

Familiar Strangers: Misuse and Overuse of the Word *Foreigner* in Korean English

Jon H. Bahk-Halberg, Assistant Professor, Department of English Interpretation and Translation, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

Introduction

Linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar, who coined the term *languaculture* to point out the interconnectedness of both language and culture, has written for decades about the connections between the two, often by looking at what he refers to as “rich points.” Agar defines rich points as “those surprises, those departures from an outsider’s expectations that signal a difference between (languaculture) 1 and (languaculture) 2 and give direction to subsequent learning.” The difference in a Korean English speaker’s mind and a Western (possibly native) English speaker’s mind when they encounter the word *foreigner* seems to be one of Agar’s rich points. Clearly, there is a different understanding of the connotations, the emotional meaning, of the word *foreigner* to someone from the Korean English-speaking languaculture than the meanings that exist for someone from an Anglo-American background.

My point is that the word *foreigner*, a word we hear and read over and over in Korean English, can be an offensive term to many native English speakers. And the use, overuse, and misuse of this word that we hear and read on almost a daily basis in Korea, can do real damage to the communication process between Korean English speakers and people from other countries, especially those who haven’t had time to adapt to this Korean English idiosyncrasy. Not only in the United States, but in the United Kingdom, and other English-speaking countries, it’s simply not acceptable in polite conversation to refer to someone as a *foreigner*, particularly if the *foreigner* is in one’s immediate presence.

I’ve lived in Korea for more than 10 years since 1995, and especially in Korea, it seems I hear or read the word almost everywhere I go, even in 2009. Though there are now more than a million people from other countries living in Korea, the linguistic focus on those from outside the country continues to make Korean English a uniquely foreigner-conscious place. For an American like me, and many of my British, Canadian, Australian, and other English-speaking colleagues who come from cultures where a mixture of nationalities, ethnic groups and races has been the norm for decades, if not centuries, the focus on foreigners is a real languacultural shock. When we use the

English language, we should understand how our message is received by English speakers, both natives and those who speak it as a second language from Korea and elsewhere. While it's not quite as severe as when I first came to Korea in 1995, and was shocked to see the signs at Kimpo Airport directing "KOREANS" and "FOREIGNERS" to different lines for immigration formalities, the emphasis on the word *foreigner*, which is politically incorrect if not offensive in most situations in Anglo-American culture, is still troubling to many English speakers. The signs now are addressed to "Korean Citizens" and "Non-Korean Citizens" but use of the word *foreigner* remains a problem that needs to be addressed.

Signs of the Problem

In the Korea Times of March 27, 2009, the headline across the front page shouted "Foreigners to Get Dual Citizenship" (Park 2009). This story and the others on the front page included the words *foreign* and *foreigner* 15 times on the front page alone. And though people from countries other than Korea – foreigners – were, after all, the subject of the top article, this edition was not particularly unusual in its fixation on the word. Of course, newspapers worldwide often use the word *foreigner* as a shortcut to succinctly refer to people from countries other than the one written about in the article. However, while the word is used infrequently as a short and convenient label by journalists in the English-speaking world, it can sometimes seem like readers are being bludgeoned with the word by its constant repetition in Korean English-language newspapers.

The subject of another brief article in the April 27, 2009 JoongAng Daily was also about people from outside Korea, as proclaimed in the headline "Bullet trains are attracting foreigners." But in four short paragraphs, the writer of this article somehow, managed to bombard readers with *foreign* and *foreigner* a total of 14 times. This was the second paragraph:

Last year, more than 10,000 foreigners have signed up to take the "Foreigners KTX Tour," which offers an up to 50 percent discount. In addition, some 5,000 foreigners have bought the "Korea Rail Pass," a ticket that lets foreigners travel on an unlimited number of railroad lines for a limited period (of 3, 5, 7 and 10 days). Through March of this year, some 1,000 foreigners have taken the Foreigners KTX Tour. (Lee 2009)

Not only in newspapers, but in Korean advertisements and other publications, again and again, one sees the “F-word” cropping up in ways that seem odd to many native English speakers. Walking in Hannam-dong one day not long ago, a billboard advertising “a private gated community for foreigners in Seoul” caught my eye and made me think about how I would try to word it so it didn’t seem so contradictory. Trying to attract someone’s business by referring to them as outsiders seemed strange and incongruous. The question of whether the gated community was to keep the native outside or the foreigners inside kept crossing my mind as I looked at the advertisement. Something just wasn’t right. Another advertisement that seemed off-key appeared last year on a banner draped across the street near my apartment offering “discount rates for foreigners” at a nearby health club. It was hard to say how I would improve the wording of either sign, and it almost surely couldn’t be done without making them longer. Also, the negatives must be balanced by the understanding that these were local Korean businesses trying to communicate in Korean English. But that doesn’t change the fact that most English speakers would probably agree that the word has some negative effects on business from potential customers surprised by the exclusionary word, put off by its offensive connotations, and unfamiliar with its ubiquity in Korea.

I’ve done a fair amount of editing or revising work for translators over the past few years, and am often surprised by the omnipresence of the word *foreigner*, particularly in places where it seems out of place, unnecessary and/or gratuitous. A driving manual issued by the Korean Road Traffic Safety Authority is published in an English version. Obviously, because it is in English, it is not intended for Koreans. It takes little in the way of detective work to understand that it’s intended for people who read English, and they probably came from outside of Korea. But though the rules of the road are the same for all drivers in the Republic of Korea, no matter where they come from, the English booklet makes things crystal clear by adding a negative, exclusionary connotation with the all-caps heading “FOR FOREIGNERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA.” A similarly well-intended guide to help residents from overseas learn about Korean laws was put out in 2007 by the Korean National Police Agency. The *Guide to Life and Laws in Korea – for Foreigners*, again might make one wonder whether the legal system has different rules for *foreigners* than it does for everyone else. In addition, ongoing efforts in Korea, particularly in Seoul and Incheon, as well as Incheon’s New Songdo City area, are aiming to draw interest and investment as they become major international developments. The problem is Koreans communicating in English continue to use the negative word to try to create a positive effect when they promote their efforts to create “a foreigner-friendly

business environment.” The unusual wording on a flyer that came in the mail recently for the “Foreigner’s Free Festival” on Nami Island near Gapyeong, east of Seoul, could almost make one wonder whether the festival was trying to attract people from other countries or get rid of them. Were they offering free admission for foreigners or trying to rid the place – “make it free” – of all foreigners? While I’m sure I know the answer to my tongue-in-cheek question, it might not even have occurred to me (and to a colleague who remarked along the same lines) were it not for the fact that this very negative word, *foreigner*, was again being used by people who seemed completely oblivious to the connotations it might hold for many of those who the message was intended to reach.

These examples and others clearly show a major discrepancy between the way many Koreans and other Asians think about the word *foreigner* when they use it, if they do even give it much thought, compared to how many English speakers respond to it. It is a frequent topic of conversation, laughter, and even irritation among English speakers living in Korea, who often jokingly overuse it on each other as well. What seems to many from other countries as the unnecessary overuse of the word to point out the distinction between *foreigners* and other humans is a minor difficulty for those of us who adapt to living here after years or decades. But for English speakers who don’t live here, those who Koreans are increasingly trying to do business and communicate with, there may well be much understanding, laughter, and tolerance of the incongruous overuse of the negative word.

A Survey

Last spring, I invited 76 people by e-mail to take part in an online survey on the word *foreigner*. A total of 55 responses were collected and analyzed. All e-mail requests for participation went out to people who had lived in Korea for more than two years. Most of the requests went out to English educators at various institutions in Korea, but some were also sent to English speakers in business, military, and a few who had left after living in Korea in recent years. The survey was fairly simple, and was guided by some relatively straightforward guiding questions. Among them were: 1.) Do Anglo-Americans with some time in Korea perceive the word *foreigner* as having any negative or positive connotations? and 2.) What associations does the word bring up in their minds?

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (64 percent) reported they attached negative or strongly negative connotations with the word *foreigner*. A request for comments related to the word *foreigner* provided definitive

evidence of the emotional power of the word, even among Westerners who have lived in Korea for several years.

They included:

“It carries a nuance of xenophobic tendencies and conjures images of Nazi Germany and racism in my own country and elsewhere. I would prefer a word like ‘international’ rather than ‘foreign.’ It is an old word that’s time has passed. It could be better used to describe an infectious virus from outer space or some harmful substance which enters the body, or something like that.”

“Use of the word foreigner in Korea is rampant, and often used without intent to insult. However, my experience was that the word was often used as an explanation for all sorts of questionable behavior. Unfair treatment, demeaning comments and general rudeness. The word foreigner applied to you is quite offensive, because it says clearly ‘you do not, will not, and can not belong here.’ You may be able to stay here for some time, but we expect you to leave soon.”

“This word should go--it has too many negative connotations. It reminds one of Xenophobic periods in history--pogroms, discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiment, et cetera. When referring to a person from the West the word ‘Westerner’ might be used and have no negative connotation. World Citizen may also be a better choice, but definitely the English meaning of foreigner has a negative connotation and does not help Korea become a more ‘foreigner-friendly’ place.”

Concluding Thoughts

While web pages and documentation from the Korean Immigration Services are replete with references to *foreigners*, the word is not to be found in either U.S. or U.K. immigration documentation or websites. Likewise, U.S. State Department documents and webpages scrupulously avoid using the politically incorrect term *foreigner*, though the words *foreign* or *foreign nationals* are used on occasion to make reference to things or people from outside of the United States. While there is no all-purpose solution to what many perceive as a communication problem, it’s important to be aware of the negative ramifications of the word. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution because the word is used in so many different contexts. But it’s important to remember that *foreigner* is not an all-purpose word that can be repeated again and again without doing damage to the communication process with

English speakers. It's a word that can be quite offensive to some readers and listeners. If you want to communicate with them, be aware of the side-effects of the words you choose.

References

Agar, M. (2006). Culture: Can you take it anywhere? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), article xx. Retrieved [Aug. 15, 2009] from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/agar.pdf

Lee, Eun-joo. "Bullet trains are attracting foreigners." *JoongAng Daily*, April 27, 2009.

Park, Si-soo. "Foreigners to Get Dual Citizenship." *Korea Times*, March 27, 2009.