The Nature and Impact of Language Policies and Conventions in Korea

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia.

In this edition on 'The Nature and Impact of Language Policies and Conventions in Korea', our authors focus on the variety and complexity of intersections between language, ideology, and identity in North and South Korea. Daniel Pieper discusses the linguistic divide between North and South Korea, due to the diverging language policies of post-World War II regimes in both countries. Adam Zulawnik analyses the ideological differences in the various references to the very notions of 'Korea' and 'Korean'. Lucien Brown addresses the linguistic, social, and cultural challenges experienced by foreign learners of Korean during their study programs in South Korea.

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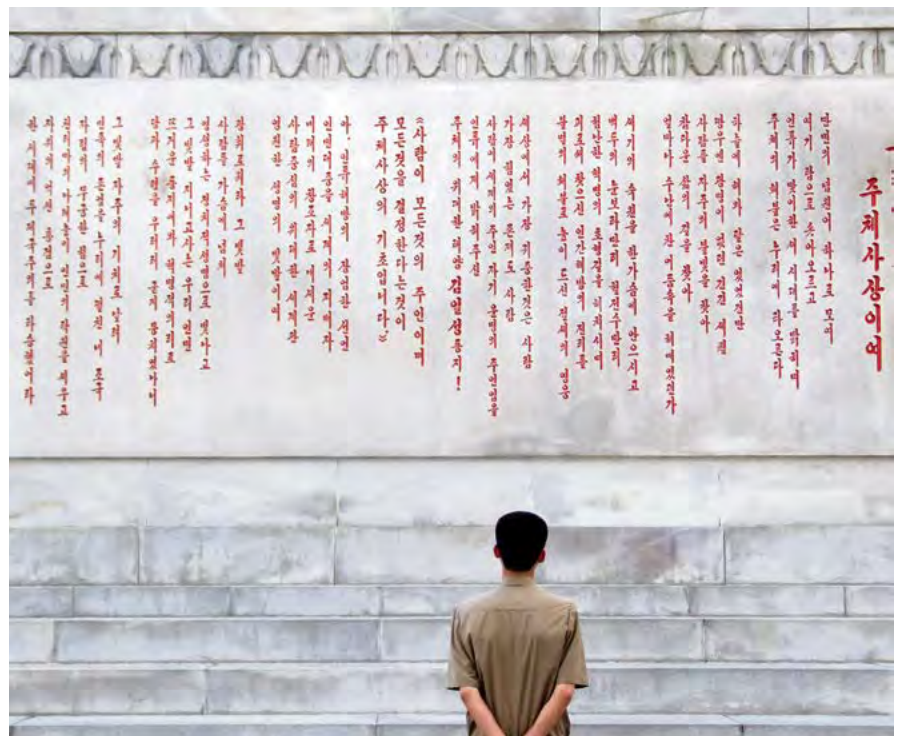

Fig. 1: North Korean reading an inscription at Juche Tower, 2012. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Nicor and reprinted under Creative Commons license)

Do You Speak North Korean or South Korean? The Korean Peninsula's North-South Split Has Created a Distinct Linguistic Divide

Daniel Pieper

In the closing days of WWII, the Korean Peninsula, home to one of the most ethnically homogenous populations in the world with political boundaries among the oldest on earth, was arbitrarily divided by the great powers. Competing regimes have since applied contrasting approaches of policy and planning to the Korean language, which have far-reaching implications for possible reunification and for North Korean refugees living in the South.

What's happened to language since the Peninsula was divided

In South Korea post-1945 there was an impetus to remove *hancha*[1] (Chinese characters) in favour of hangul only, and to expel Japanese loan words from the language. But more recently, the country's overall laissez-faire approach to its language has meant that language change has been largely driven by the linguistic market and the whims of the public. This has meant the increasing influence of English on the Korean language.

In the North, *hancha* was also removed in favour of hangul-only writing, as the North placed a premium on mass literacy for the effective spread of propaganda and the advancement of socialist revolution. According to Soviet sources,[2] beginning with a 1945 illiteracy rate of more than three quarters (and even higher for mixed script),[3] North Korea virtually eliminated illiteracy even before the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

However, it is North Korea's language policies from the 1960s that laid the foundations for more drastic divergence between the language varieties and has posed the greatest challenges for *saet'ŏmin* (North Korean refugees).

In that decade, the North Korean leader Kim Il-sung conducted and published his so-called 'Conversations with Linguists' (1964 and 1966), in which he portrayed the southern variety of Korean as "inundated with foreign borrowings," a "gibberish mixture of Chinese, Japanese and English" that had lost its ethno-national characteristics, necessitating the state's intercession to defend the language.[4] In addition to the explicit proscription of foreign borrowings (especially from English and Japanese), Kim called for creating pure (North) Korean words to replace not only Japanese and English loan words, but also the extremely numerous Sino-Korean vocables as well.

A successful campaign to do away with (obvious) Japanese loans also unfolded in South Korea, and so the first area was not as consequential. But in the case of English loans and Sino-Korean vocabulary, these proclamations by Kim and the subsequent policies they engendered have resulted in a profound divergence of the Korean varieties.

Research has shown that the greatest divergence between the languages has been in the various areas of lexicon. These include synonyms like *kungmin* (국민 citizen; NK: 인민 *inmin*), words with the same spelling and pronunciation but different connotations such as *tongji* (동지 friend or colleague; NK: comrade), remaining Sino-Korean words such as *minganin* (민간인 civilian; NK: *samin* 사민 private citizen), and even the pronunciation and spelling of limited loan words such as *k'ŏp* (컵, NK: *koppu* 고뿌 cup), the latter revealing Russian influence.[5]

The most highly publicised (and for some snicker-inducing) changes, however, are the North Korean attempts at actively creating pure Korean words in place of Sino-Korean words. Examples include terms such as *Hanbok* (한복 traditional Korean clothing; NK: *Chosŏn ot* 조선옷 [North] Korean clothing), *hongsu* (홍수 flood; NK: *k'ŭn mul* 큰 물, "big water"), *sirŏp* (시럽 syrup; NK: *tanmul* 단물, "sweet water"), *rek'odŭ* (레코드 [music] record; NK: *sorip'an* 소리판, "sound disk"), and *p'ama* (파마 perm; NK: *pokkŭm mŏri* 볶음 머리, "fried hair").

An uphill battle for North Korean refugees adapting to South Korean linguistic life

The significant number of successful adaptations along with the effective limitation of foreign borrowings has contributed to the creation of a very distinct language variety. This directly affects the linguistic assimilation of North Korean *saet'ŏmin* when they settle in the south. It is estimated there are 34,000 North Korean refugees living in South Korea.[6]

According to one study, while South Koreans tend to underestimate the differences between the language varieties and the challenges they pose to new settlers, *saet'ŏmin* ranked linguistic challenges as the most significant impediment, with over 70 percent of respondents reporting 'much difficulty' or 'considerable difficulty' due to language.[7] Importantly, all of the 34 *saet'ŏmin* interviewed as part of this study indicated language difference as a contributing factor to difficulty in work life.

Significant percentages of respondents reported experiencing difficulties due to differences in pronunciation and intonation, the extensive use of English expressions in South Korea, differences in honorifics, ignorance of *hancha*, not knowing the name for an object or everyday vocabulary word, and a feeling of self-consciousness when interacting with southerners.[8]

Research has also reported extensive discrimination experienced by *saet'ŏmin* due to language difficulties.[9] Instead of revealing their true identities, many respondents are either mistakenly ascribed or assume the identity of ethnic Korean Chinese (*Chosŏnjok*), various Korean dialect speakers, or overseas Koreans. This suggests that many *saet'ŏmin* view their background and identity as an impediment or mark of shame rather than a potential asset that might be fostered.

As the population of *saet'ŏmin* inevitably increases in the south, the difference between the North and South Korean language varieties will continue to be

Continued overleaf

a salient issue. Reflecting the perceived widening gap between the languages, work began in 2005 on the *Kyŏremal k'ŭn sajŏn* (Unabridged Dictionary of Our Language),[10] an ongoing joint project involving experts from North and South Korea that seeks to index the entire Korean language and 're-converge' the varieties. Moreover, in the event of political unification, the issue would have even more intense and far-reaching ramifications for the entire population of the Korean Peninsula, as it grapples with social inequality, discrimination, and power imbalances.

Not only is it paramount that we identify the different areas and specific reasons for linguistic difference, but also that we determine how this history of linguistic change continues to affect the two Koreas today. Moreover, extra care must be taken not to demonise either variety, blame either side for the linguistic divergence, or identify either language as flawed or an impediment that needs to be eliminated or overcome. Rather, it is crucial to embrace linguistic diversity and acknowledge pluricentric Korean as an unexpected, though at this point established, byproduct of political division.

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How Korean Language Students Studying in Seoul Navigate Linguistic and Cultural Homogeneity

Lucien Brown

The linguistic and cultural immersion offered by studying abroad is often positioned as the perfect context to build second language skills and to acquire cultural knowledge. The study abroad context is idealised as 'an imagined monolingual utopia'[1] where language learners can be completely immersed in the target language. The reality, of course, is more complicated. Research on the acquisition of a swathe of languages shows that students on study abroad spend varied amounts of time interacting in their target language,[2] often face struggles to adapt to the local culture,[3] and return from study abroad having made variegated linguistic gains.[4] In some cases, teachers might even perceive students' language skills to have regressed.[5]

The expectation that study abroad provides a perfect setting for linguistic and cultural immersion may be particularly problematic for students who visit South Korea, a country grappling with the early stages of multiculturalism[6] and where powerful ideologies of cultural homogeneity still hold strong.[7] The Korean language remains a powerful emblem of ethnic homogeneity via ideologies that equate 'speaking Korean' with 'being Korean.'[8] These racialised ideologies translate into folk beliefs shared to varying extents within South Korean society[9] that all people of Korean ethnicity should be able to speak 'good' Korean and, on the flipside, that learning Korean is difficult, unnecessary, or incongruous for those of non-Korean ethnicity.

In the course of my research, I traced the experiences of Grace (a pseudonym), a proficient and highly motivated Caucasian American female learner of Korean.[10] Although Grace went to Korea with the explicit goal to speak only Korean in order to immerse herself as much as possible in the language, my analysis showed that many of her daily interactions featured English and she was engaged in an ongoing struggle to establish an identity as a potential speaker of Korean. Her attempts to speak Korean were often met with responses in English, which sometimes seemed to disrupt rather than assist her interactions. In some cases, Grace's use of Korean was so unexpected that her interlocutors mistakenly assumed that she was in fact using English.

Experiences of study abroad are of course different for students who have Korean ethnicity or who are 'Korean-passing' (i.e., whose appearance leads people to assume they are Korean). In a blog post written by Hong Konger-American Rachel Wong, who spent a semester in Seoul,[11] the author reports never being addressed in English, and she notes that there were high expectations that she would be a proficient Korean speaker (in fact, she only had novice Korean). It led her to question her own identity as an Asian American and made her feel guilty that she was unable to live up to the expectations that came with her Korean-passing appearance.

For some students who do have Korean heritage, studying abroad can be a transformative experience. In a study of a mixed-heritage learner of Korean named Gina (a pseudonym), who had a white father and Korean mother, her Korean heritage allowed her to make meaningful connections with local communities and afforded her greater opportunities to learn Korean in comparison to her non-heritage peers, strengthening her sense of 'Koreanness'.[12] However, Gina also experienced heightened levels of anxiety in the immersion classes that she took, due to tacit expectations that as a 'half' she should be able to outperform her non-heritage classmates. She also shunned chances to practice Korean with proficient non-heritage students in her dorm, since their high levels of proficiency would exacerbate her own insecurities about her Korean ability. In addition, perhaps due to exposure to the same ideologies that equate ethnicity with linguistic ability, she seemed to conceptualise using Korean with non-native speakers as inauthentic and unhelpful.

Although we have ample evidence of the experiences of study abroad students in South Korea who are white English speakers and those who are of Korean ethnicity or Korean-passing, as yet we lack the same level of research that looks at the experience of exchange students from other ethnic backgrounds. We may expect that South Asians and Southeast Asians as well as Black students, for instance, would face particular hurdles, since non-Koreans who are of darker skin tone tend to face high levels of discrimination.[13] Black students would likely face the same struggles to establish Korean-speaking identities as their white peers, but coupled with the explicit racial discrimination documented elsewhere.[14]

Previous studies have also shown that the racialised experiences of study abroad learners in South Korea interact closely with gender and sexuality. White female students in Korea frequently complain of receiving unwanted attention or even sexual harassment from Korean men in public places, including Grace in my own study[15] Meanwhile, in my study of a white lesbian Korean learner named Julie[16] she struggled to negotiate her identity in a context where markers of her sexuality such as her short hair and androgenous clothes were not necessarily understood in the same ways as they would be in her native United States. These struggles with sexual harassment and gender identity can negatively impact study abroad learners' sojourns in Korea, including curtailing their opportunities to practice the language.

In the case of Grace, the path towards the resolution of her identity struggles and attempts to speak more Korean ultimately lay in developing an appreciation for study abroad as a multilingual and multicultural space. She found that interactions with fellow Korean-speaking international students from third countries including China and Iran who shared her desire to improve their Korean skills were valid and productive contexts for developing her linguistic proficiency, as well as for building her intercultural competence. Through this process, she moved away from seeing native Korean-speakers as the model that she needed to follow, and instead aspired to adopt the identity of a translingual international student who could skilfully switch between English, Korean, and other languages. With this shift, she gained confidence to use Korean in her interactions, while she also managed to shed the guilt that she had previously felt about using English, and she became interested in learning further languages and building her knowledge of additional cultures.

The various studies suggest that students who are set to study abroad in South Korea might benefit from pre-departure training that explicitly sensitises them to these complex issues that involve the interaction of race, gender, sexuality, and linguistic ideologies. Such sessions should also look to break down the stereotype of study abroad as a monolingual setting where all that counts is speaking Korean with 'real' Koreans. They should pinpoint the importance of interactions with global Korean speakers (rather than just local Korea-born speakers) as the goal of study abroad and should further discuss how to balance and integrate the use of Korean, English, and other languages during sojourns in Korea.

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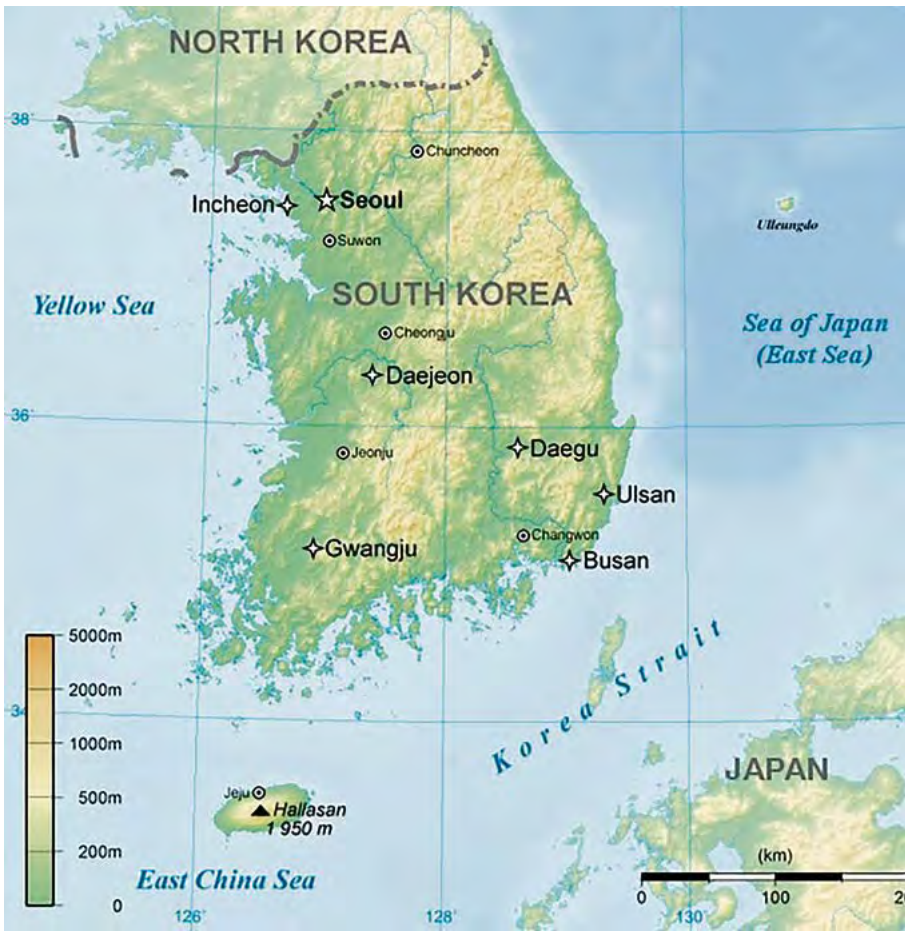

Fig. 1: Open source map of North and South Korea. Courtesy of Wikimedia.

Hanguk or Joseon? Republic of Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and the Complex Nature of Reference to 'Korea'

Adam Zulawnik

Escapees from North Korea face numerous challenges upon arriving in South Korea, with cultural and language barriers being one of the most significant. As of 2023, approximately 34,000 North Korean defectors reside in South Korea,[1] contributing to the complex social fabric of the nation. The 2024 appointment of Thae Yong-ho,[2] a former senior North Korean diplomat, to a vice-ministerial position in the South Korean government, symbolises the growing political and social integration of defectors. However, despite such seemingly positive advancements, the societal stigmas faced by North Korean defectors remain significant.

Although the Korean language contains examples of ethnocentric nation-building[3] and unification in the form of terms such as Ournation *(urinara)* and Ourlanguage *(urimal)*, it is arguable as to whether these envelop the whole of the Korean diaspora or, indeed, in a more tribalistic sense, simply those born and raised in South Korea. The discrepancy may be seen in the rhetoric of the South Korean public, with expressions such as 'North Korean vocabulary lookup in Ourlanguage' visible in the titles of certain publications.[4] Such usage may be seen as rather ironic (and arguably reflective of actual, contemporary South Korean identity as opposed to that prescribed by institutions such as the National Institute of the Korean Language), as the official definition of Ourlanguage *(urimal)* is 'the language of the people of Ournation *(urinara)*'.[5]

In this essay, I focus on the ideological discrepancies in the naming of 'Korea' and everything that is 'Korean' – something that is often overlooked in English translations of both South and North Korean written matter. Although the arguably 'subtle' differences in the naming of a country (i.e., the equivalent of 'North' and 'South' Korea in many Indo-European languages) may seem trivial for audiences from some linguistic backgrounds where the difference is not as linguistically marked as in languages with Sinoxenic (Chinese character) vocabulary, inadvertent misuse and misnomer may have repercussions for both source (victim) and target (perpetrator) culture individuals.

'Han' and 'Joseon': Two Koreas

Although the Korean language is fundamentally the same in both North and South Korea, it has diverged significantly due to the 70-year separation and differing sociopolitical conditions.[6] Korean in South Korea has been heavily influenced by foreign languages, especially English, due to globalisation, while North Korea has taken a purist approach with some Soviet Russian influence.

조선(朝鮮)
한국(韓國)

Fig. 2: Visualisation of the difference in the general words for 'Korea' as normally used in North (Joseon) and South Korea (Hanguk) and, in brackets, the relevant Chinese characters. Source: Adam Zulawnik.

Korea was unified under the Joseon Dynasty for over 500 years until the Korean Empire was established in 1897. Following Japanese colonisation (1910–1945), the Korean Peninsula was divided after World War II, with the Soviet-backed North becoming the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the US-supported South forming the Republic of Korea (ROK). The division also created differences in how each side refers to 'Korea'. North Korea uses 'Joseon' (from the Joseon Dynasty), while South Korea uses 'Daehan' (from the imperial period). This distinction is not mirrored in English, where both are often referred to as 'Korea'.

In everyday language, North Koreans refer to their country as 'Joseon' and South Koreans as 'Hanguk', extending the terms to other national symbols such as the Korean alphabet, which is called 'Hangeul' in the South and 'Joseon-geul' in the North. The Korean Peninsula is similarly referred to as 'Han bando' (*bando* meaning peninsula) in the South and 'Joseon bando' in the North. These distinctions indicate political or ideological alignment, especially when terms like 'Joseon Peninsula' are used in the South or 'Hangeul' in the North, raising eyebrows due to their symbolic significance. In languages other than Korean, the situation is even more complicated. For example, in Japanese, South Korea is called 'Kankoku' (Hanguk) while North Korea is 'Kita Chōsen' (Buk Joseon, 'Kita' the Japanese *kun-yomi* reading for 'North'), therefore somewhat reflecting the use in the respective countries.

In North Korea, using 'Han' for Korea has been illegal and highly policed. For instance, during a visit by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung in 2000, North Korean media reported he arrived on 'H Air' instead of 'Daehan Hang'gong' (Korean Air). More recently North Korean officials have referred to South Korea as 'Daehan Minguk' (the official term used in South Korea), to reflect a view of the South as a separate nation and enemy.[7]

In South Korea, there are no bans on the usage of 'Joseon' (in fact, one of South Korea's major newspapers, the *Chosun Daily*, is literally the *Joseon Daily*). Nevertheless, there is some stigma in relation to the term Joseon being used in reference to the Korean people, as it is associated with North Korea and the Japanese colonial period and sometimes used as a racial slur in Japan towards South Koreans.[8] According to some historical sources, patrons of the American-backed interim government in the South held a vote in 1948 to decide on the naming of the new government,[9] with 17 votes going towards Republic of Korea (Daehan), seven towards Republic of Koryo (*Koryo* originating from the ancient Koryo Kingdom), and two towards the Republic of Joseon (the same term for Korea now used in the North).

Koryo is used sporadically in both the North and South as well as in reference to the Korean diaspora in Central Asia (known as *'Koryo saram'*). The term *'Koryo'* also made a brief comeback in 1980,[10] when Kim Il-Sung, the founding leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, proposed a 'Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo'. Historical sources note that proponents of Daehan (the term used now in the South) – such as politician and Korean independence activist Jo So-ang – argued that the Japanese colonisers tried to eradicate the term in favour of 'Joseon', which is "symbolic of *sadaeju'ui*",[11] a largely pejorative term often used in reference to historical Korean reliance on China (within a Sinocentristic world order), particularly during the Joseon Dynasty.[12]

It is, therefore, the combination of such narratives and historical flows (including naming decisions made by a select few on both sides) that have resulted in a relatively complex socio-political situation, often overlooked by languages outside of Asia. And yet, the name that we go by, or choose as self-reference, have been a hot issue historically, including in the Anglophone world.[13]

The heightened sensitivity of South and North Koreans to misnomer may be seen as linked to the very plurality of 'Korea' in the Korean language, and ideologies imparted through decades of education. This can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and a lack of objectivity, such as when interacting with states such as Japan, China, and Vietnam, who choose a more diplomatic approach to nomenclature. Regardless, considering the importance of naming in ascertaining collective identity and positionality, all nations should have the right to be referred to using their own naming convention of choice (within contextual reason).

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