

Preface

This book shares the language journey on which my family has embarked and which it is still on. I used to think children learn their parents' languages. I have since found that there are no teachers and no students; we all learn every day from each other. No-one speaks a perfect language, but our language arguably becomes perfect, tailored for our own unique needs.

My Korean-English family develops our own languages, mixing them together just as we cook food that is neither Korean nor English. In the process of tailoring our language, words matter, but so do gesture and prosody. We have learnt how different ingredients from each language carry particular nuances, be they emotional or attitudinal. It's a bit like seasoning. You might add some sugar to a particularly sour sauce to tone it down, just as my children might add Korean address terms to create solidarity when talking to a Korean person, even if the rest of the sentence is in English. Different words and gestures bring new meanings, and my family negotiates these meanings every day.

Crossing languages and combining the resources that we have is comparable to making a jigsaw puzzle. As a multilingual family, we make meanings using the puzzle pieces between and beyond our languages and cultures. In this practice of mixing and sharing our languages, we grow and nurture them. We learn not only how to speak and express ourselves but also how to listen and care for others. This is not a journey that we make as a family alone. Our languages are also built through our encounters with others, such as friends, neighbours, relatives. In the AI era, virtual assistants also interact with and impact us. On this journey, we also face conflict with ourselves and with others. It is not just words and languages that we must take into consideration: the cultures that we belong to also matter greatly. Our free and border-crossing manner of communication can be misunderstood as being incorrect and broken. Although it may look broken at first glance, I want to suggest we have found the perfect language of our own. It helps us to find our sense of belonging and identity that enriches our lives. I hope this book provides some insight into multilingual families as they navigate and explore their multilingual and multicultural world through language.

