

Vietnamese and Korean: more alike than different

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Abstract: Through a number of idiomatic expressions in Korean and Vietnamese, and based on the author's knowledge and experience as an English speaker and teacher, the paper shares the author's preliminary findings of the linguistic and cultural similarities of the two peoples, and gives additional support to the status of Konglish (Korean English) and Vinglish or Vietlish (Vietnamese English) as part of the Asian Englishes – the pridesworthy varieties of the World's Englishes to date.

Keywords: idioms, proverbs, Konglish, Vinglish/ Vietlish, Asian Englishes.

1. Introduction

Recalling a discussion at the 8th Asian TEFL conference hosted by our University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS), VNU in 2010, I heard an English teacher raise such questions as “Can we speak English the Asian ways?”, “Can we use Asian idioms like *they are just pots and pans, you can't be both the soccer player and the referee at the same time* instead of the American *they are just Coke and Pepsi* or the British *you can't be both the judge and the jury at the same time* respectively?” “Can we make ourselves understood when speaking Asian English?” “What should we teach our students in this

regard?” etc. These have been controversial topics of numerous debates among Asian English teachers to date, and I tend to agree with many of them that Asian English, or rather Asian Englishes have all the rights to be recognized as varieties of the English language (and they have truly been), and inter-cultural communication via the medium of English is always possible because we human beings are in fact more alike than different, as evidenced in the Vietnamese and Korean idiomatic expressions I have been able to find with my still very limited knowledge of the language.

In this paper, I would like to share my preliminary findings of the linguistic and cultural similarities between Vietnamese and Korean peoples before giving additional support to the status of Konglish (Korean

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English) and Vinglish or Vietlish (Vietnamese English) as part of the Asian Englishes – the pridedworthy varieties of the World’s Englishes to date. As can be seen, the first part of my paper is preliminary in nature as I am a mere beginner in Korean language learning, and the second part is my observations, knowledge and experience as a speaker and teacher of English.

2. Linguistic and Cultural Similarities

The Vietnamese and the Korean language share a large number of words originating, or borrowed from Chinese – the language of our common neighbor, with necessary modifications in pronunciation to fit our own languages, for instance, *đại học* (*higher education/ university*), *khoa học* (*science*), *học sinh* (*pupil*), *công chúng* (*public*), *mâu thuẫn* (*conflict*) in Vietnamese, and *tehak* (대학), *kwahak* (과학), *hakseng* (학생), *kongjung* (공중), *mosun* (모순) in Korean. It is estimated that words of Chinese origin can account for as many as two-thirds of Vietnamese and Korean vocabularies. However, the two languages coincide in more ways than that.

It is widely agreed that proverbs in particular, idiomatic expressions in general, are derived from people’s daily activities; they therefore reflect thoughts and ideas through the use of familiar images to the speakers of each language [1] [2] [3], etc. Cross-linguistically, in terms of content, idiomatic expressions share life views, philosophies, rules, cultural norms and ethics, amongst others. These are universal truths, such as condemn and criticism of the evil, and commendation and encouragement of the good. Yet each language community has its own ways to represent these truths by choosing

from the many linguistic materials readily available to the speakers, which may coincide or be language-specific. This results in interesting similarities and differences among them, as apparently demonstrated in the case of English and Vietnamese proverbs presented in one of our earlier papers [4].

Turning now to Korean, the language I was learning during the International Scholar Exchange Fellowship (ISEF) Program 2012 sponsored by the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS), I found in an interesting book *How Koreans Talk – A Collection of Expressions* [5] an amazing number of similar idiomatic expressions in the Vietnamese and Korean languages. These similarities are established on the basis of the following criteria:

- i) the images and metaphors employed in the expressions, which reveal profound cultural features;
- ii) the literal and figurative meanings of the expressions; and
- iii) the contexts in which these idiomatic expressions are used.

In the subsequent section are a number of examples for illustration.

2.1. Conceptually, in describing a cold, indifferent, hard-to-tempt person, the Vietnamese say *con người gổ đá* while the Korean say *mokseok* (목석) (roughly equivalent to *mộc thạch*); short but gritty people are called *Jakeun gochuga maepda* (작은고추가 맵다) (*small pepper [is hotter], bé hạt tiêu*), clothes are likened to *Osi nalketa* (옷이 날개다) (*a pair of wings, bộ cánh*); a daring person is *Kani kheuta* (간이 크다) (*one with a big liver, to gan*), a sly woman is *kumiho* (구미호) (*a nine-*

tailed fox, *cáo chín đuôi /hồ ly tinh*), or a powerless person may utter *Bagachireul sseuta* (*바가지/를 쓰다*) (*they put a nose ring on me, tôi bị xỏ mũi*).

2.2. Culturally, like many other Asian nations, Vietnam and Korea rely heavily on rice, the staple grain without which almost no meals can go, and the two languages abound in terms that describe a whole variety of products made of, from, or related to rice. It is, therefore, natural that many of their sayings center round this life-support necessity. For instance, the Korean say *Eat, eat: rice is everything*, very much like the Vietnamese *com tẻ là mẹ ruột; no com tẻ, thôi mọi đàng* (lit. *rice is mother of the intestines; no appetite when you're filled with rice*). Referring to some illusionary promise or something good but unattainable, both peoples use the same image *geurimui tteok* (*그림의떡*) (*rice cake in the picture, cái bánh vẽ*). Describing a gray area, or a useless product, for example, they both say *jukdo anigo bapdo anigo* (*죽도 아니고 밥도 아니고*) (*it's neither rice nor porridge, cơm chẳng ra cơm, cháo chẳng ra cháo*). Interestingly still, *sikshaetseoyo?* (*식사했어요?*) (*have you eaten (rice) yet?*, Anh/Chị ăn cơm chưa?) rarely means an inquiry as whether you are hungry or not, but is a common way of greetings in both languages, which can shock a Westerner if so asked by a Vietnamese or a Korean. Wishing a girl to be settled in marriage soon, both peoples make a rhetoric question, normally accompanied with a smile, *kuksu eonche meokji* (*국수 언제 먹지?* *When will I have a chance to eat your noodles?* *Bao giờ cho ăn cỗ đây?* Obviously, rice and its derivatives are integral parts of the two cultures and their languages.

2.3. Furthermore, behavioral norms, life experience, advice, and Confucian moral rules, etc. in the two cultures are also vividly reflected in their idioms and proverbs. Similarities are found not only in the images/objects used as metaphors in these idioms and proverbs, but also in the literal and figurative meanings conveyed. For example, in a wedding, the newly-wed couples receive a wish like *머리가 파뿌리가 되도록* (*Until your hair turns into leek roots*), *Sống đến đầu bạc răng long / bách niên giai lão* (Cf. *until death do you part*). A weak, poor commoner may rise to overthrow the ruler when cornered with oppression, *지렁이도 밟으면 꿈틀* (*even an earthworm wiggles when someone steps on it*, like the English *a treaded worm may turn*, *Con giun xéo lắm cũng quăn*). An inexperienced youngster who dares to do things beyond his ken is referred to as *머리에 피도 안마른놈* (*the blood has hardly dried on his head* or *He still reeks of milk*, *Chưa ráo máu đầu / miệng còn hơi sữa; Chưa học bò đã lo học chạy*). A broken marriage is likened to *Pakyeong pakyong* (*a broken mirror, gương vỡ*). Advising people to hold their reputation in esteem, the Korean say *호랑이는 죽으면 가죽을 남기고 사슴은 죽으면 이름을 남긴다* (*When a tiger dies, it leaves its fur. When a man dies, he leaves his name*), precisely the same as the Vietnamese *Cọp chết để da, người ta chết để tiếng*. A narrow-minded person yet believing he knows everything is *Umul an gaeguri* *우물 안 개구리* (*a frog in a well, ếch ngồi đáy giếng*). A useless venture is described as *Sajokeul danda sachoekul danda* (*adding legs to a snake, vẽ rắn thêm chân*); fighting with an invincible rival is merely *Dangranggeocheol dangranggeocheol* (*a mantis kicking a horse-cart wheel, châu chấu*

đá xe); a fight that benefits only a third party is *Eobujiri* 어부지리 (the fisherman is the only one who benefits from the fight between the stork and the shell, *Traì cò tranh nhau, ngư ông đắc lợi*). Asking someone to stop flattering is *Bihanggi taeuji mara* 비행기 태우지 마라 (Stop giving me a paper plane ride, *Đừng cho tôi đi tàu bay giấy nữa*); a salesperson cheating customers is criticized as *Yangduguyuk* 양두구육 (Sheep/ goat's head and dog's meat, *Treo đầu dê, bán thịt chó*); interpersonal intimacy is like that between lips and teeth, as in *입술이 없으면 이가 시리다* (If you lose your lips, your teeth get cold, *Môi hở răng lạnh*); *옥시할 놈* or *옥장날 놈*, *Cho voi giày ngựa xé / xé xác phanh thây* or *Đem bỏ vạc dầu* is a curse on a scoundrel. Unpredictable luck in life, good or bad, is just like a man who lost his horse: *Saeongjima* 새옹지마 *Tái ông mất ngựa*. Another piece of good advice is “do not exercise punishment on a person at meal time, just like your dog – do not beat it while it is eating”, *Bap meokeul ttaeneun gaedo an ttaerinda* (밥 먹을 때는 개도 안 때린다) (*Trời đánh tránh bữa ăn*). A man of forty years of age is *Bulhok* 불혹, *Bát hoặc* (từ thập nhi bát hoặc), or fleeing a danger is the best strategy – *Samsipyukgye* 삼십육계, *Tam thập lục kế, tẩu vi thượng sách*. There are countless examples of this sort in the two languages.

2.4. Similar to several other Asian countries, in Korea and Vietnam, Confucian moral rules for long laid contempt on women while paying respect to men. *Man is the seed*, and a woman who ventured outside her duties and status would bring ruin to the family, *암탉이 울면 집안이 망한다* (If the hen cries, the household will collapse, *Gà mái gáy*). Women were required to conform to *Samjong jito* (삼종

사도), *tam tông tứ đức* (three types of obedience and four types ethical attributes, namely obey their father, husband and son; diligence, appearance, language and dignity), and so, you should break in your new daughter-in-law when she is still in a rainbow dress, *Dạy con từ thuở còn thơ, dạy vợ từ thuở bơ vơ mới về*, as the Korean and Vietnamese sayings go. A daughter-in-law is truly your daughter, but a son-in-law is not, so treat him like a special guest, *Sawineun baeknyeongjigaek* (사위는 백년지객, *dâu là con, rể là khách*). However, things have changed, women's status has ameliorated, and now the Koreans have such a saying as *딸 하나 열 아들 안 부럽다* – one good daughter is worth ten sons rather than the Vietnamese *nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô* (you are considered fertile even if you have one son, while having ten daughters means you have no children at all).

As can be seen, despite being some thousand miles apart, the two nations possess more similarities than differences, linguistically, culturally and mentally, as has been seen through their languages and ways of life. Inter-cultural communication between us is not only possible, but always smooth thanks to what we share.

We not only communicate in our own languages – Korean now is among the most popular foreign languages to Vietnamese students and people, partly because Korea is one of the biggest investors in Vietnam; and Vietnamese is one of the foreign languages Korean high school students can choose as a curricular subject. We can also communicate using the global language – English, or rather, Englishes, i.e. English spoken in Korea and English spoken in Vietnam. What is the status of our Englishes in the world Englishes? Following are my arguments as an answer.

3. Korean-English and Vietnamese-English in Asian Englishes

I am not going to discuss at length the issue of pronunciation, because definitely all non-native learners of English, in order to ensure intelligibility, should aim at getting their pronunciation as close as possible to a particular, established vernacular of English, such as “standardized” “the Queen’s English” in London, or Standard American English, or Australian English, to name just a few. (In learning a foreign or second language like English, mother tongue’s influence is naturally inevitable, but that should not be allowed to result in some pronunciation so far away from, or causing so much distortion to, the target language that serious misunderstanding occurs, and even communication totally fails). What I am trying to support here is the Englishes used by Asian people in Asian ways with Asian words via the medium of English.

Language is a means of human communication, we all know, and the people with whom we communicate every day, more often than not, are our fellow people, those who speak the same mother tongue as we do. Even when we speak English with speakers of other languages, we are usually not trying to express what the English natives think and do and how they do it; rather, we use English to express our own thoughts and deeds. As the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) puts it, ‘at the end of the upper secondary (high school) level, students will be able to better inform the world of the Vietnamese people, their history and culture, and to take pride in Vietnam, its language and culture’ (MOET, 2007, cited in Hoang Van Van [6]). Thus, a tourist guide showing foreign visitors around a scenic beauty, telling them the history behind the mossy bricks of a ruin, explaining to them

the rituals associated with some type of music and/or singing; a scientist presenting his/her research results at an international conference; a waitress explaining what ingredients make up the traditional dishes to foreign diners at a local restaurant - these are common scenes in any country. English then is no longer the sole unshared treasure of the natives, but has become the world’s language and is used at the disposal of the non-natives. They use it in their own ways, for instance, “The flattening of underwear with pleasure is the job of the chambermaid. Turn to her straightaway” in an announcement in a Yugoslavian hotel, “When a passenger of the foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet at him melodiously at first, but if he still obstacles your passage, then tootle him with vigor” in a warning to motorists in Tokyo [7], or a notice in an unidentified non-English speaking country as seen in the picture below [8]:



The Vietnamese are no exception. We have used English in our ways which outsiders are obliged to accept. Take the word *socialization* as an example. In “pure” English, the meanings of the original verb *socialize* are explained as follows:

Verb	1.	socialize - take part in social activities; interact with others; "He never socializes with his colleagues"; "The old man hates to socialize"
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| 2. | socialize - train for a social environment; "The children must be properly socialized" |
| 3. | socialize - prepare for social life; "Children have to be socialized in school" |
| 4. | socialize - make conform to socialist ideas and philosophies; "Health care should be socialized!" |

Based on WordNet 3.0, Farlex clipart collection. ©2003-2011 Princeton University, Farlex Inc [9].

It has nothing to do with the cost-sharing mechanism of projects/programs for social development between the government and the citizens, or the collection of funds from people for a community activity, or the mobilization of social forces to engage in a certain campaign, which is expressed in the Vietnamese language as *xã hội hoá*. This term well corresponds to verb formation rules in both Vietnamese and English with the addition of the word/suffix *hoá/ize*; hence *socialize* and its derivative *socialization*. "New wine in an old bottle", as the Vietnamese saying goes – the English word has acquired a new meaning in the Vietnamese context. When the word was first used, few foreigners would understand what it meant, and it took us quite a while to get them understand its Vietnamized usage. Now, that new meaning is well-established in the lexicon of non-Vietnamese English speakers who work in Vietnam or maintain frequent contacts with the Vietnamese, though it will continue to take several more years to find ways into standard English dictionaries.

Socialization is just exemplary at word level. At phrase, sentential and textual levels, English use is overwhelmed with Vietnamese grammatical rules and rhetorics. Following is an English verse-like creation in conformation to the Vietnamese poetic rules supposedly credited to some *xích-lô* (cycle rickshaw,

pedicab) pedalist in Hanoi who offers a ride to foreign visitors:

One dollar, one you

Two dollars, two you

You okay, you sit

Not okay, thank you.

Among my students' writing assignments, I found "*People want to have equality in position, employment ..., especially gender equality, one of the hottest problems attracting many people's notice*"; "*start seeing 3 types of family with different works of Female which are shown in the table below*"; "*The Arab was luxurious and extravagant life in town, had wide commercial dealings but no culture contact with Christian. There was 3 months no fightings. The society was powerful political and religion formed by Muhammad called Muslim and Muslim grew strongly among areas*". They violate English grammatical rules; they may not be straightforward in presenting ideas as the English rhetorics dictates, but does such violation or divergence seriously block understanding and communication?

The answer is yes, but not of high frequency. Sharing the same mentality, ways of thinking, speaking and writing, it is not always difficult for us to understand one another while communicating in English this way, although it can be a chore on the part of other unaccustomed English users. They will soon learn, I believe. For successful intercultural communication using the global English today, both sides have to make efforts – the non-natives have to improve their English in the direction of the standard while the natives have to acquire better understanding of the language and culture of the non-natives, and in so doing, they may come to a point of convergence.

Many native speakers of English have now arrived at the recognition that they simply cannot ‘colonize’ the world with their language (although they did *cocacolonize* the world¹); they cannot require all English speakers in the world to speak it like they do. That is to say different varieties of English, or Englishes, are accepted as natural, as in the case of Indian English. We have long heard of *Franglais* (French English), *Phinglish* (Philippino English), and more recently, *Singlish* (Singaporean English), *Chinglish* (Chinese English), so surely *Vinglish* (or *Vietlish*, meaning Vietnamese English) and *Konglish* (Korean English) have a pride-worthy place among our Asian Englishes. As a Japanese author puts it, “Students of English should realize that Japanese English is not an inferior form of English but one variety of the “various” language, or world Englishes. They should be guided so that they could be confident in becoming speakers of Japanese English that is a fine output of the English education in Japan” [10]. We Vietnamese and Korean should feel the same pride.

To conclude this paper, I would like to reiterate that we – the Vietnamese and Korean people – should feel the same pride because to both nations, English is the language of an Other, because our attitudes towards English are very much the same, as are the ways it is taught and learned in both countries, and, as anyone may expect, we share almost the same problems. Exchanging experiences and learning valuable lessons from each other’s

successes and failures, therefore, must be strengthened.

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¹ This pun was used by an American professor from the University of Indianapolis at a workshop on American Popular Culture at our VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities in 1997. *Coke* and *Pepsi* have become two of the most popular beverages to billions of people, especially children virtually everywhere in the world, hence *colanization*, or *cocacolonization*, which sounds much the same as *colonialization*.

Việt và Hàn – Giống nhiều hơn khác

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Tóm tắt: Thông qua một loạt các thành ngữ, tục ngữ tiếng Hàn và tiếng Việt, bài báo trình bày những nét tương đồng về ngôn ngữ và văn hóa của hai dân tộc Hàn Việt, qua đó cung cấp thêm lập luận ủng hộ vị thế của Konglish (tiếng Anh Hàn Quốc) và Vinglish hoặc Vietlish (tiếng Anh Việt Nam) trong tiếng Anh châu Á – những loại tiếng Anh chính thức trong các loại tiếng Anh trên thế giới hiện nay.

Từ khóa: thành ngữ, tục ngữ, tiếng Anh Hàn Quốc, tiếng Anh Việt Nam, tiếng Anh châu Á.