Linguistic and Philosophical Origins of the
Korean Alphabet (Hangeul)

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Hunminjeongeum, a Korean invention that
originated in China, was used in 1446
after being widely studied and discussed
for over a century. The inventor is
unknown, and it is said that "Hunminjeongeum" literally
means "heart and mouth". It is said that
Ogawa Denryu, a Korean scholar, and his
associate, who is unknown, developed
Hunminjeongeum. Ogawa Denryu wrote
about the invention of "Hunminjeongeum
and the heart and mouth" and the
development of Korean writing. The
invention of Hunminjeongeum is said to
have been influenced by the Japanese
"Kanji" system, which was already
in use. Ogawa Denryu is said to have
written about the development of
Korean writing, and his work is
considered important. Ogawa Denryu's
description of Hunminjeongeum is said
to have been influenced by previous
work.
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), ㅁ (m), ㅅ (s)” and the vowels “ㅏ, ㅓ, ㅗ, ㅜ”.

The Principle of Vowels and Consonants

Vowels

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

The other vowels are variations of these basic vowels. “ㅏ (g,a), ㅑ (ya), ㅓ (eo), ㅐ (yeo), ㅗ (o), 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 from 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,ㅌ ㅁ:ㅂ,ㅍ 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),ㅌ (t),ㅍ (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 JuSigyeong 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 pronounce Hangeul, and in English as Hangul. In its classical and modern forms, the alphabet has 19 consonants and 21 vowel letters. Of this letters, fourteen
are basic consonants and ten basic vowels. Five of the consonants are doubled to form the five “tense” consonants of Korean. The ten of basic vowels 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,ㅌ,ㅍ,ㅎ

2) 5 double consonants - ㄲ,ㄸ,ㅃ,ㅆ,ㅉ

3) 10 basic vowels - ㅏ,ㅑ,ㅓ,ㅕ,ㅗ,ㅛ,ㅜ,ㅠ,ㅡ,ㅣ

4) 11 combined vowels - ㅐ,ㅒ,ㅔ,ㅖ,ㅘ,ㅙ,ㅚ,ㅝ,ㅞ,ㅟ,ㅢ

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;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonant</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ㄱ[k,g]</td>
<td>Giyeok (기역) or kiúk in north Korea (기윽)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㄴ[n]</td>
<td>Nieun/ niún (니은)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㄷ[t]</td>
<td>Digeut or tiút in north Korea (디금)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㄹ[l,r]</td>
<td>Rieul/riúl (리울)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅁ[m]</td>
<td>Mieum/miúm (미음)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅂ[b,p]</td>
<td>Bieup/piúp (비읍)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅅ[s]</td>
<td>Siot or siút in north Korea (시읟)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅇ[ŋ]</td>
<td>Ieung/i úng (이응)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The name of the vowel letters are simply the vowel itself, written with the null initial ㅇ ieung and the vowel being named. Thus:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonant</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ㅈ[j]</td>
<td>Jieut/chi út (지읒)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅊ[ch]</td>
<td>Chieut/chiút (치읓)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅋ[k]</td>
<td>Kieuk/kiúk (키윽)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅌ[t]</td>
<td>Tieut/tiút (티을)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅍ[p]</td>
<td>Pieup/piúp (피읩)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅎ[h]</td>
<td>Hieut/hiút (히읗)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonant</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ㄲ[♮]</td>
<td>Ssanggiyeok (쌍기역)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㄸ[♮]</td>
<td>Ssangdigeut (쌍디귿)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅃ[♮]</td>
<td>Ssangbieup (쌍비읍)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅆ[♮]</td>
<td>Ssangsiot (쌍시옷)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅉ[♮]</td>
<td>Ssangjieup (쌍지읒)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ㅏ</td>
<td>A 아</td>
<td>ㅐ</td>
<td>Ae 애</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅑ</td>
<td>Ya 야</td>
<td>ㅒ</td>
<td>Yae 았</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅓ</td>
<td>Eo 어</td>
<td>ㅔ</td>
<td>E 에</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅕ</td>
<td>Ye 여</td>
<td>ㅖ</td>
<td>Ye 예</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅗ</td>
<td>O 오</td>
<td>ㅘ</td>
<td>Wa 와</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅝ</td>
<td>ㅞ</td>
<td>ㅢ</td>
<td>ㅚ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅢ</td>
<td>Yo</td>
<td>ㅘ</td>
<td>Wa 와</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅣ</td>
<td>U 우</td>
<td>ㅞ</td>
<td>Wi 위</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅤ</td>
<td>Yu</td>
<td>ㅡ</td>
<td>Eu 음</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅡ</td>
<td>I 이</td>
<td>ㅣ</td>
<td>ㅣ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 “ㅣ” and horizontal stroke “ㅡ”. 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 + ㅓ = 너 (ne)

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

ex) ㄱ + ㅗ = 고 (ko)
ㄴ + ㅜ = 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, ㅇ is pronounced the same as “ㅏ” and ㅗ is pronounced the same as “ㅡ”.

ex) ㅇ + ㅏ = ㅓ
ㅇ + ㅡ = ㅗ

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
아이앰어보이

**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 (women’s 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
writing would be impossible, let alone the study of more advanced subjects. Without being able to read and write, there can beno 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.

Reference List


AnJi-Yeong, Shon Hyun-Hwa (2007). *Korean through Sinhala*. Korea International Cooperation agency, Korean Language Division, Department of Modern Languages