

a salient issue. Reflecting the perceived widening gap between the languages, work began in 2005 on the *Kyöremal k'un sajön* (Unabridged Dictionary of Our Language),¹⁰ an ongoing joint project involving experts from North and South Korea that seeks to index the entire Korean language and ‘re-converge’ the varieties. Moreover, in the event of political unification, the issue would have even more intense and far-reaching ramifications for the entire population of the Korean Peninsula, as it grapples with social inequality, discrimination, and power imbalances.

Not only is it paramount that we identify the different areas and specific reasons for linguistic difference, but also that we determine how this history of linguistic change continues to affect the two Koreas today. Moreover, extra care must be taken not to demonise either variety, blame either side for the linguistic divergence, or identify either language as flawed or an impediment that needs to be eliminated or overcome. Rather, it is crucial to embrace linguistic diversity and acknowledge pluricentric Korean as an unexpected, though at this point established, byproduct of political division.

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Notes

1 This paper utilizes the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization.
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How Korean Language Students Studying in Seoul Navigate Linguistic and Cultural Homogeneity

Lucien Brown

The linguistic and cultural immersion offered by studying abroad is often positioned as the perfect context to build second language skills and to acquire cultural knowledge. The study abroad context is idealised as ‘an imagined monolingual utopia’¹ where language learners can be completely immersed in the target language. The reality, of course, is more complicated. Research on the acquisition of a swathe of languages shows that students on study abroad spend varied amounts of time interacting in their target language,² often face struggles to adapt to the local culture,³ and return from study abroad having made variegated linguistic gains.⁴ In some cases, teachers might even perceive students’ language skills to have regressed.⁵

The expectation that study abroad provides a perfect setting for linguistic and cultural immersion may be particularly problematic for students who visit South Korea, a country grappling with the early stages of multiculturalism⁶ and where powerful ideologies of cultural homogeneity still hold strong.⁷ The Korean language remains a powerful emblem of ethnic homogeneity via ideologies that equate ‘speaking Korean’ with ‘being Korean.’⁸ These racialised ideologies translate into folk beliefs shared to varying extents within South Korean society⁹ that all people of Korean ethnicity should be able to speak ‘good’ Korean and, on the flipside, that learning Korean is difficult, unnecessary, or incongruous for those of non-Korean ethnicity.

In the course of my research, I traced the experiences of Grace (a pseudonym), a proficient and highly motivated Caucasian American female learner of Korean.¹⁰ Although Grace went to Korea with the explicit goal to speak only Korean in order to immerse herself as much as possible in the language, my analysis showed that many of her daily interactions featured English and she was engaged in an ongoing struggle to establish an identity as a potential speaker of Korean. Her attempts to speak Korean were often met with responses in English, which sometimes seemed to disrupt rather than assist her interactions. In some cases, Grace’s use of Korean was so unexpected that her interlocutors mistakenly assumed that she was in fact using English.

Experiences of study abroad are of course different for students who have Korean ethnicity or who are ‘Korean-passing’ (i.e., whose appearance leads people to assume they are Korean). In a blog post written by Hong Konger-American Rachel Wong, who spent a semester in Seoul,¹¹ the author reports never being addressed in English, and she notes that there were high expectations that she would be a proficient Korean speaker (in fact, she only had novice Korean). It led her to question her own identity as an Asian American and made her feel guilty that she was unable to live up to the expectations that came with her Korean-passing appearance.

For some students who do have Korean heritage, studying abroad can be a transformative experience. In a study of a mixed-heritage learner of Korean named Gina (a pseudonym), who had a white father and Korean mother, her Korean heritage allowed her to make meaningful connections with local communities and afforded her greater opportunities to learn Korean in comparison to her non-heritage peers, strengthening her sense of ‘Koreanness’.¹² However, Gina also

experienced heightened levels of anxiety in the immersion classes that she took, due to tacit expectations that as a ‘half’ she should be able to outperform her non-heritage classmates. She also shunned chances to practice Korean with proficient non-heritage students in her dorm, since their high levels of proficiency would exacerbate her own insecurities about her Korean ability. In addition, perhaps due to exposure to the same ideologies that equate ethnicity with linguistic ability, she seemed to conceptualise using Korean with non-native speakers as inauthentic and unhelpful.

Although we have ample evidence of the experiences of study abroad students in South Korea who are white English speakers and those who are of Korean ethnicity or Korean-passing, as yet we lack the same level of research that looks at the experience of exchange students from other ethnic backgrounds. We may expect that South Asians and Southeast Asians as well as Black students, for instance, would face particular hurdles, since non-Koreans who are of darker skin tone tend to face high levels of discrimination.¹³ Black students would likely face the same struggles to establish Korean-speaking identities as their white peers, but coupled with the explicit racial discrimination documented elsewhere.¹⁴

Previous studies have also shown that the racialised experiences of study abroad learners in South Korea interact closely with gender and sexuality. White female students in Korea frequently complain of receiving unwanted attention or even sexual harassment from Korean men in public places, including Grace in my own study¹⁵ Meanwhile, in my study of a white lesbian Korean learner named Julie¹⁶ she struggled to negotiate her identity in a context where markers of her sexuality such as her short hair and androgenous clothes were not necessarily understood in the same ways as they would be in her native United States. These struggles with sexual harassment and gender identity can negatively impact study abroad learners’ sojourns in Korea, including curtailing their opportunities to practice the language.

In the case of Grace, the path towards the resolution of her identity struggles and attempts to speak more Korean ultimately lay in developing an appreciation for study abroad as a multilingual and multicultural space. She found that interactions with fellow Korean-speaking international students from third countries including China and Iran who shared her desire to improve their Korean skills were valid and productive contexts for developing her linguistic proficiency, as well as for building her intercultural competence. Through this process, she moved away from seeing native Korean-speakers as the model that she needed to follow, and instead aspired to adopt the identity of a translingual international student who could skillfully switch between English, Korean, and other languages. With this shift, she gained confidence to use Korean in her interactions, while she also managed to shed the guilt that she had previously felt about using English, and she became interested in learning further languages and building her knowledge of additional cultures.

The various studies suggest that students who are set to study abroad in South Korea might benefit from pre-departure training that explicitly sensitises them to these complex issues that involve the interaction of race, gender, sexuality, and linguistic ideologies. Such sessions should also look to break down the stereotype of study abroad as a monolingual setting where all that counts is speaking Korean with ‘real’ Koreans. They should pinpoint the importance of interactions with global Korean speakers

(rather than just local Korea-born speakers) as the goal of study abroad and should further discuss how to balance and integrate the use of Korean, English, and other languages during sojourns in Korea.

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