

Some Korean/Japanese linguistic implications of Korean wooden tablet writing

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<Abstract>

The purpose of this paper is to discuss what writing on Old Korean wooden tablets (木簡) implies for Korean and Japanese historical linguistics.

With the decipherment results of the writings, a linguistic description of Old Korean, although fragmentary, is possible. First, there was a closed syllable structure, i.e. CVC, in Old Korean. Second, syllable-final /*t/ in Middle Chinese was instead pronounced as /*l/ by Koreans due to an analogical change in loan phonology. It is estimated that the analogical change, caused by the tendency to avoid syllable-final /*t/, occurred during the mid-7th century. Third, Korean Hanja 韓國漢字 were frequently used to write on wooden tablets, and these later evolved into Gugyeol graphs 口訣字. Fourth, some Korean Hanja were borrowed into Old Japanese.

These findings are all closely linked to Old Japanese. Some scholars argue that only open syllables had existed in Old Korean, but this parallelism to Old Japanese is revealed wrong. The occurrence of analogical change in loan phonology would well-explain why and when syllable-final /*t/ in Middle Chinese changed not only to /*l/ in Sino-Korean pronunciation, but to /*ts(i)/ or /*ts(u)/ in Sino-Japanese. Some Korean Hanja used in Old Japan serve convincing evidence that Japanese writings were influenced by notational systems of Old Korea. It is supposed that Japanese On'gana- based and Kun'gana-based systems were borrowed sequentially from Baekje and Silla, respectively.