Endangered Indigenous Languages in Japan and Korea*

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According to standard popular accounts, Japan and Korea are highly unusual countries in that each recognizes the existence of just one indigenous language within its borders—Japanese and Korean, respectively.[1] This absence of linguistic diversity contrasts sharply with the situation elsewhere

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[1]We set Ainu to the side in the case of Japan, as it appears to no longer have a community of native speakers.

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in Asia, in which almost all countries acknowledge the presence of multiple distinct languages, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Language Diversity in a Sample of Asian Countries (data from Ethnologue.com)

Country	*Number of indigenous languages*
Bhutan	21
China	275
Indonesia	701
Mongolia	7
Myanmar (Burma)	112
Philippines	175
Taiwan	20
Thailand	50
Vietnam	93

There is good reason to believe that Japan and Korea also manifest significant linguistic diversity, and that a more accurate picture of their linguistic make-up would recognize at least eight indigenous languages in Japan and at least two in Korea (with Hamgyeong as a possible third).

Table 2. Indigenous languages in Japan and Korea

Japan	Korea
Japanese	Korean
Amami	Jejueo
Kunigami	Hamgyeong (?)
Miyako	
Okinawan	
Yaeyama	
Yonaguni	
Hachijo	
(Ainu)	

The existence of linguistic variation in Japan and Korea is widely acknowledged in both countries, but its significance has been obscured by the insistence that it consists only of 'dialectal' differences. The question of how to distinguish between a language and a dialect has long been problematic for a variety of reasons, largely because of two competing approaches to the definition of language—one political and the other linguistic.

The political definition tends to equate the notions of 'language' and 'nation'—an association that Weinreich (1945) humorously characterized with the help of the now famous aphorism 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.' The implausiblity of the association is reinforced by the overwhelming mismatch between the number of recognized nations (197, according to the United Nations) and the number of identified languages (over 7000, according to estimates by Ethnologue).

In contrast, the linguistic definition focuses on mutual intelligibility, a notion put forward most influentially by Hockett (1958:321), who suggested that 'people who "speak the same language" can understand each other and, conversely, that people who cannot understand each other must be speaking "different languages".' The proposal is not entirely unproblematic, as Hockett acknowledged in detail, since intelligibility is a matter of degree, and questions arise as to how it should be tested, what the cut-off point should be, whether it should involve the written language or the spoken language, and so on (for discussion, see Gooskens 2013). Nonetheless, Hockett's criterion often yields clear-cut results, and when it does—as in the case of, say, Dutch and Norwegian or Cantonese and Mandarin—there is no serious dissent among *linguists* as to whether distinct languages are in play (despite politically driven claims to the contrary in the latter case).

A vivid illustration of how the political and linguistic criteria for language-hood can clash comes from Jejueo, the traditional speech of Korea's Jeju Island. In a study involving 56 participants, Yang, O'Grady et al. (2018) demonstrated that Jejueo is largely unintelligible to people who speak only Korean. Success rates on comprehension questions designed to test understanding of a Jejueo narrative were less than 10%—an outcome roughly equivalent to the results of a similar test of the ability of Dutch speakers to understand Norwegian. Yet, the conclusion that Jejueo should be considered a language was promptly rejected by the National Institute of the Korean Language, which insists that Jejueo is simply a regional variant of Korean. In the words of one scholar who insists on dialectal status for Jejueo (Kim 2016:109-10), 'It might [be] okay to call Jejueo a language if Jeju Island had been an independent country and Jeju people had a different ethnicity. However, those two requirements are not met.' This stance reflects the long-standing belief in Korea that 'the notions of a single race/nation and single language are central to modern Korean concepts of national identity' (King 2007:229). However, it clearly runs counter to the status that Jejueo deserves: it is not a national language, but it is nonetheless a language.

The tradition of calling Japan's Ryukyuan languages 'dialects' started in the 19th century when the Meiji government absorbed the Ryukyu Kingdom, which had been independent from the 15th to the 19th century. A century later, the new nationalistic ideology was reflected in the then-Prime Minister

Nakasone's 1986 description of Japan as a mono-ethnic nation. Although UNESCO's 2009 report on the endangered status of Ryukyuan languages prompted positive changes in the minds of Japanese people in general and some linguists in particular, the idea that Japan is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society needs the continuing endorsement and support of specialists.

The plight of the minority languages of Japan and Korea is dire. According to UNESCO estimates (http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/), Jejeuo is critically endangered, Yaeyama and Yonaguni are severely endangered, and Kunigami, Miyako, Okinawan, Amami and Hachijo are definitively endangered. These languages are all a vital part of the cultural history and fabric of their respective countries. Unless urgent and appropriate action is taken to support their preservation, they will be lost forever. The first step in that direction is to recognize their existence as languages in their own right.

In an attempt to heighten awareness of this important issue, the organizers of the 25th Japanese/Korean Linguistics Conference organized a special session on language endangerment in Japan and Korean, which included the introductory remarks on which this report is based, as well as the four presentations that follow in this volume. In addition, conference attendees were invited to endorse a statement calling for the recognition and preservation of the minority languages of Japan and Korea. That document, along with the signatures of fifty-nine linguists, has since been sent to the consulates of Japan and Korea in Honolulu as well as to the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics and the National Institute of the Korean Language. We conclude our report with the statement itself.

Statement on Language Endangerment in Japan and Korea:

Since the publication in 1992 of a special issue of *Language* devoted to the problem of language endangerment,[†] there has been a general consensus that our responsibility as professional linguists extends beyond the challenges of linguistic analysis. We also have a duty to educate the public about language, especially on matters that involve social policy and communal welfare.

As linguists, we lament the ever-accelerating loss of linguistic diversity in the world, not only because of our scientific interest in the properties of language but also because we recognize that language is integral to a community's identity, as well as an essential part of the cultural history and heritage of the nation in which it is spoken.

[†]Hale, Ken, Michael Krauss, Lucille J. Watahomigie, Akira Y. Yamamoto, Colette Craig, LaVerne Masayesva Jeanne, Nora C. England. 1992. Endangered languages. *Language* 68:1-42.

As specialists in the languages of Japan and Korea, it is our professional responsibility to inform our colleagues, as well as the general public, about linguistic diversity and language endangerment in those countries, with special attention to the following vital facts:

- Varieties of speech that are not mutually intelligible are, by definition, distinct languages, regardless of their official or popular classification as dialects of the national language.
- Both Japan and Korea are linguistically diverse countries. In addition to rich and well documented dialectal variation, both are home to indigenous *languages* other than the official national language. These languages include Amami, Kunigami, Okinawan, Miyako, Yaeyama, Yonaguni, Hachijo and Ainu in the case of Japan and Jejueo in the case of Korea.
- It is possible that new research in each country will lead to the reclassification of other speech varieties as languages rather than dialects.
- The currently identified minority languages of both countries are seriously endangered. The situation has been exacerbated by stigmatization and official neglect stemming from ignorance about the status of these languages and their importance to the cultural fabric of the nations in which they are spoken. Without intervention, they will soon disappear forever.
- It is often possible to revitalize endangered languages if prompt action is taken by the appropriate agencies working in cooperation with trained linguists and with the communities where those languages are spoken.

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