HOW NORTH KOREA MADE ITS ENGLISH-KOREAN DICTIONARY

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Introduction

When the North Korean lexicographers at the Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies compiled the Yŏngjo taesajŏn (‘Grand English-Korean Dictionary’) in 1992, the first unabridged English-Korean dictionary in North Korea, they based their work on Kenkyusha’s New English-Japanese Dictionary, one of the most established English-Japanese dictionaries. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that the Yŏngjo taesajŏn is none other than a North Korean version of the New English-Japanese Dictionary: it translates almost every single word in it. South Korean lexicographers have also historically shown a heavy dependence on Japanese lexicography during its early stage of English-Korean dictionary making in the wake of liberation from Japanese rule. Later, however, their dictionaries became much more diverse and sophisticated than anything found in North Korea.

The Northern Yŏngjo taesajŏn shows one significant difference from Southern dictionaries. South Korean lexicographers, despite their efforts to filter out expressions with strong Japanese flavour, stay reliant on Chinese characters as the traditional lingua franca of East Asia. Consequently, their translations of English entries are predominantly based on the Korean phonetic readings of words that consist of Chinese characters as they appear in Japanese dictionaries. By contrast, North Korean lexicographers try to replace difficult words that originate from Chinese characters with indigenous words or established Sino-Korean words that do not sound alien to native speakers.

So why is there such a difference? This article argues that the distinguishing factor is the opportunity to systematically explore one's own

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1 In this paper I have used the following transcription convention: Korean lexical items and quotations from the dictionaries investigated are transcribed according to the principles of the Yale romanization method. Terms, proper names and book titles, on the other hand, are rendered either in their customary form (e.g. Pyongyang, Kim Il Sung) or in the McCune-Reischauer romanization method, conforming to the cataloguing style used by the US Library of Congress.
language, and that Japan and North Korea, albeit in different ways, acquired that crucial experience. For the former, it was through the explosive amount of translation work done since the late nineteenth century, and for the latter, it was the language refinement movement which was intensively pursued since the early 1950s. South Korea’s lack of such an experience is revealed in the contrasting approaches the two Koreas’ lexicographers took when compiling their respective English-Korean dictionaries.

A Unique Tradition

From the outset, the North Korean leadership emphasized the role of language as a weapon for achieving their dream of communist revolution. Accordingly, they conducted an intensive literacy campaign between 1946 and 1949, which claims to have reduced the number of illiterate people by about three million. Also, as part of their efforts to eradicate illiteracy, they banned Chinese characters in every official document from 1949 onwards. In reality, however, the abolition of Chinese characters as such did not constitute a full solution to the problem posed by the Sino-Korean tradition: hanja, the Chinese characters, were simply phonetically transcribed into han’gul, the Korean script, and many obscure and unintelligible words remained in use.2

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2 For instance, catching the meaning of expressions like hwa.uy.yongsim (화의용심 ‘watch out for fire’), chengcho.aychwi (정초애취 ‘cutting green grass’), pipay.kwanli (비배 관리 ‘management of fertilizer dispensing’) written only in Korean characters was incomprehensible to common people (Li Hokyŏng 2005: 68). Hwa.uy.yongsim was Korean reading of Japanese hi.no.yōjin (火の用心), in which Korean hwa, uy, yongsim correspond to Japanese hi, no, yōjin expressing English ‘fire’, ‘of’, ‘watch out’, respectively. As the word consists of four characters, it sounded, in spite of the existence of native Korean element of uy, like one of the Chinese tetagrams, which was very confusing. In the second example of chengcho.aychwi, aychwi derives from the inaccurate Korean transcription for the Chinese characters used in expressing Japanese 刈取る (karitoru), which is 제취. Although the correct Korean reading of 제취 is not aychwi (애취) but ayeychwi (예취), the mistake has not been redressed. Today in South Korea both aychwi and ayeychwi are used as agricultural terms for designating the same work of cutting grass. To make matters worse, due to the fact that ‘grass’ is expressed as cho (초) in Sino-Korean rendering and the pronunciations of cho and chwi are similar, South Korean farmers have two more confusing words at their disposal nowadays: aycho (애초) and ayecho (예초). It means South Koreans are confronted with four Sino-Korean words describing exactly the same farming work of cutting grass: aychwi, ayeychwi, aycho, and ayecho. North Koreans have avoided this frustrating situation by refining chengcho.aychwi to phwul.peyki (풀베기), in which phwul and peyki are indigenous Korean words meaning ‘grass’ and ‘cutting’, respectively. They also polished hwa.uy.yongsim and pipay.kwanli to simple Korean expressions like phwul.chosim (봉조심) and kakkwuki (가꾸기).