

CHAPTER 3

LANGUAGE PLANNING IN THE TWO KOREAS

One language, Two Policies

1. INTRODUCTION

The Korean Peninsula is a large body of land suspended from China, bounded on the north-west by the Yalu River and on the north-east by the Tumen River, on the west by the Yellow Sea, on the east by the Sea of Japan, and on the south by the Korea Straits.¹ The Peninsula is approximately 670 miles long and, at its widest point, approximately 320 miles wide; there are also some 3,000 islands to the south and west of the Peninsular mainland which belong to Korea, though only the largest (e.g., Cheju-do) are inhabited. Korea (including the mainland and the islands) covers a total area of approximately 219,020 km² (85,050 sq. mi.),² of which 120,540 km² lie in the North and 98,480 km² in the South, with a total population of something in the order of 69,158,519 million people (approximately 47,470,969 in the North and 21,687,550 in the South). (See Appendix A, Figure 6.)

2. BRIEF HISTORY

Although what is called the 'Northern theory' of Korean origin is accepted by many scholars, it is not by any means universally accepted. According to that view, Tungusic-speaking tribesmen began to infiltrate the Korean Peninsula around 4,000 BCE. (It is thought that a people now designated 'Paleo-Siberians' had inhabited the Peninsula since about 30,000 years ago, but nothing is known of them or their language.) During the period from approximately the 1st century BCE to approximately the 1st century CE, many small tribal states sprang up in the Peninsula. While the inhabitants of these small states spoke ancient Korean, there appear to have been two distinct dialects: Han (spoken in Mahan, Chihan, and Byŏnhan in the southern peninsula), and Puyŏ (spoken in Puyŏ, Kokuryŏ, Okchŏ, and Yemack in Manchuria and northern Korea). It is important to note that China invaded and conquered the northern half of the peninsula in 108 BCE; the Chinese were not driven out until 313 CE.

Around the 4th century CE, three more-powerful states emerged: Kokuryo (speaking Puyŏ) in the northern peninsula, Paekche (whose ruling class spoke Puyŏ, though the general variety spoken in the area is not known) in the south-western peninsula, and Silla (speaking Han) in the south-eastern peninsula. The peninsula

was unified under the Silla state in approximately the 7th century CE, and the Han variety emerged as dominant, eventually becoming the sole basis for the Korean language.³ Mogul armies invaded Korea and essentially conquered it in 1259 CE, but they too were driven out in 1368 CE. In 1392, General Yi became king and founded the Yi dynasty, which lasted until 1910.

Not a great deal is known about the Korean language prior to the 15th century CE, in part because of the scarcity of records, and in part because only Chinese characters were used for writing.⁴ The alphabetic script of Korean (Hangŭl) was invented in the 15th century, and is normally attributed to King Sejong (Kim, N.-K. 1992). In 1590, Japanese forces attempted to invade Korea but were repulsed. In 1630 Manchu armies from China invaded Korea and dominated the country until the late 19th century. Furthermore, Korean rulers essentially closed the country to foreigners for some 200 years, from the 17th to the 19th centuries, causing the country to acquire the European sobriquet *The Hermit Kingdom*. In 1886, Korea's first 'modern' school (Yugyong Kongwon) was established; the teaching was done by teachers brought from the United States, in English, employing interpreters.

The use of Chinese characters in Korean writing constituted the main means of writing until the 19th century and the use of Chinese characters continues to some extent in South Korea, though in North Korea Chinese characters have largely been purged from the language. However, the extensive use of Chinese characters has resulted in a massive influx of Chinese loan words—so much so that roughly half of the contemporary Korean vocabulary consists of such loan words. Indeed, because Korean words and Chinese characters were used in parallel, a great deal of the native Korean vocabulary has disappeared. It is evident that the close contact with China over most of modern history has had a profound impact on the language. [See also discussion of Chinese characters in the chapter on Japan.]

In 1876, Japanese arms forced Korea to open some ports to foreign trade, and the United States and Russia, among other European states, signed commercial treaties with Korea. Shortly thereafter, Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), and in 1910 Japan annexed Korea.⁵ The Japanese ruled Korea until the end of World War II in 1945. During this period, Japanese was widely taught and was required in some registers.

In Korea, the Japanese Governor General undertook to implement educational policies comparable to those in Japan proper, stressing moral education and the importance of Japanese language (*kokugo*—not *nihongo*) through an assimilationist policy (Rhee 1992). The Koreans actively resisted assimilation; rather Japanese rule became a catalyst for Korean cultural and linguistic nationalism. Cumings (1997: 141) remarks: "Koreans never saw Japanese rule as anything but illegitimate and humiliating." While Korean intellectuals had for centuries cultivated Chinese writing, Japan's language-spread policy caused them to turn to Korean, written in Hangŭl, as an act of insubordination and resistance. In 1919, on the occasion of the death of the last Korean king, following the formal funeral, there were demonstrations which showed clearly that Koreans may have accepted the Japanese educational system, but that they categorically rejected the inculcation of Japanese culture and values, which was the primary objective of that educational system (Coulmas 2002).

With Japan's defeat at the end of World War II, United States troops occupied the southern half of Korea and Russian troops occupied the northern half. Separate governments were formed in each of the two parts of Korea. For two years, the US, the USSR, Britain, and the two Korean governments tried—but failed—to develop a plan for reunification, and in 1947 the problem was referred to the United Nations which undertook to conduct elections in each of the two separate areas. In the southern sector, the UN election resulted in the formation of a national assembly, which elected Syngman Rhee as its first president. No election took place in the northern sector; rather, The Democratic People's Republic of Korea was declared to exist on 15 August 1948, less than a month after Rhee's election in the south. Russia and the US withdrew their respective armed forces from Korea by mid-1949. North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, (in an attempt to achieve re-unification by force) beginning the Korean War (1950-1953).

Each of these events has had an impact on the Korean language; the presence of US troops in Korea from 1945-1949 and from 1950 to the present has brought a strong English influence to the Korean language in the South, while the presence of Russian troops, the pursuit of socialism and isolation have in their turn had an impact on the language in the north. The peninsula remains divided at the 38th parallel, though since 2000 there have been signs that there may be a thaw in relations between the two Koreas and that some sort of reunification may occur at some point in the future.

3. LANGUAGE

Korean has been widely spoken on the Peninsula since the Silla unification in the 7th century CE. However, the paucity of records and the exclusive use of Chinese characters has meant that any understanding of the Korean language really begins with the invention of the Hangŭl alphabet in the 15th century. That alphabet consists of 24 basic letters (14 consonants and 10 vowels), but there are some 40 symbols in use because some phonemes are represented by combinations of basic letters. Letters are not arranged in simple linear sequence; rather, the components of each syllable are combined in a vowel by consonant (10 x 14) rectangular arrangement (see Coulmas 1989: 121). Korean is an SOV language, employing such devices as postposition, relatively free word order, prodrop (and other kinds of ellipsis—at least in spoken discourse—for any information readily recoverable from context), and an elaborate system of honorifics—i.e.: (i.) formal (authoritative), (ii.) polite, (iii.) blunt, (iv.) familiar, (v.) intimate, and (vi.) plain—marked by a series of postpositional particles attached to the verb. The first two levels are typically used by a speaker to show deference to the hearer or between equals on formal and impersonal occasions. The third and fourth levels are normally used between elderly persons, but they are regarded as archaic and are slowly disappearing. The fifth and sixth levels are normally used by a senior to a junior or between equals who are on friendly terms. The sixth also constitutes the unmarked case, typically written in more or less formal discourse (Chang 1983).

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Kaplan, R.B.; Baldauf Jr., R.B.

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