

## DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATION FROM KOREAN TO ENGLISH (AND NOT ONLY)

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**Abstract.** *The following text is written based on the experience, accumulated during a six-month amateur literary translation and it is related with the met difficulties of translation from Korean from the point of view of reliability and expressiveness. It deals and describes the biggest challenges of translation from Korean to English, Russian and Romanian in my opinion, difficulties as differences in compactness and expressiveness, homonyms, different number of politeness speech levels, different sentence structure and grammar, untranslatable titles, onomatopoeias and idioms.*

**Key words:** *Korean, English, Romanian, Russian, translation, difficulties.*

Before speaking about translation the reader must be familiarized with the nature of Korean language and its writing system. When it comes to numbers Korean is considered to be 11<sup>th</sup> most spoken language in the world. Its total number of speakers is close to 74 million, the majority of which are in South Korea (48 million) and North Korea (26 million). It is the official language of Korean Peninsula and also in Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture, China.

Nowadays Koreans use an alphabet called Hangul (han – Korean, gul – letters), instead of the modified Chinese characters system used before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was designed by a group of scholars gathered secretly by King Sejong the Great who reigned between 1418–1450, in order to create a simple writing system that would make education accessible for peasant who did not have the time and financial resources to dedicate themselves to learning the writing and interpretation of Chinese characters, huge in their number. In this way the king wanted to diminish the power of nobles. His political opposition took measures not to let the new writing system to be implemented, a measure that conserved the feudal authority of the upper class for a few more centuries but stagnated the development of the Korean till its splitting in last century.

Thus, now that a short introduction is done let's proceed to the translation difficulties part.

**The compactness: Korean is taller and skinner than English.** Since there is a large number of loan words in Korean, and the system of writing is based on a cell concept, Korean is much more compact than English. This on the first sign great feature of this language is sometimes a two-edged sword for a translator. The main issue being the reliability. Sometimes a sentence is required to describe the meaning of a single word. Ex: 취직 /chui:dʒig/ is a noun that describes the process of looking for a job, implying all the activities required for it, like sending a CV, having interviews and so on; 수온 – water temperature; 잡아먹었던 – somebody/something who/what was cached and eaten.

**Confusing Korean words. The language of homonymy.** As it was mentioned before, from ancient times Koreans used Chinese characters for writing. Thus a lot of new words were created through the Korean reading of Chinese words. Later the with the adaptation of European Languages words, a big confusion between words appear, creating a strong need pf context for the word to be understood. Ex: 유저 /ju:dʒo/ 1. User (adaptation from English); 2. posthumous work (Chinese originated). 소장/so:dʒaŋ/ 1. a complaint; 2. small intestine; 3. manager, chief; 4. an own, possession. 기타 /gi:tha/ 1. Others (Kor); 2 guitar. 모자 /mo:dʒa/ 1. Hat (Korean originated); 2. mother and her son (Chinese originated).

**Politeness Korean speech levels.** There are seven verb paradigms or speech levels in Korean, and each level has its own unique set of verb endings which are used to indicate the level of formality of a situation. Unlike „honorifics" – which are used to show respect towards someone mentioned in a sentence – speech levels are used to show respect towards a speaker's or writer's audience, or reflect the formality or informality of the situation.

하소서체 this type of speech was used to address a king, queen, or other member of the royal family.

Ex. 통촉하여 주시옵소서 (I beg your majesty to take heed.)

합쇼체 is a very respectful, polite form of formal speech. In contemporary Korea, it's used to speak to strangers or to elders. It's used in the service industry to speak to customers, and in business settings for

presentations, or to speak to people like the CEO of a company or president of a nation. It's also used by anchormen during a newscast.

하오체 is an outdated style of formal speech that can be heard in historical Korean drama. It's used to address people that are the same rank or lower (rank may be based on social standing or age), and still maintains a moderate degree of respect. (It should NOT be used when speaking to those ranked above you). People occasionally use 하오체 to refer each other while chatting online.

하계체 Used by someone in a higher-ranking position to speak to someone lower (like a boss speaking to employees). Also used by middle-aged adults speaking to other adults with whom they are close to, but consider to be ranked lower socially.

해라체 Any time you want to say that someone else (including yourself) said something, it's expected that the speech within the quotes is in 해라체.

해요체 is informal, but polite speech. It's the style of choice in most normal, everyday situations where politeness is expected. Regardless of the relative rank (higher, lower, or the same level) of the addressee, 해요체 can be used when speaking respectfully or politely.

해체 is informal, casual speech with no added degree of respect or politeness. It's the speech level people refer to by "반말" (low form) and what Korean people use when they speak casually to each other. It's used between close friends and family, by adults to speak to children or minors, between children, and also by adults to speak to old friends (regardless of how close they were in childhood or now as adults).

**Different Sentence Structure.** Korean sentence structure is quite different than English, Romanian or Russian, making a word by word translation impossible, and since the subject can be easily omitted, and the verbs do not change according to subject's gender or number, it is quite confusing.

Ex: 학교에(to school) 빨리(quickly) 갔어요(went) – I/you/he/she/it/we/you all/they quickly went to school.

**Korean's age hierarchy and untranslatable titles.** Depending on where you're from, the saying "age is nothing but a number" might ring true. But in Korea, it's a BIG number. Knowing someone's age will instantly let people know where they stand on Korea's hierarchical respect scale, which is very important in Korea.

Same Age = Friend (친구) - Being the same age in Korea means you're equals, and you'll be instantly labeled a friend. It doesn't matter if you're a very unpleasant person, and the other person hates you.

Sunbae (선배, 先輩) is a word that refers to people with more experience (at work, school, etc), and hoobae(후배, 後輩) refers to people with less experience. Generally, hoobaes have to use jondaetmal(존댓말, honorific language) to sunbaes, meaning they have to speak very politely and treat them with respect.

I'm sure most of you heard of Psy's Gangnam Style before. If you had, you would have heard the line, "Oppan Gangnam style." frequently. This literally means in Korean, "Oppa is Gangnam Style." But what exactly does oppa mean?

In South Korea, there are four terms you will hear people call other people whom they are close with: 오빠 (oppa), 누나 (noona), 언니 (unnie), 형 (hyung)

–Oppa (오빠) = Older brother (used by females)

–Noona (누나) = Older sister (used by males)

–Hyung (형) = Older brother (used by males)

–Unnie (언니) = Older sister (used by females)

If you are a GIRL, you would call your big brother/older guy friend/older guy cousin/etc. oppa. And you would call your older sister/older friend (who is a girl)/older girl cousin/etc. unnie. If you are a boy, then you would call your big brother/older guy friend/older guy cousin/etc. hyung. And you would call your older sister/older friend (who is a girl)/older girl cousin/etc. noona.

This is quite confusing since you can't surely now who is who for somebody, and it is hard to translate.

**Active use of onomatopoeia: the adorable part of Korean.** The most interesting types of Korean onomatopoeias are descriptive sounds. These sounds represent feelings that might not even make an actual sound. For example, the feeling of warmth can be given the sound 따끈따끈 (ttaggeun-ttaggeun). They often sound similar to the corresponding

Korean verb for that feeling, for example "따끈따끈" sounds a little but similar to 따뜻하다 (ttatteuthada, to be warm). This helps to show the emotions and feelings more clearly in Korean. 따끈따끈 (ttaggeun-ttaggeun) – sound of feeling of warmth; 방글방글 (banggeul-banggeul) – sound of smiling beamingly; 반짝반짝 (banjjak-banjjak) – sound of glittering or sparkling; 미끌미끌 (mikkeul-maekkeul) – sound of being slippery; 뽀글뽀글 (bogeul-bogeul) – the bubbling of boiling water

**Idioms.** There is no need to explain Korean idioms which have completely different equivalents in the European languages. Some of them can't be even found in online dictionaries, creating additional challenges for language learners or translators. There are some examples with equivalents in English, Romanian and Russian:

~ 울며 겨자를 먹기로 (Keep eating the mustard through tears)

Bite the bullet.

A lua inima în dinți.

Собратся духом.

~ 티끌 모아 태산 (Gathering dirt to make a big mountain)

Little and often fills the purse.

Strop cu strop se face balta.

С миру по нити, голому рубашка.

~ 꿩 먹고 알 먹는다 (If you eat a pheasant, you also eat the egg)

Kill two birds with a stone.

A împușca doi iepuri dintr-un foc.

убить двух зайцев одним выстрелом.

~ 등잔 밑이 어둡다. (The bottom of the lamp is dark)

It's often difficult to see what is right in front of you.

A vedea paiul din ochiul altuia, dar nu și bârna din propriul ochi.

Не видеть, что твориться под собственным носом.

~ 개천에 온 난다 (A dragon rises from a pound.)

From rags to riches.

Din zdrențe la caftan.

Из грязи в князи.

~ 고생 끝에 낙이 온다 (Delight comes at the end of difficulty)

No pain, no gain.

După noapte urmează zi.

Будет и на нашей улице праздник.

**Merging verbs. Creating new ones.** A real challenge for a translator who is not a native are merged verbs. Verbs that are created by unifying two or more verbs and to obtain an original verb that can briefly describe an action. Usually this new created words are not present in any dictionaries. Understanding of such words requires a good knowledge of vocabulary and feeling of language to know how to split it. Here are some examples:

겪어가다 = 겪다 (to suffer) + 가다 (to walk) = to pass through suffering

잡아먹다 = 잡다 (to catch) + 먹다 (to eat) = to prey on

갖아오다 = 갖다 (to hold) + 오다 (to come) = bring up

잊어버리다 = 잊다 (to forget) + 버리다 (to throw) = to put smb out of one's mind

**Loaned words and slang.** Apparition of a huge number of homonyms isn't the only problem of the East coming neologism popularization. New words are continuously created merging syllabus from archaic Chinese originated unites and parts of European words. Dealing with this phenomenon requires basic knowledge of Chinese and good academic background. Ex: **악플** /ag'pʰl/ A compound word of a Chinese character '악할 악(惡)' /akhal jak/ - *harmful poison*, and '리플' /riphl/ - *replay*. It means 'a bad comment'.

알바 A shortened form of '아르바이트' ('Arbeit' in German). It means a part-time work.

반갑녀 A shortened form of '환갑의 절반'(aged half of sixty) and '녀'(a Chinese character 女, meaning 'woman'). It indicates a thirty-year-old woman.

As a conclusion one may say that translation is a practice that needs experience, knowledge and feeling of the language, and should be not underestimated. Especially in the case when the source and target languages are representatives of different language groups.

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