

A Study on Framing a Lecture on “Korean Culture through the Korean Language” for Foreign Students*

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There is a gap between teaching Korean culture and teaching the Korean language to foreigners. In many Korean language courses, Korean culture is being taught as an appendix, or as entertainment. If teaching Korean culture through the Korean language is possible, we can expect a synergic effect. We try to frame a lecture on Korean culture through the Korean language. First, we list linguistic elements having cultural relevance: gender, number, word order, elipsis, Sino-Korean words, lexical differentiation, basic vocabulary, and idioms. Secondly, we show a class schedule based on the linguistic elements for a semester. Thirdly, we show a sample lecture on one of the topics: Word order and order of thinking. We detail the contents to show on handouts or screen and the scripts to use.

Keywords: Korean culture, Korean language, word order, order of thinking.

Introduction

Those who want to understand Korea are increasing as the status of Korea in the world rises and interactions between Korea and other countries increase. Since the first gate to understand Korea is to learn Korean, there has been a steady increase in the number of foreigners trying to learn it. Korean language education has become one of the most popular items that Korean colleges offer to foreigners.

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Now, Koreans should be interested in new tasks other than Korean language education. Among many Korean language learners there appear those who want more than just Korean language skills. Their needs are of several types. Korean linguists could fulfill two of them. One is to understand the structure and use of the Korean language from the perspective of world languages. The other is to understand Korean culture through the Korean language.

In fact, Korean culture education is significant for foreigners. However, it is not being carried out in appropriate ways. The reason is that there have been few studies on the contents and methods of Korean culture education. This is a consequence of the lack of an established and independent discipline on Korean culture. There are no departments of Korean culture at various universities and colleges in Korea. Korean culture should have been studied as an interdisciplinary area, but the high barriers between the sciences have blocked such attempts.

One possible solution Korean linguists can present is to teach Korean culture as reflected in the Korean language. To learn a language is to learn the culture that has formed the language. Conversely, the better one understands the culture of the society, the easier he or she can learn the language, especially when there is a great difference between the learner's language and the target language. Therefore, teaching Korean culture through the Korean language is one of the most effective ways to help foreigners understand Korea.

Background

So far, Korean culture education has been a subject, even if minor, in Korean language courses. But it has not been related to Korean language education. Korean history, religion, politics, economy, literature, art, music, food, traditional clothes, and customs have been introduced independently in the process of Korean language teaching. It is necessary, of course, to teach such to foreigners as they are. Such can be separated in principle from Korean language teaching. In this case, however, Korean culture education and Korean language teaching can hardly create a synergy effect. This does not mean that they should be performed at the same time in the classes. The point is that we need another type of Korean culture education now.

There are dozens of papers on how to teach Korean culture in Korean language classes. Their common interest is how to incorporate Korean culture into the curriculum of Korean language education. Their major arguments are about

the contents of Korean culture (Min Hyun-sik 1996; Lee Sun-yi 2003; Park Youngsoon 2003), cultural subjects that would be useful to teach foreigners (Min Hyun-sik 1996; Cho Hang-Rok and Kang Seung-Hye 2001; Woo Inhae 2004), and methods of teaching Korean culture (Han Sang-Mee 1999; Wang Hye Sook 2000).

We will limit the scope of discussion to Korean culture reflected in Korean language because our interest is to search for cultural elements in the Korean language. Many studies attempt to discover cultural elements in Korean. We can recognize two groups that are relevant to the issue. One is to interpret the cultural meanings of words or phrases. For example, Lee Oyoung (2002) analyzed the Korean native word *cheol* (철) meaning “season” from a cultural point of view. A Korean phrase *cheori deulda* with the noun *cheol* as the subject literally means “the season begins,” but actually means “to know better.” This says that Koreans equate the change of seasons with the maturing of men to know better because both involve the growing process. Etymological studies such as Cho Hangbum (1997) might also fall under this category. The other is to interpret the cultural meanings of linguistic elements. To explain the relationship between Korean culture and the honorific system is a good example. Lee Suk-joo (2002) presents a concept named “Korean language culture,” which would be clearer if named “linguistic culture of Korea.” He summarized the contents of the linguistic culture of Korea as:

linguistic etiquette

speaking modestly
 refusing gently
 responding to praise
 talking at a meeting
 asking about private affairs
 attitude in a conversation
 talking to one’s senior or junior
 rate of talking
 cutting in others’ conversation
 using vulgar words
 using taboo words

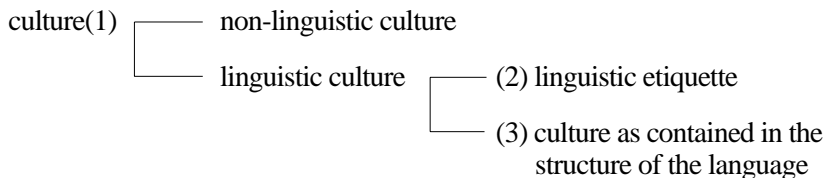
linguistic content

- honorifics
- terms of address and reference
- color terms
- being or having
- I or we
- expressing plurality
- reduplication
- sound symbolism
- difference in the domain of word meaning

This list includes many interesting topics to help explain the linguistic culture of Korea. It is reasonable to put these topics into two distinct categories. Linguistic etiquette is about ways of communicating. In short, Koreans make much of etiquette in communicating. “Linguistic content” would be better replaced with “language structure.” This list, of course, must be examined and the cultural relevance must be measured before deciding how to teach. He does not mention any cultural relevance of the subjects in the list except “I or we.” As for “I or we,” he says that *our* is widely used instead of *my* because Koreans let a group precede an individual. We are well aware of that fact. He should have noted how the other subjects are related to Korean culture.

Linguistic Elements Containing Cultural Relevance

The denotation of culture is very broad when we talk of the intersection of language and culture. We need to clarify it before discussion. From a linguistic point of view, culture can be divided as:



Clothing, for example, belongs to (1) non-linguistic culture. (2) Linguistic etiquette is regarded as a kind of communicative culture. Waving one's hand to express farewell is an example of non-linguistic communicative culture, while saying goodbye is an example of linguistic communicative culture, i.e., linguistic etiquette.²

We are interested in (3), culture as contained in the structure of the language.

In order to frame a lecture “Korean Culture through the Korean Language,” we had better approach this subject from language. After listing linguistic elements having cultural relevance, we should select possible topics fit for the lecture. Then we could frame a lecture for a semester.

The list proposed by Lee Suk-joo (2002) as “linguistic content” help listing linguistic elements having cultural relevance. We propose a new list here. We will not include honorifics and terms of address and reference in the list below because their cultural relevance has already been widely recognized. We add comments that show their cultural relevance under each topic.

1. Gender

Korean has no grammatical gender. It is seldom overtly expressed in a sentence whether one who is being mentioned is male or female. Thus Koreans are liable to pay little attention to a person's gender when talking about someone. As to vocabulary, however, Korean also shows gender-discrimination as do many other languages. The compound nouns such as *namnyeo* (남녀) “man and woman,” *janyeo* (자녀) “son and daughter,” *bumo* (부모) “parents” are composed of two morphemes, the order of which is male-first and female-second. And we can analyze a prefix *yeo-* (여-) in the nouns such as *yeowang* (여왕) “queen,” *yeogun* (여군) “woman soldier,” which indicates the sex is female. This implies that male sex is basic.

2. Number

Korean has no grammatical number, i.e., it has no grammatical difference between singular and plural. All the nouns that designate human beings, ani-

2. The term “linguistic” used here refers to spoken or written expression. Hand-waving is part of communication in general but is not considered a part of spoken or written language.

mals, plants, things, and abstract concepts are in the same forms in sentences regardless of their plurality. (Plural suffix *-deul* (들) is not necessary for nouns which are plural in meaning. In some cases, this functions as marker of plurality of the deleted subject, attached to the object, adverbial, or even verb). Korean has two kinds of numerals; definite and indefinite numerals. One, two, three, four, etc. are definite numerals. Korean has many words that express non-exact but approximate numbers as *dueot* (두엇) meaning two or three, *yeonameun* (여남은) meaning ten or a few more, and so on. Koreans seem to be generous with numbers in their daily lives. Up until recently it was quite common for Koreans themselves talk about “Korean time” when meeting each other for an appointment. This expresses the Korean bad habits of usually being late for appointments and not being sorry for being late. This way of thinking is related to the adaptability of Koreans. Koreans tend to think and act according not to rules but to situations.

3. Word Order

In Korean, the verb follows the object and adverb. The main verb follows the auxiliary verb. The main clause follows the subordinate clause. This word order means that Koreans put the important things last. Given name follows family name. In writing address, small place follows larger place. In writing time, specific time follows general time. This order also comes from the same principle, “less important things last.” This principle seems to be related to collectivism. Collectivism puts individuals last. Hence the same order.

4. Elipsis and Implicature

Korean is rich in elipsis. The subject and object can be deleted depending on the structure of the sentence or the situation. The concept of elipsis reflects the perspective of expression, i.e., speaking or writing. In terms of comprehension, inferring covert meaning matters. The covert meaning is implicature. The Korean sentence *Migugeneun eonje gayo?* (미국에는 언제 가요?) can be translated into “When are you going to America?” We have no overt subject in the Korean sentence. The subject and object in the sentence is implicated. Korean is rich in implication. One Korean word that is hard to translate into foreign languages is *nunchi* (눈치), which means the ability to infer meaning from unspoken messages. Elipsis and implication cause Koreans to rely on *nunchi* in many situations.

5. Sino-Korean Words

Old Korean borrowed Chinese characters. A lot of Sino-Korean words entered Korean through Chinese characters. Ancient Koreans understood many good concepts Sino-Korean words carried. They knew the existence of the “wind,” which they could express through a native word, but they don’t seem to have a word for “air.” They recognized the notion of “air” after they borrowed the word for it from Chinese. Today, we have a native word *baram* (바람) for wind, and a Sino-Korean word *gonggi* (공기) for air in Modern Korean. Nevertheless, the presence or absence of native words does not always tell the fact exactly. Korean has several date-nouns that designate a certain day according to the distance from today. Of these only *naeil* “tomorrow” is Sino-Korean while all the others including *eoje* “yesterday,” and *oneul* “today” are native Korean. It has been said that the Koreans have lacked prospects for the future because they did not have a native word for “tomorrow” and had to borrow the word *naeil* from Chinese. This view, however, results from superficial observation. The words *more* “the day after tomorrow,” *geulpi* “two days after tomorrow,” and *geugeulpi* “three days after tomorrow” are all native Korean. Even English does not have specific words for these three Korean words and instead expresses the meanings with the phrases as shown above. Then, do the Koreans have good prospects for the future? Perhaps there did use to be a native word for “tomorrow” in ancient Korean, which might have given way to *naeil* for some unknown reason.

6. Lexical Differentiation

Lexical differentiation can easily be understood through contrastive analysis of vocabulary. As is well-known, the English word “rice” corresponds to four Korean words, *mo* (모), *byeo* (벼), *ssal* (쌀), and *bap* (밥). In this case, Korean is lexically more differentiated than English is. This results from the cultural importance of rice in Korea.

7. Basic Vocabulary

We can discover interesting aspects of a society through checking the list of basic vocabulary of a language. Basic vocabulary reflects the daily lives of the people who speak the language. Korean words like *ramyeon* (라면) “a kind of

noodles,” *apateu* (아파트) “apartment house,” *maepda* (맵다) “spicy” would belong to a group of about 1,000 basic words, while their English equivalents would not. This proves these words are more important to Koreans than to Americans. In the case of *maepda*, we might conclude that Koreans enjoy many more spicy foods when compared to Americans and whether spicy or not is important to Koreans but not to Americans.

8. Idioms

Idioms have a close relation to culture. The Korean idiom *guksu meokda* (국수 먹다) “to eat noodles” means enjoying dishes at a wedding banquet. This idiom reflects the fact that noodles have traditionally been a common dish at wedding banquets. Another idiom, *jukdo bapdo anida* (죽도 밥도 아니다) “It is neither rice nor porridge,” which means a big project that goes nowhere, indicates that rice and porridge were common dishes in traditional Korea. In addition, Koreans say, “It’s true! If not, I swear I’ll change my family name.” to stress a point. Changing a family name is a taboo in Korea. Moreover, children must maintain their father’s family name by law. It is impossible for anyone to change his or her family name.

Model Lecture: “Korean Culture through Korean Language”

Korean culture could be taught through the Korean language at a college. Such a lecture should be based on Korean linguistics. Students should be at least at the intermediate level in Korean and have basic knowledge on linguistics. This lecture would be helpful for Korean language learners who want rise to the advanced level, Korean language teachers who try to teach Korean interestingly with relation to Korean culture, graduate students or researchers who study various aspects of Korean culture, and even foreign scholars of Korean studies.

1. Class Schedule

- a. Introduction: An overview of Korea
- b. Grammatical gender and sex discrimination
- c. Numerals, grammatical number, classifiers, and numeration
- d. Word order and order of thinking

- e. Elipsis and implicature
- f. Chinese characters, Sino-Korean words, and Chinese cultural influence on Korea
- g. Lexical differentiation and cultural importance
- h. Basic vocabulary and daily life
- i. Idioms, traditional and modern Korea
- j. Summary: Overall characteristics of Korean culture

It would take two to four hours to deal with each topic. How long it would take depends on the teacher, the students, and the classroom, etc. Following, sample lecture is presented, which has been adjusted to take about an hour.

Sample Lecture” Word Order and Order of Thinking

Presented first in boxes are the contents shown on handouts or screen. Second is a script.

1. Word Order in a Sentence

On handouts or screen

[E] Verb-Object Tarzan <u>loves</u> <u>Jane</u> . V O Q. I like apples. ⇒ _____	[K] Object-Verb 타잔은(Tarzan) <u>제인</u> 을(Jane) <u>사랑한다</u> (loves). O V
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Script

Today, we will examine word order. Word order of a language reflects its speakers’ order and way of thinking. So it is a source of the major difficulties that foreign language learners have in making sentences. First, we will contrast English and Korean in terms of word order. Then, we will analyze the differences and think over their cultural meaning.

Let’s go into section 1, “word order in a sentence.” Look at the first example: “Tarzan loves Jane.” The verb “loves” precedes the object “Jane,” as in all the normal English sentences. But in the Korean equivalent on the right, the verb “사랑한다” (loves) follows the object “제인을” (Jane), as in all the normal

Korean sentences. They are in reverse order.

Now here is a question for you. What would it be if you say the sentence “I like apples.” according to the Korean order? Michael! Try! () Okay. “I apples like.”

<p>[E] Verb-Adverb Tarzan <u>lives</u> <u>here</u>. V Adv Q. Tarzan runs fast. ⇒ _____</p>	<p>[K] Adverb-Verb 타잔은(Tarzan) <u>여기</u>(here) <u>산다</u>(lives). Adv V</p>
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Well, let’s move on to the next example. In the sentence “Tarzan lives here,” the verb “lives” precedes the adverb “here,” so we have “lives here.” “Tarzan lives here” is a normal English sentence. But Koreans say, “타잔은 여기 산다” (Tarzan here lives). The verb and the adverb are in reverse order just as in the case of verb and object.

Now here is a question for you. How can you say the sentence “Tarzan runs fast” according to the Korean order? Bill! Try! () All right, “Tarzan fast runs.”

“Tarzan Jane loves.” “Tarzan fast runs.” “I Tarzan like.” “You Batman like.” It is a funny language game. In the film *Star Wars 4*, “Return of the Jedi,” Yoda, the Jedi master says to Luke, “That face you make. Look I so old to young eyes?” and so on. Later he also says, “Then, only then, a Jedi will you be. And confront him you will.” The Korean word order may look strange and even ridiculous to native English speakers, just like Yoda’s sentences.

<p>[E] Auxiliary Verb-Main Verb Tarzan <u>is</u> <u>coming</u>. AxV MV</p>	<p>[K] Main Verb-Auxiliary Verb Q. Tarzan is coming 타잔이 있다 오고 Tarzan-i itta ogo (romanization) ⇒ _____</p>
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Well, let’s turn to the third example. In the sentence “Tarzan is coming”, the auxiliary verb precedes the main verb. Then what is the correct Korean sentence corresponding to “Tarzan is coming”? Kate! Read the romanization and say! () Very good! “타잔이 오고 있다.” It’s a perfect Korean sentence.

[E] Noun-Relative Clause the <u>man who lives here</u> N RC	[K] Relative Clause-Noun <u>여기 사는</u> (who lives here) <u>남자</u> (man) RC N
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In the example “the man who lives here,” you can see the noun precedes the relative clause. But in Korean the relative clause “여기 사는” (who lives here) precedes the noun “남자” (man).

[E] Main C.-Subordinate C. <u>I am glad you are back home.</u> MC SC	[K] Subordinate C.-Main C. <u>당신이 집에 돌아와서 기뻐요.</u> SC MC
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In the example “I am glad you are back home,” you can also see that the main clause “I am glad” precedes the subordinate clause “you are back home.” But in Korean the subordinate clause “당신이 집에 돌아와서” (you are back home) precedes the main clause “기뻐요” (I am glad). Here again, it is in reverse order.

Head	Main Clause
Non-head	Object
Verb	Adverb
Verb	Main Verb
Auxiliary Verb	Relative Clause
Noun	Subordinate Clause

English is head-initial. Korean is head-final.

To sum up, while English is head-initial, Korean is head-final. The table shows which part of each construction given above is the head. A head is the grammatical center of a construction such as a word, phrase, clause, or sentence. The head of a construction determines its grammatical category and is said to govern the rest of the construction. In most cases, the head is more important than the non-head in meaning.

The same rule is true when one is writing the address on an envelope. Here, English and Korean have opposite positions for the personal names. In English, the personal name is at the top, followed by the smallest place and moves towards the larger. In Korean, the name of the nation comes first and the personal name last.

<p>[E] Specific Time-General Time</p> <p>I met him at 9 in the <u>morning</u></p> <p>① ②</p> <p>of <u>May 10, 2002.</u></p> <p>③ ④ ⑤</p>	<p>[K] General Time-Specific Time</p> <p>Q. 나는 그를 (⑤-④-③-②-①) 만났다.</p>
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Now we examine the order of temporal elements. In English we say the most specific time or the smallest unit of time first, the most general time or the largest unit of time last. It is illustrated by the example “I met him at 9 in the morning of May 10, 2002.” Then what’s the normal order of the temporal elements in its Korean counterpart? Is the order “2002-10-May-morning-9 o’clock” right? Raise your hand if you think it’s right. OK. This time raise your hand if you think it’s not. OK. The answer is it’s not right. The normal order is “2002-May-10-morning-9 o’clock.” Korean has a consistent order that ranges from the largest to the smallest. In English “the 10th of May” would be logically more consistent than “May 10th” or “May the 10th.”

<p>[E] Present-Past (in Resume)</p> <p>1996-2000 Yonsei University</p> <p>1993-1996 Gangnam high School</p> <p>1990-1993 Dogok Middle School</p>	<p>[K] Past-Present (in Resume)</p> <p>1990-1993 도곡중학교</p> <p>1993-1996 강남고등학교</p> <p>1996-2000 연세대학교</p>
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The next example is from a resume. In English, we generally start from the present and trace back to the past. In Korean, we start from a certain point in the past and proceed to the present.

<p>English has a Me/Here/Now-first principle.</p> <p>Korean has a Me/Here/Now-last principle</p>
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In brief, English has a Me/Here/Now-first principle, while Korean has a Me/Here/Now-last principle.

3. Conclusion

(1) Korean Order of Thinking

Q. Which would be the first in the following pairs?

- ① marginal things vs. central things
- ② less important things vs. more important things
- ③ specific things vs. general things
- ④ I vs. other people
- ⑤ community vs. individual
- ⑥ the past vs. the present

Now let's consider the cultural meanings of the word orders of English and Korean. As for the Korean order of thinking, which would be the first in the following pairs?

Number 1, marginal things vs. central things. Tom! () Yes, marginal things.

Number 2, less important things vs. more important things. John! () Yes, less important things.

Number 3, specific things vs. general things. Judy! () Yes, general things.

Number 4, I vs. other people. Anne! () Yes, other people.

Number 5, community vs. individual. Sandy! () Yes, community.

Number 6, the past vs. the present. Paul! () Yes, the past.

Of course, the American order of thinking is the reverse.

(2) Korean Ways of Thinking

Collectivism vs. Individualism

Relationship vs. Privacy

Blood ties (혈연), School ties (학연), Hometown ties (지연)

uri 우리 (we)

우리 나라 (our country), 우리 학교 (our school), 우리 회사 (our company), 우리 집 (our home), 우리 식구 (our family), 우리 아들 (our son), 우리 마누라 (our wife)

Then where did the Korean order of thinking come from? The answer must be collectivism. What is collectivism? It is making a decision and carrying it out based on one's role in a larger group and on the effect of such action(s) on the group.

Koreans are group-oriented. Koreans see themselves in relation to others, as part of a larger group first and as individuals second. The relationship of the members of a group is typically far closer than that of say, Americans. The boundaries between members are not clear. Good relationships and harmony have priority over privacy. The members help each other well within a group. Koreans make much of various types of ties such as blood ties, school ties, and hometown ties. In personnel affairs these ties are of primary importance. Koreans themselves are well aware of these concepts. Accordingly, these ties have names in Korean. Blood ties are “혈연,” school ties are “학연,” and hometown ties are “지연.” And thinking much of these ties is called “연고주의,” where “연고” means “ties,” “주의” means “thought,” “proposition,” or “-ism.”

To take another example, the first person plural pronoun in Korean is “우리.” “우리” refers to all the members of a group including oneself. Its basic meaning is nearly the same as that of “we” in English. But Koreans use “우리” much more than say, Americans use “we/our/us.” Especially when one talks about the group he or she belongs to, he or she usually calls it “our group,” e.g. “우리나라” literally meaning “our country,” “우리 학교” “our school,” “우리 회사” “our company,” “우리 집” “our home,” “우리 식구” “our family,” and “우리 아들” “our son.” Are the English translations good? Which is unnatural in English? John! () OK. An extreme case is “우리 마누라” “our wife.” It is certain that “our wife” is illogical in Korean because one cannot share his wife with other people. A Korean husband seems to feel comfortable when he regards himself as a member of a group in which he includes his wife.

What we have suggested until now may be an overgeneralization based on only positive evidence. But the cultural meaning of Korean word order cannot be interpreted better by any other approach.

Are there any questions?

Well. That's all for today. See you next time. Bye.

Conclusion

Every language evolves as a system of communication within a particular community, and in many details, it carries the marks of its natural and social environment. Language is a good tool by which one understands the society and culture of its speakers.

We have suggested that we should find out linguistic elements having cultural relevance and make the most of them when teaching the Korean language or Korean culture to foreigners. We have listed and explained linguistic elements having cultural relevance: gender, number, word order, elipsis, Sino-Korean words, lexical differentiation, basic vocabulary, and idioms. We have proposed a class schedule based on the linguistic elements for a semester. We have shown a sample lecture on one of the topics: Word order and order of thinking. We have detailed the contents to include on handouts or on screen and the scripts to use.

This lecture will help foreign students understand Korean culture reflected through the Korean language. Students will find many valuable hints on Korean culture through considering several topics on Korean grammar, vocabulary, and idioms. In addition, intermediate learners of Korean can get insight into the Korean language and find a shorter way to reach the advanced level.

The class schedule and the sample lecture we have presented await further refinement and correction. Especially, anyone who actually gives such lecture as we proposed should revise the contents of the sample lecture for one's own purpose. After all, a sample is merely a sample.

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