“What did the Korean grandmother say to the turkey?”: Joking around in Korean, English, and Konglish

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Joking is a device used in solidarity building within a group. In a bilingual group where members have varying degrees of competences in both languages, linguistic devices of joking, like homonyms, puns, and other plays on words, become increasingly complex. For a joke to be understood and to evoke a response, the teller and the listener(s) must share a measure of cultural, linguistic, and social knowledge.

In this paper, I will show how a close-knit group of Koreans and Korean Americans navigate joke-telling. This group consists of 10 to12 young people of Korean descent who are learning poongmul, Korean drumming rooted in farm music. Although everyone speaks Korean and English, their levels of competence vary widely, with a majority preferring to speak English rather than Korean. The group meets at least once a week for practice, as well as for performances and social gatherings. Jokes are told in Korean, English, and a mixture of the two, or Konglish. Sometimes, jokes that are told in English have to be explained in Korean and vice versa. In other times, members who have better facility in one language co-opts and uses expressions and phrases of the other language in and out of context as a joke. The study is based on field notes and interviews with members of the group.

By looking at contexts and ways in which joking is deployed I will demonstrate how it becomes a tool for fostering solidarity and, ultimately, cultural and ethnic identity formation.

Key terms: Asian American studies, bilingualism, cultural studies, discourse analysis, ethnography