

What is Phonetic in *Han'gŭl* (Korean Writing System)?

Dr. Frank P. Nellen
Professor
Konkuk-University
133-701 Seoul/ROK

I am teaching German as a Foreign Language and Contrastive Linguistics in Korea since seven years. The latter one brought me to this symposium. Being in Korea for teaching and - more superior - doing field research is an extraordinary experience for a German linguist, since the Korean language could not yet have been classified 100% under one of the language families. It is said to be Ural-Altaic, but even this rough classification is not yet fully proved.

So I had the chance to do contrastive field research between Indo-European languages (more than ten) and the outsider, Korean. Being also musicologist I specialized my research on phonetics.

The paper is divided into three parts as you may see in the abstract:

1. The Korean writing system *Han'gŭl* has been instituted by King *Sejong* in 1446 in the name of *Hunmin-jōngŭm* (right sounds for the instruction of the people). A full "letter" has to be made with a combination, at least, of one consonant and one vowel as an influence by Chinese characters; this can be called syllabigraph. I.e. individual letters are combined into blocks which correspond morphophonemically to spoken syllables. So far, *Han'gŭl* combines the features of an alphabet and syllabary and can be called a morphophonemical writing system.

2. Many Korean authors proclaim *Han'gŭl* as an invention of a Korean king, which led to a nationalistic pride and even a holiday, called *Han'gŭl-Day* (until 1990). These "Han'gŭlists" advertise that every language and all phonetic systems can be transcribed with the very Korean "phonetic" 24 letters. Even today this misleading is an important tool in foreign language teaching, which let the students produce strange and incomprehensible words.

3. Proposals for corrections: The way how the Koreans took over another established script and suited it to their needs must be a research base for phonetic features in Korea. After the exploration of its origin *Han'gŭl* can be used as a morphophonemical system to transcribe also other languages; but there must be no confusion between phonememes and graphememes, i.e. only the phonemes of other languages can, more or less exactly, be transcribed with *Han'gŭl*. For better use of the transcription the author encourages the re-installation of the complete *Han'gŭl* writing system, together with those letters that are no more in use¹.

After this short introduction let me start with the second point:

Until today it is part of the Korean curricula to teach the children the very

nationalistic character of *Han'gŭl*. This means, according to the curricula the students must be convinced

1) of the "fact" that the Korean writing system is the only man-made alphabet in the world, i.e. all other writing systems have been developed through hundreds or thousands of years, only the Korean one has been invented by Korean ingeniousness with pure Korean background and based on Korean philosophy.

2) that the originality of the Korean alphabet includes the fact of being the only phonetic/phonemic writing system in the world.

3) that the ingenuity of *Han'gŭl* allows to transcribe every language of the world with the very 24 Korean "phonetic" letters.

ad 1: When I came first to Korea in 1981 it was strictly forbidden to speak about the possibility, that the Korean writing system has been taken over or, at least, has been influenced by other writing systems of the Asian area. Research results like the dissertation by Ledyard (1966)², where he proved the close connection between Pali, 'phags-pa, Devanagari, Gupta, Tibetan and *Han'gŭl*, had to be ignored. My own research confirmed Ledyard's thesis. A few years later some scholars dared to publish their results more objective, e.g.: "It is important to note that they did not take over another established script and suit it to their needs but, rather applied phonological theories which had come to them from India via China (in company with Buddhism) to specific question of reducing the Korean language to writing...Such a comprehensive writing system as it was the crowning jewel of phonological studies passed on by the Sanskrit scholars of ancient India."³

ad 2: Since the Korean writing system is neither phonetic nor phonemic but morphophonemic, it is impossible to compare it with phonetic/phonemic scripts. Even if one concedes the phonemic character of single letters, it cannot be called the only one in the world.

(In fact, you can learn to read single letters in maybe 15 minutes, because there are only 24 of them, but you need more time to learn reading, say, Sanskrit, because there you have more than the double quantity; but the morphophonical rules are much more harder to learn, and there are Korean linguists even nowadays with problems in explaining them.)

ad 3: Every Korean child makes it own experiences concerning the impossibility to transcribe every language of the world with *Han'gŭl*, at least, when they try to speak English (what is obligatory from middle-school on) to foreigners, who react with incomprehensibility because of the phonetic realization. The background is that they transcribe e.g. English with *Han'gŭl* without recognizing the differences in phonetic components of both languages and, much more worse, without recognizing that *Han'gŭl* is a morphophonemic script.

Let me show some examples. The most products in Korea have foreign brands (because this is "in"). But because most people cannot know whether the very brand name should be from French, English, German, Japanese etc., they transcribe it in *Han'gŭl*. E.g. a very popular car brand is "Le Mans" (according the French city known by its car races) which is read in

Korean [rŭmang]. Sometimes I read in Korean [olgan], after long research I found out, that this is English for "organ". In both cases it is the negligence of the morphophonemic

attitude of the Korean letter "riŭl", which is initially always pronounced [r] and finally [l]. Coming to German, the restaurant name "Hof" (courd, yard) circulates explosionlike since four years. But since there is no [f] in Korean they transcribe (and realize) something like [hopŭ]. Interesting is one experience of mine when I asked the owner of such a "Hof", who retranscribed the Korean transcription back into English letters, namely into "Hop". His answer was, the meaning of "Hop" is English "hope", but unfortunately they forget the final "e".

Similar experiences you can find all over Korea, and in most cases you get the impression that they really do not know what they write or speak.

By the way, the (re-)transcription is a special problem per se. Although the Ministry of Education gives exact instructions how to transcribe Korean words and names with English letters⁴, most Koreans prefer the U.S.-Americanization of their names. This may be no problem on the U.S.-American markets, but it is a big problem in all other countries. E.g. in Germany it is sometimes very difficult to verify Korean students or Korean products and companies. Last year in September the first Korean car has been introduced in Germany. Many articles have been published and every reporter had his own idea of the Korean car company's pronunciation: no one was right.

Now let me come to point 1. of the introduction. As it easily can be understood by the above mentioned examples it is very important to emphasize that the Korean writing system is a morphophonemic one and that the combination of single letters to one syllable defines the pronunciation (and putting together syllables causes different rules of pronunciation). This is quite easy to understand by learners of Korean; but it also must be understood and known by the Koreans themselves. Since their pride (e.g. C.U. Kim: "The Chinese, the Mongols, the Huns, the Manchus, and the Japanese all came, some with an intention to colonialize the land and people completely, some even with a policy to abolish the Korean language and alphabet. But Korean, with remarkable resiliency, survived. Today, it is one of the major languages of the world"⁵) of the Korean language, all these things are taught at school. The problems are the matter of course and the educational system: Like in many other countries that use language as a nationalistic self-conceit and as one (or often enough the only) reason for national pride, most Koreans are convinced (mostly by their teachers), that they are able to learn foreign languages (e.g. by transcribing them with the 24 Korean letters), but that no foreigner is able to learn Korean. The other problem is the educational system: Students use to learn from one test to the next one; they ask their teachers what to prepare for the next test. Only this must be learned (in most cases by heart), and after the test everything can be forgotten (i.e. there will be no more use of it in the future). This educational way starts from elementary school and will be kept through the whole life.

That leads us to the third point: proposals for corrections. During my co-operation with the Korean Ministry of Education I was able to change a lot, but the practification will take some time (and some work as well). One proposal is the re-installation of the complete *Han'gŭl* writing system, together with those letters that are no more in use (10 letters) and a certain knowledge of the consonant clusters in Middle-Korean. E.g. in my lectures on Contrastive

Linguistics the students first have to "learn" their own language, i.e. to analyze and to observe their own language-behaviour. After doing this we analyze other languages and compare certain aspects. This is - I am sorry for repeating - not possible without a certain knowledge of the mother language (see the problem of contrastive dissertations written by Koreans). Let us make one example in the field of contrastive phonetics: Koreans think they are unable to pronounce the double consonant /ps/, which is often used in e.g. German pronunciation of Greece words starting with Psi, although they had this double consonant initially in Middle-Korean. But the realization of /ps/ is also common in modern Korean, when the first syllable ends with a /p/ and the next one starts with a /s/, like in "jŏp-ssal". In this case one can speak very slowly and "cut out" the consonant cluster /ps/ and then realize it separately. Suddenly the pronunciation of /ps/ became possible.

These proposals will have consequences for new curricula and show other ways to learn languages and to do Contrastive Linguistics in Korea. Criticizing a language-behaviour as a foreigner is very unwise and can even be dangerous in a country where language is a mainpart of the national pride. But encouraging the people to be "prouder" of their language by asking them e.g. for the re-installation of the complete *Han'gŭl* writing system can be an advantage for teaching and research.

Thank you.

-
1. Nellen, F.P. (1989) *Kontrastive Phonetik als didaktische Hilfestellung beim DaF-Unterricht in Korea*, Han'guk-Munhwasa, Seoul
 2. Ledyard, G.K. (1966) *The Korean Language Reform of 1446, the Origin, Background, an Early History of the Korean Alphabet* (Diss.), Berkeley
 3. Pihl, M.R. (1983) *The Alphabet of West Asia*, UNESCO, 117 and 119
 4. Ministry of Education (1988) *Sae Han'gŭl Machumpŏp Sajŏn* (Dictionary of the new Korean Orthography), Seoul
 5. Kim, C.U. (1983) *The Making of the Korean Language*, UNESCO, 23