

Linguistic and Philosophical Origins of the Korean Alphabet (Hangeul)

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Hunminjeongeum, නැත හොක් හන්ගල් නමින් හැඳින්වෙන කොරියා අක්ෂර මාලාව ක්‍රමානුකූල සහ විද්‍යානුකූල පදනමකින් ගොඩනැගුණු ඉතාමත් දියුණු අක්ෂර මාලාවකි. පහළොස් වැනි ශත වර්ෂයේ දී “සේජොන්” නැමැති රජු නිර්මාණය කළ මේ අක්ෂර මාලාව වත්මන වන විට කොරියාවෙහි පමණක් නො ව සමස්ත ලෝකයෙහි ම ඉතාමත් ප්‍රචලිත, එ මෙන් ම අද්විතීය අක්ෂර මාලාවක් බවට පත් වී ඇත. කොරියා ජාතිකයන්ට පමණක් නො ව විදේශිකයන්ට ද කිසි දු අපහසුවකින් තොර ව ග්‍රහණය කරගැනීමේ හැකියාව මේ අක්ෂර මාලාවෙහි සුවිශේෂ ලක්ෂණයක් වේ. කොරියා අක්ෂර මාලාවෙහි උත්පත්තිය, එහි මූලික ලක්ෂණ හා එහි භාවිතය ආදිය පිළිබඳ විග්‍රහයක යෙදීම මේ ලිපියේ අරමුණ යි.

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සංස්. පී. ඒ. අමීල මදුසංක, ජයමල් ද සිල්වා, දිල්ෂාන් මනෝජ් රාජපක්ෂ, වන්දන රුවන් කුමාර, එච්. ඒ. ගිහාන් මධුසංඛ, නන්දුලා පෙරේරා ‘ප්‍රභා’ ශාස්ත්‍රීය සංග්‍රහය, සිවු වැනි කලාපය - 2014/2015
මානවශාස්ත්‍ර පීඨය, කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය

Introduction

Koreans have a scientific, systematic and unique writing system. It is called Hangeul. It is considered one of the most effective and excellent alphabets in the whole world. It was created during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) by King **Sejong** the Great. In 1446, the first Korean alphabet was proclaimed under the name **Hunminjeongeum**, which literally meant “the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People”. Hunminjeongeum is the original name for Hangeul, As well as the name of the Chinese commentary book on Hangeul. Hunminjeongeum was completed in 1443 and distributed throughout Korea in 1446. In ancient times, Koreans did not have their own writing system and they used Chinese Characters. But later it became too difficult for ordinary people to learn, read and write. Hangeul was invented so that it would be easy for everyone to learn.

King Sejong, the motivating force behind Hangeul, is considered to be one of the greatest rulers in the history of Korea. People highly respected him for his benevolence and diligence. King Sejong was also a passionate scholar whose knowledge and natural talent in all fields of study astounded even the most learned experts. When King Sejong was not performing his official duties, he enjoyed reading and meditating. During his reign, King Sejong always deplored the fact that the common people, ignorant of the complicated Chinese characters that were being used by the educated, were not able to read and write. He understood their frustration in not being able to read or to communicate their thoughts and feelings in written words.

The Chinese script was used by the intelligentsia of the country, but being of foreign origin, it could not fully express the words and meaning of Korean thoughts and spoken

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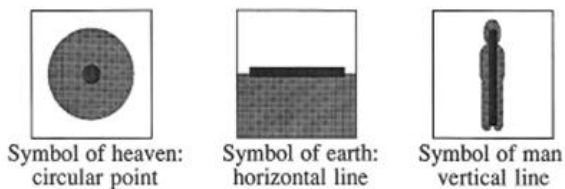
language. Therefore, common people with legitimate complaints had no way of submitting their grievances to the appropriate authorities, other than through oral communication, and they had no way to record for posterity the agricultural wisdom and knowledge they had gained through years of experience. King Sejong felt great sympathy for the people. As a wise ruler strongly dedicated to national identity and cultural independence, he immediately searched for solutions. What he envisioned was an alphabet that was uniquely Korean and easily learnable, rendering it accessible and usable for the common people. Thus Hunminjeongeum was born. Originally Hunminjeongeum had 28 letters, but these days only 24 letters are used. The basic letters of the alphabet when Hunminjeongeum was first created numbered eight; they were the Consonants “ㄱ(g,k), ㄴ(n), ㄷ(m), ㄹ(s)ㅇ(η, voiceless) and the vowels “•, -, ㅣ”.

The Principle of Vowels and Consonants

Vowels

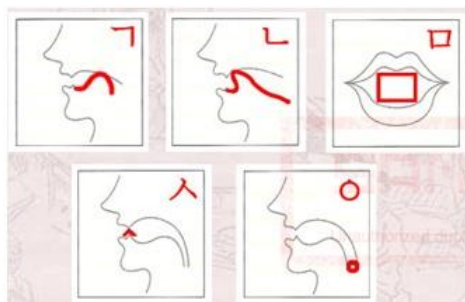
The vowels were modeled after the shape of heaven, Earth, and man. “•” portrays the shape of the round heaven, “-” portrays the shape of flat earth, and “ㅣ” portrays the standing person. Combining basic Strokes (•, -, ㅣ) together is how the four letters (ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ) were created. “ㅏ, ㅑ” were made by combining “ㅣ” and “•”, “ㅓ, ㅕ” were made by combining “-” and “•”. “ㅏ” portrays the sun setting in the west. “ㅓ” portrays the rising of the sun in the east, and “ㅑ” portrays the sun setting in the west. “ㅓ” portrays the sun rising from the horizon, and “ㅕ” portrays the sun below the horizon.

The other vowels are variations of these basic vowels. ㅏ(g,a), ㅑ(ya), ㅓ(eo), ㅕ(yeo), ㅗ(o), ㅛ(yo), ㅜ(u), ㅠ(yu), ㅡ(eu), ㅣ(i)



Consonants

Consonants were created based on the shape of articulation in the mouth when they were uttered. First, the basic letter (ㄱ, ㄴ, ㅁ, ㅅ, ㅇ) were created and the others were made by adding strokes to the basic ones.



1) ㄱ (k,g) - To pronounce this letter, part of the tongue, touches the molar teeth and sticks near the uvula. The shape of the letter is based on the lateral form of this process.

2) ㄴ (n) - To pronounce this letter, the front of the tongue curves and the tip of the tongue sticks to the upper gums. The shape of the letter is based on the lateral form of this process.

3) ㅁ (m) - To pronounce this letter, the upper and lower lips are joined. The shape of the letter is based on the form of the joined lips.

4) ㅅ (s) - To pronounce this letter, the tip of the tongue and the upper teeth are brought close together, and sound is created by

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blowing through the narrowed passage. The shape of the letter is based on the form of the teeth during the process.

5) ㅇ (o) - To pronounce this letter that is created by stimulating the uvula, the throat assumes a round shape, hence the form of the consonant.

In addition, nine additional letters were made by adding additional strokes to the five basic consonants based on the strength of the sounds, as follows.

ㄱ:ㅋ ㄴ:ㄷ, ㄹ ㄴ:ㅁ, ㅂ ㅇ:ㅎ

14 consonants: ㄱ (g,k), ㄴ (n), ㄷ (d,t), ㄹ (r,l), ㅁ (m), ㅂ (b,p), ㅅ (s),
ㅇ (ŋ, voiceless), ㅈ (j), ㅊ (ch), ㅋ (k), ㄷ (t), ㅂ (p), ㅎ (h)

King Sejong and the scholars of the Jiphyeonjeon (an academic research institute), inventors of the Korean alphabet, considered human sounds as being more than mere physical phenomena. They assumed that an invisible yet more powerful principle was the controlling force behind these phenomena. They adhered to the principle that human sounds and all universal phenomena are based on eum-yang (negative – positive) and ohaen (the five primary elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth). Hence they thought it natural that there be a common link between sounds and music.

Modern Korean Hangeul

The modern name **Hangeul** was coined by Ju Sigyeong in 1912. Han could also be understood as Sino- Korean word “Korean” so the name can be read “Korean script” as well as “great script”. Korean 한글 is pronounced **Hangeul**, and in English as **Hangul**. In its classical and modern forms, the alphabet has 19 consonants and 21 vowel letters. Of these letters, fourteen

arebasic consonants and ten arebasic vowels. Five of the consonants are doubled to form the five “tense” consonants of Korean. The ten of basic vowel letters are combined into eleven sequences for diphthongs. The following letters add clusters of letters are found in the modern script,

- (1) 14 basic consonants letters - ㄱ, ㄴ, ㄷ, ㄹ, ㅁ, ㅂ, ㅅ, ㅇ, ㅈ, ㅊ, ㅋ, ㆁ, ㅍ, ㅎ
- (2) 5 double consonants - ㄲ, ㄷ, ㅃ, ㅆ, ㅈ
- (3) 10 basic vowels - ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ, ㅡ, ㅣ
- (4) 11 combined vowels - ㅘ, ㅙ, ㅚ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ, ㅡ, ㅣ, ㅝ, ㅞ, ㅟ, ㅠ

Consonants

Basic Consonants Names

The modern consonants have two- syllable names, with the consonant coming both at the beginning and end of the name, as follows;

Consonant	Name
ㄱ[k,g]	Giyeok (기역)or kiúk in north Korea (기옥)
ㄴ[n]	Nieun/ niún (니은)
ㄷ[t]	Digeut or tiút in north Korea (디귄)
ㅁ[l,r]	Rieul/riúl (리을)
ㅂ[m]	Mieum/miúm(미음)
ㅅ[b,p]	Bieup/piúp (비읍)
ㅈ[s]	Siot or siút in north Korea (시옷)
ㅇ[ŋ]	Ieung/i úng (이응)

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ㅈ[j]	Jieut/chi út (지읒)
ㅊ[ch]	Chieut/chiút (치읓)
ㅋ[k]	Kieuk/kiúk (키읔)
ㅌ[t]	Tieut/tiút (티읕)
ㅍ[p]	Pieup/piúp (피읖)
ㅎ[h]	Hieut/hiút (히읇)

Double Consonant Names

Consonant	Name
ㄸ	Ssanggiyeok (쌍기역)
ㄹㄹ	Ssangdigeut (쌍디귤)
ㅃ	Ssangbieup (쌍비읍)
ㅆ	Ssangsiot (쌍시읏)
ㅉ	Ssangjieup (쌍지읒)

Vowels

Basic and Combined Vowels names

The name of the vowel letters are simply the vowel itself, written with the null initial ㅇ ieung and the vowel being named. Thus:

‘ප්‍රභා’ ශාස්ත්‍රීය සංග්‍රහය, සිවු වැනි කලාපය

Basic		Combined	
Letter	Name	Letter	Name
ㅏ	A 아	ㅑ	Ae 애
ㅓ	Ya 야	ㅕ	Yae 얘
ㅗ	Eo 어	ㅛ	E 예
ㅛ	Yeo 여	ㅜ	Ye 예
ㅜ	O 오	ㅝ	Wa 와
		ㅟ	Wae 왜
		ㅢ	Oe 외
ㅠ	Yo		
ㅜ	U 우	ㅠ	Wo 워
		ㅟ	We 웨
		ㅢ	Wi 위
ㅠ	Yu		
ㅡ	Eu 으	ㅡ	Ui 의
ㅣ	I 이		

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Making Syllables

Hangeul is capable of creating thousands of words by combining the consonants and vowels. Syllables are created when consonants meet vowels. Among the vowels, there are vowels composed mainly of vertical stroke “|” and horizontal stroke “—”. The location of a vowel within a syllable is determined by whether it is a vertical or a horizontal vowel. “ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅣ” are vertical vowels. They are written to the right of the first consonant in the syllable.

ex) ㄱ + ㅏ = 가 (ka)

ㄴ + ㅑ = 네 (neo)

“ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ” are horizontal vowels. They are written immediately below a syllable’s first consonant.

ex) ㄱ + ㅓ = 곱 (ko)

ㄴ + ㅗ = 누 (nu)

There are cases where a syllable is composed only of a vowel. Syllables are composed of a consonant in the initial position, a vowel in the medial position, and a consonant in the final position. However, when there is no consonant sound produced by the initial position, the consonant ㅇ is written. In such cases, ㅇ is silent and acts as a filler. Therefore, ㅏ| is pronounced the same as “ㅣ” and ㅓ is pronounced the same as “—”.

ex) ㅇ + ㅏ | = ㅏ|

ㅇ + — = ㅓ

The Korean language has a well-developed and expansive vocabulary. Therefore, it is very difficult to express it fully in foreign letters. However due to its scientific design, it is quite easy to approximate the sounds of foreign words in the Korean

alphabet. Following are some examples of English words expressed in Hangeul.

London New York Hong Kong

런던뉴욕홍콩

I am a boy

아이엠어보이

Conclusion

Because of its simplicity and the rather small number of letters, Hangeul is very easy for children or speakers of other languages to learn. Most children are capable of expressing their feelings and thoughts by the ages of two or three, albeit in primitive form. However, most Korean children by the time they start schooling have mastered Hangeul. This fact clearly attests the easy learnability and accessibility of the Korean alphabet. It is ironic that the strongest proof of the easy learnability of the alphabet came from the critics who argued against the creation of Hunminjeongeum. Some scholars vehemently voiced their views against the “new” alphabet because of its learnability, and in derision, they called it Achimgeul (morning letters) or Amgeul (womens letters). Achimgeul meant that it could be learned in one morning. For those scholars who had spent years in learning the complicated ideographs of the Chinese language, Hangeul did not appear to be worthy of learning. Amgeul meant that even women who had no academic training or background around the time Hangeul was invented could easily learn the alphabet. Back then, there were those who believed that the pursuit of academic studies and the subject of reading and writing should be the sole domain of a few privileged scholars.

Such misconceptions were the result of confusing simple linguistic learning with more advanced academic studies. Without learning the basic alphabet, reading and

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writing would be impossible, let alone the study of more advanced subjects. Without being able to read and write, there can be no indirect communication of one's feelings and thoughts. Surely, King Sejong's intent was to enrich the lives of the people by introducing Hangeul, and not to make scholars out of all his subjects. In subsequent history, Hangeul has been a mainstay of Korean culture, helping preserve the country's national identity and independence.

Illiteracy is virtually nonexistent in Korea. This is another fact that attests the easy learnability of Hangeul. It is not uncommon for a foreigner to gain a working knowledge of Hangeul after one or two hours of intensive studying. In addition, because of its scientific design, Hangeul lends itself to easy mechanisation. In this age of computers, many people now are able to incorporate computers into their lives without difficulties, thanks to a large number of programs written in Hangeul.

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