessly switch between Korean and English. He explained that “respect is a pretty important covenant in Korean. There is a separate set of language that is dedicated to respect so I always use it with adults who are older than me.” If someone older than Song who spoke Korean approaches him, Song Joong-Ki is able to “default to that respect language.” In a robotic voice he explained that it is not like “All right, adult is coming forward. Time to turn off all uses of English, use only Korean in this context” (27). Song mostly thinks in English; however, there are times when he will revert to Korean (14). When he is angry he will sometimes curse in Korean out loud. He admitted, “no one knows because it is in Korean. Like if [I] drop something I’ll say something by accident and then [say to myself] like oh, I shouldn’t *curse* you know” (16). Other times he said “I’ll think in Korean when I can’t express it in English.” I asked for an example to which he replied, “there’s a certain word called like... *dap dap hae* in Korean. It’s like claustrophobic but not really. It’s like claustrophobia and frustration mixed together but there is no true definition that you can give in English. It’s like when someone goes super slow in lab and you’re waiting for them to go next. It’s frustration but it feels like there is someone grabbing your chest and constricting you kind

of.” At times Song Joong-Ki will try to translate a Korean word to English-speaking friends. He explains that “I’ll try to get them to get the feel of the word... You think that if you know two languages you think you can interchange them easily but that is not always the case” (26).

When asked whether he identifies or associates with one or both cultures, he replied that he does not feel like he belongs to one or both cultures (21). He added that “it’s more like neither. I do identify with certain aspects of both cultures but I can’t say that each one necessarily captures the whole of my identity. This is in a lot of articles but Asian Americans say that they are not part of the American culture nor the Asian culture... There is a lot of [conflicting] and different aspects of society and values. You can’t group them into either.”

I followed with a question about what it meant for him to be bilingual. After a moment of thought he revealed, “It’s something like what my poetry teacher has said. When people who speak multiple languages think about the world, they can view it in two different ways... And because of that they have a more accurate picture of the world because they can view it in more perspectives.” He added that “with more languages comes more opportunities to communicate, more knowledge, more ability to talk to people and understand them” (19). From his various English-speaking and Korean-speaking relationships to his poetry writing in English and his love for Korean dramas and music, he lives in both languages and does not feel the pressure to hide his Korean language as he did when he was younger. As Song so eloquently added in response to the question about hiding his bilingualism, “I can speak to people in Korean... And Korean food is good... Also, I can talk to *yuhj*’s¹ in Korean so everything works out!” (32)

¹ *yuhj*: Song Joong-Ki’s own slang for *yuhjah* in Korean for “girl.” Often used in the context of a girl that a boy is interested in or likes.