

Comparison of the Korean and Japanese Language and Imperialism

Ammarah Hussaini ^{*,1}

^{*}Department of Humanities, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, IL 60616, USA

Historical Background

For the first half of the 20th century, the Korean peninsula was under imperial Japanese control. The Japanese rose in status to a global power in 1905 after victory in the Russo-Japanese War which was regarding the control of Korea and parts of Manchuria. That same year, the Korea-Japan Treaty of 1905 was signed which officially declared Korea a Japanese protectorate and by 1910, the peninsula was annexed (Weatherhead East Asian Institute).

Japanese Colonial Ideology:

According to Japanese ethnographers, Japanese and Koreans both belong to the same race however the Japanese were considered a more developed and advanced civilization. On the one hand, Japanese ethnographers claimed that Japanese and Koreans possessed "considerable physiognomic, linguistic, and cultural similarities" (Henry, 2005). On the other hand, Japanese ethnographers also indicated that the two cultures were very different and labeled Koreans as incompetent and unable to make progress themselves. This simultaneous similarity in race and differences in dispositions and stages of development validated Japan's role in leading Korea in civilizational and cultural development.

During Japanese imperial rule

Koreans were deprived of freedom of assembly, association, the press, and speech. Many private schools were closed because they did not meet certain arbitrary standards and the Japanese school system was instead enforced. In order to completely assimilate Korea into Japanese culture, students were taught in Japanese and subjects like Korean history and language were excluded (Britanica).

In opposition, Korean media such as newspapers and magazines spoke out against Japanese occupation and inspired Koreans with the ideals of patriotism and democracy. In the academic community, scholars conducted studies on Korean culture and tradition as well as the revival of interest in novels and poems in colloquial Korean. As war progressed, during peak World War II and the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Japan attempted to completely eradicate Korean culture through adopting Japanese-style names, and banning academic institutions dedicated to Korean studies as well as newspapers and magazines published in Korean. However, after the end of World War II in 1945, the Japanese surrendered and Korea was declared independent.

Similarities and Differences Between the Japanese and Korean Language

Both Japanese and Korean have roots in the Chinese language but evolved differently. In the 1st century BC, due to the

emergence of Buddhism in countries like Korea and China, the Chinese language was introduced to Korean people, and this was the reason behind the development of the alphabetical system called Hangul. However, in the 15th century, the Korean people tried to replace Hangul with Hanja, but they failed in the attempt, and Hangul is still the most recognized alphabetical system of the Korean language and has been in place for approximately five centuries.

Hanja is defined as traditional Chinese characters introduced in the fourth century that are adapted for the Korean language and while Hangul is the preexisting traditional Korean phonetic writing system, Hanja still plays a large role in the Korean language. Before Hangul was formally established and implemented by King Sejong the Great in the early twentieth century, Hanja used to be the predominant Korean writing system. In modern Korean, Hanja can be seen used in people's names, advertising, traditional phrases, arts, historical documents, and legal documents. Similarly to Chinese, the characters have their own distinct meaning and only pronunciation. The majority of Korean first and last names have a Hanja equivalent. For example, the last name Kim, pronounced "gim" in Hangul, would be pronounced "jīn" in Mandarin. Another common surname Park pronounced "bak" in Hangul, would be pronounced "piáo" in Mandarin. However, this is not restrictive as one Korean name could have multiple Hanja equivalents (Hooshmand, 2020).

On the other hand, kanji are Chinese characters adapted for the Japanese language. Kanji was introduced to the

Ancient Japanese in the eighth century almost four centuries after Hanja was introduced to the Korean peninsula and before that there was no writing system for the spoken language. Unlike in Korea, most words in Japanese are written in kanji but are pronounced with the Japanese phonetic sounds represented by Hiragana and Katakana. Kanji is most often used in writing nouns, verb roots, adjectives, and other important words whereas Hanja is used less frequently. An adaptation that came from kanji are verb tenses, prepositions, and other grammatical markers, which do not exist in Chinese, were then presented through kana or hiragana ("kanji", Britannica).

Comparison of the Honorific System Japanese and Korean Honorific System

The Japanese language utilizes a system of three different honorific speeches, called *keigo* (Advanced Plain), *Teineigo* (Simple Plain) and *Kudaketa* (Plain), which includes both honorific suffixes and prefixes when referring to others in a conversation. Suffixes are attached to the end of names and are often gender-specific, while prefixes are attached to the beginning of many nouns. *Keigo* is divided into two groups: *Sonkeigo* and *Kensongo* in which *Kensongo* is used when referring to a group that is of the same social standing such as a coworker, brother, or sister and *Sonkeigo* is more formal and used for bosses or customers. *Teineigo* is considered casual speech with a small degree of politeness. *Kudaketa* is used between people who are very close to each other (Backhouse, 2005).

On the other hand, Korean has over seven different speech levels with their own distinct arrangement of verb endings. Five of them can be grouped together as *jondaemal* which is the polite form and at the other can be grouped as *banmal* which is the casual form (Bruno, 2011).

Similarities and Differences

Honorific suffixes also indicate the level of the speaker and referred individual's relationship and are often used alongside other components of Japanese and Korean honorific speech. Honorific suffixes are generally used when referring to the person one is talking to or unrelated people, and not used when referring to oneself. If honorifics are

not used, then this means that the two people are very close. Similarly, the Korean honorific also reflects the hierarchical social relationship between a subject and a recipient. Both systems require people to be aware of their standing in the social hierarchy which includes whether they are older or younger, speaking to a man or woman, a person of a certain occupation, and whether or not they are close enough relationship wise to speak informally.

A major difference between the Korean and Japanese honorific system is that the Japanese system only uses prefixes, suffixes, and relations whereas the Korean system utilizes honorific particles, verbs with special honorific forms or honorific markers and special honorific forms of nouns that includes the terms of address. This can be highlighted especially in referring to occupation. For example, the word for

president in Japanese is *shacho* and in Korean it is *sajang*. However, when referring to the president, a Japanese person can simply call them *shacho* whereas the Korean person must add the particle *-nim* at the end and call them *sajangnim* (Bruno, 2011).

Moreover, the Japanese system is more flexible in their honorifics as they see standing as more relative. When addressing people there are “in-groups” and “out-groups” in the Japanese system. However, this is not the case in the Korean system, as honorifics are applied regardless of whether they are referring to a person or directly to them and does not take into “in-groups” and “out-groups” (Bruno, 2011).

Conclusion

Overall, Japanese imperialism had very little effect on the Korean language system despite attempts at eradicating Korean culture and language. The honorific systems of both Japanese and Korean are considered the most elaborate in the world which may be due to Chinese Confucian influence. Both systems place emphasis on social relationships when speaking with the Korean system being more rigid and inflexible than the Japanese.

Works Cited

Asia for Educators, C. U. (n.d.). *Key points across East Asia-by era*. Key Points | Asia for

Educators | Columbia University. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_1900-1950.html

Backhouse, E 2005, *The Lexical Field of Taste: A Semantic Study of Japanese Taste Terms*,

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bruno, L 2011, *Asian Honorifics*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Philadelphia

PA.

Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.). *Kanji*. Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved May 6, 2022,

from

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/kanji>

Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.). *Korea under Japanese rule*. Encyclopædia Britannica.

Retrieved May 6, 2022, from

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Korea/Korea-under-Japanese-rule>

Henry, T. A. (2005). Sanitizing Empire: Japanese Articulations of Korean Otherness and the

Construction of Early Colonial Seoul, 1905-1919. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 64(3),

639–675.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25075828>

Hooshmand, D., Funda, S., & Poggi, S. (2022, May 6). *Hanja in modern Korean - four places*

you'll see it. Discover Discomfort.

Retrieved May 6, 2022, from

<https://discoverdiscomfort.com/hanja-in-modern-korean/>