

Language

The Koreans today are one of the world's most ethnically homogeneous peoples. In recent times there have been no significant ethnic or linguistic minorities. Ethnicity is a very difficult term to define, but language is simpler. All Koreans speak Korean as their native tongue, and all people who speak Korean as their first language identify themselves as ethnically Korean. No other language is known to have been spoken by any large group on the peninsula in recent centuries.

Korean is not closely related to any other language. Most linguists classify it as related to Japanese and remotely related to the Altaic languages of Inner Asia, which include Mongolian, the Turkic languages, and the Tungusic languages such as Manchu. Korean shares a grammatical structure with Japanese and the Altaic languages. All are agglutinative, that is, one adds components to a root to form words that are often long. This linguistic relationship, if accurate, is often interpreted as meaning that the ancient ancestors of modern Koreans came from Central Asia and entered the peninsula through Manchuria, with some of them going on to occupy the Japanese archipelago. According to one current theory, the ancestral Koreans spoke Proto-Altaic, one branch of which evolved into the Tungusic languages and another into Proto-Korean-Japanese, which eventually became the modern Korean and Japanese languages. Korean shares many similarities in sentence structure with Japanese, and it is probable that the two languages are genetically related, but linguists differ on whether both languages are related to the Altaic languages. A recent linguistic theory places Korean and Japanese along with Ainu in its own language group and does not see a direct connection between this proposed Japanese-Korean-Ainu language family and those of any other. Genetic evidence lends some support for both theories. Analysis of Y-chromosome DNA suggests that at least some of the ancestors of Koreans entered from Manchuria and Northeast Asia, and that after a long period in the peninsula some of their descendants moved into Japan. The migration into Japan may have taken place 4,000 years ago. Koreans and Japanese share a cluster of genetic markers that is uncommon among other Asians. Whatever the origins of Koreans and their relations with their neighbors, in the 2,000 years of Korean history that can be supported with written records, no documented large-scale migrations of people into the peninsula took place.

Although most probably related to Japanese, the unusual sound system of Korean and most of its native vocabulary are very different. Korean consonants make a distinction between aspiration and nonaspiration, and between tense and lax sounds, but do not make phonemic distinctions between voiced and unvoiced consonants. This means that Korean has no initial b, d, hard g, or j sounds but has three p, three t, three ch, and three k sounds. This plus the complex system of sound changes makes it a difficult language for most nonnative speakers to pronounce. It is highly inflected and has no tones. Although modern Korean is filled with many Chinese loanwords it does not resemble Chinese at all. The distinctiveness of Korean native vocabulary and phonology is a source of pride to some modern Korean nationalists who like to emphasize Korean uniqueness. For the historian it presents a linguistic puzzle, making it hard to trace Korean origins. It should be added that historians do not know much about how the language sounded before the invention of the Korean alphabet in the fifteenth century and can only guess at its structure in ancient times.

Seth, M. J. *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011.