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Revising the Language Map of Korea

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Nanna Haug Hilton, Sang-Gu Kang, and So-Young Kim

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Abstract

As linguists develop a deeper understanding of the properties of individual varieties of speech, they often find it necessary to reclassify dialects as independent languages, based on the criterion of intelligibility. This criterion is applied here to Jejueo, the traditional variety of speech used on Jeju Island, a province of the Republic of Korea. Although Jejueo has long been classified as a nonstandard dialect of Korean, evidence from an intelligibility experiment shows that it is not comprehensible to monolingual speakers of Korean and therefore should be treated as a separate language, in accordance with the usual practice within linguistics. This finding calls for a revision to the standard language map of Korea.

Keywords

Jejueo · Korean · Language · Dialect · Intelligibility

The Changing World Language Map

The language map of the world is changing at a faster rate than at any time in history. On the one hand, revisions are necessary to accommodate the rapid loss of linguistic diversity in many regions around the globe, as languages lose their speakers at an unprecedented rate due to urbanization, economic pressures, and the loss of traditional homelands, among other factors (Austin and Sallabank 2011; Grenoble 2011). Indeed, relatively few languages have a secure future. The top 16 languages in the world are spoken by about 55% of the population (Maffi 2011, p. 12), while 96% of languages are spoken by just 3% of the population (Bernard 1996, p. 142). The UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003, p. 2) estimates that 50% of the world's current languages are losing speakers and that as many as 90% of all languages may be lost by the end of the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, changes are also needed in response to the identification of previously unknown or unrecognized languages. Such discoveries were especially common during the twentieth century, which saw the number of known languages grow from an estimated 1000 in the early 1900s to around 7000 by the end of the millennium (Anderson 2004). As linguists and anthropologists gain a deeper understanding of the linguistic situation in various remote parts of the world, they have been able both to identify previously unknown languages and to reassess the status of speech varieties that had been incorrectly labeled as dialects. This chapter focuses on one such case involving the language map of Korea.

Discussion of this matter begins with a brief review of the distinction between “language” and “dialect,” a contentious issue that has influenced the topography of many language maps. It then turns to a case study involving Jejueo, the variety of speech traditionally used on Jeju Island, one of nine provinces making up the Republic of Korea (hereafter “South Korea”). The methodology that was employed to assess the possible language-hood of Jejueo is then outlined, including the use of a parallel study of Norwegian and Dutch to establish a baseline for interpreting the results for Jejueo. The chapter concludes with some general remarks about the status of Jejueo and the implications of the reported findings for the linguistic landscape of Korea.

Language and Dialect

For much of modern history, the distinction between language and dialect has been largely political: the speech of a bigger or more powerful community is a language, whereas the speech of a smaller or less influential group is a dialect. Max Weinreich (1945) summed up this view with a famous aphorism: “A language is just a dialect with an army and a navy.”

Another, perhaps more ubiquitous force also comes into play, namely, national identity. It has long been recognized within the field of sociolinguistics that language is a major marker of national unity (e.g., Haugen 1966, p. 927, Fishman 1972, p. 44). This in turn often leads to a “one nation – one language” ideology that denies language-hood to a community’s minority languages. Both Koreas have long maintained, independently of each other, that Korean national identity is embodied in a shared single indigenous language (e.g., King 2007, p. 233), preempting discussion of possible additional languages in their territory.

For the most part, modern linguistics rejects politically motivated definitions of language-hood by insisting that the distinction between dialect and language should be based on *linguistic* considerations. For linguists, a dialect is simply a variety of speech with its own distinctive characteristics of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. As varieties of speech change over a period of centuries, each in its own unique way, they typically become less and less alike. At the point where speakers of one dialect can no longer understand speakers of another dialect, the two varieties of speech are classified as separate languages. In other words, the key linguistic criterion for distinguishing between dialects and languages involves intelligibility: when two dialects cease to be mutually comprehensible, they are classified as separate languages (Hockett 1958, p. 321ff; Casad 1974; Gooskens 2013).

History offers many examples of the emergence of new languages as the result of dialect divergence. The languages now known as French, Spanish, Italian, and Romanian were once all varieties (dialects) of Latin. Over time, each evolved in different ways, ultimately reaching the point where speakers of one could not understand speakers of the others. The evolution of English, German, Dutch, Swedish, and Icelandic took place in a similar manner. All were once dialects of

Germanic; now, thanks to the different changes that each underwent, they are recognized as separate, mutually unintelligible languages.

Dialects diverge slowly and incrementally, with the result that the contrast between dialect and language is not always clear-cut. A common “cutoff” point for drawing a line between dialect and language is a comprehension rate of 70% (Bouwer 2007; Kosheleva and Kreivnovich 2014): a higher score is interpreted as evidence that the two speech varieties are dialects of the same language, and a lower score is taken to indicate that they are separate languages. Even though there is undoubtedly a gray area on the language-dialect continuum (see Okura (2015) for a review), numerous clear-cut cases exist, including many that go unrecognized for long periods of time. Just such a case is found in South Korea. The twofold goal of this chapter is to illustrate how linguistic experimentation can help distinguish a dialect from a language and, at the same time, to propose a more accurate language map for Korea.

The Language of Jeju Island

According to the standard view, the language map of South Korea is monochromatic, reflecting the country’s supposed linguistic homogeneity (Fig. 1). (For now, the situation in North Korea is set to the side.)

Jeju Island lies about 35 miles southwest of the Korean mainland. Approximately 700 square miles in size, it is dominated by Hallasan, whose height of 6500 ft makes it the highest mountain in South Korea. Known for its temperate climate, its stone statues (*dolhaleubang*), and its female divers (*haenyeo*), Jeju Island has become a major tourist mecca in East Asia. Yet, many of its foreign visitors are unaware of the unusual variety of speech still used there by its older inhabitants and known by a variety of names: *Jejueo* (the new official name designated by the provincial government), *Jeju(n)mal*, *Jejudo(n)mal*, *Jeju satuli*, and *Jeju bangeon*, among others. According to recent UNESCO estimates, Jejueo is spoken with varying degrees of fluency by 5000 to 10,000 people, a small fraction of the island’s population of more than 600,000.

Jejueo is uncontroversially related to Korean, as illustrated by numerous similarities in the vocabulary and morphosyntax of the two languages. Table 1 gives examples of some of the lexical similarities that point toward a genetic relationship, as well as some of the differences that suggest that the two are nonetheless distinct from each other. (For the purposes of exposition, Jejueo examples are written in the so-called Revised Romanization developed by South Korea’s National Institute of Korean Language.)

The traditional view, espoused by the National Institute of Korean Language and the Ministry of Education, as well as by many linguists (e.g., King 2006, p. 276; Yeon 2012, p. 11; Sohn 1999, p. 74), is that Jejueo is a nonstandard dialect of Korean. For that reason, its use has been strongly discouraged, both in school and in public life. In fact, however, there is good reason to think that Jejueo is an

Fig. 1 The language map of South Korea, according to the “standard” view. (Based on map by Hae Sung Park)



independent language and probably has been for hundreds of years. The key evidence comes from the criterion of intelligibility.

Reports that Korean speakers have difficulty understanding Jejueo date back to at least the 1500s. Kim Jeong, the author of the *Topography of Jeju Island* (published in 1552) and a visitor to the island for 14 months starting in the summer of 1520, made the earliest surviving comment on the island’s speech. He noted that he had encountered many unfamiliar words and expressions but that, with time, he learned the language “like a child learning a barbarian language.” Eighty years later, in 1601, Kim Sangheon spent 6 months on Jeju Island as a secret inspector for the government in Seoul. He too was struck by what he heard there, complaining in his travelogue *Namsarok* that he had trouble understanding the islanders’ speech.

Table 1 Comparison of some Korean and Jejueo vocabulary

Korean	Jejueo	Meaning
<i>bam</i>	<i>bam</i>	night
<i>bi</i>	<i>bi</i>	rain
<i>namu</i>	<i>nang</i>	tree
<i>abeoji</i>	<i>abang</i>	father
<i>so</i>	<i>swe</i>	cow
<i>kkoch</i>	<i>gojang</i>	flower
<i>gamja</i>	<i>jiseul</i>	potato

Communication would only have become more difficult in the decades that followed. A ban on travel to the mainland was imposed in 1629 and lasted until 1828, increasing the island's isolation and deepening the linguistic divide between Jejueo and Korean. It is no surprise that today's visitors who are fortunate enough to hear Jejueo report that they cannot understand it at all.

In sum, the anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that Jejueo is a distinct language. According to the intelligibility criterion, if speakers of Korean find Jejueo incomprehensible, then it is a distinct language – and the language map of Korea must be modified. The goal of this chapter is to test this conclusion with the help of a rigorous comprehension experiment.

Participants

The choice of participants for the study was driven by two considerations. First, because most fluent speakers of Jejueo are middle-aged or older and because age is in general an important factor in psycholinguistic studies, all participants were selected from the same 52-to-68 age range. Second, it was necessary to select participants from various parts of Korea in order to ensure that there was no dialect continuum in which Jejueo might be comprehensible to speakers living in the nearby southernmost parts of the Korean mainland, but not to speakers in the Seoul area, which lies much further to the north.

A total of 56 people participated in the experiment: 10 native speakers of Jejueo, whose results on the comprehension test would serve as a baseline against which to measure the performance of the other participants, and 46 monolingual speakers of Korean who had no significant previous exposure to Jejueo – 23 from Seoul, 11 from Yeosu, and 12 from Busan. The latter two cities are located in the southernmost part of the Korean Peninsula (Fig. 2) and are known for their distinctive varieties of Korean.

Materials

Various tests have been used in the literature to measure crosslinguistic and cross-dialectal comprehension. Some studies employ written texts, and some make use of

Fig. 2 The four locations for the intelligibility study.
(Based on map by Hae Sung Park)



oral materials; some assess comprehension of words, while others focus on sentences and even narratives. Gooskens (2013) offers a general review of the vast literature on this subject.

The objective in designing an intelligibility test for Jejueo was to create a task that involved the sort of language use that goes on in ordinary interpersonal communication about everyday matters (Hockett 1958, p. 323). For that reason, the test focused on the ability of residents of the Korean mainland to understand a simple narrative spoken in Jejueo. (A reverse version of this task testing the ability of Jejueo speakers to understand Korean would not be useful, as all Jejueo speakers also speak Korean.)

The narrative was derived from the “Pear Story” (Chafe 1980; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRNSTxTpG7U>), a silent video that depicts a series of events that begins with a man on a ladder picking pears. Two fluent native speakers of Jejueo watched the video and described the events in Jejueo as they unfolded. The two versions of the story were then merged into a single script that eliminated false starts, pauses, incomplete sentences, and the like. An audio recording was then made of the script being read aloud by a highly fluent female speaker.

In order to maximize the participants’ attention and concentration, only the first minute and nine seconds of the narrative, which consisted of a string of 22 clauses containing 118 words, was used. For ease of analysis, the narrative was divided into five segments, varying in length from 1 to 3 clauses as reproduced below in English. (The actual Jejueo text and audio file are available upon request.)

Segment 1: (I) hear a chicken crowing in the distance. A person who didn’t hire a helper is picking pears up at the top of the tree. (He/she) drops about two (pears) down to the ground.

Segment 2: After picking a lot of pears and putting them into (his/her) pocket, (he/she) came down the ladder.

Segment 3: (He/she) is popping all the pears into the basket.

Segment 4: (He/she) is carefully polishing the things [pears] that (he/she) dropped, with a bandana that (he/she) took off from around (his/her) neck, and putting them into the basket.

Segment 5: And then (someone) came under the pear tree from a distance pulling a goat. After looking at the basket, (he/she) limps away again with the goat.

Method

Participants first listened to the entire test portion of the narrative without interruption (and without seeing the video). The recording was then replayed segment by segment. After each segment, the participants were asked to respond in writing to one or more written questions designed to test their understanding of what they had just heard. In order to make the task as easy and straightforward as possible, the questions were formulated in Korean, and the participants were encouraged to respond in that language as well. In all, there were nine questions, presented below in English. The actual script of the narrative and details pertaining to the scoring of the responses are available at the following URL: <https://sites.google.com/a/hawaii.edu/jejueo/stuff/jejueo-intelligibility-test>

Questions (and answers)

Segment	Question	Answer
1	1. What kind of noise was described at the beginning of the story?	A chicken (crowing).
	2. How many people appear in the story?	One.
	3. What is the person in the story doing?	(He/she) is picking pears in the tree alone.
Segment 2	4. What is the person in the story doing (now)?	(He/she) comes down the ladder, with his/her pocket full of pears.
Segment 3	5. What is the person in the story doing (now)?	(He/she) is putting all the pears into a basket.
Segment 4	6. What is happening in this part of the story?	(He/she) is polishing the fallen pears with a handkerchief from (his/her) neck and putting them into the basket.
5	7. What appeared with the person in this part of the story?	A goat.
	8. What is the person in this part of the story doing?	(The person) came under the pear tree pulling the goat, looked at the pear basket and then left (limping) with the goat.
	9. How is the person in this part of the story walking?	With a limp.

Table 2 Percentage of correct responses to the comprehension questions

Jejueo native speakers	Seoul	Yeosu	Busan
89.21%	9.92%	6.00%	6.14%

Participants received one point for each correct piece of information. In the case of some questions (e.g., 7), where there was only one piece of relevant information (“a goat”), just one point was awarded. However, in questions such as 6, where there are potentially three pieces of information that could be reported (polishing pears, using a handkerchief to do so, and placing the pears in a basket), up to 3 points could be awarded. The maximum total score was 19.

Results

Table 2 reports the mean percentage of correct responses by each participant group. As can be seen here, there is a vast difference between the ability of the native speakers of Jejueo to respond correctly (89.21% correct) and the performance of the other three groups, which ranged from a mere 6.00% to 9.92%. Moreover, whereas approximately 52% of the responses by the mainland participants either consisted of “I don’t know” or were left blank, there was only one response of this type by a participant from Jeju Island.

The contrast between the comprehension scores of the Jejueo speakers and those of the other participants is so large that no statistical analysis is required. However, the difference among the scores of the three groups of monolingual Koreans (ranging from 6.00% to 9.92%) calls for scrutiny. An analysis of variance showed that the effect of region is significant, $F (2, 43) = 3.997$ and $p = 0.03$. However, post hoc comparisons conducted with the help of Hyunah Ahn using the Bonferroni adjustment indicated that the mean percentage correct for the Yeosu and Busan participants did not differ significantly from the score for the Seoul participants: Seoul and Yeosu ($p = 0.07$) and Seoul and Busan ($p = 0.09$). In other words, the apparently higher level of success attained by the Seoul participants compared to the other two mainland groups is not statistically significant and requires no explanation.

Discussion

The results of the comprehension test show a stark contrast. Whereas speakers of Jejueo responded to the comprehension questions with a level of accuracy approaching 90%, the other groups had an average success rate of less than 10%. Evidently, Jejueo was not intelligible to monolingual speakers of Korean, regardless of whether they speak Seoul Korean or one of the regional varieties found in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula.

This conclusion is further reinforced by the results of a self-assessment survey that was conducted in conjunction with the experiment. The survey asked the

Table 3 Self-assessment scores for comprehension (scale of 0 to 10)

Survey question	Jeju Island	Seoul	Yeosu	Busan
Before experiment	8.0	1.78	1.72	1.16
After narrative	8.1	0.65	0.27	1.08
After questions	8.3	0.41	0.30	0.75

participants to rate their ability to understand Jejueo by circling the appropriate number on an 11-point scale that ranged from 0 (“not at all”) to 5 (“quite a bit”) to 10 (“everything”).

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not at all					quite a bit					everything

The survey question was posed three times in the course of the comprehension experiment: once right before participants heard the narrative, a second time right after the narrative, and a final time after they had finished responding to the comprehension questions. Table 3 presents the findings.

Here again, a sharp contrast is evident between the Jejueo speakers on the one hand and the Korean monolinguals on the other. The former group indicated a strong ability to understand Jejueo from the beginning (8 on the scale) and slightly increased that assessment as they progressed through the experiment. In contrast, the three groups of monolingual Koreans acknowledged at the outset that they had a very limited ability to understand Jejueo (less than 2 on the scale), and they ended up lowering their self-assessment in the course of the experiment to less than 1 – the equivalent of “almost nothing.”

In sum, taken together, the results of the comprehension task and of the supplementary survey point to a clear-cut conclusion: Jejueo is not comprehensible to monolingual speakers of Korean. By the intelligibility criterion, it therefore deserves to be treated as an independent language, not as a dialect of Korean.

Now a new question arises. Is there a way to understand the relationship between Jejueo and Korean in terms of some other pair of languages, whose status relative to each other is already well established? Dutch and Norwegian offer an interesting example in this regard.

Dutch and Norwegian

Dutch and Norwegian are Germanic languages, whose family relationship can be easily observed in the large number of cognates in their vocabulary – as is also the case for Korean and Jejueo of course. At the same time, though, Dutch and Norwegian are also uncontroversially recognized as distinct languages, raising the possibility that they might provide an instructive baseline against which to measure the performance of the participants in the Jejueo study. With this possibility in mind,

an experiment was designed to determine the extent to which Norwegian is intelligible to speakers of Dutch.

Participants

Twenty-eight native speakers of Dutch (16 females and 12 males) participated in the study, none of whom had significant prior exposure to Norwegian. Because both Dutch and Norwegian (unlike Jejueo) have fluent speakers of all ages, no attempt was made to restrict the age of the participants, who were between 19 and 68 years old.

Materials

The Norwegian test materials consisted of a native speaker's retelling of the Pear Story, not a direct translation of the Korean narrative. It consisted of 14 clauses, containing a total of 87 words. It was divided into 7 segments, each of which was followed by one or more questions – for a total of 11 questions.

Method

The same method used for Jejueo was employed for Norwegian. The Dutch participants first listened to the entire narrative without interruption. The recording was then replayed in segments, each of which was followed by one or more written questions in Dutch, to which the participants responded in writing (in Dutch). (Both the text and the questions are available upon request.)

Results and Discussion

The average success rate for the Dutch speakers on the comprehension questions for Norwegian was 9.89%, which falls into roughly the same range as the success rate of the monolingual Korean speakers in the Jejueo study. Moreover, a self-assessment survey similar to the one used in the Jejueo study yielded comparable results. On average, the Dutch speakers estimated their ability to comprehend Norwegian at 2.3 on the 11-point assessment scale before the study began; they then lowered their mean self-assessment to 1.18 after hearing the narrative, and lowered it still further to 1.05 after trying to respond to the comprehension questions.

The conclusion seems obvious. If Norwegian and Dutch are to be considered distinct languages based on the criterion of low comprehensibility, then the same conclusion should be drawn for Jejueo and Korean, for which intelligibility levels are comparably low. This further supports the claim that Jejueo should be classified as an independent language.

Table 4 One version of the Altaic language family, including sample members

Koreo-Japonic		Turkic	Tungusic	Mongolic
Korean	Japanese	Turkish	Evenki	Mongolian
		Tatar	Manchu	etc.
		Kazakh	Orok	
		Uzbek	etc.	
		Uyghur		
		etc.		

Conclusion

In the past, it has been suggested that Korean is part of a Koreo-Japonic language family that could perhaps be placed in a still larger Altaic grouping along with Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic languages, as depicted in Table 4 (based on the summary offered by Sohn 1999, p. 18).

However, this idea has proven to be highly problematic (Vovin 2009), and it is not uncommon these days to see Korean classified as an isolate – a language with no living relatives.

In fact, though, Korean is not an isolate; it has a sister language, Jejueo, whose origins can be traced back to the same ancestor, either Kodaegugeo (Old Korean) or Chungsegugeo (Middle Korean). Jejueo is therefore not just part of the cultural heritage of Jeju Island; it is part of the heritage of all of Korea. It more than merits its place on language maps of the Korean Peninsula, past and present. Two revisions in particular are called for.

First, an accurate language map of the southern part of Korea prior to 1950 should capture not only the generally accepted fact that the dominant variety of speech used by the indigenous population of Jeju Island was Jejueo but also that Jejueo was and is a language distinct from Korean (Fig. 3).

Second, an accurate contemporary language map should show that there are currently two languages on Jeju Island, the endangered traditional language (Jejueo) and the now dominant Korean (Fig. 4).

It is important to note in closing that this is by no means the end of the story. According to the traditional view of linguistic variation on the Korean Peninsula, there are five major “dialects,” two in North Korea (Hamgyeong and Pyeongan) and three in South Korea (Central, Gyeongsang, and Jeolla), as illustrated in Fig. 5.

An obvious question now arises: is it possible that one or more of these speech varieties might qualify for language status, just as Jejueo does? It has been suggested that Hamgyeong may well be an independent language (e.g., Alexander Vovin, personal communication), but the only way to answer this question for any of the supposed Korean dialects is to establish the degree to which they are intelligible to monolingual speakers of standard Korean. It is to be hoped that the eventual resolution of these issues will lead to the creation of a more definitive language map for Korea.

Fig. 3 A language map for South Korea recognizing the dominance of Jejueo on Jeju Island prior to 1950. (Based on map by Hae Sung Park)



Fig. 4 A language map of contemporary South Korea recognizing the continued existence of Jejueo. (Based on map by Hae Sung Park)



Fig. 5 The five major “dialects” in the Korean Peninsula (Based on map by Hae Sung Park)



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