

## **Ethnic North Korean War Refugees' Views on the Intersection of Identity and Language in Colonial and Post-Colonial Korea**

### **Author's Statement**

This paper was written for 76-101 (Interpretation and Argument) my freshman year. Throughout the course taught by Professor Megan Heise, my classmates and I explored the ideas of transnationalism and migration through readings written by a variety of immigrant and refugee writers. As we sought to understand the lived experiences of those who dwell in the spaces between borders, I kept thinking of the experiences of several of my family members prior to and during the Korean War. I had grown up listening to stories of how they were taught to not speak Korean in public during their childhood. Quickly after the end of this colonial period, many of my family members were forced to flee their homes in the North of Korea due to the Korean War. This generation of my family had grown up hearing their parents use the dialect of Korean spoken in the North, but never used it themselves. I interviewed these family members and analyzed these interviews using the ideas presented in class. Through this work, I hope to contribute to developing a better understanding of a group that struggled to exist in a linguistically liminal space at a tumultuous period in Korean history.

Emily

**Abstract**

In order to better understand Korea's complicated colonial history and move towards more effective integration of North Korean defectors into South Korean society, the intersectional nature of those born during the end of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) and immediately after the Korean War (1945-1950) must be investigated. This paper attempts to fill the gap of research into the Korean language identity as it relates to the double pressures of colonialism and anti-North Korean sentiment that refugees from the North of Korea faced. After doing a literature review of seven different sources, four on North Korean defector identity and three on colonial identity, four people who either fled the North during the Korean War or were born shortly after their family fled North Korea were interviewed. In these interviews, participants answered questions about their views of the Korean language, North Korean dialect, and their own use of language. The findings indicate that this generation's relationship with their own identities is more nuanced than previous literature would suggest, and demonstrates the potential for stimulating more dialogue between older generations of refugees and modern-day defectors.

**Keywords:** Korean, Language, Colonialism, Refugee, Defector, Intersectionality, Identity

**Introduction**

Modern Korea has had a tumultuous history of colonialism and wartime conflict. The country, colonized by Japan in 1910 and liberated in 1945, just five years before the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, experienced both oppressive colonialism and painful division within the same half century (Chung). Thus, the experiences of individuals born in the North of Korea who fled to the South during the war exist at the intersection of multiple linguistic pressures, as they experienced discrimination against their language through colonialism and then against their dialect through anti-communist sentiment in post-war South Korea. Throughout this paper, the term “refugees” will refer to those who defected from the North of Korea (the geographic region that eventually would become North Korea prior to the Korean War) before the existence of North Korea. This term will contrast with “defector,” which describes those who fled the country of North Korea after its establishment.

Researchers have studied the deficit views and lower academic achievement outcomes forced on ethnic Koreans during the colonial era due to Japan’s stringent language policy, as well as how these deficit views were subverted by anti-colonial movements in the 40s (Pieper; Tillman). Similarly, there have been studies on how to integrate the North Korean dialect into the South Korean education system, as linguistic bias against this dialect is the primary form of discrimination against modern-day defectors (Kang; Matherly). Unfortunately, there has not been much research done into the linguistic identity of Northern Korean war refugees, who share the most similar experiences to modern-day defectors yet exhibit the most suspicion towards these new arrivals (Chung). Thus, the research question that this study aimed to answer is: how did the double pressures of colonialism and suspicion against ethnic Northern Koreans in the late colonial to postcolonial eras in Korea shape the identities of Korean War refugees from the

North of Korea? As North Korea faces its worst food security crisis in 30 years (White), the number of defectors from North Korea into the South will only continue to climb. Since language divides defectors and their southern counterparts, it is imperative to understand Korea's complicated linguistic history to bring down the linguistic barrier between these two groups.

## **Methods**

This study consisted of interviews with four Korean War refugees whose families came from the North of Korea. These interviews manifested themselves in two different mediums. First, two of the participants were not comfortable enough with technology to respond to an online survey. These participants, referred to as P1 and P2 (see Figure 1), were interviewed over the phone and their conversations were recorded. These participants, having lived in Korea for their childhood and most of their adult lives, preferred to express their thoughts in Korean. Thus, P1's interview was transcribed in Hangul first and then translated to English. P2's interview was similarly translated to English, but directly from the recording due to time constraints. The other two participants, P3 and P4, were more comfortable with technology and replied to the interview questions via email. These two participants have lived in the United States for a considerable amount of time and chose to express their thoughts in English. The transcripts and responses for the participants are provided in Appendix A.

**Table 1: Participant Identification Table**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Birth Year</b>               | <b>Birth Location</b> | <b>Interview Language</b> | <b>Interview/Survey Format</b> |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>P1</b>          | 1943 (officially 1944) — during | Pyongyang (North)     | Korean                    | Phone Interview                |

|           |  |                   |         |                 |
|-----------|--|-------------------|---------|-----------------|
|           | Japanese occupation                      |                   |         |                 |
| <b>P2</b> | 1946 — immediately after liberation      | Pyongyang (North) | Korean  | Phone Interview |
| <b>P3</b> | 1950 — start of the Korean War           | Seoul (South)     | English | Email Survey    |
| <b>P4</b> | 1949 — immediately before the Korean War | Seoul (South)     | English | Email Survey    |

**Source: Personal Interviews. [April 2022]**

The survey and interview began with questions that asked participants to describe their experiences (or alternatively, stories that their relatives told them) about colonialism, their perception of the Korean language and culture, the northern Korean regional dialect, and North Korean defectors (see Appendix A). The questions were purposefully open-ended and included both opinion-based questions (asking about perceptions and associations) and story-based questions (asking for anecdotes). The story-based questions, which asked participants to recall a certain time in their lives (e.g. when the Korean War began or when they fled from the North to the South of Korea) were positioned before questions that asked about their perceptions of various concepts (e.g. Korean culture or North Korean defectors). As a result, this series of questions aimed to have these refugees express their ideas about language and identity after reflecting on their own experiences with colonialism and war. After being transcribed, translated, or received, the participants' responses were read thoroughly. Revisiting the research question, which addresses the double pressures of colonialism and regionalism, findings from the survey were organized into three categories: perceptions of the Korean language as a whole,

associations related to the North Korean regional dialect, and opinions on modern-day North Korean defectors. These findings will be explained in further detail in the next section.

## **Results**

The findings of the interviews and surveys can be summarized in three points. First, the participants unanimously held positive views of their Korean language identity, which were reinforced by the oppression they experienced under colonialism. Second, there were different levels of self-identification with the North Korean regional dialect, which potentially correspond to whether or not the participant actively fled or lived in the North of Korea. Finally, opinions of North Korean defectors were varied and potentially correlated with the participant's own identification with North Korean regional language identity, but all participants showed concern and empathy towards defectors through the lens of their own experiences. Throughout the interviews, it is important to note that many refer to the standard Korean language, which is based on the dialect spoken in Seoul (the capital of South Korea), in contrast to the dialect from the North of Korea and from regions outside of Seoul.

### *Views of the Korean Language*

All participants agreed on their views of Korean as a language of resistance and freedom. These beliefs were not contradicted by their experiences with the remnants of colonialism but rather enforced by their pride in living in a liberated country. P1 noted that he and his family “were able to change our names back to our Korean names from Japanese names that were imposed by the Japanese under occupation.” Note that although P1 was born during the colonial period, he views the change to his Korean name as going “back” to his true name. P2's positive

views of the Korean language were also reinforced by its subversive role in the colonial period. In response to one of the story-based questions, she recounted how her father was jailed due to writing a poem that was viewed as being anti-colonial during the colonial era. When he contracted dementia later in life, she explained, he lost the ability to speak Korean and could only speak in Japanese. For her, Japanese holds a place of revulsion and trauma. On the other hand, she explained that she loves the Korean language, noting that “there are many beautiful words and expressions that cannot be directly translated into other languages.” P4 explicitly stated that he believed that Japanese colonial language “policy fueled even stronger anti-Japanese sentiment, as it was an attempt to change Korea's identity.” For these participants, a strong anti-colonial sentiment fuels their positive interpretations of the Korean language.

In particular, Hangul, the Korean writing system, was a point of pride for study participants. P3 noted that she was proud of “especially the written Korean, Hangul. Hangul consists of 24 alphabet [characters], which has a very scientific configuration and can be learned easily and written.” The participants’ viewed Hangul as more than an effective writing system, however, as P1 mentioned that after the colonial era many publications began eliminating Kanji (a Japanese writing system) characters. He noted by the late 80s, the Sports sections of newspapers were all written in Hangul. It is clear from this observation that Korean as a written language in particular played a substantial role as an expression of freedom from colonialism.

### *Self-Identification with North Korean Dialect*

The participants showed mixed levels of identification with the North Korean regional dialect. P1 simply stated that “I only used Daegu<sup>1</sup> dialect until I moved to Seoul. Then I used the

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<sup>1</sup> A city in South Korea

standardized Korean,” noting that he has no linguistic association with the North Korean dialect. P2 explained that she “stopped using it when I left but people who moved from the North notice once in a while,” noting that “certain words and intonation give it away at times,” though she does not know exactly what they are. Thus, she has no conscious attachment to the dialect, but does unknowingly use words and phrases outside of standard (Seoul) Korean. P3 had a more affectionate connection with the regional dialect, stating that “[the dialect] reminds me of my older family members, with whom I feel the familiar attachment.” P4 had the strongest attachment to the North Korean linguistic identity, noting that “we are Northern Koreans, having lived there before moving to the South. We spoke Northern dialect.” He further reinforced this identification by saying “Northerners like us.”

It is interesting to note that those who lived in the North of Korea (P1, P2) before fleeing down to the South identified less with the regional dialect than those born during or after their families’ flight to the South (P3, P4). This correlation may suggest that the trauma of fleeing the North could have led to less positive associations on the part of P1 and P2. This could also be because P3 and P4 immigrated to the United States earlier; P4 came to America for schooling when he was 14 or 15 and thus endured less anti-North Korean pressure in the staunchly anti-communist South during the postwar years.

### *Opinions on Modern North Korean Defectors*

The participant’s views on modern-day defectors seem to correspond to their perceptions of their own identity, as it relates to the North Korean regional dialect. Those who associated with the North Korean regional dialect empathized more with modern-day defectors. P1 expressed concern over the North Korean defectors:



My opinion (about defectors in South Korea) is the government should do a better job of educating defectors. When the governmental financial and economic assurances end, it is not easy for these people to survive in a capitalistic society. Economic assistance has its limit to long-term survival in the South.

His cautious view was shared by P2, who noted that she was “wary about whether they are true defectors in the sense that they risked their lives for freedom or double agents to both South Korea and North Korea or just North Korean spies.” She noted that this suspicion is grounded in concern over the difficulty of adjusting to life in the South. She elaborated on her views in a more empathetic way than P1:

I wonder if this is a process and pain we have to go through before being able to unify this country. Once North Koreans experience the freedom in South Korea, it is difficult for them to go back and live without it [...] I am sure once they come to South Korea, there are things they miss about the North. Freedom does come with responsibility. Competition and having to think for themselves are things which they never needed to deal with.

P3 simply stated “I admire their courage and wish them successful adjustment to South Korea.”

P4 showed the most camaraderie with North Korean defectors and elaborated on his support of them:

I am very/most sympathetic to any Northern defectors, as we are the same people and as our parents are devout anti-Communist (the Stalinistic kind, not the present Chinese) and left all their property and risked their lives to move to the South. The defectors have difficult time adjusting to the life in the South because of many societally built in biases.

It is important to note that even those who are wary of modern-day defectors express their concern in an empathetic manner, acknowledging the educational and economic disparity as well as social biases that create barriers for defectors.

## **Discussion**

The participants' positive views of the Korean language suggest that colonialism, and the end of colonialism in Korea, only reinforced the participants' pride in the Korean language. Additionally, even the one participant (P1) who was alive during the colonial period still viewed his linguistic identity as Korean. Thus, although aggressive Japanese-language-only educational policies on the part of the colonial government "delegitimized alternative pronouncements of identity and actualized the continued transition to Japanese literacy in higher education", as Pieper claims, Japan's attempts to cement Korean as a "foreign first language" were subverted immediately before and after the end of the colonial era (87). Additionally, from P1's responses about transitioning from Kanji to Hangul and from P4's note that "only the elite class was able to attend school; so only 1.6% of men and 0.6% of women knew Japanese," it seems that this post-colonial generation was acutely aware of Japan's attempt of creating an educational policy that disadvantaged ethnic Koreans. Thus, one can infer that, at least for these participants, the effects described in Pieper's paper were not lasting.

The responses also formed a different view of refugees than those presented by Chung, who claimed that in terms of Korean War-era refugees:

When the new settlers show even a small amount of approval for North Korea's society or political system, the older war refugees become instantly suspicious. The possibility of

pro-North Korean sentiments activates an “anticommunism circuit,” a deeply internalized conditioned reflex, in older refugees. (Chung 7)

While his findings may be partially true (anti-communism is deeply embedded in the consciousness of these older refugees), the findings from my interviews and surveys reveal that older war refugees may have more nuanced views of their newer counterparts. Every response contained sympathy and understanding for why refugees may become nostalgic or long for a return to North Korea, a drastic contrast to the automatic and hostile “anticommunism circuit” that Chung describes (7). In fact, one participant (P4) even noted that his parents showed animosity to the “the Stalinistic kind [of communism], not the present Chinese,” showing a more nuanced view of communism than Chung’s findings would suggest.

Additionally, the findings from these interviews in relation to these war refugees’ views of defectors support the continuation of efforts to bridge the linguistic gap between North Korean defectors and South Korean society. Hough found that one of the key factors in the otherization of North Korean defectors living in South Korean society is their dialect, with many defectors attempting to hide their dialect in order to avoid judgment from natives of South Korea. In fact, there have been programs designed to educate South Koreans on the basics of North Korean dialect in order to promote greater linguistic unity between the two nations (Kang). The fact that these Northern war refugees have lived their entire lives outside the nation of North Korea and yet still retain some linguistic nostalgia or attachment to the North serves as a reminder that there are still remnants of a shared linguistic heritage between the two countries. Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that there may be a correlation between empathy towards defectors and positive views of the North Korean regional dialect. Thus, the results of this paper could aid

in creating greater dialogue between modern-day defectors and wartime refugees in order to remove bias against the Northern dialect.

The linguistic experience of these war refugees stands at the intersection of anticolonialism and anticommunism. These interviewees had pride in a general Korean linguistic identity as it relates to their experiences with Japanese colonial rule and nuanced views of modern-day defectors rooted in their own use of language. These findings suggest avenues forward for greater integration of North Korean defectors in South Korean society as the linguistic barrier between the two countries may be more tenuous than it seems. Of course, further research from more groups within this time period (centering war refugees from different regions, older generations who lived during the colonial period, etc.) is needed to realize this integration. These findings, however, offer some hope for a reconciliation for Korea's complicated linguistic past.

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### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. How old were you when Korea was liberated from Japan? Do you have any memories of either liberation or being under colonialism, and if so, what were those memories?
2. Based on either your experiences or stories you've been told, how do you think Koreans' perceptions of the Korean language changed after Korea was liberated?
3. What do you believe your perception of the Korean language and Korean culture was growing up?
4. How old were you when you moved from the north of Korea to the South of Korea? Do you have any memories of that time, and if so, what were those memories?
5. What are your thoughts on the North Korean regional dialect? Are there certain words or phrases that you use from that dialect? What sort of associations does it have for you?
6. How do you believe your experiences have shaped your opinion of North Korean defectors in the current day?