

## THE MAINTENANCE OF THE KOREAN LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN JAPAN

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between the Korean language and the ethnic identity of 'zainichi' Korean residents in Japan. The discussion includes: (1) the role of Korean for Korean residents in Japan; (2) ethnic education for the maintenance of Korean identity; (3) the relationship between the young Koreans and their language. The investigation has found that (1) there is only a small population of Korean speakers among the Korean residents; (2) there are also a small number of Korean children sent to Korean schools where ethnic education is practiced; (3) some young Koreans manage to maintain Korean identity, not through using Korean, but through other means, such as the use of Korean names and the maintenance of Korean nationality. The discussion seems to suggest that while literacy in Korean and ethnic education should be promoted, it should not be done for political or ideological purposes, but should be based on individual needs for pursuing ethnic identity.

### Introduction

Despite the fact that Korea is the nearest country to Japan and that Korean residents form the largest foreign community in Japan, the Korean language does not receive due recognition and acknowledgment in Japan. It is indeed a minority language in Japan that should have been recognized, but has been greatly neglected.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the relationship between the Korean language and the identity of 'zainichi' Koreans, or Korean residents in Japan.

First, I will discuss the role of Korean for Korean residents in Japan. Second, I will discuss ethnic education for the maintenance of Korean identity. Third, I will introduce a couple of examples of the young-generation Korean residents to find how they relate language to ethnic identity.

By examining these factors, I believe I shall be able to discover some of the dynamics operating between Japanese society and the Korean language as a minority language and the role of linguistic and cultural literacy in Korean to maintain Korean identity in Japan.

Needless to say, there are political and historical reasons for the neglect of Korean in Japan. However, these aspects are beyond the scope of this study. This study is limited to linguistic, cultural, and psychological aspects of the relationship between the Korean language and identity and Japanese society as a whole.

### **Korean for Korean residents in Japan**

There are approximately one million Korean residents in Japan, forming the largest minority group. About 70 percent of them register as 'foreigners', while at least 20 percent of them are naturalized as 'Japanese' citizens.

For the majority of Koreans in Japan, the Korean language is very much like a foreign language. The reasons are many.

First, the majority of Koreans in Japan are second-, third-, and fourth-generation Koreans who are not native speakers of Korean, while first-generation Koreans constitute only 15 percent of the Korean population and are decreasing in number. One observer predicts that in the future all the 'zainichi' Koreans in Japan will be born in Japan (Maher 1997).

Thus, the population of Korean speakers is remarkably smaller than the population of Korean residents. For the majority of Koreans in Japan, Japanese is the first language.

Second, many (not all) Korean residents in Japan take an assimilationist and realistic attitude in terms of using Korean, so that they do not seem to be trying very hard to be bilingual.

Being able to communicate in Japanese seems to most Koreans, especially young people, sufficient to survive in Japanese society. Actually, there is a strong anti-Korean and discriminatory sentiment against Koreans among the Japanese. With their own assimilationist tendency and this anti-Korean sentiment combined, Koreans tend to deemphasize their language and culture so that they can avoid further discrimination and harrassment from the Japanese people.

**Table 1:** Number of colleges offering foreign language courses

English	495
German	471
French	396
Chinese	265
Russian	129
Spanish	111
Korean	54

Another reason is found not in the Korean community, but in the educational policy of Japan and Japanese society at large. There is still a lack of interest in promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism in education in Japan institutionally, socially, and individually. For instance, the curriculum of foreign language education is so Western-oriented that there are not enough courses in non-Western languages, as can be seen in Table 1, in which the courses of Western lan-

guages are offered in the majority of universities, while Korean is offered only at 54 universities across Japan. At junior and senior high schools, English is practically the only foreign language Japanese students can be exposed to, and Korean remains almost nonexistent to the majority of children.

In addition, the Japanese people are so Western-oriented that they do not show much interest in the non-Western languages and cultures. I have to admit that I myself represent a typical example of a Japanese without much multilingual and multicultural awareness, as I spent the most time learning English while taking the Korean class only once and ending up in dropping out.

Thus, we have seen that there are some dynamics operating between the mainstream Japanese society and the minority Korean community.

Many Koreans seem to comply with the forces of the monolingual and monocultural tendency in Japan in order to survive in Japanese society, which seems to most of them more important than maintaining their language and ethnicity.

Multilingualism and multiculturalism in Japanese education is very Western-oriented so that it neglects the teaching of a minority language within the country.

Therefore, it appears that there has not been enough effort to maintain the Korean language and identity either from the Korean side or from the Japanese side.

### **Ethnic education and Korean identity**

In the face of the weakening of their language, how do Korean residents try to maintain their cultural and ethnic identity? Some of them have made serious efforts.

Let me discuss some of the efforts and strategies some Koreans employ in order to enhance their ethnic identity and pride.

I will discuss the following three points: (1) ethnic education at Korean schools; (2) use of Korean names; (3) identity planning of young Korean residents.

First, Korean residents have established Korean schools across Japan in order to maintain their language and culture. The number of Korean schools is summarized in Table 2. The number of Korean children going to these schools amounts to a little more than 20,000 across the nation. In these schools, bilingual education is instituted by using both Korean and Japanese as the media of instruction. A large number of hours are allocated for the teaching of Korean.

However, the majority of Korean children go to Japanese schools. One report tells that 86 percent of Korean children go to Japanese schools. It is argued that one of the reasons that most Koreans do not go to Korean schools is because the Japanese government does not give Korean schools the same status as Japa-

nese schools, thus disqualifying Korean children from taking the entrance examination to national universities (Maher, 1997).

**Table 2:** Number of Korean schools in Japan

	MINDAN	SOUREN
Kindergarten	2	68
Elementary	3	85
Junior High	4	56
Senior High	4	11
College	0	1

It is also argued that these Korean schools are ideologically and politically oriented toward North Korea and many parents do not send their children to these schools.

For those Koreans who do not go to Korean schools, textbooks for learning Korean have been published in great numbers. One such textbook is aimed at promoting ethnic education, as its contents include not only language but Korean history, geography, music, and customs.

One of the greatest difficulties facing Koreans is the division of opinions and philosophies among them. There are two major organizations for Korean residents, one politically sympathetic toward South Korea, and the other, toward North Korea.

'Mindan', an organization sympathetic toward South Korea, welcomes assimilation into Japanese society. Therefore, they have very few schools of their own and encourage Korean children to go to Japanese schools.

In contrast, 'Souren', an organization sympathetic toward North Korea, encourages the promotion of ethnic education, thus opening a large number of Korean schools across the nation. These organizations have a great influence upon how Korean residents maintain their ethnic identity and pride.

Second, the use of names is also important in terms of maintaining ethnic identity. Whether Korean residents take the assimilation-oriented lifestyle or identity-oriented approach is reflected in their choice of names. If they take Japanese names, most of them are naturalized Japanese citizens who wish to be assimilated into Japanese society. On the other hand, assuming Korean names is a strong expression of Korean identity.

Also, assuming Korean names implies the restoration of their ethnic identity, because Koreans were forced to give up using their names during the rule of the Japanese Empire from the beginning of this century. Therefore, taking Korean names is in a sense a political statement criticizing Japanese imperialism in the past, as well as a strong expression of Korean identity and anti-assimilationist posture.

It takes great courage for Korean residents to assume Korean names, because it will definitely put them at great disadvantage in many respects. As a matter of fact, the majority of Korean residents have Japanese names so that they

avoid unnecessary friction with the Japanese and more discrimination in Japanese society.

Recently, however, Japan has developed slight cultural tolerance for Korean culture in everyday life. The Japanese government, for example, has stopped forcing the use of Japanese names upon Korean residents who wish to take Japanese nationality. A number of local governments have started employing foreign residents as governmental employees. A very famous literary award was given to a Korean resident with a Korean name. Actually, one survey even points out that the use of Korean names has been increasing since 1979 (Maher, 1997).

Thus, the majority of Korean residents still have considerable anxiety and hesitation over the revelation of their ethnic identity by assuming Korean names, but it seems that an increasing number of Korean residents, especially the young generation, take on Korean names, as they realize that it is important to reveal and preserve their ethnic identity and that Japanese society has developed some tolerance for the use of Korean names in recent years.

Third, how do the young Korean residents manage to negotiate their identity as they live in Japanese society?

A Japanese sociologist, having interviewed more than 100 third-generation young Koreans in Japan, has determined that there are four different identity orientations present among these young Koreans (Fukuoka 1996).

These four types of identity orientations are: (1) co-existence-oriented; (2) home-country-oriented; (3) individualist-oriented; (4) assimilation-oriented.

'Co-existence-oriented' Koreans wish to live in Japanese society as they maintain their ethnic identity. They believe that their hometown is a place where they were born and raised in Japan, but at the same time they keep their Korean names, because they believe Korean names are a symbol of their ethnicity. They want to respect both Japanese and Korean cultures equally. Most of them speak only Japanese, but they try to learn Korean, as they believe it is their mother tongue.

'Home-country-oriented' Koreans regard themselves as 'Koreans' living outside of Korea and give a top priority to making a contribution to the development of Korea. These people tend to keep psychological distance from Japanese society and live within the Korean community. They identify deeply with Korea and try to develop a strong sense of pride as Koreans. They are bilinguals and they believe that Koreans should be able to speak Korean.

'Individualist-oriented' Koreans identify neither with Korea nor with Japan, but believe in individual abilities and accomplishments. They have a very strong aspiration for upward social mobility, but they do not have much emotional attachment to any particular culture or nation. They believe that achievements based on individual abilities are the answer to all their problems. They regard language as an instrument of success and achievement. They do not show much interest in learning Korean, but they are often ardent learners of English, as it is viewed as an instrument for a successful career.

'Assimilation-oriented' Koreans want to adapt to Japanese society by becoming Japanese. They take Japanese names and develop relationships only with the Japanese, thus dissociating themselves from the Korean people and trying to live as 'Japanese'. They often do not try to maintain their Korean identity, but try to keep away from it. Most of them do not speak Korean and they think this is unavoidable.

There are no statistics available to show which identity orientation is the most dominant. But as discussed above, except for the 'Home-country-oriented' Koreans, the young-generation Korean residents have almost no literacy in Korean, not to mention a working knowledge of it. Does this mean that Korean residents are experiencing a loss of ethnic identity? Or are they still able to maintain their ethnic identity and pride in some other ways?

### **Language and cultural identity: Korean vs. Japanese and English**

Does the fact that the majority of Korean residents in Japan cannot speak or write Korean, or show little interest in learning and preserving Korean, suggest that language is not necessarily an integral part of ethnic identity?

As a matter of fact, a Japanese sociologist reports on a young Korean resident who believes that his ethnic identity is attributed to his Korean name and nationality, and not to the language (Fukuoka, 1993, p.182).

Can a person maintain his/her ethnic identity without knowing and using his/her mother tongue? Can a person maintain his/her ethnic identity by identifying with languages other than his/her mother tongue?

Let me introduce two cases in which young Korean residents identify with Japanese and English, respectively, and still they do not identify with either one of them culturally.

#### **Case 1: Identification with Japanese**

A Korean woman regards herself as a 'Japanese-speaking person'. She defines herself as a Korean born in Japan and using Japanese, thus accepting both Korean and Japanese cultures. She also believes that since she thinks, speaks, and writes in Japanese, she is neither Korean nor a Korean resident in Japan. She feels that the label 'Japanese-speaking person' is better than the label 'Korean resident' in that it liberates her mind from discrimination, the unfortunate history between Korea and Japan, and complex ethnic consciousness which the label 'zainichi' or 'Korean resident' is usually associated with. She has a Korean family name with a Japanese first name (Maher & Kawanichi 1994).

#### **Case 2: Identification with English**

A Korean woman, frustrated by the close-knit and closed atmosphere of Japanese society which discriminates against Korean residents, went to the United States for graduate study after retiring from a

company where she worked for almost three years after graduation from a Japanese university. She had been studying English all the time and her studies in the U.S. were successful. She feels as if she were a semi-Japanese while living in Japan, whereas in the U.S. she feels as though she could do or say anything. She also says that she does not belong to any country. When she visited Korea, she felt it was like a foreign country. Still, she cannot identify with Japan, Korea, or the U.S. She feels that she just wants to be herself, regardless of nationalities (Fukuoka, 1993:183-96).

Case 1 represents an example of a 'coexistence-oriented' Korean resident who accepts both Korean and Japanese identities. She is a speaker of Japanese and identifies with it as she thinks, writes, and reads in it. She retains her Korean family name, maintaining her Korean identity. This implies that even though the woman cannot communicate in Korean, by retaining her Korean name, it is possible to maintain her Korean identity. This suggests that language is not necessarily the best medium of maintaining ethnic identity, which can be achieved through other means.

Actually, John Edwards (1985:169), a social psychologist of language and identity, points out the disconnection between language and the maintenance of group identity as follows:

As an objective marker of groupness, language is highly susceptible to change; despite its obvious claims on our attention, its continuation is not necessary for the continuation of identity itself. There is evidence to suggest that the communicative and symbolic aspects of language are separable during periods of change, such that the latter can continue to exercise a role in group identity in the absence of the former.

Thus, the woman in Case 1, even though she cannot use Korean as a tool of communication, can maintain her Korean identity by using her Korean name as a symbol of her ethnicity.

The woman in Case 2 represents an example of an 'individualist-oriented' Korean who wishes to free herself from ethnic confines and pursue self-realization by utilizing English and achieving her goals in the U.S. She wishes to dissociate herself from Korean, Japanese, and English nationalities, and therefore, she does not have any emotional or symbolic attachment to any of these three languages.

She seems to pursue a global or transnational identity, trying to go beyond national and ethnic boundaries. Her working knowledge of English helps her to pursue her goals. However, she does not develop very much emotional attachment to English or to American society. Rather, she is very critical of the U.S. for its imperialist tendency to dominate other nations, just as she is critical of Japan, which has very little tolerance for people different from the Japanese.

From this example, it is hypothesized that English can be a medium for developing global or transnational identity if it is learned and acquired without much emotional attachment, but with instrumental motivation. If English is learned as a medium of becoming assimilated in the U.S., the learners will run the risk of losing their ethnic identity to an American identity, thus not being able to develop a global or transnational identity.

### Summary and conclusion

To sum up the discussion so far, we have seen the following three points: (1) We have seen that in the Korean community there is only a small number of speakers of Korean and that the number is becoming smaller as the newer generation of Korean residents whose first language is Japanese is increasing in number. (2) To maintain Korean culture, Korean schools have been established to teach Korean children the Korean language and culture, even though the number of children who go to these schools is very small. (3) We have discussed the relationship between language and ethnic identity by examining the identity orientations of the young Koreans, and have discovered that they have managed to maintain their ethnic identity, not necessarily through language as a medium of communication, but through other means, such as the use of Korean names and the possession of Korean nationality.

From these findings, we can argue that learning and teaching the minority language is not necessarily the best strategy for the maintenance of ethnic identity. Rather, it is possible that if the maintenance of the minority language is made for an ideological and political purpose through formal institutional practices, it might confine its speakers to a small minority community and prevent them from communicating with the mainstream society, unless they learn the dominant language.

It is also argued that the ethnic identity of a minority group can be maintained through having a symbolic attachment to the minority language, and not necessarily as a medium of communication.

Does this mean that providing ethnic education and developing linguistic and cultural literacy in the minority language are not necessary or even harmful to its members if they are to survive in the mainstream of society?

Will all the minority languages become mere symbols of ethnicity without really functioning as a tool of communication? Is it really desirable, for example, to find that all Koreans in Japan cannot speak a word of Korean?

As far as Japan is concerned, there is a great deal to be done to make Korean a respected foreign language instead of a mere symbol. And this can be done through education.

I have pointed out that in Japanese foreign language education, Korean is neglected. I propose that more Korean courses should be offered at junior and senior high schools and universities. In order to do this, the Western-oriented foreign language education, in which English dominates, should be modified and a

multilingual curriculum should be established, so that there will be more Japanese who learn Korean.

I also propose that intercultural education courses should be offered from elementary schools up to universities so that children will be able to develop intercultural understanding and awareness with which they can show tolerance for different cultures, ethnicities, and languages.

I believe Japan is changing slowly but steadily toward a pluralistic society. There is a case in point. Recently, a Korean resident has been appointed as a full-time professor at the University of Tokyo. Of course, he has his Korean name.

Lastly, what can Koreans do to maintain the Korean language in Japan? It is really up to the Koreans to decide what to do. But I think individual, not institutional, ethnic education, free from any political purpose, is very desirable. Actually, I have been told by a Korean resident student that there are some signs among the young Korean people in Japan trying to learn Korean because by learning their own language they believe they will be able to develop a sense of pride in being a member of an ethnic minority. This example may suggest that the development of positive feelings and attitudes toward their own ethnicity on an individual basis will be the foundation of the maintenance of their language and identity.

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