



# Learning Korean

## My experiences and perhaps some advice for foreign researchers at KIAS



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Knowing even an epsilon of a language can be tremendously useful.

A version of the above citation was communicated to me by Prof. Mathilde Marcolli, a mathematical physicist at Caltech, USA, commenting on her experiences in Beijing.

If you are a foreigner living in Korea, as you are looking at the above citation, you might be thinking that given the average English fluency of Koreans, knowing how to speak English is certainly more useful than knowing an epsilon of Korean. Or perhaps you think that knowing some Chinese characters is yet a better bet still. And chances are you're right. The citation is by the way an observation about being on your own in Beijing, where Prof. Marcolli visited three times, with respectively a zero, epsilon and two epsilons knowledge of Mandarin. The fact that the citation is about Beijing matters insofar as Prof. Marcolli's original knowledge of Chinese was quasi non-existent.

I think that the essential content of the above observation is that language fluency for the most basic conversations does not require all that much knowledge. Ordering a coffee in Korean, even if it's a half-sweet regular size soy white chocolate mocha with no whip cream at Starbucks, does not require all that much knowledge.

Why should you bother with learning any Korean though? Especially since your time in Korea is most likely limited, wouldn't it just take time away from your research? Those are very legitimate questions. I will try to motivate you to plunge into learning Korean, as well as giving you some advice that has worked well for me. I am going to assume

that you neither speak Japanese nor Chinese (or much Korean). If you're lucky to speak either of them, your Korean language learning will greatly benefit from it. Korean and Japanese grammar (and curiously Turkish and some other language's grammar too) closely resemble each other, which makes learning Korean much easier, especially in the beginning. If you speak Chinese, then you have a huge vocabulary advantage. Indeed, as many as around 60 percent of Korean word stems are derived from Chinese words.

The first time you can order said mocha from Starbucks entirely in Korean, what a feeling of success and satisfaction! More importantly in the long run, won't it improve your quality of life during your stay in Korea, if you're able to converse at whatever level? If you don't always have to rely on your Korean friends for even the most basic things? What are some advantages of knowing some Korean outside of Korea? Perhaps there are not so many tangible ones. However, there are tremendous benefits to your memory. If you can memorize Korean words, which oftentimes are so dissimilar from English ones, your general memory will improve. Plus, any future language learning will benefit from your experiences with Korean.

In my opinion, the most important reason to learn Korean is to have a genuine Korea experience and to avoid the foreigner bubble. I truly believe that living abroad is one of the most rewarding experiences – if you make a genuine effort to fit in. It's easy and tempting to stay in said bubble. Between Pajung-sa, KIAS, the neighboring restaurants and shops, the occasional trip to Homeplus or Lotte Mart and some excursions now and then to the city and the country-side, you have everything you need. But does that in itself constitute a thorough Korean experience? Well, if you find yourself in the just

described situation and would like to change something, perhaps shall I recommend you start learning Korean? Or perhaps you have already gotten around the idea of giving the Korean language a try. So what if the obstacles seem insurmountable, especially given that your research is already demanding so much of your time? Well, I would like to provide some sensible advice that hopefully can help you in your Korean endeavors.

Firstly, learn Korean in an immersive way. Take advantage of being surrounded by it all day long everywhere. As you walk down the street, you can practice giving yourself directions in Korean. You can strengthen your reading skills by reading the signs and advertisements that you encounter. You can practice your Korean numbers by reading out loud the number plates of the parked cars.

Second and most importantly:

#### **Use Korean all the time.**

Let me emphasize this point again: Use Korean all the time. It's hard. One worries about an unintelligible accent, about not knowing what words to use. I firmly believe that there is no other way around learning Korean though. There is the temptation of waiting until one is ready, until one knows enough Korean. Sadly, if that's your attitude now, chances are you will feel the same way in one year, in two years, just before you leave. Given that your time in Korea is limited, better get started speaking right away. You cannot hope to achieve an anywhere close to satisfactory level of Korean without making it your default language outside KIAS. This advice naturally applies to learning any language in any country of course.

Two comments are in order. Firstly, to understand what someone is telling you in Korean, oftentimes it is enough to listen for some key words, for some key gestures and to consider the situation you are in. Secondly, in order to speak in daily situations, not all that much Korean is needed. In the before-mentioned ordering coffee example, very little Korean knowledge is required. But if you order a coffee in Korean once a day, every day, after a few weeks, you will say it quasi-perfectly (of course, getting rid of accents is an entirely different matter).

At the beginning of learning Korean, I think that it is more powerful to know a few

sentences very well, as opposed to knowing many sentences a little bit. It is the well-known idea that recurring words and sentences are used inappropriately often.

Furthermore, for a satisfactory language experience, you don't need to speak Korean perfectly. Even if you mix up your Korean particles and only know the basic polite verb ending, you will be able to communicate. And what are languages about if not about communication?

Learning Korean can also be very fun. Isn't it wonderful how starting from a stem, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and nouns can be formed? As an omnipresent example, consider the 내리실 문, exit doors, that you've heard countless times on the subway. Its meaning is more subtle than just the English translation would suggest. It is composed out of 내리다, to get off, 시, the subject honorific, 을, which make 내리시다 into an adjective and 문, which means door. Instead of을, one could also use은, the difference is that 을 is used to describe a future situation, whereas 은 is used to describe a present situation. It is assumed that getting out through the door will happen in the (however near) future.

Moreover, isn't it fun to stack up different endings to form subtle meanings? That's not necessarily advisable in everyday situations of course, but it is a great exercise for Korean language learning. An elementary yet instructive example is 보여줄게요! It is composed of 보이다, to show, 주다, to give, and the ending -을게요, I will (offering some service). The composition 보여주다 is a standard way of requesting something to be shown. Making it보여줄게요 translates into I'll show you. Its direct translation, I offer to give you a showing, sounds strange in English, but it is a natural thing to say in Korean. This simple example illustrates how language reflects the attitude towards life and the way of thinking of the underlying culture. This is elegantly illustrated by the relative absence of the work have in Korean. In individualistic culture English, I have a brother. In Korean, as for me, there is a brother, 저는 남동생 있어요.

A feature I find irresistible is the flexibility of the Korean language on one hand - different parts of a sentence can be ordered in different ways - and the power of the particles to specify the relationship of the different parts to each other. For example, consider the sentence 제가 좋아하는 커피는 비싸요. The middle clause, 좋아하는 커피, means liked coffee. 제가 is derived from 저, I, and the subject marking particle 이/가. Here the subject marking particle specifies that the middle clause concerns저, i.e. it is the coffee that is liked by me. Then, the topic marking particle은/는 indicates that

the coffee that I like is the topic of the sentence and the verb비싸요 is saying that said coffee is expensive. I think that it is impossible not to marvel at such a subtle, delicate and efficient construction. In English you would have to say ‘The coffee that I like is expensive’ – Three more words: the, that, is. Much less efficient.

Outside of taking some classes, I recommend the online resources from talktomeinkorean.com (TTMIK). The team behind that website is located in Seoul and they have regular meetups (meetup.com/talktomeinkorean/) that you can participate at. I personally like the grammar explanations from the TTMIK website very much, as they are usually about global concepts and not just isolated cases - say, the meaning and usage of 을 in every conceivable situation and not just in one specific type of example. I personally find their audio series entertaining and motivating. You can also download some anki flashcards that use the material and explanations from TTMIK.

I further recommend the wordpower app by innovative language learning, which is available for several languages. There are different functions, but the most important one in my opinion is the word of the day function. Every day, it gives you one new word and a few example sentences where that word is used. Crucially, you can listen to the sentences as recorded by native speakers and make usage of the built in microphone function. Thus, you can record yourself and compare your own recording with a recording featuring perfect pronunciation. Though you might feel a bit self-conscious at first, it is a great way to improve your pronunciation. In addition, by reviewing these sentences, you automatically (for instance by checking with the TTMIK website) learn about grammar structures and new expressions and words.

A tricky but rewarding language training exercise is to think in Korean. That might be a bit ways off, but it can make a big difference. As humans we learn by repetition and this exercise will help to wire your brain to the Korean grammatical structures. In particular, it will increase the speed at which you are able to form sentences - a crucial point if you aspire to eventually have regular speed conversations.

The trick to memorizing words is to use mnemonic techniques. Our brain remembers information by categories, by relating it to information it has already memorized. Moreover, we remember surprising, unusual information effortlessly. So I recommend you find similar sounding words in your native language and try to think of amusing

stories that contain the similarly sounding word and the meaning of the Korean word you try to remember. This will help your brain to categorize the new word. It’s a bit of work in the beginning, but words learned that way stay memorized for a long time. Memrise (from memrise.com) is an app based on that age-old idea. To memorize sentences, it helps to associate a melody to it. Indeed, if you learn a sentence with one of your favorite tunes, it will stick all that more easily.

A characteristic of language learning is that one reaches plateaus, at which one’s level does no longer or only slowly improve. What should you do if that situation befalls onto you? It’s simple: just change your learning strategy. It’s worth and fun to experiment with different methods anyhow. And whenever you find a strategy that works for you, put into it all your enthusiasm.

Discipline is one of those rare human qualities that are known to be universal. If you strengthen your discipline for learning Korean, you will have strengthened your discipline for doing research as well.