

Adjectives and Descriptive Verbs: English and Korean

Here are two articles from “Hungbo’s Gourd,” by Gary Rector, in *The Korea Herald*.

Translation - the impossible task (*Korea Herald* 03-08-99)

A friend of mine and I went to see a movie together one Saturday afternoon. I’ve long since forgotten what movie it was or even what it was about, but I still remember a little snip-pet of the conversation we had as we left the theater. My friend turned to me and asked, “Chossup-tikka?” At that time I had been in Korea just over a year, so my Korean was still in the rudimentary stage. From what I’d learned out of books and from our Peace Corps language teachers, it seemed to me that he’d said, “Was it good?”

I was at a loss as to how to answer him. In English I probably would have just blurted out some rude remark like “Geez, what a stupid question! You saw it, too.” Fortunately for me, I didn’t yet know how to phrase such a comment in any sort of natural-sounding way in Korean, so I just hemmed and hawed a bit and checked my understanding: “You mean the movie?” When he said that he was indeed talking about the movie, I decided just to say yes and mull the problem over later. It was thanks to that short exchange that it dawned on me that even a simple, “straightforward” word like *chota*, which we had learned meant ‘good,’ could actually be quite different from the supposedly corresponding English word. I started paying closer attention to little things Koreans said to each other and was slowly able to piece the puzzle together. I had also learned that the verb “to like” is *choahada* in Korean, and that provided a clue that helped me figure it out. I realized that while we English speakers are making a value judgment when we call something good, Koreans are simply describing how it affects them. In other words, a better translation of what my friend asked me would have been “Did you like the movie?” But even that’s a distortion of the true meaning because to like something is to do something to it (that is, the something you like is the object of the verb) while in Korean the movie was the subject of the question: “Yonghwa-ga choss-uptikka?” The nearest equivalent in English would be something like “Was the movie likable to you?” Of course, no one would ever say such a thing in normal conversation, so it would never do as a translation.

This morsel of enlightenment soon led me to the discovery that in Korean the same holds true not only for the concept of goodness/likability but for all words describing feelings and emotions. In English we say we’re glad to meet someone, but *pangapta*, the equivalent expression in Korean, describes a characteristic of that someone whom we are meeting. When I say, “I’m glad to meet you” in Korean, you, not I, are the subject of the sentence. We’d have to make up some abomination like “You are gladness-producing” to come close in English. Even *komapta* works that way: when we say “Thank you” in English, the understood subject is I; when a Korean says

“Komapssumnida,” the understood subject is you or whatever you have done to inspire a sense of gratitude in the speaker.

Perhaps this difference helps explain why many Korean students of English make such mistakes as “I’m boring” or “I’m interesting” when they mean “I’m bored” or “I’m interested.” They probably feel that the “I’m” part is the topic, like “nanun,” rather than the “real” subject, which for them in Korean would be the circumstances they are talking about rather than themselves. Native speakers of English may find such errors hilarious, but before they laugh too hard, they might want to do a reality check on their own Korean. I’ve heard quite a few Americans who’ve been here for some time say such things as “Naega pabul mokko sipssumnida” (“I want to eat rice”) instead of the more natural “Nan pabi mokko sipssumnida” with rice as the subject of the sentence. I swear I’m not making this up. I even heard one American guy, “translating” for a fellow Yankee who knew no Korean, say, “Nae chingu-ga mokko sipoyo,” which means “I want to eat my friend.” His Korean listener must have been used to “filtering” this type of “Englean,” for he didn’t blink an eyelash. The American obviously didn’t know that “mokko sippta” really means something like “eat-desirable” rather than actually “want to eat.”

You may be beginning to see the reason for the title of this week’s column. This is an important and broad subject that I would like to continue discussing next week.

More on the impossible task (03-15-99)

Last week I wrote about how in the process of translating we are bound to distort the meaning to some extent, especially when the languages involved are as different from each other as English and Korean. You may recall that I pointed out in particular how words expressing such emotions and feelings as gratitude, gladness, desire, need, and so on work “in reverse” in Korean, with the part that would be the object in English showing up as the subject. For example, while in English we say, “I need a friend,” in Korean it’s “Chingu-ga piryohada.” Of course, from a Korean speaker’s viewpoint, it’s English that’s got things turned around.

One reader wrote to me objecting that if the subject of *komapssumnida* (thank you) or *pangapssumnida* (glad to see you) is “you,” why don’t we ever hear Koreans use the honorific *-shi-* in those expressions. It’s a good question because it sheds some light on how Koreans think about such things. Unlike English, Korean does not obligate its speakers to provide a specific subject for every verb. Although in most cases Koreans can supply a specific subject if the need arises, they often don’t bother, since the listener can easily guess what it is. In many cases,

however, including a subject would unnecessarily narrow the field of what you're talking about. If you give a Korean a book and she says "Komapsumnida," what is the subject? Is it the book? Is it you? Or is it that act of giving her the book? The answer is that it's all those things. But the fact is that Koreans do use the honorific *-shi-* with words like *komapta* and *pangapta* when the subject is clearly some person about whom they feel they should speak in the most polite terms. This usually takes some form such as "Cham, komaushin bunida," and here again we're forced to distort the meaning in English by translating this as "I'm really grateful to him."

Expressions of feelings aren't the only place where there are such fundamental differences between the two languages. Another basic gap exists in the handling of comparisons. Adjectives in English have a sort of absolute meaning, while descriptive verbs (the Korean equivalent to English adjectives) are relative; that is, they have the idea of comparison already built into them, as they do also in Chinese and Japanese. So, when given the choice of a product that comes in two different sizes, an English speaker is likely to ask for "the bigger one" or "the smaller one" whereas a Korean would simply say "keun geot" or "chageun geot." If you "translated" the English directly and said, "Teo keun geot juseyo," you'd be asking for a size even bigger than the larger of the two you've been presented with.

The examples I've given cover only two areas out of who knows how many where Korean and English do not match up very well. What is the poor translator to do when even such simple expressions

can't be moved from one language to the other without twisting the meaning to some degree? In some cases, such as when translating verse or song lyrics, he should try to salvage some of the sound of the original language as well as the meaning. In other cases, such as when translating movie dialogue for subtitles, he has to use wording that sounds natural in the target language, preserves those features that show the character of the *dramatis personae*, and makes the plot clear while at the same time taking into the consideration the limitations of reading speed.

The translator's job is not only difficult, it's also a big responsibility because there are often financial ramifications. If a public relations brochure is poorly translated, the company it's touting may be out quite a lot of business. And have you noticed how foreign movies that depend a great deal on the dialogue rather than action and special effects are rarely box office hits here? It's usually because the subtitles were badly done. I can't help wondering if anyone at 20th Century Fox realizes that *The Thin Red Line* didn't even have a chance here in Korea, because of the awful subtitles. (For instance, in the subtitles the atheist Sean Penn character sounds as though he believes in God.)

All this doesn't mean that we should take translators out and shoot them (there are too few around as it is) or give up on translation altogether, but it would be a good idea to make translation a more highly respected, lucrative job with more reasonable deadlines in order to encourage qualified people to go into the field.

Gary Rector runs an editorial and writing service in Seoul called Red Arrow and can be contacted at garyclayrector@yahoo.co.kr. (Ed.)