

# **BELONG** *with* **KONGLISH**

**A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING  
KOREAN-STYLE ENGLISH AND AVOIDING  
COMMON MISCOMMUNICATIONS**

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WITH YIRE LEE**



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# INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I once had a student from Korea who told me her son was an officer. For months, I thought her son was a police officer in Korea. At one point, we were talking about him, and I asked, “Is it dangerous to be an officer in Korea?” She looked really confused. “Of course not.” I later found out he worked for a government agency in the finance department and that “officer” did not mean the same thing to Koreans as it did to me. Something had been lost in translation.

During my early years of teaching English to Koreans, I noticed that students would often say English words that didn’t fit into the context of our conversation and didn’t make sense. “He did overeat yesterday, so he can’t come to class today.” I’d feel confused and try to ask clarifying questions to understand their meanings. “I don’t understand why the amount he ate yesterday is related to whether he is coming to class today...” Students would feel frustrated, wondering why I didn’t understand the English they were speaking. One student even said quite bluntly in exasperation, “I am speaking English, why don’t you understand me? Is it my accent?” In reality, he was speaking Konglish.

Konglish, or Korean-style English, is a fascinating version of English spoken in South Korea, much like Singlish in Singapore, Kongish in Hong Kong, or Japanglish in Japan. It includes Koreanized English words with similar meanings to their original English counterparts and just slightly different pronunciations (*pizza*). However, Konglish also includes hundreds of English words that have completely different meanings in Korean English than they do in American English (*consent*). Sometimes, there are even words that are neither Korean nor English (*Pierrot*). Additionally, many terms are technically English but in practicality don’t exist at all (*salaryman*) while others are creative abbreviations that are not used or understood outside of Korea (*CF*).

In many ways, Konglish often provides a sense of identity for the Korean community within the United States and other countries, building unity and connection. In South Korea, Konglish reflects a piece of Korea’s unique culture and serves as an intriguing and evolving example of the ever-changing world of language and our ever-growing global connectedness. However, outside of Korean

communities themselves, the Korean version of English gets lost in translation, and misunderstandings abound.

Virtually every American who has spent significant time in South Korea can tell you a story about a language misunderstanding while speaking English with someone who was otherwise fluent. In Korea, a business partner will be quick to offer you his or her **name card** before inviting you to the **hop** to drink soju **one shot**. A friend may be envious of someone's **S-line** or **V-line**. Someone might tell you they love to eat **sand** at the beach, and you will likely come across doctors who prefer to give shots in a patient's **hip**.

The purpose of this book is to serve as a guide for English speakers who spend time speaking English with South Koreans. The aim is to help avoid some of the miscommunications that are often encountered when one is unfamiliar with Konglish. Maybe you are a businessperson regularly working alongside Korean companies; maybe you plan to teach in South Korea; maybe you work closely with a Korean expat or immigrant community; maybe you love Korean culture like K-pop and K-dramas; maybe you're planning a trip to Korea, or maybe you just love learning about other cultures and languages... Then this book is for you.

You will learn many words that have different meanings in Korean English (Konglish) and in American English and others that are technically English but only exist in South Korea. You will likely find that a few words in this book simply come from British-style English (*diary*, *caravan*) and have similar meanings when spoken in the UK and in South Korea but different meanings when spoken in North America. You will also hear some personal stories of my own confusion with Konglish along with a few cultural pointers that I've learned along the way. My hope is that this book will help you understand your friends, clients, coworkers, and favorite celebrities more clearly and avoid some of these potential miscommunications!

If you are a native Korean speaker wishing to speak English more clearly to your American or Canadian friends, please check out *Wronglish Konglish: A Guide to Avoiding Miscommunications when Speaking English to North Americans*.

**Special Note 1:** *Language is constantly changing! Even in the years of writing and putting together this book, new Konglish words have been adopted; older Konglish words have*



*become outdated, and some previously obscure Konglish words have become mainstream and commonly used even in American English circles.*

*It's also important to keep in mind that English itself is extremely diverse. This book focuses on the differences between American English and Korean English and does not address the differences that may be found between Konglish and other varieties of English. However, even within the United States, there can be regional differences in certain word choices as well as differences based on age, generation, socioeconomics, life experiences, subculture, ethnic background, field of work, and much more. You may find that depending on your own language background, your usage of the included terms may differ slightly.*

*This book is not meant to serve as a complete dictionary, rather a helpful resource, and I have included the most common, useful, or relevant information. With those caveats listed above, I have done my best to make this book as extensive as possible, knowing that because of the diversity of English itself and the ever-changing nature of language, it will never be completely possible for this book to be truly all-inclusive.*

**Special Note 2:** *It's helpful to keep in mind that some Korean consonants do not correspond exactly with one English letter. As a result, there can sometimes be slight differences in romanization of terms. As an example, the pronunciation of the Korean “ㄷ” is somewhere in between that of an “L” and “R”, and the pronunciation of the Korean “ㄱ” is somewhere between that of an English “G” and “K”. As an example, the term 골덴바지 may be translated to English as “Golden Pants” or “Cordon Pants” where the actual Korean pronunciation would be somewhere in between those two words.*

**Special Note 3:** *You will find that the terms “Korean” and “South Korean” as well as “Korea” and “South Korea” are used interchangeably in this book. Many people from South Korea simply use the terms “Korea” and “Korean,” often leaving Westerners confused with the question, “North Korea or South Korea?” In this book, you may assume that any usage of the word “Korea” refers to South Korea, and any usage of the word “Korean” refers to South Korean.*

**Special Thanks** *to Yire Lee for her extensive help in the development of this book and her diligent work in translating its counterpart for Korean speakers (Wronglish Konglish: A Guide to Avoiding Miscommunications when Speaking English with North Americans).*

# HOT DOG 핫도그

## Meaning in Konglish:

A sausage on a stick that's lightly breaded and fried. It's similar to an American corn dog, but it is often covered with lots of interesting and creative toppings and textures to create different delicious flavor profiles!



## Example Konglish Sentence:

I love hot dogs because they are on a stick and are easy to eat.

## Translated to American English:

I love corn dogs because they are on a stick and are easy to eat.

# ONE PIECE 원피스

## Meaning in Konglish:

A casual dress

## Example Konglish Sentence:

She's wearing a one piece to the party.

## Translated to American English:

She's wearing a dress to the party.



## What Kind of Party?

Here is a conversation I once had with a Korean student:

**Me** – What are you going to wear to the party tomorrow?

**Student** – I'm going to wear a one piece.

**Me** – Oh? It's a swimming party?

**Student** (*confused*) – No. It's not a swimming party.

**Me** (*confused*) – It's not? Then why are you wearing a swimsuit if it's not a swimming party?

**Student** (*more confused*) – I'm not wearing a swimsuit tomorrow!

**Me** (*even more confused*) – What? I'm confused. You said you were wearing a one piece tomorrow?

## JUNIOR 후배

### Meaning in Konglish:

1. Someone younger than you
2. Someone who has worked at your company for a shorter period of time in a lower position (which usually means they are younger than you in Korea)

### Example Konglish Sentence:

I met my junior at a market.

### Translated to American English:

I ran into a girl I went to high school with at a market. She was a grade younger than me / a grade behind me.

### Korean Life & Culture – Age Hierarchy

In South Korea, it is very common to talk about age. “How old are you?” is a common question for someone you are meeting for the first time. Your age commonly determines your position in a job, so even in the workplace, this is a normal topic of discussion. The Korean language has different levels of respect and formality, many of which are determined by age. If you are speaking to someone older than you, even just one year older, you will likely speak to them using different word forms than you would if speaking to someone the same age or younger than you. So culturally, even when speaking English, talking about age in Korea is not considered taboo for adults as it sometimes is in the United States.

## PUNK 펑크

### Meaning in Konglish:

Flat tire

### Example Konglish Sentence:

She had a punk this morning, so she'll be late to the meeting today.

### Translated to American English:

She had a flat tire this morning, so she'll be late to the meeting today.



## RADIATOR 라디에이터

### Meaning in Konglish:

Space heater, portable heater, electric heater

### Example Konglish Sentence:

American office buildings are so cold because of the *air con*, but you can buy a radiator at the Korean store.

### Translated to American English:

American office buildings are so cold because of the *air conditioner*, but you can buy a space heater at the Korean store.

