Korean Language Planning

Over the past six centuries, the South Korean Language has undergone instances of language planning which has fundamentally shaped the language that exists today. From the creation of Hangul in the fifteenth century, to the almost forty years of colonial rule by the Japanese and then following the long-awaited language reforms which followed are all what shapes its successes and failures.

One of the first instances of language planning in Korea was the creation of Hangul, a writing system highly regarded by linguists, created by King Sejong (1417-1450) in 1446 in order to aid the illiterate commoners at the time. Since the fourth or fifth century CE, Chinese (Hanja) was the dominant writing system and was largely a characteristic of the ruling class. The ability to read and write Chinese characters was limited to the male members of the nobility, and it is not a surprise that the majority of Koreans were illiterate up until roughly the twentieth century. This symbol of social status largely posed a threat to the King's implementation of Hangeul – and for a long period of time up to around the late nineteenth century it was regarded as a 'vulgar' writing system, only pertaining to noble women and commoners.

It is unclear as to how the system spread to the masses or which variety of Korean it was based off, yet the simplicity and elegancy of the system is clear motivation for how highly it is regarded in today's society. The conceptual basis of Hangeul is highly regarded due to three main points:

1. The consonants have strong reference towards the place of articulation in the mouth when it is realized
2. The same consonant letters are used regardless of whether they occur initially or finally in a syllable block, and additionally this often meant slightly different realisations of the same phoneme (allophones)
3. The phonetic property of aspiration is indicated by diacritics on the 'base letter' – similarities in shape correspond to similarities in place of articulation

Take the symbol giyeok (?) for example, the shape represents the need for the tongue to be raised in the back of the throat and touch the velum (soft palate) in order to be produced. In terms of the pronunciation of the giyeok, initially in a syllable it is realised as an unvoiced velar plosive [k], as a voiced velar plosive [g] when occurring between two vowels, and at the end of a syllable (when not followed by another word with an initial vowel) is pronounced as an unvoiced velar plosive with no audible release [k ?]. Although pronounced differently in each instance, it is recognised as the same phoneme /k/. Diacritics can then be added to this 'base letter' to create the ki-euk (?), an aspirated unvoiced velar plosive /kh/, which is an entirely separate phoneme with its own pronunciation rules dependent on its placement in a word and its surroundings.

King Sejong's intention was not to eliminate the use of Hanja, however over time there were several attempts to adopt a Hangul-only policy, albeit unsuccessful. To this day Hanja is still used, though on a decreasing scale, particularly to contribute to the avoidance of confusion of homonyms evident in the language, brought upon by King Kojong in 1897, where he declared that a mixture the Korean script with Chinese characters be used in official contexts such as in

written legal documents, newspapers and academic books. At this point in time however, language planning did not concern concrete rules to be applied in the written form, in regularised grammar, orthography and lexicon, but merely the official writing system.

Between the years 1910 and 1945, Korea was under the rule of the Japanese Colonial Administration. Over time, although not initially realised, this brought upon the attempt to abolish the Korean language and inherently make Korea a part of Japan. During this period of time, disregarding the Japanese colonial rule, there was little to no sign language planning or policy due to the use of Chinese characters still being continuously upheld by the upper-class. In 1921, the ‘Korean Language Society’ was established and attempted to raise awareness as to the standardisation of Hangul. However, this movement was short-lived due to the Japanese’s attempt at abolishing the language altogether.

You could say that in itself, the integration of the Japanese language into Korea is a form of language planning in and of itself, however in a colonial context, language planning is distinctive from ‘linguicism’, in which ideologies, structures and practices are put into place to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce unequal divisions of power between groups in which are defined based on a dissimilarity language. In the words of Rhee (1992), “These notions of 'linguicism' and 'linguistic imperialism' assume that language planning can extinguish a language and can produce a monolingual population speaking the dominant language.” In saying that, the Japanese language planning policy with the intent of eradicating the Korean language doesn’t involve only oppressive acts of linguicism. Mainly focusing on status planning, colonial Japan distributed the Japanese language through education, while simultaneously establishing a corpus planning policy where both Korean and Japanese scholars were instructed to standardise the Korean spelling.

In 1911, just one year after the occupation of Korea, Japanese began to be taught in schools, and gradually all the way up until the conclusion of World War II, Korean was being used less and less until it had been completely removed from the colonial education system. Textbooks were rewritten to present both Japanese and Korean in order to aid the teachers who were trained and were required to teach Japanese, the curriculum consisting of included reading, interpretation, conversation, memorisation of phrases, dictation, writing, and calligraphy. Gradually, the hours allocated to studying Korean became less than those for studying Japanese, until by the time it was 1941 Korean language teaching was completely abolished.

After the complete removal of Korean, the language suffered itself to the transference of Japanese lexicons, morphological elements such as nouns, adverbs and verbs, and idiomatic expressions (as cited by Rhee, 1992). Japanese was promoted in all areas of daily life. Because of this gradual banning of the language, and change in grammar, the Korean Language Society’s new objective was the preservation of the language. However, in 1942 many of its members were either imprisoned or killed, and thus was disbanded.

Even after colonial power was restored to the Koreans after 1945, still to this day there are remnants of the Japanese language scattered throughout the language unbeknownst to them. In 1947, the Ministry of Education set up a language purification committee with the intent of creating new native Korean, or Sino-korean words to replace the Japanese and in some instances even replace Sino-Korean words. A large number of words which were contained in up to five volumes of new terms were replaced successfully, yet despite this, the majority of these words were never accepted by the public. Critics often mention that this was indeed

extremely difficult, and in fact naïve to expect the public to accept and use artificially creative native words in place of such basic words.

Chu Shigyoung (1876-1914) was the first Korean linguist to initiate the stanardisation of Korean orthography and grammar, and his studies ultimately influenced the 1933 standardisation of the spelling system which was consented by the Japanese colonial government general at the time. Changes to the phonemic and morphological nature of Korean included, but was not limited to (as cited by Rhee, 1992), the abolition of obsolete consonants and vowels, and the recognition of the formation of double consonants, labial, and assimilation pronunciations with spelling changes being employed accordingly. In addition, parameters were outlined for writing of Hanja in Korean phonetic script, the Seoul dialect was chosen as the standard, and punctuation and grammar rules were outlined. Arguably the most significant feature of the orthography reform was the change of syllable division changed from a phonetic one to a morphological one, where the spelling of particular words and their governed rules were strengthened, many of which already existed when Hangul was conceived, which helped to eliminate confusion. Despite the brief leniency from the Japanese colonial-government, the unified orthography could not be adopted.

Without serious evaluation, it was immediately accepted by the South Korean government after the independence in 1945. But, it was gradually realised that this refined orthography was arbitrary, and thus in need of more improvement. Another committee was formed in 1970 who conducted a survey of 1288 people to further amend Hangul consisting of 61.2% secondary teachers, 12.2% primary teachers, 11.7% university professors, 7.8% media professionals, 4.8% authors and professional writers, and 2.3% of others (as cited by ~~).

In 1978, a Revised Orthography was drafted, however it wasn't until a series of additional revisions and evaluations by the Korean Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1981, the Korean Language Institute in 1985, and finally by the Ministry of Education in 1987, and long at last was officially announced in 1988 with the intent of being out into practice in 1989, seven years after the end of Japan's colonial rule.

The Korean Language Society and their supporters again began to push for the exclusive use of Hangul after post-World War II independence from Japan, in order to disassociate Korea from the use of Chinese characters. It was in 1957 that the cabinet passed a resolution for the ban of Hanja, which resulted in outrage from the educated society and the media. They protested vehemently that since Chinese characters are logographic 'it gave readers an effective means of visual communication' (as cited by ~~~), and that it was effective in the elimination of confusion between homonyms which, due to the phonetic nature of Korean, are inherently also homographs.

The government conceded and in 1964 came up with a list of 1300 Chinese characters to be gradually introduced into schooling. Advocates for the new Hangul-only policy continued to put forward arguments for consideration, such as:

1. The efficiency of Hangul in terms of learning and printing
2. The positive effect of Hangul on elimination of illiteracy
3. Hankul as the popular medium of mass education and;
4. The susceptibility of Hangul to mechanization.

Successful persuasion was again successful in creating a five year plan to abolish Hanja (later revised into a two year plan), which then instantly triggered the attention the media into bringing back not only previously made arguments, but they also they brought attention to the undisputable fact that the earlier previous policies essentially failed because, outside the government and school, Hangul and Hanja had continued to be mixed in writing and publications, while schools were churning out graduates who were functionally illiterate in Hanja. In 1972, the national government changed its tune again and came up with a new list of 1800 basic Chinese characters to be taught in secondary schools, and then the implementation of the 1997 revision of the national curriculum means that instead the students now have the option of learning these 1800 throughout middle school and high school if they wish.