Korean Language Maintenance in Japan: an Osaka Study

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Introduction

This paper outlines the current sociolinguistic situation of the Korean minority in Japan. I focus on the role of the Korean language in Japanese society and in particular efforts to maintain its vitality. I shall draw upon some preliminary findings from an investigation which I am conducting among the Korean community of Ikuno-ku a district of Osaka. I have visited and observed two schools: one primary school and one junior high school in which the Korean language is now being taught, conducted interviews with 4 junior high school students, two women over the age of 70 and two 'activists' (30-40yrs old) involved in language maintenance.

I have found two language issues to be of interest and concern in the Korean speech community: the Korean language maintenance and the restoration of Korean names. The concept of bilingual education is not yet established as important not even among the Korean community as a whole and certainly not in the Japanese official bodies such as local education boards.

The most dense concentration of Korean speakers in Japan lies in the Ikuno-ku ward of metropolitan Osaka. It was noticeable that all of the Korean informants interviewed were strongly marked speakers of Osaka dialect (Osaka-ben). Preliminary findings appear to suggest a link, from the point of view of ethnolinguistic solidarity between the Korean language and Osaka dialect. Identification with the Korean language must also be placed beside identification with Osaka dialect. Both of these speech varieties are consciously contrasted with standard Japanese (Hyojungo) which is identified geographically with Tokyo rather than Osaka and psychologically as the language of power, centralization and the source of discrimination against the Korean language and community.

Cultural Pluralism in Japan

What is the current nature and future prospects for cultural pluralism in Japan? This remains a crucial issue to those language minorities seeking popular and official support for their languages. Honna urged that "Japanese people achieve drastic attitudinal changes in order to become sensitive and compassionate towards minority groups" and that "many people are persisently suspicious about learning other languages as a means of attaining intercultural understanding. They are afraid that their children's sense of national identity will be diluted, weakened or destroyed by their exposure to influential foreign culture" (1979: 53). Japan, together with many other countries, fully accepted the 19th century ideas of nation, cultural assimilation and linguistic conformity. Thus, a vigorous cultural and linguistic assimilation policy has operated in Japan since the 19th Century. To give an example, regarding the native Ainu people the 1899 ' Law for the Protection of Native Aborigines' seriously damaged many aspects of Ainu culture including the removal of access to and the right for Ainu people to speak their native language. This law is still in force. Assimilation policies have continued to affect other distinct linguistic communities such as Okinawans, Ogasawaran islanders, deaf-signers and Chinese.

The fastest growing linguistic minority in Japan is Tagalog-speakers. In 1980, they numbered 5547 and constituted 0.7 of the registered alien population. By 1988, they increased to 32,185 an increased fivefold to 480.2%. It is not unusual to hear Tagalog speakers even in the rural areas although it is a low prestige language and Tagalog speaking mothers are routinely forbidden by families from using this "useless" language with their children. Cultural and linguistic assimilation is assisted by a powerful government-sponsored myth that Japan is ethnically homogenous: one race and one language. This ideology of racial uniqueness and separateness pervades many aspects of intellectual and cultural life in Japan and influences both its view of international relations but also its internal affairs (for example, the reluctance to accept refugees, the refusal to give legal and social rights to foreign workers and the selection of foreign labour from South America according to racial categories, i.e. selecting only workers with Japanese 'blood').

Japan and Korea: the Historical Background

Japan and Korea have a long history of close contact including linguistic exchange stretching into Prehistory when language and culture crossed the narrow straits separating the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. In the Yayoi era, rice and metal tools of bronze and iron were transferred to northern Kyushu from the southern Korean peninsula between 300 B.C. and 2,000 B.C. In the 5th century, members of the Japanese dynasty (the Yamato Imperial Court) located in Nara learned Chinese from Korean scholars and employed them to record history and write official administrative documents. In the early sixth century, Buddhism and Confucianism along with religious art and the writing of scriptures were conducted by Korean envoys who came to settle in Japan. Metalwork, religion, literature, printing, weaving, medicine and pottery are all activities in which the peoples of the Korean peninsula brought to Japan.

The Korean language has been functionally part of the diglossic situation in Japan for a long period of time. Up until Japan's postwar period and lasting over a period of several hundred years the country was in a state of diglossic bilingualism. As is usually defined, diglosssia is a relatively stable language situation (Ferguson 1959) in a society which has two functionally separate language codes. One code is used in one set of circumstances and is a highly codified, more complex, superposed variety and is usually the vehicle of written literature. In Japan, this has been the H (High), namely Chinese, variety. In another entirely different set of circumstances, an L (Low) variety operated through spoken language and was the language of ordinary conversation. The L variety has been used by the Korean population even by those cultural ambassadors whose role it was to transmit Chinese culture.

The Korean community is conscious of the historical connections betweeen the two cultures and among teachers of Korean it is an omniprescent background theme and source of pride (Kim 1991). Studies of Korean in Japan, excepting the teaching of Korean as a foreign language in university, is dominated by research on the historical links between the early Japanese and Korean languages. The British diplomat W.G. Aston published his pioneering 'A Comparative Study of the Japanese and Korean Languages' in 1879. From his analysis of 100 pairs of words, Aston concluded that Korean and Japanese were related to the same extent as two distant languages in the Indo-European family.

Meiji scholars continued to research the etymology of Korean elements in Old Japanese. Hattori (1898) supported this view with a study of 200 lexical items. Kanazawa (1910) as much with eye towards political hegemony as towards linguistics concluded in 'The Common Origin of the the Japanese and Korean Languages' that both Korean and Ryukyuan were both "branches of our Great Japanese Empire." The Finnish scholar Ramstedt was guardedly affirmative regarding the connection between Japanese and Korean using historical-comparative linguistics to compare *sima 'island' and *pai 'boat' in his paper 'Two Words of Korean and Japanese' (1926). The Koreanist Ogura Shinpei in his 1920 study remarked that between these two languages "in some points greater or lesser differences are present, but anyone could see the predominance of similarities" (1920:31-32 quoted in Lewin 1976). This statement is probably still an accurate summary of the today's state of opinion regarding the two languages.

The Current Situation

There are approximately one million Korean people residing in Japan including nationals of North and South (700,000), those who have voluntarily taken Japanese nationality (120.000) and mixed immigrants (between 20,000 and 10,000). 86.2% of all resident foreigners. 70% of the Korean residents in Japan are married to Japanese nationals. Most of the Korean community are descendants of the hundreds of thousands of forced labour brought to Japan during the war following Korea's annexation by Japan in 1910. The 2.5 million Koreans in Japan at the end of World War II were forced to work at coal mines and construction sites for military facilities. The 36-year colonial rule made Koreans Japanese subjects but abandoned them as aliens after the war.

Japan's Korean Speech Communities

A linguistic map of Japan's Korean speech community is fairly uncomplicated. Closer to South Korea than Kyushu, the island of Tsushima at the southernmost tip of the Korean peninsula (53km away) is probably the only place in Japan where Hangul is used widely as a daily language of communication. It is part of Nagasaki Prefecture. On the mainland, Koreans in Tokyo are much more dispersed than in Osaka and tend to concentrate in the downtown (shitamachi) wards of Arakawa, Adachi, Edogawa, Taito and Koto, to the south of the city in Ota-ku or in Kawasaki-city in neighbouring Kanagawa