

Jejueo: Korea's Other Language

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1. Introduction

Jejueo, the traditional variety of speech used on Korea's Jeju Island, is often called a dialect (사투리) or a type of regional speech (방언) rather than a language (e.g., King 1996, Sohn 1999:74, Yeon 2010). We intend to show that this classification is erroneous, and that Jejueo is in fact an independent language—a sister to Korean (한국어) within a Koreanic language family.

We begin our discussion of this matter in section 2 by considering the criterion used in modern linguistics to distinguish between a dialect and a language. Section 3 reports on an experiment that our research team (Changyong Yang, Sejung Yang, and the current author, assisted by Sang-Gu Kang and So-Young Kim)¹ designed and carried out to determine whether Jejueo satisfies this criterion and therefore deserves recognition as an independent language. Section 4 considers the implications of our findings in light of various international accords on the rights of linguistic minorities.

2. 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 Weinrich (1944) summed up this view with a famous aphorism, which he attributed to an audience member at one of his talks: "A language is just a dialect with an army and a navy." That is, 'language-hood' wrongly depends on politics.

Modern linguistics rejects the political definition of language-hood, 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. Thus, the speech of London and the speech of Washington, D.C. are dialects, and so is the speech of Seoul. Their special status compared to other dialects comes not from their linguistic characteristics, but from their association with centers of power and influence in their respective countries.

Because language is constantly changing and because it changes in different ways in different places, communities of any size will have in their midst multiple varieties of speech (i.e., dialects). It is common to recognize three major varieties in the U.S. (Inland North, South, and West; see Labov et al. 1997). However, a more detailed map, such as the one presented by Smith (2004), shows many further subdivisions.

¹ Sang-Gu Kang administered the experiment in Seoul and So-Young Kim was responsible for testing in Busan.

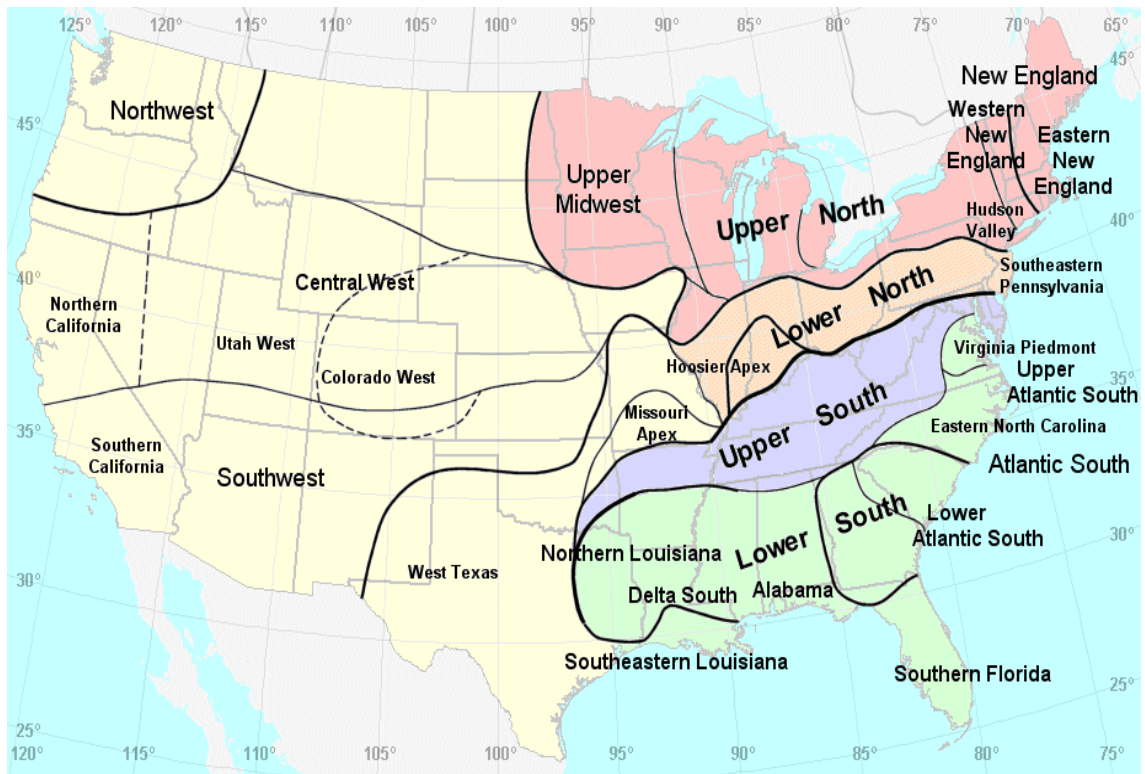


Figure 1. Dialectal variation in the U.S. (Smith 2004)

Notice that no part of the United States lies outside a dialect zone: there is no ‘American English’ that is not a dialect.

England too manifests very significant dialectal variation, of course. Between four and six major dialectal zones are usually recognized, as illustrated in the map in Figure 2, from Smith (2004).

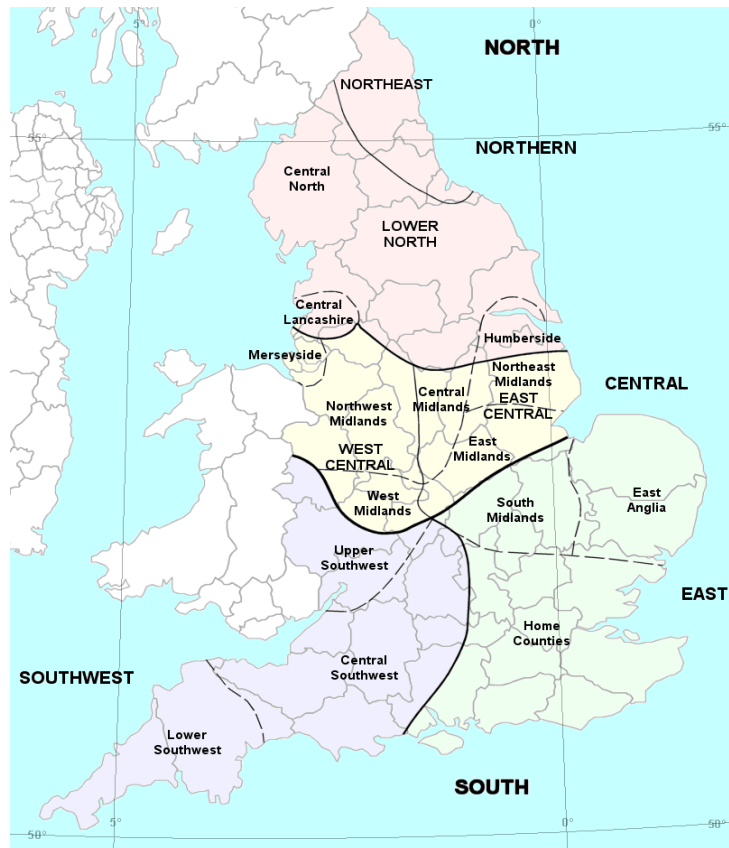


Figure 2. Dialectal variation in England (Smith 2004)

Within Korea, six major varieties are usually recognized (King 1996, Yeon 2012): Hamgyeong and Pyeongan in North Korea, and Central, Jeolla, Gyeongsang and Jeju Island in South Korea).² The map in Figure 3 is from King (1996).

² Sohn (1999:58) posits a seventh dialect zone corresponding to Chungcheng province.



Figure 3. The six major dialect zones in Korea (King 1996:265)

As varieties of speech continue to 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 other dialects, the two varieties of speech are classified as separate languages. In other words, the key criterion for distinguishing between dialects and languages involves intelligibility: at the point where two dialects are no longer mutually comprehensible, they are classified as separate languages (Hockett 1958, chapter 38).

History offers many examples of the transition from dialect to language. The languages that we call 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 dialect could not understand speakers of another dialect. The evolution of English, German, Swedish and Danish 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.

Could the same scenario have unfolded in Korea, with Jeju evolving over time in ways so unique that it became a separate language? In order to answer this question in an objective and methodologically sound way, we need to determine the extent to which Jeju and the mainland varieties of Korean are intelligible to each other. If speakers of the mainland dialects can understand Jeju, then Jeju is a dialect of Korean. On the other hand, if speakers of mainland dialects find Jeju incomprehensible, then it is a

distinct language.³ We investigated this matter with the help of the experiment described in the next section.

3. An intelligibility experiment

In accordance with the research question outlined at the end of the previous section, our experiment was designed to determine whether residents of mainland Korea who had not previously been exposed to Jejueo could understand it.

3.1 Participants

A total of 40 people participated in our experiment —10 native speakers of the Seoul variety of Korean (the national standard), 10 native speakers of the South Jeolla variety of Korean, all residents of Yeosu; 10 native speakers of the South Gyeongsang variety of Korean, all residents of Busan; and 10 native speakers of Jejueo. Because most fluent speakers of Jejueo are middle-aged or older and because we wanted to control for the age factor in our speaker groups, all participants were aged 49 to 64. None of the mainland participants had previous significant exposure to Jejueo.

The inclusion of speaker groups from Busan and Yeosu in addition to Seoul calls for comment. We included these groups in order to check for the presence of a 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.

3.2 Materials

Our objective in designing an intelligibility test was to create a task that involved the sort of language use that goes on in ordinary interpersonal communication about everyday matters (Hockett 1958:323). For that reason, we chose to focus on the ability of residents of the Korean mainland to understand a simple narrative spoken in Jejueo.

The narrative we employed 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. We had two fluent native speakers of Jejueo watch the video and describe the events in Jejueo as they unfolded. We then merged the two versions of the story into a single script that eliminated false starts, pauses, incomplete sentences, and the like. The script was then read aloud by a highly fluent female speaker, as we made an auditory recording.

In order to maximize attention to the task by our participants, we used only the first minute and nine seconds of the narrative, which consisted of a string of 12 clauses containing 62 words.

3.3 Method

Participants first listened to the entire test portion of the narrative without interruption. The recording was then replayed in five segments, varying in length from 1 to 3 clauses. (The actual Jejueo text is available upon request.)

³ Practical considerations make it impossible to test whether a speaker of Jejueo can understand Korean; as far as we can tell, all speakers of Jejueo have received extensive exposure to Korean and are thus bilingual to begin with.

Segment 1: A rooster is crowing in the distance. A man is picking pears by himself. Some pears fall to the ground.

Segment 2: The man comes down from the ladder with his apron full of pears.

Segment 3: He takes the pears out from his apron and puts them into a basket.

Segment 4: He polishes the fallen pears with a handkerchief from his neck and puts them into the basket.

Segment 5: Someone comes from a distance pulling a goat and arrives under the pear tree. He looks at the pear basket and then limps away with the goat.

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, including the following three about the first segment. (The full set of questions is available upon request.)

Questions for segment 1 (asked and answered in Korean):

- 1) What kind of noise was described at the beginning of the story?
- 2) How many people appear in the story?
- 3) What is the person in the story doing?

3.4 Results

Table 1 summarizes the result of our experiment by reporting the mean percentage of correct responses by each participant group to the nine test questions.

Table 1 Percentage of correct responses to the comprehension questions

<u>Jeju Native Speakers</u>	<u>Seoul</u>	<u>South Jeollado</u>	<u>South Gyeongsangdo</u>
89.21%	12.03%	6.00%	5.26%

As can be seen here, there is a vast difference between the ability of the natives speakers of Jeju to respond correctly to the Jeju narrative (89.12% correct) and the performance of the other three groups, which ranged from a mere 5.26% to 12.03%.

These results demonstrate that Jeju is not systematically comprehensible to speakers of Seoul Korean or to speakers of regional varieties of Korean in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. Indeed, comprehensibility scores fall within the range that has been reported for other pairs of related but distinct languages (e.g., Polish and Russian, or Spanish and French; see Lindsay no date a,b). We are thus left with a clear conclusion: Jeju is a distinct language, not a dialect of Korean.

4. Implications

Jejueo has been classified by UNESCO as critically endangered (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap.html>), in accordance with the classificatory system summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Degrees of language endangerment, according to UNESCO (based on Moseley 2010)

Degree of endangerment	Intergenerational Language Transmission
Safe	The language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted
Vulnerable	Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g. home).
Definitely endangered	Children no longer learn the language as the mother tongue in the home.
Severely endangered	The language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.
Critically endangered	The youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently.
Extinct	There are no speakers left.

The youngest fluent speakers of Jejueo are grandparents, and the language is no longer being learned by children. It is estimated that just 5,000 to 10,000 residents of Jeju Island are still fluent (some only partially) in Jejueo, out of a total population of approximately 600,000. The decline of Jejueo is part of a larger international trend. Of the world's 7000 languages, it is estimated that 45% are currently in peril and will eventually be lost unless appropriate action is taken (Campbell et al. 2013).

Korea is a signatory of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage,⁴ which includes provisions for policy initiatives “aimed at promoting the function of the intangible cultural heritage in society, and at integrating the safeguarding⁵ of such heritage into [educational and training] programs” (UNESCO 2003:6). The government of Korea currently recognizes 119 manifestations of the country's intangible cultural heritage that are worth preserving,⁶ including four associated

⁴ Korea accepted the convention on March 24, 2006 and supposedly put it into effect on April 20, 2006. For a list of countries that accepted the concord, see http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/other_treaties/parties.jsp?treaty_id=385&group_id=22

⁵ The convention goes on to define “safeguarding” as measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including its identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and nonformal education.

⁶ For the complete list, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Important_Intangible_Cultural_Properties_of_Korea

specifically with Jeju Island: a shamanic exorcism ritual (제주칠머리당굿), the making of *Mangeon* headbands (망건장), the making of *Tangeon* hats (탕건장), and several folks songs (제주민요). Surprisingly, Jejueo is not included in this list, even though language is explicitly mentioned in the UNESCO convention as an example of intangible cultural heritage.

It is also worth noting that Article 13 of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which was passed by the General Assembly with the support of Korea, includes a provision (Article 13, Clause 3) guaranteeing to children the right to an education in the language of their community.⁷ To date, however, no action has been taken to extend this right to the Jejueo community —despite a national policy on multiculturalism that calls for bilingual education (Grant & Ham 2013:83).

The plight of linguistic minorities in many European countries is very different. The 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages⁸ begins by observing that “protection of the historical regional or minority languages of Europe, some of which are in danger of extinction, contributes to the maintenance and development of Europe’s cultural wealth and traditions.” It goes on to commit its signatories to take measures to ensure the survival of minority languages, including education in those languages, where warranted and where requested by families. A number of progressive governments have already taken significant steps to comply with this commitment: there are Frisian school programs in the Netherlands, Welsh and Gaelic programs in the United Kingdom, Catalan programs in Spain, and Irish programs in Ireland, and so on.

5. Conclusion

It was once quite widely believed that Korean was 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 3.

Table 3. One version of the Altaic language family, including sample members

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

⁷ The document is available at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf. Speaking on behalf of Korea, UN representative Hee-Won Park said that adoption of the Declaration constituted “a solemn pledge ... in support of [the] dwindling culture [and] language of indigenous peoples; see <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/ga10612.doc.htm>

⁸ The charter is available at <http://www.conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/148.htm>.

However, this idea has proven to be highly problematic (Vovin 2007), and it is not uncommon these days to see Korean classified as an isolate—a language with no living relatives (Sohn 1999:18).

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 (고대국어 ‘Old Korean’) or, perhaps, Chungsegugeo (중세국어 ‘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. Koreans inside and outside Jeju Island must act with a sense of urgency and determination to ensure that this vital part of their culture is not lost forever.

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