The 3rd JASCA International Symposium

Some Issues on Writing about Korea in English and the Englishization of Anthropology

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The title of today’s symposium covers a very broad range of themes and topics, so, I would like to narrow it down and focus on internationalization of writing ethnographies, or in a broader sense, producing something based on fieldwork in a written form.

Regarding this aspect of anthropology, the word “internationalization” now seems to be used to mean “Englishization.” I am fully aware that English is now the lingua franca in academia, just as it is in business or other professional sectors in today’s globalized world, but I still have mixed feelings about it. Part of me thinks it is an undeniable and unchangeable fact¹ that we have to face and accept; another part of me finds it strange and unfair. I feel strange because English is a local language that has happened to become the de facto lingua franca thanks to the prosperity of the British Empire, followed by the rise of the U.S. I think it is unfair because English is the native language for some, but not for others. However, at the risk of sounding like a pathetic realist, I here define “internationalization” as “Englishization” and talk about the issues on writing about Korean culture and society in English, along with more general issues concerning writing in English, including the issue of the Englishization of anthropology as a whole.

Before that, however, I would like to touch upon my background in terms of English and academic training because, as was pointed out elsewhere,² this background can greatly affect one’s attitude towards the Englishization of anthropology.

My English and Academic Training Background

The high school I went to was famous for its acceptance of kikokushijo (young returnees). Formally two-thirds, and in reality, even more of the students were kikokushijo, but I was not.

¹ See Nic Craith (2016: 73-8).
² At the roundtable on the internationalization/globalization of anthropology in Japan, which was held in the JASCA 49th Annual Meeting in 2015, one audience member commented that the educational and academic background of each panelist seemed to affect his or her attitude towards Englishization (Kokusaika/Gurōbaru-ka Taiō Iinkai 2015: 472).

I never left Japan until my mid-twenties except for a short trip to Europe. Purely domestic students like myself were very few. The majority of my peers were native-level English speakers, and I suffered from a sense of inferiority in English. On the one hand, it provided me with motivation to keep studying English hard even after I graduated from high school. On the other hand, however, this inferiority complex was so deeply ingrained in me that it has persisted, though to a lesser extent, until today.

As for my academic training, I eventually obtained a PhD in social anthropology from Oxford University with a thesis on Korean kinship and written genealogy, but there were a few twists and turns along the way.

I got my BA in sociology at Keio University. However, my study in anthropology started when I was an undergraduate, as I entered an anthropology seminar course taught by Professor Teigo Yoshida. Professor Yoshida wanted even his undergraduate students to do fieldwork, so I did some short-term fieldwork on Sado Island. In the first year of my MA at Keio, I also conducted short-term fieldwork with a focus on the kinship system in northeastern Japan. Looking back, this fieldwork was immature, but I enjoyed it very much.

It was in the first year of my MA that I applied for the two-year master’s course in social anthropology at Oxford University, as I was interested in kinship studies and wanted to study in an Anglophone country. In the application form, there was a column asking the area of my interest and I wrote “Japan,” partly because I thought my fieldwork experience in Japan might be of use, and partly because I wanted to know how Japanese kinship was studied outside Japan. My application was fortunately accepted, so I intermitted the second year of my MA at Keio and left for Oxford in 1989.

The first year of the two-year master’s program at Oxford was a taught course. As Professor Okpyo Moon mentioned in her keynote lecture, there were no faculty who specialized in East Asia at that time; my supervisor was Dr. Peter Rivière, a specialist of Lowland South America. The central part of the taught course was a weekly tutorial, for which I read assigned books and articles, and wrote an essay. Now I reckon this weekly reading and essay writing were beneficial to improving my English as well as my anthropological knowledge and way of thinking, but in those days, they were excruciatingly hard for me.

The second year was a research course, in which I worked on my thesis that compared ie and dōzoku studies in Japan and in the West. As I developed my research, I found there was very little, if any, mutual scholarship between Japanese scholars and their Western counterparts. I subconsciously felt that what lay there was not only the absence of mutual scholarship but also an asymmetrical power structure of knowledge production. In hindsight, I now realize that it is what Professor Takami Kuwayama (1997, 2004a, 2004b) calls “the world system of anthropology.” At that time, however, I could not tell what I felt. I was just confused and frustrated. The somewhat anomalous status of native anthropology in the
discipline also contributed to my confusion. I simplistically assumed I would not have felt that way if I had not chosen Japan as my thesis’s theme. Bearing this uncertain feeling, I wrote up my thesis and finished my master’s course at Oxford.

As soon as I came back to Japan, I had to write another master’s thesis for Keio. Because I wanted to distance myself from native anthropology, I wrote a thesis on Lévi-Strauss’s concept of “house,” which I came across while I was writing my master’s thesis at Oxford. When I finished it up, I found myself psychologically lost. I could not imagine myself studying about Japan again as a native anthropologist. Nor did I know what else to do. I was in this state of limbo for a while, but eventually I decided to go back to Oxford and study another culture, hoping that might help get me out of this psychological dead end.

When I went back to Oxford for my PhD in 1993, I had already decided to study Korean kinship. The primary reason I chose Korea was because I wanted to study a society that shares similarities with and yet keeps many differences from Japan. My PhD supervisor was Dr. Roger Goodman, who had newly arrived at Oxford as a specialist of Japan Anthropology. He seemed to be a little surprised at my decision, as he expected I would extend my prior study on Japanese kinship to my PhD, but he kindly accepted my decision and encouraged me to go forward.

After a year spent learning Korean and doing library-based research on Korean kinship, I conducted year-long fieldwork in a mountain village in Kyŏngsang Namdo, a province in the southeast of Korea, from 1994 to 1995. For the last two months of my fieldwork, I stayed at the Academy of Korean Studies through the good offices of Professor Moon, which enabled me to do textual-research. Then I went back to Oxford, wrote up my PhD thesis on Korean kinship and written genealogy, and submitted it in 1997.

It was when I had almost finished the first draft of my thesis that I encountered Professor Kuwayama’s article (1997) on native anthropologists focusing on Japanese studies and the world system of anthropology. I thought, “Yes! This is what I wanted to say when I was writing my thesis on ie and dōzoku studies.” Strangely enough, when I was writing my PhD thesis, the issue of the world system of anthropology hardly ever occurred to me. Now it is difficult to remember my state of mind in those days and explain why, but it was probably because I was fully occupied at the time with the comings and goings between Japanese, Korean, and English, both linguistically and conceptually. It was such a trial that perhaps I just could not afford to contemplate the power structure in anthropology. Additionally, while writing on a different culture and society from my own in English, just as most Western anthropologists do, I might have unwittingly assumed a less critical mindset towards Western academic hegemony.

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3 Cheater stated (1987: 164) that “polite astonishment and raised eyebrows may still greet the anthropologist who chooses to work in his own society.” I, too, experienced this kind of reaction. Knowing that I chose Japan as the theme of my thesis, some gave me a wondering look and asked if studying one’s own society could be anthropology. One even told me, though jokingly, that it was not fair.
When I finished my PhD, I came back to Japan and looked for a job. After receiving a pile of rejection letters, I eventually got a post as an English instructor at Senshu University, which is where I have been ever since.

This has been a rather lengthy account of my English and academic training background, but I think it is necessary for when I talk about issues concerning writing in English.

Now I would like to discuss these issues. First, I will address the issues that come up when writing about Korean culture and society in English. Then I will address more general issues related to writing one’s ethnographic results in English and the Englishization of anthropology.

**Issues in Writing about Korean Culture and Society in English**

In fact, most of the issues on writing about Korean culture and society in English overlap with those on writing in English in general, which I am going to address later on. However, there certainly are a few issues that are specific to writing about Korea in English, especially when you are a Japanese native.

It may sound too simple, but writing about Korean culture and society in English is difficult. The difficulty is felt more acutely for Japanese natives because Japanese and Korean are linguistically very similar. For years I have been an editor of a journal issued by the Association for Studies of Korean Culture and Society (韓国・朝鮮文化研究会). The journal’s language is Japanese, but it contains the Korean and English version of the table of contents. Comparing the three versions makes tangible how linguistically close Japanese and Korean are and how distant English is from these two languages. Japanese and Korean are grammatically similar and share many words based on Chinese characters. Of course there are some Korean words that are simply untranslatable into Japanese and thus need a rather long explanation, but, overall, there is much less trouble translating Korean into Japanese than into English. This is a great advantage for us Japanese natives when we refer to or incorporate Korean language sources into our writing, and actually we frequently do so, as there are so many important sources in Korean. The downside of this advantage is that we are used to the convenience so much that we find it more difficult to write about Korea in English.

The similarity of language can be extended to some concepts as well. In most cases, they originated in ancient China. For example, it takes many words to explain the concept of *ki* (氣) or “spirit” in English. Nonetheless, since more or less the same concept exists in Japan, you do not encounter such difficulty when you write about *ki* in Japanese. A pitfall of this convenience is that you may mislead readers, and sometimes even yourself, by skipping subtle but important differences in a similar concept existing in both Korea and Japan, which may be avoided when writing in English. Again, *ki* is a good example. Though the concept of *ki* in both countries mostly overlaps, in Korea *ki* in the context of Neo-Confucian theory is so important that it has influence on kinship organization and ancestor rituals,
while in Japan it does not. Writing in English makes you more careful and hence more aware about this kind of difference, which, I think, is one merit in writing about Korean culture and society in English.

Another merit specific to writing about Korean culture and society in English is that you are more conscious about searching for existing Korean studies written in English. Because there is a huge amount of research on Korea written in Korean and Japanese, when writing in Japanese, we are, or at least I am, likely to tend to pay less attention, inadvertently, to studies in English. English references on Korea are relatively few compared to those in Korean and Japanese, but they include important works worth citing, and the chances to encounter them are higher when writing in English. This advantage, however, has its own cost, as I will mention later.

So far I have talked about issues specific to writing about Korean culture and society in English. Now I would like to move on to more general issues and implications concerning writing one’s fieldwork outcomes in English and the Englishization of anthropology.

**Issues on Writing in English and the Englishization of Anthropology**

As obvious as it may sound, writing in academic English itself is difficult for those whose first language is so different from English. In natural and quantitative social sciences, the difficulty seems less, if it exists at all, but in qualitative social sciences and humanities, where the quality of writing itself is so important, the difficulty is much greater, and anthropology belongs to the latter. We all know that both vivid descriptions of ethnographic events and persuasive theorization require good writing.

As is often pointed out, “good writing” in English does not mean an ornate and flowery style. I know that simple and intelligible English, often written by non-Anglophone authors, has a merit of its own. Nonetheless, for most non-Anglophone authors like myself, the line between “simple and intelligible English” and “clumsy and awkward English” is so thin that writing in English always comes with apprehension.

There are quite a few non-Anglophone anthropologists, including Japanese and Koreans, who write in English just as well as their Anglophone counterparts because of their enormous talent or effort or both. But, for most of us, it is too high a goal to reach. Even if we manage to reach it, English writing ability easily deteriorates unless we continuously try to retain it at the cost of our limited time and energy, which we could otherwise use for useful activities like extra field work.

Even more problematic is that you cannot be a good writer of English just because you have good knowledge of the language itself. This is because the English writing style is different from that of Japanese. In English, the topic sentence is at the beginning of most paragraphs, but in Japanese, it is more likely to be at the end. The same can be applied to the structure of argumentation. While in English, the conclusion comes first followed by

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4 See Mathews (2008: 59) and Moeran (2016: 65-6).
supporting data and evidence, it tends to be the opposite in Japanese. This is one of the reasons why simple translation from Japanese into English, or vice-versa, does not work well even if each sentence is perfectly translated into the other language.\(^5\) Therefore, it is often the case that an English and Japanese version of the same book have a different order of presentation. What often happens is that some part of the introduction in an English version has to be moved to the conclusion in the Japanese version.\(^6\)

Thus far, I have talked about difficulties in writing in English, focusing on technical aspects. Now I would like to look at the wider issues and implications surrounding writing and publishing in English, in other words, the Englishization of anthropology.

More than ever, we are now under pressure to write and publish in English: as the Ministry of Education has made it clear, in one way or another, we are required to be more “internationalized,” namely “Anglicized,” in terms of our research output. This will greatly affect our scholarship, because, as I said before, anthropology is a discipline straddling social science and humanities, and hence is very language-based.

Every coin has two sides and so does the Englishization of anthropology. One obvious negative effect is that much more time and energy is required to write up the results of our studies. This is especially hard for Japanese and Korean anthropologists studying each other’s culture and society, as the existing studies as well as written documents in both languages are so abundant that it already takes a lot of time and energy to comb through them. Writing in English will put an additional burden on us. Another possible and greater negative effect is that the world system of anthropology can be further strengthened. Englishization seems to me a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. By writing and publishing our academic products in English, we are not only incorporated into but also reinforce the Englishization of anthropology, and hence the world system of anthropology, as the language is such an important key there.

I am afraid my talk so far may sound unduly pessimistic, so I would now like to look on the bright side, as there are obvious merits in writing in English. Writing in English can make our presence known and our voices heard not only to those at the center of anthropology but also to some of those in the semi-periphery and periphery.\(^7\) We can communicate and interact with a wider variety of readers, some of whom may be future collaborators. For those who study people whose native or official language is English, writing their fieldwork results in English can be a way of showing their gratitude to the people as well as getting feedback from them. This last point is not the case of Japanese and

\(^5\) Another reason is that translating something cultural to a readership with a different cultural background requires more than a simple translation of word(s). On this point, see Kuwayama (2014: 75-6).

\(^6\) For example, see Goodman (1990, 1992).

\(^7\) However, as Mathews (2016: 82) pointed out, writing in English per se does not guarantee attention. Takashi Akiba’s voluminous English paper (1957), which includes his thesis on the dual structure of Korean society, has hardly received any attention, probably because the journal which published it is not well-known. Outside Japan, Vincent Brandt, who also described the dual structure in a Korean village without knowing about Akiba’s work and published his ethnography (1971) with Harvard University Press, is thought to be the one who first suggested the thesis (Han 2015: 209-210). This shows that not only language but also the medium by which one’s research outcome is published is very important to get international attention.
Korean anthropologists studying each other's culture and society, but we, too, can share other benefits. Indeed, when I do online research and come across a seemingly interesting article or book written in Chinese, I wish it were written in English rather than considering learning Chinese.

**Concluding Remarks**

As long as Japanese and Korean anthropologists study each other, English, at least as a communication tool, is not necessary. However, when stepping out of this bilateral scholarship, even if it is within East Asia, we need English as the only working lingua franca. As I said at the beginning, I have mixed feelings about this fact and find myself shifting between the two sides of the argument on the Englishization of anthropology.

Through the roundtable and the post-roundtable discussion, I found that not only one’s English and academic training background but also many other factors, such as one’s field site, research theme, multilingual practice, affiliation, and relation to other scholars, affect one’s attitude towards the Englishization of anthropology. These factors differ between each anthropologist and may change for personal reasons and/or in accordance with changes within and outside of anthropology. Certainly the ongoing spread of Englishization is one of the biggest changes within and outside of the discipline, but how to respond to it eventually depends on each individual anthropologist, who must act according to his or her own attitude towards it.

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