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My Father Tongue

These are the Korean words and phrases that I understood as a child:

Bulgogi: barbecued beef

Kalbi: barbecued short ribs

Keem: crispy fried sheets of dried seaweed

Mandoo: dumplings

Kimchee: spicy fermented cabbage that burns the mouth and makes eyes water

Kap shi da: Let's go!

Bulli bulli kap shi da: Hurry up! Let's go!

Pi nang ka: flee

The food words were only useful when we visited relatives, because they didn't refer to anything we ever ate at home. The other words and phrases were more integrated into our family vocabulary. "You'd be in big trouble if we had to *pi nang ka*," my father would tell my brothers and me if we were running late. "The communists would get you all." We didn't think about what it really meant to *pi nang ka*. It was just a phrase that my father used.

I also knew—or rather, recognized the sounds of—some Korean folk songs. My father sang Korean songs around the house, and although my mother was considered the musical parent, my father sang on pitch and with great feeling, and I loved to hear him. He also liked to sing Japanese military songs, which he learned growing up in Japanese-occupied Korea. When he sang those he usually accompanied them with vigorous arm-swinging. When he was a boy, he said, the students began each school day exercising in the schoolyard while singing those songs. Under the Japanese occupation, the schools were taught by Japanese teachers, the lessons conducted in Japanese, and the Korean students given Japanese names.

When I was a child, my father would sing to me at night when I had trouble sleeping. Sometimes he sang the folk songs, and sometimes he sang the Japanese military songs, sometimes with the arm-swinging and sometimes without. Perhaps the heavy downbeats soothed me. In time I was able to sing all the songs he

sang to me, in the same way that a child might sing *frair-uh zhock-uh* without knowing the meaning of the words. But when I asked him what the songs were about, he would say, “They’re Japanese army songs. They mean ‘Kill all the Chinese.’” So I gave up asking.

At some point, I became more persistent about the meanings of the words. Perhaps I had started school, or was learning to read, and had begun to believe that everything could be deciphered. I remember trying to pin my father down, begging him to translate my favorite Korean folk song, one which was meant to accompany a hand-clapping game that my mother taught me.

“Uh, it’s something about the moon,” my father said.

“No, the words, tell me what the words mean,” I nagged.

“Too much trouble,” he said.

I turned to my mother, but she had left Korea when she was six years old, and although she could readily show me the hand-clapping, she could only struggle with the words. “Let’s see,” she said, frowning as she remembered. “*Pu d’n hanul*, that’s, um, nighttime.”

“No, Mom, that’s wrong,” my father cut her off.

“Then you translate for her.”

“Naah,” and a waving gesture, both hands.

The other Koreans of my parents’ generation spoke Korean to each other and to their children, belonged to Korean churches, traveled to Korea on a regular basis. My parents did none of those things. We knew a few other Korean families, and I remember feeling, when we visited them, that they were Korean in a way that we were not. Their homes were pungent with the smells of fermented *kimchee*, their walls adorned with Korean painted scrolls, and they all seemed to have this particular kind of round, embroidered silk pillow on their sofas and round tricolored fans hanging on their walls. Their English was equally foreign to me—heavily accented, broken up with unfamiliar words.

My parents did not speak Korean at home. This was partly because my mother’s Korean was poor, but it may also have been because my father did not care to. He was not interested in being a part of any Korean community. On the few occasions when I saw my father interact with Korean people, he returned their bows with stiff, uncomfortable nods and grunted in response to their politeness.

My father grew up in an unusually westernized family. His father had been orphaned in North Korea at a young age, and an American missionary had taken

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an interest in his education and eventually sent him to the United States. My grandfather spent eleven years in this country as a young man, earning graduate degrees from Yale and the Princeton Theological Seminary. When he returned to Korea, he taught English at a university in Seoul until his western background made him a target of Japanese suspicion, and he was removed from his post, and his home, during the war. In the years after the war, he became Korea's minister of education and founded a major university. He dreamed of the day when young Koreans would not need to go abroad to receive first-class educations.

His first loyalty was to the Korean people, but my grandfather had also loved living in the United States. He took the name George, after the missionary who had been his mentor, and he gave his sons American names as well. My grandfather spoke a quaint 1920s vernacular English. This was his favorite joke: "Why is bread like the sun? Because it rises with the yeast and sets under the vest."

Every time he told this joke, he laughed a full, booming laugh, though he was not a man who laughed often. He plainly enjoyed speaking English to us during his rare visits. He never attempted to teach us any Korean, and as far as I know, never suggested to my parents that we should learn.

My father's mother spoke English fluently—she had been my grandfather's best student when they met—but she did so only grudgingly. She complained to me once about how irritating she found my grandfather's fondness for Western food. She disliked cooking big steaks, couldn't stand shredded wheat. She had wanted all four of her sons to stay near her, in Korea, but instead they had all moved permanently to the United States. She and my father, her second son, did not get along.

When I went to college, I was still so unaccustomed to seeing other Asian-American people that I found myself staring at them. I enthusiastically attended the first meeting of the Korean-American club, thrilled at the thought that there was an entire club made up solely of people who were *just like me*. Despite the fact that I had never had anything in common with the few Korean-American kids I had met in my life, I believed for some reason that here, at last, would be a group with whom I could identify. The meeting was held in a small dining room, and when I walked in, I heard something odd—they were all speaking Korean, the sounds and cadences of which I associated with people of my parents' age or older. I found an empty spot and set down my tray, and the girl on my right smiled at me and addressed me in Korean. When I responded in English, her

smile waned, and she turned back to the person on her other side. A few people made a slight effort to speak to me in English. But not for long. After all, they hadn't formed a club in order to speak English.

"Why didn't you ever want us to learn to speak Korean?" I asked my father the next time I was home.

"Why would I?" he replied.

"All the other Korean kids speak Korean."

"So what?"

"So it makes me feel uncomfortable around them."

"So don't be around them."

"Why didn't you think it was important?"

"Because it isn't. You're American. You'll never need to speak it, you'll never live there."

"It's still important," I persisted.

"Oh bullshit," he said. "What difference does it make what language your ancestors happened to speak?" I knew he wasn't interested in the subject, but I was mad at him for making me an oddball, so I continued.

"It's easy for you to be so dismissive. You grew up in Korea, so you don't know what it's like to always be an outsider. Maybe it would have been nice if we didn't have to feel like outsiders among Koreans, too."

"Don't tell me about being an outsider. I'm an outsider in my own family." He stopped. He leaned back in his chair, took off his glasses, wiped his face with his palm.

"I'll tell you something," he said, putting his glasses back on. "Once, when you kids were little, I thought that maybe you should be aware that we weren't the only Korean people in the world. So I decided to take the boys to tae kwon do classes."

I remembered that he had done that. I remembered that it had seemed like an effort, that it had taken up the better part of Saturday.

"I had to take them all the way into Boston, a forty-five minute drive, but I thought it would be good for them to meet some other Korean boys, and to see a big, strong Korean guy who knew how to fight. And you know what? The first day I took them, it turned out the teacher was a teeny little blonde woman. There were no Koreans in the class at all. The whole idea was stupid. Your 'heritage' doesn't matter—that's just what you happen to be given by someone else, whether you like it or not. Your culture is what you choose."

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“It’s not that simple,” I tried to argue, but my father is a scientist, and for him things are either true or false.

“Yes, it is. You wish you knew how to speak Korean? So go learn how.”

So after college I decided to go to Korea to try to learn how. My grandfather had recently passed away, and although my grandmother was not exactly alone—she lived with a maid and a chauffeur—she was lonely, so I spent the summer living with her in her house in Seoul.

The house was surrounded by a garden, which in turn was surrounded by high stone walls and a gate that kept out urchins and noises from the narrow, dusty street. One lone rooster ran free in the garden. I never understood what it was doing there, but I sought it out after lunch whenever we had chicken soup, feeling my stomach settle only after I caught sight of its scruffy dark russet head. The house was quite large, with numerous bedrooms, most of which were empty except for piles of enormous pink sacks of rice and crates of soft drinks tied with orange twine. My grandmother chose to sleep on a padded mat in a small room off the living room, where she had taped some photographs of my grandfather to the wall.

During the day my grandmother would have a cavalcade of visitors, who bowed very low before her and brought her cases of high-quality American—as opposed to Korean—Coca-Cola, which the maid lugged off to one of the bedrooms. Sometimes her friends would be accompanied by their children and grandchildren, and they would all bow, one generation at a time, lower and lower and lower. I would stand by her side, her only descendent on the continent, mute and mostly uncomprehending. I am sure I seemed quite possibly retarded, in fact, since I could not bring myself to bow when people bowed to me and could only sort of nod my head in a sheeplike way.

“This person is the daughter of your first son?” This much I could understand.

“No. The daughter of my second son.”

“Ah.” No interest.

“My first son has no children.”

“Ah?” More interest.

“My second son has a PhD.”

“Ah!!” Considerable interest, followed by what I took to be a cursory evaluation of my obvious deficiencies as a potential daughter-in-law, and whether they could be modified or at least overlooked.

At night my grandmother cried. She told me that of all her children, she missed my dad the most. When I relayed this to him he said, “Oh, bullshit.”

My grandmother took me to the mountains south of Seoul, where a friend of hers had a house with a vast swimming pool carved right into the rock. A waylaid mountain stream tumbled into the pool from a pipe carved like a dragon's head, and then spilled off the far end back down the mountain. The edge of the pool looked like the edge of the world, with the water running over it and only mist beyond.

"Sometimes I come here when the students from the university are visiting," said my grandmother from where she sat in a chair by the pool, fanning herself with a round red, yellow, and blue fan. She was a fleshy woman, and as she seemed to be always sitting down, her height was difficult for me to gauge. She had naturally curly hair and large round eyes, and so was often mistaken for a foreigner, someone with Western blood. When my grandfather ran, unsuccessfully, for a congressional seat in 1960, an opponent accused my grandfather of disloyalty to his people and country because he had married "a German." The suggestion that she was not of pure Korean blood offended my grandmother deeply.

"The young people all love this swimming pool. They all go right in," she told me, fanning.

"It's as cold as ice," I told her, pulling my toe back quickly.

"Yes, very healthy. We Koreans are strong people. We love the cold. The Korean young people really enjoy it. I see you don't like it. I'm sorry, you're not having fun."

"I'm having plenty of fun," I said, spreading out my towel and sitting down.

"I thought you would like it here, too. I'm sorry," said my grandmother, shaking her head.

I suppressed an urge to shake the rest of her.

"Grandma, don't be sorry. It's really beautiful here. I'm having fun."

"No. You don't like the pool. *All* the young Korean people like the pool."

I could see no other way to make her stop but to get up and dive into the pool, so—teeth clenched with determination, irritation, and fear of the cold—I did. I swam across the short way and back. I then shot out of the water, grabbed the towel, and rubbed my legs until the little bumps disappeared. But suddenly the sun on me felt very good, and I was quite pleased with myself for the first time that summer. I turned to my grandmother, jubilant.

"It's too bad," my grandmother said.

"Grandma, what? I went in. It was great."

“You went in? I didn’t see you! I don’t think you did. And we came all the way up here so you could have a nice time.”

And then, even though I actually wanted to go back in the pool, somehow I just couldn’t. I tried to hold on to the feeling of satisfaction I had known just a moment before, but, without even trying very hard, she had replaced it with confusion and doubt.

I took a job teaching English at the Foreign Language Institute at the university my grandfather had founded, and as part of my compensation, I was entitled to enroll in a Korean language class. My fellow students were mostly college-age Korean-American kids, all of whom, as far as I could tell, had been sent by their parents in an effort to get them to meet other Korean-American kids, preferably of the opposite sex. I am sure no one else’s father had rolled his eyes and said, “You’ll hate it there.”

The first day, the teacher, a trim, sprightly young woman, asked each student a question. I still don’t know what the question was. I was the only person who didn’t understand her. As it turned out, most of the other students were in a beginner class, because, like my mother, they spoke a childish form of the language and needed to learn the more formal, adult way of speaking. All of them, however, seemed able to understand what was said to them and respond.

I looked at the teacher blankly. I felt defensive and probably looked hostile. She repeated the question, louder. Everyone, it seemed, spoke to me loudly when I was in Korea. The less I appeared to comprehend, the louder they spoke.

“I don’t understand Korean,” I said in English.

Her eyes widened. “None? Nothing?”

“That’s why I signed up for a beginner class.”

“Yes, but . . . none?”

“None.”

“Your parents are Korean? Or, maybe . . . you are half?”

“My parents are both Korean.”

“Aaaah.” A shake of the head and an intake of air through the teeth—a common Korean expression of incredulity, to which I had become accustomed.

The Korean language is really several languages, a different one for each type of person you encounter. There is a formal language, appropriate for addressing your superiors. There is a language you speak among your friends, another to use

with servants. Therefore, when you meet someone for the first time, you must establish your relative positions in order to know how to speak. Who is older? Who is from a better family? Who attended a better school? (The schools and universities are all rigidly ranked. "Better" is not a matter of personal opinion.) Is the other person someone worthy of respect? A doctor, or a teacher? Then you greet that person politely: *Anyong ha shim ni ka*. Is the other person coarse, uneducated? Then you say, *Yah*.

Is the other person your older brother? Then you say, *Un-yi*. Is he your younger brother? Then you say, *Yah*.

My father's older brother, Soon Ik, the firstborn son, had been a handsome child. When he was five, he was discovered using the family's passbook at the local grocery store to buy candies for his friends. When he was six, he was found stealing his father's leather gloves. At school, he would copy poems from books and try to pass them off as his own.

My father, Sung Ik, was two years younger. He was an ugly but clever baby, interested in everything his older brother did. Soon Ik brought his homework, showed it to his little brother, and taught him to read. Before long, the younger brother was reading as well as the older. When he started school, my father was promptly promoted. Shortly after that, Soon Ik gave up on school forever.

Soon Ik was the firstborn son, and the future of the family's reputation depended upon him. If Soon Ik lied about something, my grandmother made sure that what he said became true. If he took money from her purse, she said yes, she knew about it; she had given it to him. If anyone accused him of anything, that person was denounced. He was not made for school, she declared; he didn't need book learning. He had people skills. He was creative and artistic. More than anything, he was handsome. She made sure he always dressed well.

My father, the second son, could not be permitted to make his brother look bad in comparison. "Studious," decreed my grandmother, "but awkward. Doesn't care about his looks. Dresses badly. Sickly. Not good with girls."

My father left home for good when he was sixteen. "It was time for my brother to go to the United States for his education, and my parents decided to send me, too," he says. "I was an afterthought. They thought it would be good for us to have each other." My father did not return to Korea until he was thirty-five. In the intervening years, he never even called his mother.

I found this out recently because of telemarketers. They often call up my father

and address him in Korean, assuming he would love to have a special deal on long-distance calls to Korea. They do the same thing to me, but usually my husband, Daniel, who is English, answers, and when they say, “*Yoposayo?*” he says something like “There’s nobody here by that name, my good man,” and then I don’t get any of those calls for some time. My father, however, becomes enraged when they do this to him.

“It is wrong for them to assume anything about me,” he says. “Nobody in this country should *ever* talk to me in Korean. Or assume anything about me. I tell them, go ahead, check my phone records. I have *never* called Korea in my *entire* life. I wouldn’t even know how.”

I tried to recall the phone conversations I had overheard but did not really listen to as a child, during which he spoke, very loudly because of the iffy overseas connection, the language he never taught us. He always sounded angry to me, because his voice was so loud and the language so full of throat-clearing and grunting. Now that I think about it, I suppose it could well be true that he never initiated those calls.

I did learn some Korean that summer. At school I learned:

Bul: fire

Gogi: meat

Ka da: the verb meaning “to go”

-p shi da: verb ending meaning “let’s do”

I also learned at my grandmother’s house, from meeting her friends:

Namja chingu: boyfriend.

Any conversation directed at me involved food and one new subject—did I have a *namja chingu*? I also learned:

Chip: house

Saram: person

Chipsaram: wife

I also found out that I had a Korean name. When my grandmother and I took flowers to my grandfather’s grave, she told me that the names of all the grandchildren were engraved on the commemorative stone. I scanned the *hangul* writing for our names, but there was no English written there.

“Oh, no, not your American names,” she said, noticing me looking, knowing I could not read the *hangul*. “Your Korean names.”

“We don’t have Korean names,” I said.

“Oh, yes, your grandpa picked them out,” she said. “Before he died.”

“Huh,” I said. Then, after a moment, it occurred to me to ask, “So what’s mine?”

“*Ki Ryun*,” she said. “*Ryun* is a lotus flower.”

Oh give me a break, I thought.

Later that day, I called my father. The overseas connection was terrible. There was a certain trick to talking on the phone from Korea at the time; you had to surround your speech with pauses to give the sound time to travel so far. I imagined my voice arriving in his ear, all tired out. The little gaps in our conversation made me aware of how far I was from home, served as pointed reminders that the distance between where he was and where I was was too real and the electronic bridge puny, man-made, not up to the task.

“Did you know, Dad, that I have a Korean name?”

“No you don’t,” he said.

“Yes, I do,” I said. “It’s *Ki Ryun*.”

“What? *Ki* what?” he asked, the connection causing him to echo.

“*Ki Ryun*. Grandma says it means ‘lotus flower,’” I said.

“Oh bullshit,” he said. “I didn’t give you a Korean name.”

Korean, unlike Chinese, is written phonetically. According to legend, King Sejong the Great invented *hangul*—the Korean alphabet—in the fourteenth century. Prior to that time, the Korean language was written in Chinese characters. Because each Chinese character represented a word rather than a sound, literacy required the memorization of thousands of complex characters and was achievable only through costly full-time study, possible only for members of the elite class. King Sejong, however, wished for literacy for all of his people—an admirably forward-thinking and egalitarian ideal that I find remarkable in light of what strikes me as the inherently hierarchical nature of the language. King Sejong created a phonetic alphabet, beautifully simple and easy to learn, even by me.

The language is written in syllables, each consisting of either two or three elements: a beginning consonant, followed by a vowel placed to the right, and sometimes an ending consonant placed underneath, forming an inverted triangle. There are fourteen consonants and ten vowels that, when combined, ex-

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press every sound in the Korean language. I have a favorite consonant, the one that is shaped like a circle. When it is in the beginning position, it is silent. But when it appears in the end position, it acquires the sound *ng*.

I have been told that my father refused to speak when he first came to the United States. He said nothing for almost a year. Then, when he opened his mouth, out came perfect English.

Or nearly perfect. When I was a child, my brothers and I would tease him about his grammar mistakes. The area that gave him the most trouble was pluralization. “I need to pack my pajama and underwears,” he would say, to our great delight. When we laughed, he would say, “There is no rule about the *s*. Sometimes you add it and sometimes you don’t. It makes no sense.”

He never makes those mistakes anymore. He still has a slight inflection to his speech that marks him as foreign born, but his grammar is perfect and his vocabulary copious. My father loves the English language. He loves the abundance of it. He loves the fact that you can choose a word that will express precisely whatever it is you want to say. He loves that a thing can be big or huge or gigantic or titanic or monstrous or monumental.

“In Korean,” he told me, “you can show variation of meaning by varying how loudly and emphatically you speak. So you can say big, and very big, and VERY BIG. You can. But you can’t describe degrees or qualities of bigness in writing, with words.”

“That’s not true,” said my mother.

“How would you know?” asked my dad. “You speak Korean like a little kid. You are illiterate in Korean. I’m telling you, the written language has no nuances. That’s why Korean literature sucks.”

“You’d better not say that around Koreans,” said my mother.

“Why not? They’d have to admit I’m right. I mean, there are some poems and stories in Korean that are pretty nice, but it’s because they’re so simple. Childish. That’s the only way you can use the language. There is no range.”

“I’m sure Koreans would take issue with that.”

“Yeah, well, they don’t know shit.”

My father particularly loves the way the British use their language, the restraint and understatement. A few years ago he told me that he had seen a *Masterpiece Theatre* production of *Pride and Prejudice*, and he described the scene in which Elizabeth and Lady Catherine confront one another.

“So Elizabeth doesn’t lose her temper, she doesn’t yell. She just says, ‘You have insulted me in every possible method,’” he related. “‘You have insulted me in every possible method.’ Isn’t that terrific?” For the next few days, he repeated the line as often as he could, at the slightest provocation, with his best British accent.

When I was twenty-three, back from Korea and working in Washington, D.C., my father came to visit me and took me to Woo Lae Ok, a Korean restaurant. At that time, in the 1980s, there weren’t very many Korean restaurants, and I felt uncomfortable going to one by myself, since I knew the waitresses would speak rapid Korean at me and then I would get the head-shaking, teeth-whistling thing. So this was a treat, to go with my father.

The restaurant looked like the restaurants in Seoul, with wooden tables with grills set into their middles for cooking the meat. Like my grandmother’s kitchen, the restaurant smelled of garlicky smoke, an odor both vaguely familiar and alienating. The waiter came by and pulled out his little pad, bowed slightly, and addressed my father in Korean.

“Yeah, yeah,” said my father. He pushed up his glasses and examined the menu. “We’ll have the barbecued beef.”

The waiter looked up from his pad. “*Bulgogi?*”

“Barbecued beef,” repeated my father.

The waiter looked confused, opened his mouth.

My father looked at him over the top of his glasses and enunciated. “*Barbecued beef.*”

The waiter hesitated, nodded, and scurried off.

I have learned a few things about my father’s songs. First, the words to the Japanese army songs my father used to sing to me really do mean, in essence, “Kill all the Chinese.” Second, Korean people are deeply offended by the notion of a Korean person, any kind of Korean person, singing any kind of Japanese song, but particularly military songs, particularly to a child, particularly to a daughter. But because I am ignorant, I am also innocent, and to me they are ironic lullabies.

I also learned the meaning of my favorite folk song. I learned enough in Seoul to be able to use a Korean-English dictionary, and, painstakingly, I translated it for myself. It is about how the moon is a boat, sailing across the blue sky. I wondered if it would have made some difference if I had known what the words meant when I was a child, if it would have felt different to fall asleep with an

image floating under my eyelids to connect with the melody. The end of the song goes like this:

It has no oar
 It has no sail
 And yet it goes very well
 Toward the country in the west.

After I had learned the words, the next time my father sang the song, I told him what it meant. And to my surprise, he smiled at me.

After that, my interest in learning Korean waned.

When my son, Jonathan, was in second grade, he was assigned to write down all the different countries his family members had come from.

“Well,” I said. “You know Grandma and Grandpa were born in Korea.”

“They were?” he said. “I didn’t know that.”

“Of course you knew that,” I insisted, taken aback and immediately feeling guilty, as if I had neglected to teach him how to brush his teeth. “You didn’t know that?”

“No, I had absolutely no idea,” he maintained. “South Korea or North Korea?”

It had never occurred to me that I had to make a point of telling him that. I thought that somehow he would simply know. It seemed to me that I had always known my parents came from Korea, just as I knew I had brown eyes and black hair. I had considered this knowledge to be different from other kinds of knowledge, and somehow not teachable like a set of facts or a skill or a lesson. I realized that I had been wrong. Heritage isn’t inherent. It has to be learned.

I remembered when I was in second grade, or thereabouts, I had had a similar assignment. It turned out, rather obviously, that I was the only one in the class whose ancestors came from Korea, or from anywhere near there. I remember feeling that everyone was looking at me. I recall trying to make myself small and invisible; I was terrified that someone would point me out—*the only one*.

When Jonathan came home from school, I grilled him about his day.

“So, did you learn anything interesting about people’s ancestors?”

“Sort of,” he said. “Two other people have family members from Korea.”

I have to keep reminding myself that he is not destined to relive all my experiences. For him, growing up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the beginning of the twenty-first century, being the “only one” has not been a source of anxiety. I was galvanized into action, however, by what I took to be a gap in my

parenting, a failure to convey relevant information. I made a dutiful trip to the bookstore and found, in the children's section, a book about King Sejong. Colorfully illustrated, it retold the story of the invention of the alphabet. I was excited to have found a book about Korea, but when I presented it to my son, he was not interested, and even after I sat down with him and read it to him, he seemed puzzled by why I seemed so insistent. It is true that as exotic tales from faraway lands go, this one is bland. Just as in his world, such a book isn't hard to find; in his experience, being Korean—or half Korean—has not been noteworthy in either a positive or negative way. I felt discomfited by his lack of interest, though. Wasn't there something I was supposed to pass down? Didn't I owe him a heritage?

A few days later Jonathan sat looking out the window at the rain.

“It's raining *torrentially*,” he remarked.

I made a mental note to repeat his comment to my father. I knew my father would love to hear how well his grandson uses the English language.