Caroline Soffer

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Linguistics 101

Between Two Worlds: Celia's Language Journey from Korea to the United States

In this interview, I speak to my roommate Celia, 19, about Korean-American culture, specifically her knowledge of the Korean language. Celia grew up in Irvine, California, speaking Korean since she learned to talk, and English since the age of five. She explains to me her struggles of feeling "trapped between two worlds", feeling like she is too American at times, and too Korean at others. She speaks of "Konglish", a sort of hybrid language she speaks with her parents and siblings, and an embrace of Korean- Americn culture through food and annual trips to Korea. Though Celia feels her English is dominant, she acknowledges the large role that Korean plays in her life.

Celia looks comfortable sitting in her Bryn Mawr dorm, eating Korean Hi-Chew candies and a t-shirt that says "Tacos with Friends". (1) She seems at ease, eager to talk to me about relationship with Korean culture and language. I explain to her that it will be more of a conversation than an interview, and she jumps right in: "I'm 1.5 lingual." she says, referencing her knowledge of both English and the Korean language. (4, 6, 7) Celia is 19 years old, and grew up just outside of Los Angeles, California. (2) She now calls Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, her home, and begins to speak to me about her Korean culture, language, and how she feels "caught in the middle", not fully belonging in either American or Korean culture. (3)

Celia first explains feeling detached from both American and Korean culture through the journey of her parents. Celia's parents were both born in Korea, and were arranged to meet in the United States by their parents, Celia's grandparents. It wasn't really "Korean", Celia explains, as it wasn't a true arranged marriage, but it wasn't really an "American dating story" either. "It was

an arranged marriage of sorts," Celia explains, "my grandparents thought that their kids would hit it off, but my parents dated for a while before they were married". Her grandparents grew up speaking only Korean, and Celia's parents learned English when they moved to Southern California. Celia, and her sisters Joy and Kailey, were taught Korean by her parents since birth, in order to preserve a traditional Korean accent. (5) At this time in her life she was immersed in Korean culture, even while living in the United States. In fact, she spoke exclusively Korean until the age of 4 (11) "I learned English later, mostly from watching kids TV shows, like on Nickelodeon," she explains, "and a little bit from school." After Celia started public school, her relationship with Korean culture started to become slightly more muddled. Korean was spoken less and less frequently, and English, her second language, became the dominant one. Irvine, California, her hometown, is a predominantly Asian community, but every class she's taken has been taught in English. Celia continues, "Around age 5 my Korean started to get a little rough. I started speaking more and more English, and my Korean turned into 'Konglish'". Konglish, she explained, is a combination of English and Korean, with words taken from each language to form something that doesn't sound like either. (13, 17) She explains to me that certain American phrases have become staples of "Konglish", including "화이팅/파이팅 [pay-ting]", which roughly translates to "don't give up".

When Celia speaks to her parents, she tries her best to speak Korean, but sometimes English or "Konglish" phrases "slip out". Celia has also noticed that Korean can "slip out" in certain contexts. Sometimes when Celia is very relaxed, or very tired, she will speak in Korean phrases. "It's surprising because I don't think my knowledge of grammar structures is that great," Celia explains, "but when I'm tired that doesn't seem to matter." (8, 16) Celia admits that

when she's intoxicated, Korean can slip out unintentionally. "I guess my 'drunker self' is more Korean than I am", she says, laughing.

The conversation switches in tone, as Celia explains to me personal stigmas she faces speaking a mixture of Korean and English at home. Celia explains to me that she's never found it embarrassing to have to switch to English, unless she's around people who aren't her family. She says that she feels an "expectation" to speak Korean by people who don't share her language, and that when friends see her speak English to her parents it makes her feel not "Korean enough". (8, 30) In her American world, she explains that it's like she must protect her Korean heritage and seem "Korean enough" to her fully American friends.

At home with her two sisters, Joy and Kailey, she speaks English, but notices a disconnect between her knowledge of the Korean language and her sisters. "I have noticed that my Korean is much better than theirs", she says, laughing. "My younger sister, Kailey [9 years] speaks Korean with a very American accent. When we go to Korea, I don't think native speakers would know her parents were born here [in Korea]". Celia seems to take great pride in being able to pass as a native in Korea, despite not feeling fully attached to the culture herself. The Chang family visits Korea nearly every year. Celia explains that she has many relatives still living there, and that her Grandparents own a farm that they all help work on. She speaks enough Korean to get around, but explains that, despite her substantial knowledge of the language, her childhood in the United States makes her feel "too American for Korea". (29)

In an effort to combat this, Celia has attempted many times throughout her Americanized childhood to formally learn Korean, but hasn't been able to solidify it in her mind, or, in her words, "become fully fluent". She speaks of a predicament between feeling like she has "her foot in both worlds, never really feeling at home in either [the United States and Korea]". She

continues, “People in America ask me, “Where are you from, really? And I’m like...I’m from Irvine.” (32)

Celia finds ways to feel more in touch with her Korean heritage in other ways, especially through food. When her older sister Joy came to visit Bryn Mawr, they picked up snacks from H-Mart, an Asian market with foods from her childhood. She showed me her favorite crackers, which reminded my American mind of a slightly sweeter ‘Ritz’ cracker, and a chocolate filling cupcake that looked like a Twinkie. Her Korean Hi-Chew candies, which she buys in bulk, are popular with her roommates and girls across the hall. (31)

At the end of the interview, I asked Celia whether she would want her children to speak Korean and English. After everything we had discussed, I expected the answer to be a resounding ‘no’ with the hope that they would feel fully in touch with American culture, and not “stuck between the two” as Celia had explained so eloquently to me. Instead, Celia explained to me that she would love for her children to be bilingual, and that she hopes that her embrace of a Korean-American hybrid culture will pass onto her children and future generations. “Plus,” she continued, “I get to talk about people without them knowing,” with a sly smile of guilt. “It’s like a secret code.” Celia loves and is grateful for the 1.5 languages in her life, both despite of and for the baggage they bring. (31)