

LEXICAL AND EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY UNDER JAPANESE COLONIAL RULE IN KOREA (1910–1945): A HISTORICAL-SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Background. From 1910 to 1945, Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, a period marked not only by political and economic control but also by cultural and linguistic suppression. The Japanese government implemented assimilation policies aimed at erasing Korean national identity, and language was a primary target. The use of the Korean language in schools, publications, and official settings was progressively restricted, and Japanese was enforced as the language of instruction and administration. This colonization period left a lasting impact on the structure, usage, and perception of the Korean language.

Objectives. This study aims to examine the effects of Japanese colonial policies on the Korean language, focusing on three main areas: the suppression of Korean in public life, the influence of Japanese on Korean vocabulary and linguistic habits, and the post-liberation efforts to restore and purify the national language. The study also investigates how language functioned as both a tool of colonization and a medium of resistance.

Methods. The research is based on a review of historical documents, educational policies, linguistic records, and previous scholarly works on Korean language history. Comparative analysis is used to trace the lexical and grammatical changes influenced by Japanese. The study also considers sociolinguistic responses during and after the occupation, including underground education efforts and post-1945 language reforms in South and North Korea.

Results. The findings indicate that Japanese colonial rule led to a significant reduction in the public and educational use of Korean, introduced a considerable number of Japanese loanwords, and created long-term effects on Korean linguistic identity. Despite the suppression, Koreans preserved their language through informal means and later engaged in national efforts to revive Hangul and remove colonial remnants. These outcomes highlight the resilience of linguistic identity and the powerful role of language in cultural preservation and post-colonial recovery.

Conclusions. The linguistic oppression during the Japanese colonial period reveals the profound connection between language and national identity. The Korean language served not only as a target of colonization but also as a symbol of resistance and a core element of post-liberation cultural recovery. This study highlights the role of language policy as a tool of political control and the long-term effects of colonial interference on linguistic communities.

Keywords: Japanese colonial language policy, Wasei Kango, lexical influence, colonial education reforms, Korean language suppression, Hangul, language policy, post-colonial recovery.

Background

The history of the Korean language is deeply intertwined with the nation's political and cultural transformations. One of the most turbulent and formative periods occurred during the Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945. During these 35 years, the Korean Peninsula was subjected not only to political domination but also to aggressive cultural assimilation policies. Among the most affected aspects of Korean identity was the national language.

Language is a powerful carrier of cultural memory, national identity, and collective resistance. The Japanese colonial administration recognized this and deliberately targeted the Korean language in efforts to suppress nationalist sentiment and promote loyalty to the Japanese empire. As a result, the use of Korean in schools, media, and official domains was severely restricted, while Japanese was imposed as the dominant language of governance and education. This had profound implications for linguistic practices, generational transmission of language, and the psychological well-being of the colonized population.

The **relevance** of this study lies in understanding how language policies can serve as tools of ideological control and cultural domination. At the same time, it demonstrates the resilience of linguistic communities under foreign rule and the capacity of language to become a means of resistance and post-colonial revival.

The **aim** of this research is to explore the impact of Japanese colonial policies on the Korean language, focusing on three key dimensions: the suppression of Korean in public life, the lexical and structural influence of Japanese, and the post-liberation efforts to restore and reclaim the Korean linguistic identity. The study also seeks

to highlight how language shaped both the colonial experience and the national response that followed. The specific **objectives** are to examine the policies and practices that restricted or suppressed the Korean language during colonial rule, to investigate the lexical and syntactic influence of Japanese on Korean, to assess the social and cultural effects of these policies on Korean identity, to explore the post-liberation efforts to restore and purify the Korean language in both South and North Korea. The **subject** of this study is the Korean language during and after the period of Japanese colonization, with an emphasis on the political, lexical, and sociolinguistic dimensions of language transformation and resistance.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-sociolinguistic approach combining archival analysis, lexical frequency counts, and comparative colonial policy study. Primary sources include colonial-era government decrees, educational ordinances, school textbooks (1920–1945), and newspaper archives such as Dong-A Ilbo and Chosun Ilbo. Lexical analysis identified and classified Japanese-origin terms, distinguishing between direct borrowings and Wasei Kango. Comparative methods were used to contextualize the Korean case alongside British colonial language policy in India and Soviet policies in Ukraine, highlighting both shared and unique strategies of linguistic control.

In addition to primary documents, the study relies on a broad range of secondary literature in the fields of Korean linguistics and colonial studies. This allows for a critical review of existing scholarship on the topic and helps situate the research within ongoing academic discussions. Linguistic features such as vocabulary, syntax, and script usage are examined in relation to both pre-colonial and

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post-colonial stages of language development. Attention is given to the influence of Japanese on Korean lexical items and orthographic practices, as well as to the language purification efforts that followed Korea's liberation in 1945.

Furthermore, the research incorporates sociolinguistic perspectives to explore how language functioned as a tool of both oppression and resistance. By considering the lived experiences of Koreans during this period, such as the role of underground education, religious institutions, and private language use. The study seeks to understand the broader cultural and psychological impact of linguistic colonization and the subsequent recovery of national identity through language.

Results

The annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 marked the beginning of a systematic effort to dismantle Korean national identity. One of the most significant instruments of this policy was language control. In the early years of colonial rule, the Japanese government introduced various administrative reforms that gradually curtailed the public use of Korean. Although initial educational policies allowed for limited instruction in Korean alongside Japanese, this balance shifted dramatically in the 1930s as the imperial ideology of assimilation (Kor. 내선일체) gained dominance (Fig. 1).

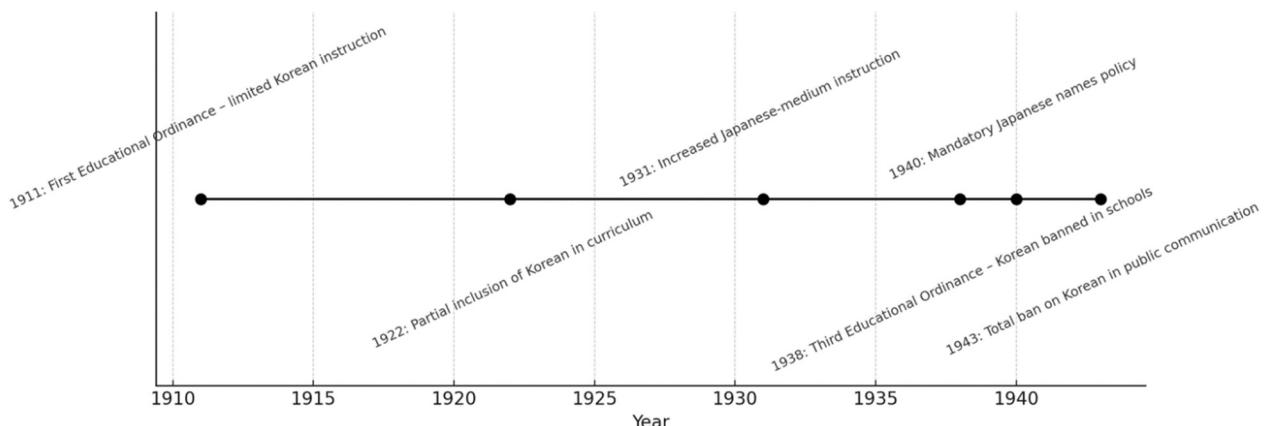


Fig. 1. Timeline of Japanese Colonial Language Policy in Korea (1910–1945)

By 1938, Korean was effectively banned from formal education. School curricula were revised to prioritize Japanese language and history, while Korean textbooks were removed and replaced by state-sanctioned Japanese materials. Teachers were instructed to communicate exclusively in Japanese, and students were penalized for using Korean even in informal settings. This policy extended beyond schools to include government offices, legal proceedings, and public signage (Caprio, 2011). The ultimate goal was linguistic assimilation, whereby Koreans would cease to use their native tongue and instead adopt Japanese as their sole means of communication and identity.

The suppression of Korean also took symbolic forms. The government actively discouraged the use of Hangul, the native Korean script developed in the 15th century, promoting the exclusive use of Japanese kana and kanji in official publications. Newspapers and magazines in Korean were either shut down or heavily censored. In the late 1930s, the regime intensified its efforts with name-changing campaigns, requiring Koreans to adopt Japanese-style names, further eroding linguistic and cultural distinctiveness.

This period represents one of the most severe episodes of language suppression in modern East Asian history. The prohibition of Korean was not merely a matter of administrative convenience; it was a deliberate strategy to weaken Korean cultural cohesion and foster a colonial identity aligned with the Japanese empire. Despite these pressures, many Koreans continued to speak and preserve their language in private settings, religious communities, and underground schools, laying the foundation for post-liberation linguistic revival.

The Japanese authorities viewed linguistic assimilation as essential for erasing Korean distinctiveness and fostering loyalty to the empire. As a result, the Korean language was systematically marginalized in public life, education, and media. Simultaneously, Japanese was promoted as the

superior and official language of modernity and power. This article argues that Japanese colonial policy had a profound and lasting impact on the Korean language by restricting its usage, altering its vocabulary, and shaping the development of national consciousness. These effects extended beyond the colonial period and continue to influence the sociolinguistic landscape of Korea today.

The linguistic oppression began shortly after the annexation of Korea, but it intensified significantly in the 1930s, particularly as Japan's militarism and imperial ambitions expanded throughout East Asia. Colonial authorities introduced a series of official decrees and educational reforms aimed at minimizing, and eventually eliminating the presence of Korean in public life.

One of the most significant developments was the enforcement of Japanese as the official language of administration, law, and education. Korean was gradually excluded from schools: in the early 1920s, Korean could still be used as an auxiliary subject, but by the late 1930s, it was entirely removed from the curriculum. The 1938 Educational Ordinance mandated Japanese as the sole medium of instruction in all schools, relegating Korean to an unofficial and often prohibited status. Teachers were required to speak only Japanese, and students who spoke Korean in class or on school grounds could be punished, humiliated, or even expelled.

These policies extended into government institutions and the legal system, where all official documentation was written in Japanese, and Korean citizens were required to submit legal claims and petitions in the colonial language. In many cases, knowledge of Japanese became a prerequisite for employment or social advancement, further pressuring Koreans to abandon their native tongue.

The suppression of Korean was also visible in printed media and cultural expression. Korean-language newspapers such as Dong-A Ilbo and Chosun Ilbo were subjected to strict censorship and frequent suspension. By

the late 1930s, most Korean-language publications had been shut down or heavily restricted. Official documents, public signage, and even product packaging shifted exclusively to Japanese, erasing Korean from the visual and informational environment of daily life.

The discouragement of Hangul Korea's unique phonetic writing system was another key component of this linguistic erasure. Although Hangul had gained wider usage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a tool for national literacy, colonial authorities promoted the use of Japanese kanji and kana scripts, portraying them as more "civilized" or modern. In schools and government, Hangul was either banned or ridiculed as an inferior system, associated with backwardness and rebellion.

These examples illustrate how colonial rule sought to reshape Korean linguistic identity by suppressing the native language and imposing Japanese in its place. But even under these repressive conditions, many Koreans resisted: through underground schools, private tutoring, church education, and the secret circulation of Korean texts, they preserved their language and cultural memory. This quiet linguistic resistance laid the groundwork for the dramatic post-liberation revival of Korean, which became a core symbol of national independence and cultural renewal.

While the primary aim of Japanese colonial policy was to suppress Korean language use, a more subtle yet lasting effect was the linguistic influence of Japanese on Korean vocabulary and structure. This influence emerged through prolonged exposure to Japanese in schools, government offices, the military, and mass media, where Japanese terminology was standardized and widely adopted in both spoken and written contexts.

One of the most significant outcomes was the introduction of Japanese loanwords into Korean, especially in domains such as administration, law, education, industry, and technology. Terms like *gakkō* (school), *keisatsu* (police), and *densha* (train) found their way into the Korean lexicon either directly or in adapted forms. Some of these words were translated or replaced in the post-liberation period, but many persisted in everyday usage, particularly in South part of Korea, where Japanese-style words (called *Wasei-Kango* (和製漢語, 일본식 한자어)) remained common due to their entrenched role in bureaucratic and technical language.

The syntactic influence of Japanese is less widely acknowledged but also worth noting. While Korean and Japanese share typological similarities: both are agglutinative, subject-object-verb (SOV) languages prolonged institutional exposure to Japanese during the colonial period likely reinforced certain patterns of honorifics, passive constructions, and compound formation in Korean, especially in formal registers. Some scholars argue that aspects of Japanese bureaucratic speech styles (*keigo*, 敬語, 경어) influenced the development of formal Korean usage in official settings.

Furthermore, Japanese-style compound words and neologisms were introduced through education and print media. Words like *haksaeng* 학생 (student), *gyoyuk* 교육 (education), and *chongmu* 총무 (totalitarianism) were often borrowed or coined in Japanese before being naturalized into Korean. In colonial/ideological contexts, *총무주의* (總務主義) could relate to totalitarianism as a political term, though *전체주의* (全體主義) is the standard Korean term for "totalitarianism". The extensive use of Sino-Japanese vocabulary during this period created semantic layers that would later require purification and revision during language reform movements in the postcolonial era.

Evidence from the Dong-A Ilbo (August 12, 1937) reveals that public notices were frequently issued in Japanese with minimal or no Korean translation, particularly in domains such as transportation and public safety (Tabl. 1). For example, an announcement in *Keijō Nippo* (경성일보) used the term 電車 (*densha*, train) without a Korean equivalent, reflecting both the imposition of Japanese terminology and the erosion of Korean synonyms in public communication. Educational materials from 1935, such as the *Shōgaku Kokugo Dokuhon* (Elementary Japanese Language Reader), integrated Japanese bureaucratic terms like 警察 (*keisatsu*, police) and 學校 (*gakkō*, school) as primary vocabulary items, relegating Korean equivalents to footnotes or omitting them entirely. In an October 1940 ordinance, the colonial administration mandated the exclusive use of Japanese for official petitions, with prescribed honorific endings (~ます/~でございます) that had no direct equivalent in Korean formal speech at the time.

Table 1

Domains of Japanese Lexical Influence in Korean during Colonial Rule (1910–1945)

Domain	Example (Japanese)	Korean Form (Colonial Era)	Notes
Administration	総務 (<i>sōmu</i>)	총무 (<i>chongmu</i>)	Wasei Kango; persisted in bureaucratic registers
Education	学校 (<i>gakkō</i>)	학교 (<i>hakgyo</i>)	Via Sino-Japanese; taught as standard term
Law & Policing	警察 (<i>keisatsu</i>)	경찰 (<i>gyeongchal</i>)	Still in use; Chinese-origin but standardized via Japanese
Transport	電車 (<i>densha</i>)	전차 (<i>jeoncha</i>)	Fell out of use after 1945, replaced by 기차 (<i>gicha</i>)
Technology/Industry	工場 (<i>kōjō</i>)	공장 (<i>gongjang</i>)	Adopted widely; remains standard in both Koreas

It is important to note that not all of this linguistic borrowing was forced. In some cases, Japanese terms filled lexical gaps in Korean, especially as Korea underwent modernization. However, the ideological context in which these borrowings occurred, one of domination and erasure meant that even neutral-seeming vocabulary carried symbolic weight. After liberation, both North and South

Korea took deliberate steps to "cleanse" the language of Japanese influence, though their approaches differed significantly (Dzyabko, 2010). Democratic People's Republic of Korea pursued a more radical policy of purging foreign elements, while Republic of Korea adopted a more pragmatic, selective reform strategy (Fig. 2).

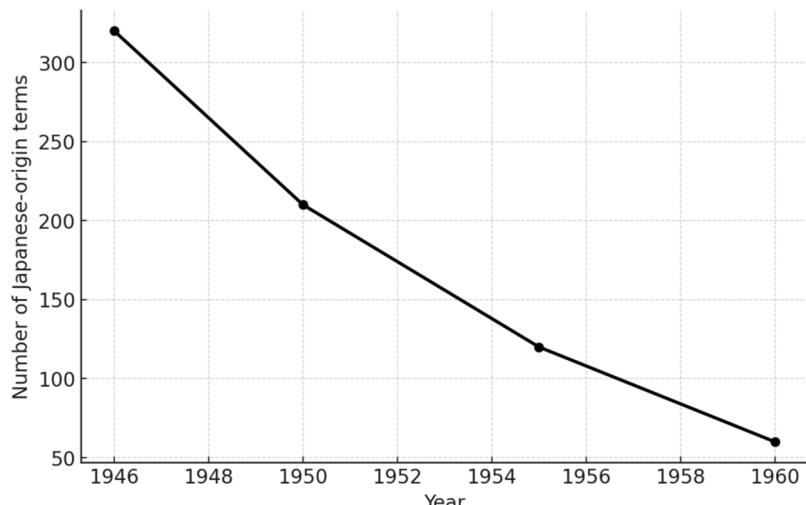


Fig. 2. Language purification after 1945: Decline of Japanese loanwords in Korean textbooks (1946–1960)

The Japanese colonial period left a visible imprint on the Korean lexicon and style. These influences, though often masked by structural similarities between the two languages, are evidence of the deeper sociopolitical pressures that shaped linguistic expression in Korea under colonial rule. Understanding these influences is crucial not only for linguistic analysis but also for appreciating the ways in which language becomes a contested space in the struggle over identity and sovereignty.

The liberation of Korea in 1945 marked a turning point in the history of the Korean language. After decades of forced assimilation and cultural suppression, the restoration of Korean as a national language became a central symbol of sovereignty and identity. However, the process of linguistic revival was neither immediate nor uniform. In the years following independence, both North and South Korea pursued ambitious but divergent strategies to decolonize and modernize the language, reflecting their respective political ideologies and nation-building goals.

In Republic of Korea, efforts to revive and reform the language began almost immediately. Educational institutions reinstated Korean as the primary language of instruction, and government bodies promoted the use of Hangul in official and public communication. However, the persistence of Japanese loanwords, bureaucratic terms, and writing conventions posed challenges. Language reform movements advocated for the removal or replacement of Japanese-influenced vocabulary with either native Korean equivalents or newly coined neologisms (King, 1997). Organizations such as the Korean Language Society (Joseoneo Hakhoe 조선어학회 1930–1940s) played a key role in researching historical texts, standardizing spelling, and promoting linguistic purity.

Despite these efforts, the realities of rapid modernization, globalization, and American influence introduced new challenges. While many Japanese words were gradually replaced or fell out of usage, others remained deeply embedded in legal, academic, and technological fields. Moreover, the post-war presence of American military and cultural power brought a new wave of English loanwords, which partially shifted attention away from Japanese influences. As a result, South Korea's language purification was more pragmatic than radical, balancing cultural restoration with linguistic functionality.

In contrast, DPRK implemented a far more ideologically driven and systematic language purification campaign. The

regime under Kim Il-sung viewed linguistic decolonization as inseparable from the construction of a self-reliant socialist state. Beginning in the late 1940s, the DPRK government launched a series of radical reforms aimed at eliminating all foreign influences, including Japanese, Chinese, and Western elements. Hangul was elevated as the exclusive writing system, and the use of Sino-Korean and Japanese-derived vocabulary was aggressively curtailed. New words were coined using native roots, and speech was standardized to reflect revolutionary and proletarian values.

DPRK language policy also served as a tool of political control and ideological reinforcement. Dictionaries and textbooks were rewritten to reflect the state's worldview, and the use of language was closely monitored to ensure conformity with official discourse. While these policies created a highly uniform linguistic environment, they also limited access to global scientific and cultural developments, as the language was isolated from international vocabulary trends.

Despite their differences, both Koreas shared a common goal in the post-liberation era: the reclamation of linguistic identity. The Korean language became a central site for expressing national pride, cultural continuity, and independence from colonial rule (Kim-Renaud, 2022). These recovery efforts not only restored the functional use of Korean in education and governance but also helped to heal the symbolic wounds inflicted by decades of suppression.

Beyond the structural and lexical consequences, the Japanese colonial policy had deep and lasting cultural and psychological effects on Korean society. Language suppression was not only a political act but also an assault on personal identity, cultural continuity, and collective self-worth. As the use of Korean was systematically restricted in education, administration, and public communication, many Koreans experienced a growing sense of alienation, from their heritage, their language, and even their ability to articulate their thoughts freely.

One of the most damaging consequences was the loss of literacy in the native language. As children were schooled exclusively in Japanese, many grew up unable to read or write Korean fluently, especially in Hangul, which had already suffered centuries of marginalization under Confucian elitism. The colonial education system trained a generation to become literate in Japanese, often at the expense of their mother tongue. This created not only

functional illiteracy in Korean among young people, but also a rupture between generations, as parents and grandparents continued to use Korean orally, while children became increasingly detached from it in writing.

This linguistic assimilation had broader implications for Korean identity. As language is a key vehicle for expressing values, emotions, and worldview, its suppression created a vacuum in the national spirit (Kazakevych, 2017). Being forced to think, learn, and express oneself in the colonizer's language disrupted the internal coherence of Korean culture and weakened the emotional connection to national history and tradition. For many, this resulted in a crisis of identity, especially among students and intellectuals who were taught to view Japanese as the language of progress and civilization, and Korean as backward or inferior.

Yet, despite the pervasive control, resistance persisted, often quietly, but powerfully. One of the most significant forms of resistance was the operation of underground schools, where Korean was taught in secret by committed educators who risked imprisonment or worse. Religious institutions, particularly Christian churches, also played a vital role in preserving Korean literacy by offering instruction in Hangul through Bible study and worship. In the domestic sphere, many families deliberately continued to speak and teach Korean at home, ensuring its survival across generations (Noh Yeon-suk, 2007). These acts of everyday resistance demonstrated that language could serve not only as a medium of expression, but also as a form of defiance against cultural erasure.

In literature and poetry, the Korean language became a symbol of endurance. Writers such as Yi Kwang-su and Han Yong-un used Korean prose and verse to express national longing and spiritual resilience, often coded in metaphors to escape censorship (Andrianov, 2024). Their works helped maintain a shared emotional vocabulary that sustained the idea of Korean nationhood during a period when formal political identity had been erased.

Ultimately, the psychological burden of language loss was matched by the dignity of its preservation. For many Koreans, holding on to their language even in whispers and secret writings became an act of hope, a way of remembering who they were and what they could be again. This cultural continuity laid the foundation for the explosive revival of Korean identity and pride that followed liberation.

Discussion and conclusions

The Japanese linguistic policies in Korea share similarities with other colonial regimes. For instance, British authorities in India promoted English-medium education while marginalizing local languages, and the Soviet Union imposed Russian as the lingua franca in non-Russian republics such as Ukraine. In all cases, language served as a tool for both administrative efficiency and ideological assimilation, with suppression of native languages often accompanied by selective borrowing of technical or administrative terminology. However, unlike British India where English maintained global prestige, Japanese in Korea was tied to the narrower geopolitical aims of the Japanese empire, leading to more aggressive eradication of local linguistic identity.

The findings of this study reveal that the Japanese colonial language policy was not merely administrative in nature, but deeply ideological, aimed at reshaping Korean identity through linguistic assimilation. The suppression of Korean in education, media, and governance was intended to undermine cultural continuity and promote loyalty to the Japanese empire. The institutionalized ban on Korean and the forced adoption of Japanese created a sociolinguistic

trauma that extended beyond the colonial period, leading to generational gaps in literacy, identity crises, and the erosion of traditional linguistic practices.

Nevertheless, the Korean response to this repression illustrates the resilience of language as a symbol of national identity. Informal and clandestine efforts to preserve and transmit the Korean language through underground schools, religious institutions, and domestic education represent a powerful form of cultural resistance. These efforts laid the groundwork for post-liberation linguistic revival, wherein both South and North Korea engaged in deliberate policies to restore and purify their national language, albeit through divergent ideological lenses.

South Korea's pragmatic approach allowed for selective modernization and international integration, while North Korea's radical linguistic cleansing reinforced political isolation. Despite these differences, both states reaffirmed the role of Korean as a cornerstone of sovereignty and cultural pride. Moreover, the persistence of Japanese loanwords and structural influences in modern Korean underscores the long-lasting impact of colonization, revealing how language carries historical memory even after formal political independence.

This study demonstrates that colonial language policies leave complex legacies that cannot be easily erased. The Korean case offers a poignant example of how language functions both as an instrument of domination and as a vehicle for cultural survival. Understanding such dynamics is essential not only for historical linguistics but also for contemporary discussions on language policy, decolonization, and national identity.

Limitations

This study is limited by the availability of digitized colonial-era sources, particularly in the case of regional publications and private educational materials that remain in physical archives. The lexical frequency counts are based on surviving documents, which may not fully represent spoken language usage. Further research could integrate oral histories and a broader set of comparative colonial contexts.

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ЛЕКСИЧНА ТА ОСВІТНЯ МОВНА ПОЛІТИКА ЯПОНСЬКОГО КОЛОНІАЛЬНОГО ПРАВЛІННЯ В КОРЕЇ (1910–1945): ІСТОРИКО-СОЦІОЛІГВІСТИЧНИЙ АНАЛІЗ

В ступ. У 1910–1945 рр. Корея перебувала під японським колоніальним правлінням – періодом, що відзначався не лише політичним і економічним контролем, а й культурними й мовними утисками. Японський уряд впроваджував політику асиміляції з метою знищення корейської національної ідентичності, при цьому мова стала однією з головних мішеней. Використання корейської мови у школах, друкованих виданнях та офіційних установах поступово обмежувалося, а японська нав'язувалася як мова навчання й адміністрації. Цей період колонізації залишив тривалий вплив на структуру, вживання та сприйняття корейської мови.

Завдання. Мета дослідження – аналіз наслідків японської колоніальної мовної політики для корейської мови, зосереджуючись на трьох аспектах: придушені корейської в публічному просторі, впливі японської на лексику та мовні звички, а також зусиллях щодо відновлення й очищення мови після звільнення. Також розглядається роль мови як інструменту як колонізації, так і опору.

Методи. Дослідження базується на аналізі історичних документів, освітніх політик, мовних джерел і праць з історії корейської мови. Порівняльний аналіз використовується для виявлення лексичних і граматичних змін під впливом японської. Також враховуються соціолігвістичні реакції корейців у період окупації та після 1945 р., включно з підпільною освітою та мовними реформами в Південній і Північній Кореї.

Результати. Результати показують, що японське колоніальне правління привело до суттєвого скорочення використання корейської мови в освіті та публічному житті, поширення японських запозичень і глибоких змін у мовній ідентичності. Незважаючи на утиски, корейці зберігали свою мову неформальними шляхами та згодом розпочали національні зусилля з відродження хангиля та очищення мови від колоніального впливу.

Висновки. Досвід мовних репресій у період японського колоніального правління показує, наскільки тісно пов'язані мова та національна ідентичність. Корейська мова виступила не лише жертвою колоніальної політики, а й символом спротиву та інструментом відновлення культурної цілісності після звільнення. Це дослідження підкреслює важливість мовної політики як політичного інструменту та довготривалих наслідків колоніального втручання для мовних спільнот.

Ключові слова: японська колоніальна мовна політика, васей-канго, лексичний вплив, освітні мовні реформи, утиски корейської мови, хангиль, мовна політика, післяколоніальне відновлення.

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