

## The East Meet the West: Deconstructing Cultural Barriers Through Language

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### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received 8 November 2011

Accepted 15 December 2011

*Keywords:*

Western culture,  
Eastern culture,  
different language

### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to present, discuss, and analyze the differences as well as the similarities between English and Korean. It is generally agreed that the categories of culture differ across different types of societies and cultures. It is also believed that Western culture differs from Eastern culture. So we tend to think that people in a different culture speak differently, eat differently, wear differently, and interact differently from those in another culture. But it is not necessarily and not always true. I prove this by focusing on how people in a different culture speak a different language without knowing that they actually use the same expressions as those in another culture use. I will deal not only with cultural barriers due to the differences between English and Korean but also with how to work out the problems through the similarities between the two languages.

## I. Introduction

Culture means what and how people living in a society have done, created, and shared. Thus it pertains to all aspects of human life. As Levy says, it “is everything you believe and everything you do that enables you to identify with people who are like you and that distinguishes you from people who differ from you” (112). Considering this, a people’s culture can be said to range not only from material culture such as technology and necessities including clothing, food, and housing but also to mental culture such as religion, art, and language. As Lo Bianco observes, it is true that although culture is everywhere and “always there” (26), the concept of culture remains “complex and elusive” (11). Certainly, language

is a part of culture and we learn culture from language because “culture is usually seen emerging directly out of the language and seems to be derived from it” (Swidersky 19). This paper presents, discusses, and analyzes how the two languages –English and Korean—are related to each other by giving specific examples of English expressions. I will also deal with how cultural barriers are built by the differences between the two languages and how they can also be deconstructed by their similarities.

We know from experience that the categories of culture differ across different types of societies and cultures. It is believed that Western culture differs from Eastern culture, so we tend to think that people in a different culture speak differently, eat differently, wear differently, and interact differently from those in another culture. Is this

true? My answer is that it is not necessarily and not always true. Among these cultural variations I will focus on how people in a different culture speak a different language without knowing that they use the same expressions as those in another culture use. I will deal not only with cultural barriers due to the differences between English and Korean but also with how to work out the problems through similarities between the two languages.

## II. Cultural Barriers Caused by Language Differences

It is not uncommon to say that English is completely different from Korean. The two languages differ from each other in every respect--syntax, grammar, sound system, alphabet, and expressions. Among these differences, it is the English syntax that makes it difficult for most Koreans to speak English easily and fluently. For example, because of the difference in word order, before speakers of Korean say something in English, they first have to undergo a change in the word order that, from birth, has already been set in their brain. The difference in word order is annoying and it makes them feel baffled, frustrated, and even disoriented.

Next, both native speakers of English and those of Korean use different alphabets, different vowels and consonances, which are combined to become a unit of language, a word. And words are combined to become an idiom. According to dictionary.com, an idiom means "an expression whose meaning is not predictable from the usual meanings of its constituent elements," and it also means "a construction or expression of one language whose parts correspond to elements in another language but whose total structure or

meaning is not matched in the same way in the second language."

Taking this definition into account, an idiom, by its own nature, is an expression that is hard to understand because it cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements. So non-native speakers of English can take it for granted that it is next to impossible to deduce, from the combined meanings of its actual words, the meanings of such idioms as "kick the bucket," "face the music," "shoot the breeze," "straight from the horse's mouth," "pull someone's leg," "knock someone's socks off," "put one's money where one's mouth is," and so on. The elements of these expressions correspond to the elements in Korean, but the meanings are not matched in the same way in Korean. The word for word translation of the idioms do not make sense in Korean simply because they do not mean what they say. So these expressions bring about culture shock that non-native speakers of English, especially Koreans, may suffer.

Let us examine what some of these expressions mean and how they baffle us. First, let's take "face the music" for instance. We usually associate music with something good, happy, amusing, pleasant, delightful, joyful. Of course, there is sad music, too. Yet all types of music, whether sad or not, gives us peace, joy, happiness, comfort, consolation, relief, and solace. So if you face the music, how do you feel? What happens is that you must feel great. But the reality is that if you face the music, you should accept the consequences for what you've done. This is hard to understand if we take a look at another usage of music in "be music to somebody's ears." Here music is used to mean "happy," or "pleasant." The origin of "to face the music" meaning "accept the consequences" is from 1850, according to dictionary.com: "The exact image is uncertain,

one theory ties it to stage performers” as in the idiom “break a leg,” “another to cavalry horses having to be taught to stay calm while the regimental band plays.”

The next example is “pull someone's leg.” Like “face the music,” the idiom meaning “to make fun of someone,” or “to fool or deceive someone” is hard to understand when translated into Korean. In our culture, if you pull someone’s leg, we take it literally to mean that you are forcing him or her not to go. Or figuratively it means that you are begging someone to do something for you. Korean language has the same expression, but its meaning is different from English. As such, we can make an educated guess at what “pull someone’s leg” means, but the guess is wide of the mark. Is this from the cultural differences? I do not think so. What happens is that the meaning of “pull someone's leg” is misunderstood or misused, so that it needs correcting. This way the meaning is matched with Korean in the same way.

Dictionary.com also defines an idiom as “a manner of speaking that is natural to native speakers of a language.” If so, I would like to ask whether these idioms are naturally understandable to native speakers of English. I wonder if it is natural for them to understand their meaning when they hear these idioms. That is, did they learn them from their culture naturally or did they learn from dictionaries and memorize them without thinking other possible meanings? When they are given the idiom “kick the bucket,” is it culturally natural for them to take it to mean “die”? If the answer is yes, you must demonstrate what makes you think it means “die.” If the answer is no, I think this definition is wrong and the definition of “idiom” must be limited to the ones I quoted above.

### III. Deconstruction of the Cultural Barriers

The examples I have given so far is to illustrate the differences between English and Korean. And they may not attract your attention because you tend to take the difference for granted. You may, however, find it interesting to note that there are some English expressions whose meaning is easy for us to guess. For instance, let me take “people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.” Since we can make a guess at what it means, this expression is not difficult to understand. Because people living in glass houses are in danger of being broken, they should not throw stones. Likewise, you should not criticize someone for a fault when you are equally at fault. The next expression “hot under the collar” is not difficult to guess, either, although we don't know the meaning. Not only hot weather but also anger make us feel hot. So when we feel hot we loose a collar by unbuttoning or unfastening a tie. So do we, when we get angry.

I hope the next example will contribute to the mutual understanding among different cultures. In English, “cough up” means “to give unwillingly.” To give an example sentence, “dad finally coughed up the money for the computer I wanted.” We use the expression “cough up” with little difference in meaning. In Korean, “cough up” is used to mean that you pay back what you have illegally taken, i.e. embezzlement. Because “cough up” also means to bring up or throw up something from the lungs or out of the mouth, what I suggest is that native speakers of English use this expression to mean “pay back,” “compensate,” or “reimburse.” The publishers and editors of English dictionaries should consider adding the

new meaning to the entry.

You may be surprised to find out that some idioms share the same meaning. For these idioms all you have to do is replace English words with corresponding words in Korean. The idioms make sense when translated into Korean word for word. Let's take "tighten your belt," for example, You simply substitute "tighten" and "belt" for corresponding Korean words--"줄라매다" and "허리띠." The two English words "tighten" and "belt" are combined to become an idiom that is totally different in meaning from what they literally say. When native speakers of English are told to tighten their belt, they do not actually make it tighter. They take that to mean they should spend less money than they used to. Likewise, in our culture, when we are told to tighten our belt, we do not take it to mean fastening tight. We know that we are told to reduce our expenditures.

Another example of similarities between the two languages can be seen in the English expression "pour cold water on" and its Korean equivalence. The expression "pour cold water on" means to discourage or spoil something like plan, hope, or expectation. In our culture the same words "pour" and "cold water,"--not just water, but cold water--are combined to express the same meaning. So when a person hear someone say, "Mike poured cold water on our plan to go to Europe," the person, regardless of which culture he or she comes from, understands that Mike did not actually pour water called H<sub>2</sub>O, but he spoiled the plan to go to Europe. This is amazing, especially because this idiom is widely and frequently used in both cultures.

The list goes on and on: "kill two birds with one stone," "the apple of one's eye," "go in one ear and out the other," "prick one's conscience," "reveal one's true colors," "one's head spins,"

"use your head," "be itching to do," "know something like the back of one's hand," "leave a bitter taste in the mouth," "tremble like an aspen," "one's heart melt," "under one roof," "be a big frog in a small pond," "roll up one's sleeves," "young blood" "put one's heads together," It is amazing to know that both English and Korean use the same idioms to convey the same ideas and meanings. And it is worth noting that which ones, English idioms or Korean idioms, are borrowings, which ones influence one another, and which ones have been used earlier.

I can say for sure that some idioms have influenced our culture and have been adopted from English for use into Korean--idioms like "young blood" and "No news is good news" being politically and socially adopted; "Time is money" for economic reason because America has been a capitalistic country, while Korea used to be an agricultural country; "Once marine, always marine," for military purpose; "The die is cast," "Blood is thicker than water" for religious reason.

Some idioms like "know something like the back of one's hand" need a slight change in expression. In our culture, instead of using "the back of one's hand," we say, "know something like reading the lines of the palm." This is, to be sure, more appealing either to native speakers of English or to those of Korean because what you see on the back of our hand is not lines, but veins under the skin. And it is usual to say one reads the palm, not the back, of the hand. Thus, it is recommended that the publishers and editors of the dictionaries make corrections by substituting the word "back" for "palm."

The rest of the idioms and many more sound too natural and absorbed to tell which ones, English or Korean, have come first. The first example is "kill two birds with one stone."

When I stumbled upon this, I doubted my eyes. I could not help being dumbfounded by this because I never imagined that there is an English idiom like that. The idiom is of Chinese origin and has been adopted to Korean so long that I thought it is unique in an Oriental culture like China, Korea and Japan where Chinese letters are used. The question is that how often and how widely it is used by native speakers of English. We can definitely say that the idiom has not been used in America as often and widely as in those countries. Therefore, it may be safe to say that it may have been adopted into English.

I have enumerated many other examples above. The more examples we look at, the more we are surprised by the similarities between the two languages. We have seen that the use of language in a different culture can influence and can be influenced by the use of other language in other culture in different ways. Not only the meaning but also the usage of the idioms can be altered, expanded, and adopted by each other.

Then comes the question: Where do you think these similarities in expression come from? Are they due to coincidence or inevitability? We cannot say they are coincidental because they are so alike that we are stunned by the likeness. I certainly believe that they are inevitable because they demonstrate that all humans, whether they are westerners or not, basically share the same way of thinking. It is true that language is a product of culture. And therefore it reflects culture and at the same time is affected by culture. The homogeneity of the languages indicates that Western culture is not very different from Eastern one and the way Westerners think is not different from the way Easterners do, either. In other words, the homogeneity is perhaps a necessary consequence of cultural affinities between

the two countries.

#### IV. Conclusion

Since we are living in a global world where people of diverse cultures communicate and work together, the need to understand a culture other than one's own has become of paramount importance. In fact, As Guest points out, cultural boundaries are increasingly becoming blurred and intermingled (154). We must prepare for this new world by developing a deeper understanding of other cultures. Now is the time to reach the new level of understanding of cultures around the world. In the contemporary world, we can do this mainly through the computer or the Internet without travelling to another culture. "Computer" and "Internet" are the basic words shared by literate people all over the world, no matter what language they may speak. But "this core lexicon of modern education," as Hirsch suggests, is not limited to these technological terms but expanded to include basic literacy "from world history, world cultures, geography, and the physical and biological sciences" (75).

For this reason, I would like to point out that in a global community, it is naturally desirable to accept the usages of other languages, just as we need to accept a change in the cultural behavior and thinking of a person or group of people through contact with another culture. Indeed, the similarities between the two different languages are the power that reinforces the bond between the two different cultures. Through the mutual acceptance and the expansion of the usages of other languages, we can narrow the heterogeneity of the languages, thus bridging the cultural gap.

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