

Language 는 Choice 를 준다

영어로 쓰여진 에세이 (Essay that is written in English)

YOUNG JIN PARK (박영진)

On the cover page of my purple college notebook is my name in English: Young Jin Park. Ever since I came to America, I've written it on notebooks, textbooks, pens, erasers, and even on my printer. But I have never forgotten to write my Korean name, 박영진, in a parenthesis next to it. My name in English sounds slightly different from my name in Korean, and due to this subtle difference that can never be overcome, I always write my Korean name, which I think more accurately represents who I am.

Sometimes, because of the indentation between Young and Jin, people (and even the university's registrar system) think Young is my first name and Jin is my middle name. But it really is not. Korean names usually consist of a one-syllable last name and a two-syllable first name, and each of the syllables (or the letters) stands for a Chinese character that has its own meanings. “영”(Young) stands for ‘precious, prosperous, rich’ and “진”(Jin) stands for ‘treasure.’ Each character is equally important to who I am, and perhaps that is why my parents registered my official English name on my passport with an indentation between “Young” and “Jin.” Unwittingly, though, my parents also paved the way for a lifetime of confusion. In college, my computer science professor calls me “Young” and my cinema studies teaching assistant calls me “Jung,” just like the famous psychologist Carl Jung.

Going by an English name such as “Sean,” “John” or “Thomas” would have no doubt made my life easier, but I chose to stick with my Korean name. In fact, I'm okay with people mispronouncing my name and calling me whatever they would like to call me, based on what they think “Young Jin Park” sounds like. I've realized that demanding the proper pronunciation only makes people forget how to pronounce my name every week and thus forget who I am. My name, in all its bastardized variations, gives me individuality.

It is this “individuality” that Richard Rodriguez, in his essay “Aria: A Memoir of Bilingual Childhood,” describes. As an immigrant child,

Rodriguez struggled between using his mother tongue, Spanish, and English, naming the former a “private” language and the latter, a “public” one. This “wrongly imagined” paradigm, Rodriguez realizes later on in his life, stifled his eagerness to learn English and encouraged him to stay within the comfort zone of his mother tongue (505). Rodriguez’s primary concern within the essay is the process of assimilating into the immigrant country by learning the native language: the day he decided to speak English in the classroom, he notes, was the day he “moved very far from being the disadvantaged child [he] had been only days earlier” (506).

But holding onto one’s own cultural identity can be as valuable as seeking assimilation. In “Lost in Translation,” Eva Hoffman also writes about her experience as a young immigrant. To her, moving from her home country, which was politically and economically unstable at the time, to peaceful, safe Canada, was a traumatic experience. After many years she still misses her hometown where she “squeezed into three rudimentary rooms with four other people, surrounded by squabbles, dark political rumblings, memories of wartime suffering, and daily struggle for existence” (177). “Cracow . . . to me is both home and the universe,” she writes, in spite of the traumatic life she had in her hometown (177). Regardless of where Hoffman goes, she always belongs to Cracow, and I feel the same about my hometown, Seoul. New York City, where I currently live, is surely one of the biggest metropolitan areas in the world. Cultural diversity, hundreds of galleries, the Met and the MoMA and Broadway musicals are all fascinating and only exist in New York, and I really love and appreciate them. And yet, I still miss Seoul and, deep down, I know that I belong to Seoul. Seoul may not be as culturally diverse as New York, but it is the place where I was born, grew up, went to school, hung out with friends, and fell in love. These memories I cherish are a large part of my identity.

And yet, to evoke and share with their readers this identity, both Rodriguez and Hoffman had to write in English, which I know must have been hard. When looking over my notes for this essay, I saw a sentence—“Language 는(neun) Choice 를(reul) 준다(joonda).” It means that language gives you the choice. What an odd mixture of two languages the sentence is! Every English word I write, I hear, I speak, transforms into a Korean word and is visualized in my mind, sometimes resulting in bilingual sentences like the one above. Just as Rodriguez distinguished “private” and “public” language, to me, Korean was my private language and English was my public language, and I often return to the comforts of the former when English words fail me. Yet, I have always appreciated that I could speak English and

tell my foreign friends how beautiful some Korean words sound or how much I love my country. I appreciated the choice that was given to me because I could speak English.

I read out loud the sentence that I wrote on that page, again: “Language gives you the choice.” Maybe Rodriguez is not just talking about bilingual education, but about how he defines language and the language defines him through choice.

In *Crash*, an Academy Award-winning film of 2004, Farhad, an Iranian immigrant, is desperate to be a part of American society. He comes to the United States with his wife and daughter to start a new life and opens a grocery store. Barely able to speak English, he feels marginalized, even though he keeps telling his daughter that he came to the United States legally and is a citizen. However, his English deficiency widens the gap between him and the society, and drives him to desperation. When someone shoplifts from his grocery store, his inability to communicate with the authorities forces him to take the law into his own hands, and he ends up shooting the little girl of the Latino key maker he blames for his misfortune.

Farhad could never gain the public “individuality” that the young Rodriguez craved, because his language defined him as an outcast of society and his words in Persian neither influenced nor were understood by the public (508). To other people, what came out of his mouth was not a language, just noise. This lack of language proficiency creates segregation without physical barriers because it prevents immigrants from learning English and becoming members of society (Schlafly). They have no choice but to isolate themselves—or to try to learn the language of their new home country, losing their own individuality and language in the process.

Research conducted by Richard Alba et al. on the degree of English monolingualism over successive generations of immigrants found that the “three-generation process of Anglicization” applied to most immigrants of different ethnicities; that is, the percentage of ethnic populations who can speak only English increases dramatically with each generation, eventually peaking in the third generation (with the original group of immigrants being the first generation) (467). Interestingly, this percentage does not increase beyond the third generation. For Mexican immigrants, for example, the percentage dropped from 43.5 percent to 43.1 percent from the third generation to the fourth (473). This means that these children are given a choice to speak whatever language they want and to belong to whatever culture they choose.

Before Rodriguez could speak English, he could only stay within the linguistic boundaries of his family and people, could not be a part of American

society at large. To be acknowledged as an individual, not just another immigrant kid, he needed to be able to communicate with the other members of his new society. English gave him a new identity—“*Rich-heard Road-ree-guess*,” not Ricardo Rodriguez (501). And although the price he paid for his new identity—decreased proficiency in his mother tongue, a sense of disconnect from his homeland like that experienced by Hoffman—seemed great, it allowed Rodriguez to articulate this loss to a larger audience, and in doing so, gain acceptance, empathy, and appreciation for his culture. A new voice means a new identity, and the ability, perhaps, to preserve an old one.

As an international student, all I want is to voice my thoughts, my beliefs, and my identity. Like Rodriguez and Hoffman, I find myself trying to connect with a culture and language that is not my own. However, in this cultural conversation and in this country, my voice matters because I can write and speak in English, the language which is not my mother tongue—and also in Korean, the language that is.

Rodriguez went through a bilingual childhood, and I did not. Rodriguez is an immigrant, and I am not. Rodriguez’s first language is Spanish, but mine is not. However, I felt such a strong bond with Rodriguez when I first read his essay. Like me, Rodriguez accepted English as his new language, but not to the exclusion of his original one. What appears to be a process of assimilation is actually a process of re-birth. Thanks to English, I was reborn as Young Jin Park—or Jung, or however you choose to pronounce my name—but I also very much remain 박영진.

Every Monday in high school, where I took English as a Second Language, we would recite our school motto and the mantra, “English is just a tool or medium to communicate within a global society.” I used to dislike the concept of any language being just a tool or method because I wanted so badly for language to be a thing of beauty. Now, I realize that the two concepts aren’t mutually exclusive. Language lends me a beautiful kind of empowerment—it gives me a new voice, a new identity, and new choices. If one is not acknowledged as an individual within society, the pursuit for one’s culture and ethnic heritage will not be seen as individuality, but as self-imposed segregation. Cultural identity can only be preserved and expressed through linguistic assimilation. If I cannot tell the people around me who I am in English, I would just be another outsider, like *Crash*’s Farhad. But, because I can tell them, “I am an outsider; I am Korean; I am Young Jin Park,” I can assert myself, preserve myself, open myself.

We, the bilingual speakers—the Eva Hoffmans and Richard Rodriguezes and Young Jin Parks—may not feel as comfortable in an English-speaking

environment as we do when we speak our mother tongue, walk down a street full of signs that are familiar to us, and breathe the air of our home, because we simply do not belong to this foreign land, this foreign language.

There is nothing wrong with this. I am Korean and that is my identity. But it doesn't mean I shouldn't take on the enormous task of learning English. Assimilation does not mean simply "blending in." It is the quest to obtain acknowledgement, which is hard, painful, yet empowering. That is what Rodriguez did; that is what I am doing; and at this very moment, that is what hundreds of thousands of immigrants are doing: choosing to have their voices heard, speaking and writing in a language that is not their own.

WORK CITED

- Alba, Richard, et al. "Only English by the Third Generation? Loss and Preservation of the Mother Tongue among the Grandchildren of Contemporary Immigrants." *Demography* 39.3 (2002): 467-84. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 June 2011.
- Crash*. Dir. Paul Haggis. Lions Gate Films, 2005. Film.
- DiYanni, Robert, and Pat C. Hoy II, eds. *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Boston: Thomson, 2008. Print.
- Hoffman, Eva. "Lost in Translation." DiYanni and Hoy 176-77.
- Rodriguez, Richard. "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood." DiYanni and Hoy 501-08.
- Schlafly, Phyllis. "Obama Rejects English Language Assimilation." *Human Events* 64.25 (2008): 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 June 2011.

98 - MERCER STREET