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Understanding accent: Korean to English influence on the phonetic and syntactic levels

Due to South Korea's rapid economic advancement and globalization over the past 70 years, English education in the Korean classroom has become as important as basic math, science, and social studies. As English continues to cement its place as the Lingua Franca of choice (for better or for worse) for many of those involved in the worlds of international business, technology, and medicine, it's become the standard for Korean children to begin their English learning journey in elementary school. However, significant differences in the writing system, phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and pragmatics between English and Korean mean that for most Korean students, learning English as a second language is a lot easier said than done. This issue is exacerbated by the Korean school system's overfocus on test-oriented learning, which places more emphasis on reading and writing (to pass all the needed tests) than verbal communication skills with a variety of English speakers (Namkung, 2019). Thus, many students in Korea are left behind when it comes to speaking in English because their lessons do not provide them with the hundreds of hours needed to effectively understand and utilize the sounds and grammar used in everyday speech.

Because I am interested in language teaching, I hope to help combat this phenomenon in the future and help my students build off of their own language backgrounds to develop the right tools to use a new language with confidence. One way that I can do this is by digging into the basic building blocks of language—in this case, phonology and syntax—and investigating how characteristics of one's first language can transfer to a second. For this project, I achieve this goal by choosing an audio clip of a Korean-speaking student's spontaneous use of English, transcribing his speech to IPA, and analyzing what differences in sound and grammar arise. Then, I consider possible characteristics of Korean that

commonly lead to non-target-like speech in English, along with how my speaker's uncommon choice of English varieties may be affecting these influences.

The language sample I chose consists of clips taken from the YouTube video “Korean guy tried to speak English for 24 hours,” uploaded by the user 승빈 Seungbin in 2020. The speaker, Seungbin Hwang, was a high schooler at the time of recording, and created this unscripted video for fun, practice, and to show his fans his favorite methods of studying English. Throughout the video, Seungbin demonstrates a great command of English, along with a notable interest in the Standard Australian English (SAuE) accent. His dedication to refining his “Aussie” accent contrasts with the desires of most Korean learners of English, who tend to focus on more high-prestige and readily-available varieties of English such as North American English (NAuE) or Southern Standard British English (Ock, 2020).

The first section of this paper explores potential difficulties Korean speakers can have with rhoticity in some varieties of English, strategies they may use to mitigate these problems, and whether these strategies are visible in Seungbin's speech. Rhoticity as a phonological concept can be hard to define, as “there is no single articulatory correlate common to rhotic consonants,” so it is often described as any “r-like sounds” that have similar phonological functions or features across languages (Ladefoged & Maddieson, 1996). Commonly seen rhotic consonants include the postalveolar/retroflex approximant /ɹ/, alveolar trill /r/, and the alveolar tap /ɾ/—though it is important to note that the alveolar flap in many varieties of English does not function as a rhotic consonant, but instead as one allophone of the unvoiced alveolar stop (Dueñas, 2015).

Because English often uses the rhotic consonant /ɹ/—a phoneme that the Korean language lacks entirely—one may expect a Korean speaker to utilize certain techniques to cope with this new sound. Culicover and Hume (2010) describe a commonly utilized strategy that involves the substitution of an unfamiliar phoneme with a similar one found in the speaker's first language. While the Korean language does not have the /ɹ/ consonant, it does utilize the rhotic alveolar tap /ɾ/, which serves as an allophone for alveolar lateral approximant sound /l/ when it is in the onset position at the start of a word or following a

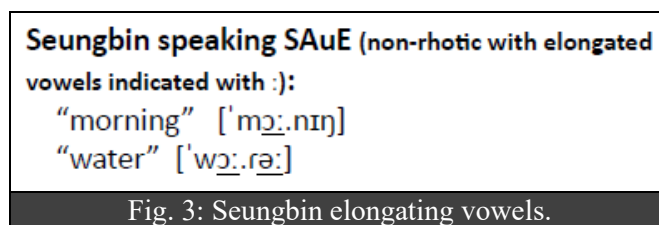
vowel (Kim & Smith, 2013). Thus, it is common both in Korean loanwords and in English speech influenced by Korean phonology for the /ɪ/ sound to be replaced by /r/ when in the onset position of a syllable (see fig. 1). The second strategy that Culicover and Hume (2010) discuss is the deletion of unfamiliar phonemes. This seems to occur in Korean loanwords and English speech by Korean speakers when there is a /ɪ/ phoneme in a position not associated with /r/ in Korean phonotactics. For example, when there is a /ɪ/ sound in the coda position at the end of a word or in a complex consonant cluster, it is often removed entirely (see fig. 2).

Replacing /ɪ/ with /r/: "rice" /ɹaɪs/ → /ɹaɪs/ "merry" /'mɛ.ɹi/ → /'mɛ.ɹi/
Fig. 1: Strategy one: replacing /ɪ/ with /r/.

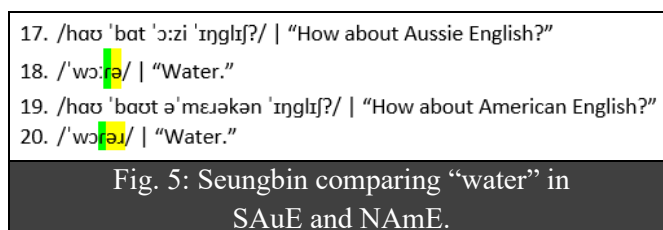
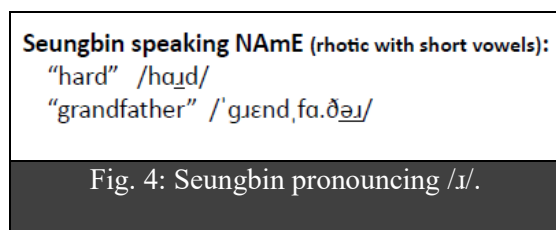
Deleting /ɪ/: "morning" /'mɔɹ.nɪŋ/ → /'mɔ.nɪŋ/ "Darth Vader" /dɑɹθ'veɪ.dəɹ/ → /dɑθ'veɪ.də/
Fig. 2: Strategy two: deleting /ɪ/.

Interestingly, Seungbin's previously mentioned interest in SAuE, which is an inherently non-rhotic variety of English, complicates my analysis and raises questions about how much of his pronunciation differences are due to transfer from Korean, and how much stems from his desire to speak in an "Aussie" accent. Non-rhotic varieties of English tend to delete the /ɪ/ phoneme when it is in the coda position of a syllable where the following sound is a consonant, or at the end of a word (Nayak, 2017). After extensively analyzing Seungbin's audio clip, I found that Seungbin frequently deletes his /ɪ/ sounds when speaking, which correlates both with strategies often used by Korean speakers *and* by speakers of SAuE.

However, multiple notable factors have led me to the conclusion that Seungbin's deletion of the /ɪ/ sound is due more to his desire to speak in non-rhotic SAuE than the influence of his first language. Firstly, in addition to deleting rhotic consonants in the same place as a first-language SAuE might, Seungbin also elongates the correlating vowels as illustrated in fig. 3, which is a distinct characteristic of non-rhotic varieties of English (Hudson, 2018). The Korean language does have certain situations where vowel length can affect meaning in speech, though it has become an subtle and seldom-taught aspect of the language, and it is not related to rhoticity (Learn Korean, 2018).



Second, Seungbin's pronunciation of the /ɹ/ sound in places where a first-language speaker of SAuE may delete it shows that he actually has a strong command of the consonant, and is actively trying to avoid saying it for the sake of his Aussie accent (see fig. 4). Not much information is available about his in-school English education, but it is possible that years of classes taught by a rhotic-English speaking teacher has caused him to use /ɹ/ automatically, even where it is not usually present in SAuE. Seungbin also reveals that he is actively aware of the important role that rhoticity plays in the distinction between different English accents by comparing his "American" and "Aussie" pronunciation of the word "water." While he deletes the rhotic consonant in his demonstration of SAuE, he strongly emphasizes the /ɹ/ phoneme heard in North American English (see fig. 5 in yellow).



Finally, while other Korean speakers may use the /r/ sound as a rhotic consonant in place of /ɹ/, Seungbin demonstrates his understanding of the alveolar flap as a non-rhotic consonant in SAuE. Seen again in his pronunciations of the word "water" (fig. 5 in green), Seungbin understands the /ɹ/ consonant's role as an allophone for the /t/ sound when in the onset position of a syllable between two vowels, where the second vowel is unstressed. The only times that Seungbin uses the alveolar flap is as an allophone of unvoiced alveolar stops. These three pieces of evidence show that Seungbin has developed a deep understanding of the roles rhotic and non-rhotic consonants play when distinguishing between varieties of English.

In addition to the sound level, understanding cross-linguistic transfer on the sentence level can also help identify one's accent and improve confidence in speech. One very common mistake made by Korean speakers learning English is the omission of a subject in a declarative sentence. Some languages, including Korean, are known as “null-subject” languages because they “permit an independent clause to lack an explicit subject” as long as it is inferable through grammatical inflection or pragmatics (Wikipedia Contributors, 2023). On the other hand, English falls under the umbrella of non-null-subject languages where the subject is generally obligatory in declarative sentences (Haspelmath, 2001). As a null-subject and high-context language, Korean often allows (and even encourages) dropping the subject, since it helps avoid redundancy and keeps sentences as short as possible (Choi, 2016).

Seungbin's Sentence (ungrammatical): *“ <u>Tell</u> you what I do when I wake up.”			
Grammatical Version: “ <u>I'll</u> tell you what I do when I wake up.”			
Korean Equivalent (grammatical)**:			
일어나면	무엇을	하는지	알려줄게
ireona-myeon	mueos-eul	ha-neunji	allyeojul-ke
get.up-COND	what-ACC	do-UF	tell-FUT
'[I'll] tell [you] what I do when I wake up.'			
Fig. 6: Seungbin's sentence in English and Korean equivalent.			
**Notes on interlinear gloss: COND = conditional mood; ACC = accusatory case; UF = uncertain future; FUT = future tense			

In Seungbin's case, there is one moment when his instinct to drop the subject where it wouldn't be needed in Korean may have influenced his speech in English, leading to an ungrammatical construction. As illustrated in fig. 6, Seungbin creates a sentence without a subject, while the grammatical version in English requires it. It is possible that Seungbin made this choice subconsciously because this type of construction would be completely allowed, and possibly even preferred, in Korean. Oftentimes, including the subject in a simple Korean sentence acts as a deliberate choice to emphasize the role of the subject in comparison to other relevant actors in the conversation (e.g., “I'll tell you what *I* do in the

morning, not my grandma...”) (Hooshmand, 2020). Thus, including the pronoun in the Korean sentence like what is required in English may be considered infelicitous in some situations.

However, it is also entirely possible that Seungbin had previously learned the phrase “tell you what” as a chunk and erroneously believed he could build more complex sentences based on it. Chunking is a popular method that language learners use to build the complexity of their repertoire and learn more meaningful phrases instead of trying to memorize each word on their own (Jones, 2022). However, in cases such as the chunk “tell you what,” the current colloquial use of the word does not align with the grammatical rules usually presented in English, so if one attempts to add more onto the phrase to change the meaning, it can go from a set chunk to an ungrammatical sentence—just like what is seen in Seungbin’s example. A longer sample of Seungbin’s speech patterns would be needed to see if omitting the subject is something he regularly struggles with in his speech, or if this is an isolated incident related to the misuse of a chunk.

Though Seungbin is only one student, much can be learned from transcribing, analyzing, and understanding what phonetic and syntactic characteristics from Korean may be affecting his speech in English. Seungbin shows a great command of unfamiliar English phonemes such as /ɪ/, and an even more impressive understanding of rhoticity’s role in different varieties of English. He revealed some difficulty with grammar and may still be struggling to grasp the rules that govern non-null subject languages. But it's also possible that he is just tapping into his method of memorizing “chunks” as a way to improve more quickly, and may just need more practice utilizing them. But beyond his skill, what also stands out to me is his enthusiasm for learning and speaking English. I think the fact that he has found a specific interest related to English—learning about Australian culture, accent, and slang—has had a positive impact on his language-learning journey and helped him improve very quickly. I hope I will be able to help my future students find something in their language-learning journey that makes them feel just as passionate and confident about English as Seungbin.

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