A Case Study of Misinterpreting in Korea-US Press Conferences

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1. Introduction

There is a saying that interpreters, like a bundle of bank notes, are known to the world only when they are fakes (Dejean 125). On July 13, 2005, just after the joint press conference of the US-Korean Foreign Ministers in Seoul, Korean reporters raised the problem with the US-side interpreter who worked English into Korean. It was the third of a series of interpreting commotions after the first one in October, 2004 during the visit of then-State Secretary Colin Powell and the second, in March, 2005 with Secretary Rice (Yonhap News, July 13, 2005). Reporters pointed out that procedural mistakes had happened during the last March visit, but this time, substantially, quite a few mistakes and omissions were made.
The US-side interpreter translated Palestinian authority as gwonwi in Korean, referring to the meaning of 'power', and agreement for a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula as dongmaeng, or 'alliance'. Articles ran in many newspapers the next morning also criticizing subsequent parts of the interpreting, where Secretary Rice's comments were not fully transferred and some important ideas omitted.

When we listen to the recorded video clips of the conference, such misgivings proved to be true and what is more surprising is the fact that not a single sentence or phrase had been correctly interpreted. In March 2005 also, the press was not happy with the interpreters mobilized by each of the two countries(Yonhap News, March 14, 2005). When the first question was not transferred by either of the two interpreters for about ten seconds, the Korean ministry's moderator of the conference was obliged to convey the gist of the question to the US interpreter. Some of the ensuing questions were not interpreted at all and only the corresponding answers were conveyed.

A US official confessed that they were aware of the seriousness of the issue(Segye Ilbo, March 14, 2005). He suggested the structural nature of the problem by saying, "The State Department makes it a rule that only those interpreters contracted as interpreters by the Department can accompany and interpret the State Secretary." On the other hand, the Korean Ministry diagnosed the repeated misinterpreting incidents by saying that interpreting is an on-going challenge for the Korea-US diplomacy.

Nevertheless, on September 14, 2006, the press conference following the Korea-US summit meeting at the White House was not an exception. A newly employed male interpreter revealed also his inexperience and showed the problem of non-professional interpreting. Fortunately, however, he did not make any headline at that time and was not known to the world.1)