

42 - Language Questions for North Korea

Opening

by Ben Torrey

Ben Torrey discusses the significant language differences between North and South Korea and their implications for effective communication and outreach.

Duration: 7:51

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, Romans 12:18

Topics: "North Korea"

Description

In this sermon, Ben Torrey discusses the language barriers that will need to be overcome when sharing the love of Jesus Christ in North Korea. He highlights the significant differences between the North Korean and South Korean languages, which are greater than most people realize. Torrey also mentions the use of language in official propaganda and ideological statements, and how it may affect the perception and response of North Koreans to preaching about Christ. He concludes by emphasizing the importance of understanding and respecting cultural differences in language to build relationships and extend the love of Christ.

Transcript

Good evening, this is Ben Torrey once again. As you may remember, I began a series last week on questions that we need to be exploring before the opening of North Korea. Last week I spoke about the issue of land.

Tonight I want to look at the questions about language. When the doors to North Korea open and God's people seek to go into that land and to share the love of Jesus Christ, there will be many barriers to understanding to overcome, not the least of which is the difference in language. Many people of South Korea seem to have an assumption that there is really no big difference in language between North and South Korea.

While most everyone is aware that there are some differences, they tend to think that surely they're not that great. The reality is a bit different. The differences between North Korean language and South Korean language is greater than most people realize.

For the average North Korean it takes about three years or more before he or she is comfortable conversing in South Korea. The question before us then is how different are the two and just what is the nature of those differences? How much of the difference is regional dialect and how much of it is from developing in different ways isolated from each other over the past 60 years? What has influenced the development of language over the past several generations? The better we understand, the easier it is to avoid misunderstanding and to develop programs to overcome the differences. One major and easily understood difference is in the area of vocabulary.

There are several aspects to this. Some very common terms are different. In the South, whenever people need to take care of certain bodily functions, they use the Hwajangsil, but in North Korea they use the Isingsil.

In the South we all drink Nokja, but in the North they drink Purunja. Add to this the fact that many American terms have made their way into the spoken language of South Korea, while in the North there has been a consistent effort to prevent this from happening. Think for a moment about any conversation you may have had in Korean recently.

How many English words did you or the other person use without even thinking? A young Korean-American friend of mine with a great concern for North Korea was in China recently. He and some friends went into a North Korean restaurant in Beijing. He turned to the waitress, a North Korean, and asked her for a menu pan, using a combination of English and Korean word.

She reacted quite strongly, telling him that they did not have anything like that there. They used a charimpyeo. In North Korea they refer to a goalkeeper as a munjikki, a donut as a karakjipang, and so forth.

The vocabulary difference increases when you think of the rapidly changing slang and other language influenced by the Internet and youth culture of the South, something that is virtually unknown in the North. There is still another phenomenon influencing the vocabulary of South Korea. That is the constant invention of new words, often created from English or some other language, but still used only in the South.

One example is the short form of digital camera, dikka. I consider this to be a purely South Korean word since it's not used anywhere else in the world. Another one is handphone.

Although this is starting to get some currency abroad, the most widely used in the U.S. is still cell phone. As great as the vocabulary difference is, there are other aspects of language that we also need to consider and research. One area of special concern is how language is used in official propaganda and ideological statements.

Much of the superficial appearance and language of juche ideology is similar to certain aspects of Christianity. Similar terms are used to refer to Kim Il-sung in the North and to God in the South. How is such language used to convey fundamental moral or spiritual meaning in this context and how is it perceived by the hearers? Will this affect how North Koreans respond to preaching and teaching about the things of Christ? If so, we certainly need to understand this.

Otherwise we could be saying one thing and the North Korean could be hearing something very different. There is another issue that is subtle that can cause enormous problems without being recognized. It has

to do with the way people use language.

It relates to thought processes. Because this issue is poorly understood, it often leads to major misunderstanding, false assumptions, and serious breakdowns in communication. Numerous North Koreans have confirmed to me that they sometimes find it more difficult to communicate with South Koreans than with Americans.

This is not a vocabulary issue. It has to do with the way language is used. South Koreans are famous for ambiguity and indirectness in conversation.

Many Westerners living and working in Korea find this to be most frustrating because we Americans tend to speak bluntly and want to get right to the point. We find it tedious and confusing to have to talk around a subject and constantly to be watching the other to see how our words are affecting them. In fact, we rarely do that which comes so natural to the South Korean.

There is no good English word for the Korean term nunji because it just is not something that Westerners do. North Koreans are much like Americans in this way. They tend to be blunt and to the point.

They also experience the same confusion and frustration that the American experiences. On the other hand, South Koreans often find this North Korean directness to be offensive. They get angry.

I have a co-worker who commented to me that dealing with me has been helpful training for dealing with North Koreans. In this case, we were talking about telephone use. He commented that a certain North Korean friend would call on the phone and launch right into what was on his mind, get to the point, and then cut the conversation short just like I do.

At first, it was very difficult for my co-worker to take but he began to realize that the issue was not the other person's rudeness or thoughtlessness but a cultural difference similar to the one between him and me. A few years ago, many churches opened their arms to the increasing flood of North Koreans coming South, only to drop ministries to refugees after a year or so, frequently citing rudeness and ingratitude as the reasons. This is very sad to me because I am sure that the North Koreans were neither rude nor ungrateful, at least for the most part.

It was the way they used language among other cultural factors. It came across as rude and ungrateful to the South Koreans reaching out to them, who ended up being offended, not realizing they were dealing with a cultural gap. We should ask why there is this difference and where did it come from? Was it the influence of Marxist egalitarianism, heavy Soviet or Chinese influence over the years, or something else? Understanding this would make it much easier to overcome the differences and not let it interfere with the relationships that we seek to build or with extending the love of Christ.

It might be helpful for you who listen to this program to give some thought as to how you use language and what cultural differences there are wrapped up in differences of language. With that thought, I will say good night until next week.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/24/SID24751.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ben-torrey/42-language-questions-for-north-korea-opening/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net