

Request for a
Commemoration of
Hangul Day in Maryland

THE KOREAN ALPHABET

“Korea’s linguistic gift to the world”

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March 12, 2020

What kind of writing system is this Korean Alphabet?

Among the writing systems of the world Hangeul is unique-- there is no other writing system in the world like it.

- It's often said to be "scientific."
- But what does that mean?

- First of all, Hangul is certainly, in all respects, a genuine ALPHABET.
- That is, each letter represents a consonant or a vowel.

- But Hangul also embodies the essence of a SYLLABARY, because the alphabetic letters are grouped into syllables. Thus, it represents individual syllables in addition to consonants and vowels.

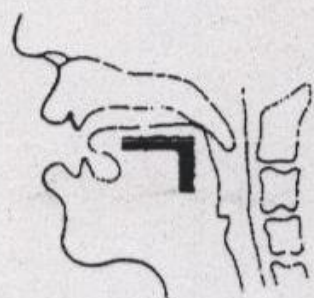
BUT:

- Hangul is MUCH MORE than an alphabet or a syllabary.
- It is the structure of Hangul that is so unusual—and in fact is completely unique.

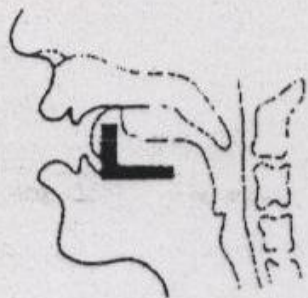
- That's because of TWO things:
- (1) the consonant letters show graphically how the sounds they represent are actually articulated;
- and
- (2) these same letters also show how the sounds they represent relate to each other—that is, they reveal the phonological structure of the language.

- (1) The basic consonant symbols (\sqcap , \sqsubset , \square , \wedge , \circ) were conceived as schematic **drawings** of how the sounds were pronounced.

The Letterforms of Han'gŭl Consonants



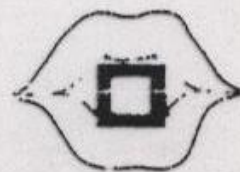
velar
consonant ㄱ



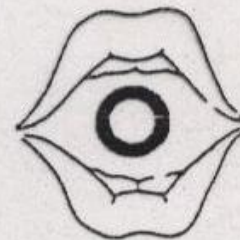
alveolar
consonant ㄴ



dental
consonant ㄷ



bilabial
consonant ㅍ



glottal
consonant ㅋ

Velar consonants



Alveolar consonants



Bilabial consonants



Dental consonants



Glottal consonants



- **(2)** Then, the other consonants showed how the sounds they represented relate to those basic consonants.
- For example, a stroke is added to the basic consonant \sqcup (n) to make the letter \sqcap (d), and one more stroke to make the letter Ξ (t). (Each stroke added indicated a “more severe” sound.)

- Thus, we can see at a glance that all three of these consonants \perp , \sqsubset , Ξ are pronounced at the same place in the mouth.
- (Compare the English letters n, d, and t, which look nothing alike!)

- Linguists say that this aspect of Hangeul represents “articulatory features” of the language.
- Western linguists really only became aware of this concept of “articulatory features” in the 19th century.
- But the man who invented Hangeul, the king known as Sejong, knew about them in the 15th century.

Sejong

- Sejong, the fourth monarch of the Joseon Dynasty, had an abiding interest in language and writing.
- His knowledge of phonology was perhaps without parallel anywhere in the world at that time.





세종대왕



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HANGUL

- And so:
- The invention of Hangul represents a contribution to linguistic science, and to human knowledge of the world and society that we all live in.

BEYOND SCIENCE

But now (a half century after I first learned about the ingenious structure of Hangul), I have come to admire the good king for something else, something even more than his scientific and linguistic knowledge.

--And that is his compassion for the less privileged and his efforts to better their condition.

Korea's most important book

- Sejong wrote a short handbook, called “The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People” (Hunminjeongeum 훈민정음), as an introductory guide to learning the new writing system.
- That handbook was bound together with a longer work, a linguistic treatise called:
- “The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People – Explanations and Examples”, which was a detailed analysis of the Korean language.
- These two writings were bound and published together as a single volume in 1446.

- There, in that book, the new writing system is described in detail, and from it we can see even more clearly what a unique and extraordinary invention Hangeul, the Korean alphabet, is.
- But one question remains: Why did King Sejong go to the trouble of creating this new writing system? (After all, he and other members of the elite already wrote easily in Classical Chinese!)
- He tells us why in the preface he wrote for the *Hunminjeongeum*. Here it is, in the king's original Classical Chinese composition:

訓民正音

國之語音異乎中國與文字
不相流通故愚民有所欲言
而終不得伸其情者多矣予
為此憫然新制二十八字欲
使人人易習便於日用矣
一。牙音。如君字初發聲

- Here is a translation:

- “The sounds of our country’s language are different from those of the Middle Kingdom [that is, China] and are not compatible with the sounds of characters. Therefore, among the uneducated people, there have been many who, having something they want to put into words, have in the end been unable to express their feelings. I have been distressed because of this, and have newly designed twenty-eight letters, which I wish to have everyone practice at their ease and make convenient for their daily use.”

- From this simple and heartfelt statement we can see that the king's greatest concern was about what is now a very modern idea, that of universal literacy, the gift of reading and writing for all the people of the kingdom—including peasants, workers, and even women.

- Moreover, Sejong had already anticipated what needed to be done a decade earlier, in 1434, when he had said this about education to his court:
- “Seek out people of learning and experience, without regard to class status, and teach everyone, **even women and girls.**”
- It was perhaps then, I believe, that Sejong decided to take it upon himself to develop a simple writing system for them.

- It was an extraordinary, anachronistic idea.
- In traditional times, a king who wanted to give the ability to read and write to all the people was something unheard of—not only in Korea but anywhere in the world.
- In those days, the elite guarded the power of literacy as their own exclusive privilege—and in some countries that's true even today.
- But it was not true for Sejong.

- In other words, Sejong's compassion and humanistic qualities were as rare and admirable as his intellect.

- And so, Hangul represents:
- (1) intellectual discovery and scientific accomplishment, and
- (2) an effort to better the quality of life for all, regardless of social position or gender
- These ideals are embodied in the creation of this simple and elegant writing system.

- That's why Hangeul Day, Korean Alphabet Day, is an occasion not only for Koreans to be proud of and to celebrate.
- It's also one for us, and our state, to commemorate.

Korean Alphabet, World Alphabet