



Everything You Wanted to Know about

the Korean Language

How many languages are there in the world? Scholars say that there are between roughly 3,000 and 7,000 languages on the planet, though these figures vary depending on the criteria used in counting them. Among these world languages, Korean is used by approximately 77 million people, making it the thirteenth most commonly spoken language in the world. In addition, the Korean language is ranked the tenth most frequently used language on the Internet. In light of the number of its speakers, as well as its use as an international language for communication, the Korean language shares a global status similar to that of French or Italian.

The steadily increasing number of foreign learners of the Korean language in recent years further illustrates its elevated status in the world. Foreigners' interest in and enthusiasm for learning the Korean language have greatly increased thanks both to Korea's economic growth and to the spread of Korean popular culture.

However, there are still many people who do not know much about the Korean language. In fact, even some native speakers of the language are unaware of its distinctive characteristics as compared to other languages. Indeed, it is still difficult for many people to obtain accessible instructional and reference materials concerning the Korean language. Some have pointed out that the material written by professional researchers is too complex for the average reader to understand, and that, conversely, the content of guidebooks is too simple to satisfy readers' needs.

Therefore, the National Institute of the Korean Language has designed a book that it hopes will serve as a complete guide for both Korean and

foreign readers who wish to learn about the Korean language. As indicated by its title, *Everything You Wanted to Know About the Korean Language*, this book provides a comprehensive guide to the Korean language, including information regarding who uses the language as well as an overview of its systems of sound, grammar, and vocabulary. It also delves into the language's background, including an exploration of its invention and the fundamental principles of *Hangeul*. In addition, it aims to help readers better understand the distinctive characteristics of the Korean language by presenting information on its regional dialects and the extensiveness of its honorific system.

The National Institute of the Korean Language has tried to present this material in a format that is accessible to ordinary readers, while also seeking to include research-based content where appropriate. As explained above, one of our primary motivations in creating this book was the fact that previous publications often contained misleading information or content that was simply too complex for the average reader to understand. We hope that many people will read this book, which has been designed to convey accurate knowledge and information about the Korean language, and that, as a result, our readers will come to have a well informed and enthusiastic appreciation of its unique features.

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1

Hangugeo, the Language of Koreans

Hangugeo, the Official Language of the Republic of Korea

Hangugeo(the Korean language), the official language of the Republic of Korea, refers to the language used by those who dwell on both the Korean Peninsula and its associated islands, including Jeju. Since the 19th century, immigrants and travelers have left the peninsula for China(in particular, Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture), Japan, Russia(the Maritime Province and Sakhalin), Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, the USA, Canada, Australia, Brazil, and other countries as the political and social situation between Korea and its neighboring countries has changed.

At the global scale, it is mainly Korean immigrants and their offspring who use Korean as their mother tongue. While the Korean language is used outside Korea by these people, the only



two countries that use Korean as their official language are the Republic of Korea(South Korea) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea(North Korea).

Korea has been undergoing a rapid transformation into a multicultural society, with an increasing population of immigrants recently due to international marriages and immigrant labor. Yet Korea is a single–language society where an absolute majority of people still speak Korean as their mother tongue.

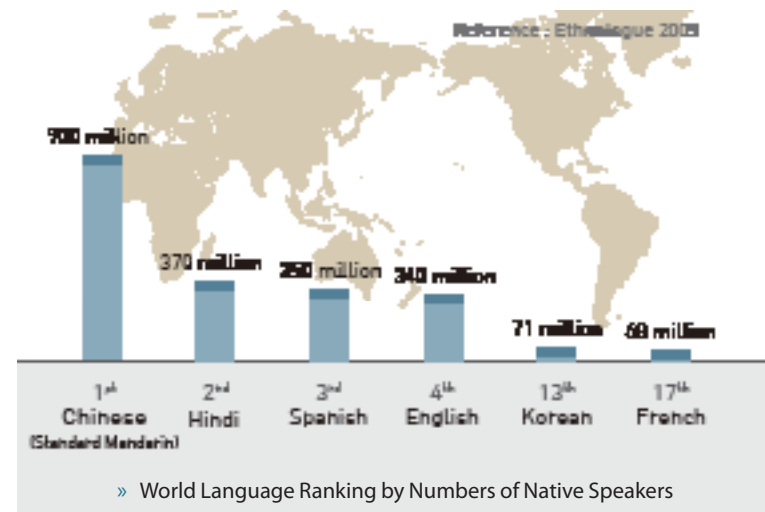
Who Uses Korean?

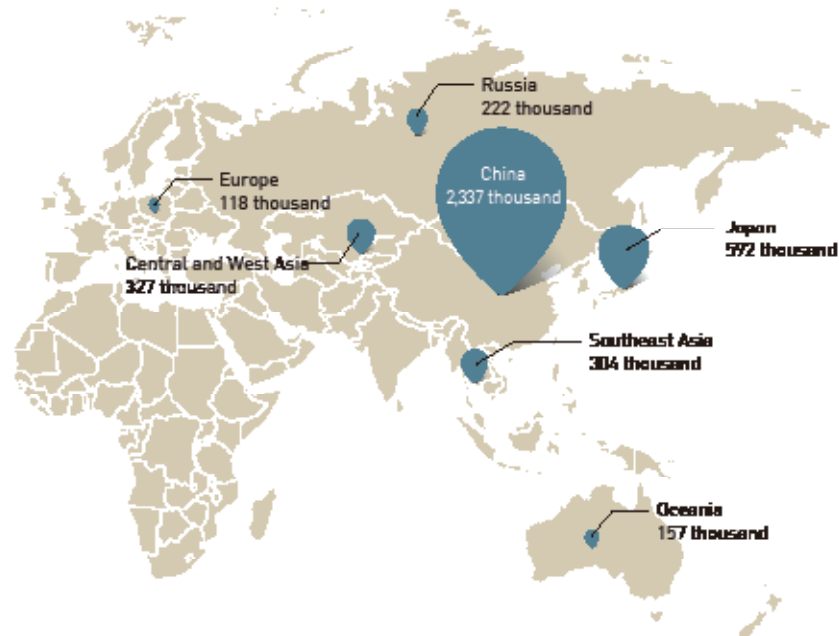
There are three major groups of people who use the Korean language. The first group speaks it as an official first language; citizens of South and North Korea belong to this group. The second group uses it as a second language. People who belong to this group speak Korean at home or in their communities,

but also use other local languages such as Chinese, Japanese, or English as their first language while living abroad. The majority of these people are Korean immigrants and their children. The third group learns Korean as a foreign language. This population, which consists mostly of non–native speakers who are interested in Korean culture and wish to learn the language, has been increasing due to the country’s recent economic and cultural advancements.

How Many People Speak Korean?

Estimates of the number of languages spoken on Earth can vary depending on how we draw the conceptual border between language and dialect; it could be argued that there are anywhere





» Distribution of Korean Speakers Outside of Korea

between 3,000 and 7,000 languages on the planet. According to 2008 reports, the population of South Korea was 48,607,000 while that of North Korea was 23,298,000. Together, they are home to a total of 71,905,000 people. That population is said to increase to approximately 77 million if one adds in the Korean immigrants and their children who live in China, the USA, Japan, Russia(the former Soviet Union), Canada, Australia, Central and South America, and Europe, among other regions. The population of Korean-speaking people ranks 13th in the world, similar to the Italian- and French-speaking populations, though population statistics vary

somewhat depending on the source.

Additionally, the Korean Language was ranked the 10th most frequently used language on the Internet in 2009. Both Korean and Portuguese were selected as international official languages in the Patent Cooperation Treaty(PCT) during the 43rd World Intellectual Property Organization(WIPO) Congress in 2007. Following that selection, the Korean language's stature as an international language increased as people were now able both to apply for international patents and to read an international patent's content in Korean.

There is not much difference between the populations of those who speak Korean as a mother tongue and those who speak it as an official language. A small number of people exclusively use the language outside of Korea, and most Korean speakers live in the homeland, where relatively few other languages are utilized.

The number of Korean speakers is similar to that of French speakers. However, the Korean Peninsula is the only place that has adopted the Korean language as an official language at the country level, while French is used in different countries such as Canada, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.

Korea is the rare example of an entire country comprising a single language community. Therefore, the Korean language holds special historical, social, cultural, and emotional meanings for the Korean people. In this respect, the Korean language not only is an important signifier distinguishing Koreans from other nations and ethnic groups, but also plays a significant role in binding the people together to form a community at home and abroad. Many Koreans regard the Korean language not merely as a means of communication, but as something that needs to be preserved and developed with a sense of affection.



2

Sounds

What Does Korean Sound Like?

Many Korean people feel that French sounds delicate, while German sounds somewhat harsh and dry. So what does Korean sound like to a foreign person? Some say that it sounds a bit stiff or unfriendly, and others say that it sounds dynamic, though the descriptions vary greatly depending upon who is asked and what their native language happens to be.

Vowels of Korean

The Korean language includes 10 monophthongs (single vowel sounds); among these, young people today tend to be unable to distinguish ‘ㅏ[[e]’ and ‘ㅘ[[æ].’ In addition, they often pronounce



‘ㅈ[ʧ],’ can occur in a Korean word – ‘나[na],’ ‘소[so],’ ‘자[ʧa]’ – but two or more initial consonants cannot be placed together. Two initial consonants, such as the *st* in *stop*, or three, such as the *spr* in *spring*, are possible in English. However, Koreans adjust and pronounce these words as ‘스톱[sitʰop]’ and ‘스프링[sipʰirɪŋ]’ by adding the vowel ‘ㅡ[ɨ]’ between each consonant in order to conform to the rule of having no more than one initial consonant in a single syllable of a Korean word.

The number of final consonants in a syllable cannot exceed one, either. Even though some words, such as ‘흙[hɪk]’ and ‘갭[gap],’ are spelled as if they have two final consonants, these consonants are pronounced as a single sound: ‘흙[hɪk]’ and ‘갭[gap].’ Because of this, an English word with two final consonants, such as milk, is written as ‘밀크[milkʰɪ]’ so that it suits the Korean structure, and is pronounced with an additional ‘ㅡ[ɨ]’ sound at the end.

Prosody of Korean

In many languages, the meaning of a word can change depending on its pitch. This also applied to the Korean language in the past, but today pitch differentiation is absent except in certain dialects.

At the same time, quite a few words in the contemporary standard Korean language differ in meaning according to the length of a vowel. For example, ‘눈[nun],’ when pronounced with a short vowel sound, means eye, whereas ‘눈[nu:n]’ with a long vowel sound means snow. Also, ‘말[ma]’ means horse, and ‘말[ma:]’ means language. However, another trend among young people is not to distinguish between the lengths of vowel sounds.

Consonants That Are Not Allowed in the Initial Position

Two phonological characteristics of the Korean language are the “initial law” and “vowel harmony.” The initial law is defined as a phenomenon whereby the initial consonant loses its original sound so that it is either pronounced as a different sound or simply

omitted. Because of this rule, it is hard to find native Korean words that begin with an initial ‘ㄹ[ɾ]’ sound, or with an

로인(老人, <i>the elderly</i>) → 노인(≡ initial law) [roin]	→	노인(≡ initial law) [noin]
리발(理髮, <i>haircut</i>) → 이발(≡ initial law) [ribal]	→	이발(≡ initial law) [ibal]
녀자(女子, <i>woman</i>) → 여자(ㄹ initial law) [njʌʧa]	→	여자(ㄹ initial law) [jʌʧa]

initial ‘ㄴ[n]’ sound in front of some vowels. In some Sino-Korean vocabulary, initial ㄹ and ㄴ have changed to ‘ㄴ[n]’ and ‘ㅇ[-],’ respectively.

However, this initial law does not affect loanwords from the West such as ‘라디오[radiŏ]’ (radio), ‘레이저[reidŏsŏ]’ (laser), or ‘뉴스[njusi]’ (news).

Harmonious and Inharmonious Vowels

As can be seen below, there is a phenomenon in which, to the Korean ear, vowel sounds such as ‘ㅏ[a]’ and ‘ㅓ[o]’ go well with other ‘ㅏ’ and ‘ㅓ’ sounds, whereas ‘ㅑ[ɛ]’ and ‘ㅕ[u]’ sounds go well with other ‘ㅑ’ and ‘ㅕ’ sounds. We call this “vowel harmony,” and it appears mainly in the stem or endings of verbs, as well as in onomatopoeia and mimetic words.

ㅏ - ㅏ [a] [a]	ㅓ - ㅓ [ɔ] [ɔ]	ㅑ - ㅑ [ɛ] [ɛ]	ㅕ - ㅕ [u] [u]
깍 - 아 [kʰakʰ-a]	꺾 - 어 [kʰɛkʰ-ɔ]	노릇 - 노릇 [norin-norit]	누릇 - 누릇 [nurin-nurit]
파랗다 [pʰaratʰa]	퍼렇다 [pʰɛrɛtʰa]	보글 - 보글 [pogil-bogil]	부글 - 부글 [bugil-bugil]
반짝 - 반짝 [pantʰak-pʰantʰak]	번쩍 - 번쩍 [pɛntʰɛk-pʰɛntʰɛk]	동실 - 동실 [tonʰil-tonʰil]	둥실 - 둥실 [tuŋʰil-duŋʰil]

3 Grammar

What Does the Ending of a Predicate Do?

How do we distinguish declarative sentences from interrogatives in Korean? How do we express past, present, and future tenses?

In English, word order plays an important role both in making declarative, interrogative, or imperative sentences and in converting declarative sentences into passive form.

This is a book. Declarative form

Is this a book? Interrogative form

As indicated above, the order of *this* and *is* is switched to convert a declarative sentence into an interrogative. Korean sentences, in

contrast, are dependent upon predicate endings, regardless of word order.

수미는 학교에 간다. *Sumi goes to school.* Declarative form
[Sumi - nin hakk'jo - e kanda]

수미는 학교에 갈까? *Does Sumi go to school?* Interrogative form
[Sumi - nin hakk'jo - e kalk'a]

수미야, 학교에 가자. *Let's go to school, Sumi.* Suggestive form
[Sumi - ja hakk'jo - e kaja]

수미야, 학교에 가라. *Go to school, Sumi.* Imperative form
[Sumi - ja hakk'jo - e kara]

As seen in the above example, attaching the ending ‘-ㄴ다[-nda]’ to the stem ‘가-[ka-]’ makes a declarative sentence, and attaching the ending ‘-ㄹ까[-kka]’ converts it into an interrogative form. Also, the ending ‘-자[-ja]’ turns it into suggestive form, and ‘-라[-ra]’ makes it imperative.

What Does a Postpositional Particle Do?

Meanwhile, uninflected words (nouns, pronouns, and numerals) are followed by postpositional particles to indicate their function in a sentence or to provide them with additional meaning.

나리-가 책-을 읽는다. *Nari reads a book.*
[nari - ga] [tʃ'æk - il] [ɾinda]
subject object

민수-만 부산-까지 갔다. *Only Minsu went to Busan.*
[minsu - man] [pusan - k'adji] [katt'a]
limit of subject destination

In the above example, ‘가[ga]’ indicates that ‘나리[nari]’ is the subject, and ‘을[il]’ indicates that ‘책[tʃ'æk]’ is the object of the sentence. Use of the particle ‘만[man]’ expresses that only ‘민수[minsu]’ arrived in Busan, and ‘까지[k'adji]’ indicates that the destination is Busan.

Separation of Ending and Particle

Postpositional particles and endings can be separated from uninflected words and predicate stems in Korean. A single particle or suffix morpheme has one function in a sentence.

The pronoun *they* in English is a plural form of *he/she*; *them* is an accusative form as well as a plural form of *he/she*; and *their* is both

he/she	그[ki]
they	그-들[ki-til]
them	그-들-을[ki-til-il]
their	그-들-의[ki-til-e]

a possessive and a plural form of *he/she*. In this example, *them* and *their* have two or more functions in meaning, but cannot be morphologically separated. On the other

hand, the Korean words ‘그들을[kidirel]’ and ‘그들의[kidire]’ can be morphologically separated into a pronoun ‘그[kɪ],’ a plural particle ‘들[deu],’ an accusative particle ‘을[ul],’ and a possessive particle ‘의[e].’

The Power of the Ending

Stems of Korean verbs are combined with a variety of endings to convey different grammatical information.

입 - 는다	[ip - nɪnda]	.....	declarative
입 - 으시 - 다	[ip - iʃi - da]	.....	honorific
입 - 었 - 다	[ip - ʌt - t'a]	.....	past
입 - 겠 - 다	[ip - k'et - t'a]	.....	presumptive
입 - 더 - 라	[ip - t'ʌ - a]	.....	retrospective

The ending ‘-으시[-iʃi-]’ performs a honorific function, while the ending ‘-았/었[-at/ʌt-]’ is used to form the past tense. Likewise, the ending ‘-겠[-ket-]’ performs an presumptive function, and ‘-더[-tʌ-]’ performs an retrospective function.

In addition, it is possible to attach several endings to the stem of a verb, as you can see below:

입[ip]	- 으시[iʃi]	- 었[ʌt]	- 겠[k'et]	- 더[t'ʌ]	- 라[ra]
stem	honorific	past	presumptive	retrospective	declarative
<i>It seemed that you/he/she(formal) had probably worn.</i>					

Ending as a Bridge Between Sentences

Korean uses connective endings when joining two sentences together, whereas English uses conjunctions like *and* or *but*.

민호는 학교에 간다. *Minho goes to school.*
[minhonin hakk'joe kanda]

수미는 집에 간다. *Sumi goes home.*
[suminin ʃibe kanda]

→ 민호는 학교에 가-고 수미는 집에 간다.
Minho goes to school, and Sumi goes home.
[minhonin hakk'joe ka - go suminin ʃibe kanda]

→ 민호는 학교에 가-지만 수미는 집에 간다.
Minho goes to school, but Sumi goes home.
[minhonin hakk'joe ka - ʃiman suminin ʃibe kanda]

Different kinds of connective endings are used depending on the semantic relationship between the two sentences in Korean. When the two sentences ‘민호는 학교에 간다[minhonin hakk'joe kanda]’ and ‘수미는 집에 간다[suminin ʃibe kanda]’ are connected with



‘-고[-go],’ it means that the two clauses are presented in parallel without any sense of contradiction between them, whereas the use of ‘-지만[-jiman]’ indicates that the two clauses are in conflict.

Miscellaneous Matters

Person, gender, and number for uninflected words(nouns, etc), as seen in the West, are not used in the Korean language. Of course, Koreans do perceive them in concept, but they are understood mainly through the context of the conversation at hand.

4

Word Order

Basic Word Order

In many languages around the world, a sentence consists of three components: subject, object, and verb. However, the word order of these three components varies among the languages.

The basic order of Korean words is “subject-object-verb,” or “SOV.” As you can see in the following example, the verb is placed



at the end of a sentence, which is clearly distinct from English or Chinese, where the verb immediately follows the subject.

나는 너를 사랑한다	Korean
[nanin nʌril sarʌŋhanda]	
(S) (O) (V)	
I love you	English
(S) (V) (O)	
我 愛 你	Chinese
(S) (V) (O)	

Modifier in Front of the Modified

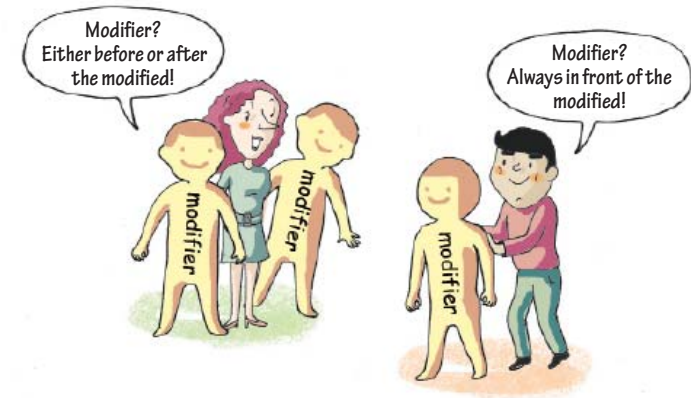
A modifier should be placed before the modified in Korean.

나는 너를 매우 사랑한다. I love you so much.
 [nanin nʌril mæu sarʌŋhanda]

이것은 읽을 만한 책이다. This is a book worth reading.
 [igʌsin ilgil manhan tʃhægida]

In the above example, the modifier *so much* in English comes after the modified verb *love*. However, the Korean modifier ‘매우[mæu]’ (*so much*) is situated in front of the modified verb ‘사랑한

다[sarʌŋhanda]’ (*to love*). Likewise, ‘읽을 만한[ilgil manhan]’ (*worth reading*) in Korean is placed prior to the modified word ‘책[tʃʌk],’ but *worth reading* in English comes after the modified *book*.



Particles after Uninflected Words

Postpositional particles in Korean, which convey a relationship between words, are placed after nouns, whereas corresponding prepositions in English are placed in front of nouns.

나는 학교-에 간다. I go to school
 [nanin hakk'jo - e kanda]

우리는 방안-에 있다. We are in the room
 [urinin paŋan - e itt'a]

As you see in the above example, the prepositions *to* and *in* are located in front of the noun, but the particle ‘-에[-e]’(*in*), which indicates location, is placed after the noun. In this respect, the particle in Korean can be considered a postposition, which corresponds to a preposition in English.

Word Order Can Be Changed

A change in word order brings about a change in meaning in English sentences because the components of a sentence are determined by the relative position of each word.

John loves Mary.

Mary loves John.

On the other hand, word components move relatively freely within a sentence in the Korean language. The basic word order of Korean is SOV, but this rule is not necessarily observed in conversation.

내-가 수미-에게 그림-을 보여 주었다. *I showed Sumi a picture.*
[næ-ga sumi-ege kŕim-ul pojʌ ʃuʌtt'a]

수미-에게 내-가 그림-을 보여 주었다. *I showed Sumi a picture.*
[sumi-ege næ-ga kŕim-ul pojʌ ʃuʌtt'a]

수미-에게 그림-을 내-가 보여 주었다. *I showed Sumi a picture.*
[sumi-ege kŕim-ul næ-ga pojʌ ʃuʌtt'a]

The positions of ‘내가[næga]’(*I*), ‘수미에게[sumiege]’(*to Sumi*), and ‘그림을[kŕimil]’(*picture*) differ in the above sentences, but the basic meaning of all three sentences is identical. Since the particles attached to uninflected words display the word’s case, the word ‘내가[næga]’ is always interpreted as a subject no matter where it moves in a sentence thanks to the nominative particle ‘가[ga].’



Sentence Focus Comes First

Though word order is relatively free in the Korean language, this does not mean that there is no word order. It is most natural to

speak in SOV order. Therefore, when the order changes there can be subtle differences in meaning or nuance even if the basic meaning is identical.

민호는 수미에게 인형을 주었다. *Minho gave a doll to Sumi.*
[minhonin sumiege inhjʌŋi ʃuʌttʰa]

수미에게 민호는 인형을 주었다. *Minho gave a doll to Sumi.*
[sumiege minhonin inhjʌŋi ʃuʌttʰa]

In Korean, words that constitute the focus are usually located at the beginning of a sentence. The locations of ‘민호는[minhonin]’ and ‘수미에게[sumiege]’ in the above sentences are transposed. There is no change in the basic meaning of the sentence. However, the first sentence focuses on ‘민호[minho],’ and the second one focuses on ‘수미[sumi].’

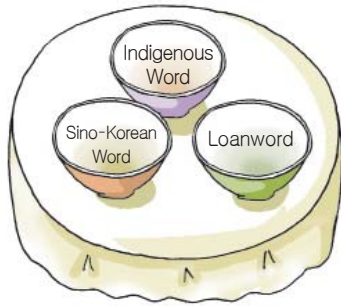
5

Three Types of Words

Indigenous Words

It is rare for a language to consist only of indigenous vocabulary. English has many words derived from German, French, Greek, and many other languages. The Korean vocabulary can be categorized into indigenous words, Sino-Korean words, and loanwords from other origins.

Indigenous words are the basis of the Korean language. They have been used on the peninsula throughout recorded history. Some examples are words for body parts like ‘손[son]’ (*hand*), ‘발[pa]’ (*foot*), ‘눈[nun]’ (*eye*), ‘코[kʰo]’ (*nose*), ‘입[ip]’ (*mouth*), and ‘얼굴[algul]’ (*face*); and numerical words such as ‘하나[hana]’ (*one*), ‘둘[tu]’ (*two*), and ‘셋[set]’ (*three*). In addition, words indicating objects in nature such as ‘하늘[haniil]’ (*sky*), ‘땅[tʰaŋ]’ (*earth*), and ‘바다[paɗa]’



» Korean Vocabulary

(*sea*) are mostly of native origin.

The basic phrases used for general communication are mostly comprised of indigenous words. In addition, words that perform a grammatical function, such as the postpositions and suffixes necessary to build a sentence in

Korean, are all indigenous vocabulary.

Most indigenous words have many meanings as they are frequently used in daily life. For instance, the native verb ‘보다 [poda]’ has more than 20 meanings, including *to read*, *to investigate*, *to meet*, *to count*, *to examine*, and so forth, as well as the basic meaning of *to see* or *to recognize an object with the eyes*.

Sino-Korean Words from China

Sino-Korean words have been added to the Korean vocabulary from words originally written with Chinese characters. Quite a lot of words came from China long before the Korean alphabet *Hangeul* was invented. Sino-Korean words have entered Korea in the form of written communication, whereas Western loanwords have been learned orally in Korea.

Though the Chinese characters, which were used as a means

of writing Sino-Korean words, are not of native Korean origin, their pronunciation in Korea is based on their Korean reading. For example, ‘漢字’ is pronounced [hanzi] in Chinese, but Koreans pronounce it as ‘한자[h:antʃʰa].’

Sino-Korean Words from Japan

Quite a few Sino-Korean words have come from Japan as well. Japanese-style Sino-Korean words were first used in Korea during the Japanese colonial era at the beginning of 20th century.

Japanese-style Sino-Korean words were mostly adopted in the process of translating new concepts from the modern West into Japanese. Such words as ‘야구(野球) [yagu]’ (*baseball*), ‘사진(寫眞)



[saɕɕin]’ (*photograph*), and ‘기차(汽車)[kiɕʰa]’ (*train*) were rapidly absorbed into the Korean language through the promotion of language suppression policy during the Japanese colonial era.

An effort to weed out Japanese-style Sino-Korean words started among some Koreans following independence from Japan, and this movement has been carried on in some circles.

Sino-Korean Words Created in Korea

Some Sino-Korean words have also been created in Korea. ‘감기(感氣)[kamgi]’ (*common cold*), ‘백일장(白日場)[pægilɕʰaŋ]’ (*essay contest*), and ‘편지(便紙)[pʰjɛndʒi]’ (*letter*) have been in use since long ago, whereas ‘노사(勞使)[nosa]’ (*labor and management*), ‘면도(面刀)[mjando]’ (*shaving*), and ‘자가용(自家用)[tʃʌgajon]’ (*private car*) are relatively recent additions to the language.

Some indigenous words are misunderstood to be Sino-Korean words due to their pronunciation. For instance, ‘구경[kugjɛŋ]’ (*sightseeing*), ‘생각[sæŋgak]’ (*thought*), and ‘서랍[sɾap]’ (*drawer*) are all indigenous words, but sometimes people incorrectly write them with the Chinese characters ‘求景,’ ‘生覺,’ and ‘舌盒,’ respectively.

Sino-Korean words account for between 50% and 70% of Korean words, depending on the source cited. However, a considerable number of those words are no longer commonly used. Similarly, the percentage of Latin and French words is high in the

English vocabulary, but these words are rarely used in ordinary conversation today. In summary, indigenous words are at the center of general communication, and Sino-Korean words are not used as much as is indicated by Korean dictionaries. If the



Sino-Korean word and indigenous word have the same meaning, the Sino-Korean word is typically used in formal settings, while the indigenous word is more often used in daily life. For example, the Sino-Korean word ‘금일[kimil]’ has the same meaning (*today*) as the indigenous Korean word ‘오늘[onil]’; however, 금일 is not used in daily life, but only in written language or situations such as a formal speech.

Loanwords from Foreign Languages Other than Chinese

Besides the Sino-Korean vocabulary, foreign words adopted from other countries (including recent addition from China) are called loanwords. The majority of loanwords are from English. Words such as ‘버스[pɾasi]’ (*bus*), ‘택시[tʰæksi]’ (*taxi*), ‘텔레비전[tʰellebidʒʌn]’ (*television*), and ‘컴퓨터[kʰɛmpʰjuɕʰʌ]’ (*computer*) are examples of

English words with daily application in modern Korea. Besides English words, the Korean language employs various loanwords from several other languages.

- German: 세미나[semina](*seminar*), 이데올로기[ideologi] (*ideology*), 노이로제[noiroʒe](*neurosis*)
- Latin: 스타디움[stʰadiu:m](*stadium*), 테마[tʰema](*theme*), 알리바이[allibai](*alibi*)
- Russian: 트로이카[tʰi:roika] (*troika*), 페치카[pʰeʧʰikʰa] (*Russian brick stove*), 보드카[podikʰa] (*vodka*)
- Italian: 첼로[ʧʰello](*cello*), 오페라[opʰera](*opera*), 템포[tʰempho] (*tempo*)
- French: 망토[maŋtho](*cloak*), 콩트[khoŋʧi](*sketch*), 모델[model] (*model*)

Some words are not recognized as loanwords by native Koreans because they were adopted so long ago that their form has been modified to fit the Korean style. Though ‘고무[komu]’ (*rubber*), ‘붓[put]’ (*brush*), and ‘구두[kudu]’ (*shoe*) come, respectively, from the Dutch, Chinese, and Japanese, these words are regarded as though they were of indigenous origin.

There are quite a lot of Japanese loanwords alongside Japanese-style Sino-Korean words. Some of these that had been in frequent use in daily life came to be excluded from the Korean vocabulary as

a result of the effort to reject the Japanese language.

Coexistence of Indigenous Words, Sino-Korean Words, and Loanwords

In some cases, all three types of words are used to refer to the same object. In counting, not only the indigenous words – ‘하나[hana]’ (*one*), ‘둘[tul]’ (*two*), and ‘셋[set]’ (*three*) – are used, but also the Sino-Korean words ‘일(一)[il],’ ‘이(二)[i],’ and ‘삼(三)[sam].’ Some additional examples are the indigenous word ‘동아리[tonari]’ (*club*) and the loanword ‘서클[sakʰil]’ (lit., *circle*); and the Sino-Korean word ‘승강기[singganggi]’ (*elevator*) and the loanword ‘엘리베이터[ellibeitʰa]’ (*elevator*).



There was a time when Sino–Korean words and Western loanwords were regarded as learned vocabulary, but indigenous words have been devalued in Korean society. Some Koreans have claimed that overuse of loanwords leads to confusion in the identity of the language. These people have been waging a campaign to replace unnecessary loanwords and difficult Sino–Korean words with simple indigenous words.

6

Rich and Nuanced Expressions

Abundant and Nuanced Phonomimes and Phenomimes

The Korean language is rich in mimetic expressions (phonomimes and phenomimes), and its sensory words are so well developed that it is possible to easily express one's myriad feelings. The abundance of this specialized vocabulary is an important factor that makes it possible to create rich and nuanced expressions.

A phonomime, also called onomatopoeia, is a word that imitates the source of the sound, while a phenomime mimics non–auditory senses. The number of phonomimes and phenomimes in the Korean language is approximately 5,000. Most languages have phonomimes, but Korean has more of them numerically, and the Korean language's abundance in phenomimes is extraordinary.

As the forms taken by mimetic words differ in each language,

it would be very difficult to guess what one means after hearing Korean mimetic words.



- Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.
- 반짝반짝 작은 별, 아름답게 비추네
[pantʃ'akp'antʃ'ak ʃ'agin pjʌl, arimdap'ke piʃ'une]
- キラキラ 光る 夜空の星よ。
[kirakira hikaru, yozorano hoʃiyo]

This song is popular all over the world, and its lyrics have been translated into various languages. The English lyric “twinkle, twinkle” imitates the image of the shining star, and this is rendered as ‘반짝반짝[pantʃ'akp'antʃ'ak]’ in Korean and ‘キラキラ[kirakira]’ in Japanese.

Difference in Sound Equals Difference in Feeling

Korean mimetic words change their consonants or vowels to create a nuance of expression. The positive vowels ‘ㅏ [a]’ and ‘ㅑ [o]’ and the negative vowels ‘ㅓ [ʌ]’ and ‘ㅕ [u]’ are generally used in pairs. Positive vowels create bright, light, clear, and small feelings, whereas negative vowels are thought to cause dark, heavy, stuffy, or big feelings.

반짝반짝 [pantʃ'ak-p'antʃ'ak]	:	번쩍번쩍 [pʌntʃ'ʌk-p'ʌntʃ'ʌk]
퐁당퐁당 [pʰoŋdaŋ-pʰoŋdaŋ]	:	퐁덩퐁덩 [pʰuŋdeŋʌŋ-pʰuŋdeŋʌŋ]

The word ‘반짝반짝[pantʃ'ak-p'antʃ'ak],’ using positive vowel sounds, expresses the image of small stars shining, and ‘번쩍번쩍 [pʌntʃ'ʌk-p'ʌntʃ'ʌk],’ using negative vowel sounds, imitates the image of big stars shining. The positive vowels in ‘퐁당퐁당[pʰoŋdaŋ]-



pʰɔŋdanj]’ mimic the sound of small objects falling into water, whereas ‘퐁덩퐁덩[pʰɔŋdʌŋ-pʰɔŋdʌŋ] would indicate a big object falling into water.

Nuance is also expressed through alternation in the lenis, fortis, and aspirated consonants. Mimetic words starting with a fortis or aspirated consonant give a stronger feeling than the corresponding lenis.




강강 [kamgam]	:	강강 [kʰamkʰam]	:	강강 [kʰamkʰam]
벌떡 [pʰaltʰak]	:	벌떡 [pʰaltʰak]	:	펼떡 [pʰaltʰak]

In many cases, Korean mimetic words are created by repeating a simple form. For example, ‘반짝[pantʃʰak]’ means “light appears for a second and disappears,” and its reduplicated form ‘반짝반짝[pantʃʰak-pantʃʰak]’ expresses the idea of “light appearing in many places at one time or consecutively.”

Words That Come from Mimetic Vocabulary

There are many words based on phonomimes and phenomimes. ‘보슬비[posilbi]’ (drizzle) comes from ‘보슬보슬[posil-bosil],’ which imitates the image of quiet and light rainfall, and ‘꿀돼지[kʰultʰ

wedʒi]’ (pig) comes from ‘꿀꿀[kʰulkʰul],’ which mimics the sound of a pig’s squeal. Many names of animals or insects come from a phonomime that mimics their respective calls.

	Phonomime (Sound Produced by Animal)	Name
frog 	개굴개굴 [kægul-gægul]	개구리 [kæguri]
owl 	부엉부엉 [puʌŋ-buʌŋ]	부엉이 [puʌŋ]
cricket 	귀뚜귀뚜 [kwitʰul-gwitʰul]	귀뚜라미 [kwitʰurami]

Mimetic Words Express Detailed Nuance

Development of sensory words in Korean does not simply mean that there are a number of such words. There are only five basic words for distinguishing colors in Korean: ‘흰다[hida]’ (white), ‘검다[kʰamtʰa]’ (black), ‘빨갈다[pʰalgatʰa]’ (red), ‘노랄다[noratʰa]’ (yellow), and ‘파랄다[pʰaratʰa]’ (blue). However, replacing the consonants and vowels in these words, or attaching various suffixes to them, creates numerous forms to express nuance in detail. The word ‘검다[kʰamtʰa]’ spawns more than 50 derivatives, which can not only express a hue or tint but also distinguish one’s psychological attitude toward the color.



Sensory words are sometimes used for metaphorical expression of characteristics. ‘싱겁다[ʃingʌptʰa]’ (*bland*) means that one’s words or behavior is insipid; ‘가볍다[kabjʌptʰa]’ (*light*) means that one’s behavior is rash; ‘거칠다[kʌtʃʰilda]’ (*rough*) means that one’s character is violent.

• 검다[kʌmtʰa] *dark, black*(vision):

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 검다[kʌmtʰa] | 가말다[kamatʰa] |
| 거멀다[kʌmʌtʰa] | 까말다[kʰamatʰa] |
| 꺼멀다[kʰʌmʌtʰa] | 새까말다[sækʰamatʰa] |
| 시꺼멀다[ʃikʰʌmʌtʰa] | 새카말다[sækʰamatʰa] |
| 시커멀다[ʃikʰʌmʌtʰa] | 거무데데하다[kʌmudedeɦada] |
| 거무멍멍하다[kʌmudeɦeɦada] | 거무속속하다[kʌmusuksʰukɦada] |
| 거무죽죽하다[kʌmujukʃʰukʰada] | 거무잡잡하다[kamujapʃʰaphada] |
| 거무충충하다[kʌmutʃʰuɦuɦada] | 거무칙칙하다[kʌmutʃʰikʃʰikʰada] |
| 거무퇴퇴하다[kʌmutʰøtʰøɦada]... | |

• 달다[talda] *sweet* (taste):

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 달달하다[taldalɦada] | 달콤하다[talkʰomɦada] |
| 달콤하다[talkʰimɦada] | 달콤새콤하다[talkʰomsækʰomɦada] |
| 달착지근하다[talʃʰaktʃʰiginhada] | 달콤쌉쌀하다[talkʰomsʰapsʰalɦada]... |

7

Hangeul, the Written Alphabet

Principles behind the Invention of *Hangeul*

Long ago, Koreans had to make use of Chinese characters to retain their records because they had no formal alphabet. However, it was not easy to create sentences due to discrepancies in grammatical structures between the two languages.

The fourth king of the Joseon Dynasty, King Sejong the Great, felt pity for his people, who had difficulty using the Chinese characters. In 1443, he invented an alphabet based on phonetic symbols – *Hangeul* – so that anyone could easily learn and use it. After the invention of *Hangeul*, Sejong continued experimenting with potential phonetic devices for three years, before finally publishing a book in 1446 called *Hunminjeongeum*, which included an explanation of *Hangeul*.



» Korean Consonants and Vocal Organs

The basic principle of the letters is the “hieroglyph,” referring to a “symbol in the form of pictures.” There are five basic consonants: ‘ㄱ[k,g],’ ‘ㄴ[n],’ ‘ㄷ[s],’ ‘ㅁ[m],’ and ‘ㅂ[n].’ These are taken from the shape or position of the vocal organs, such as the tongue and lips, as in the above figures.

Vowels were also created based on the hieroglyph. The three basic vowels – ‘ㅏ[æ],’ ‘ㅑ[i],’ and ‘ㅓ[u]’ – were respectively taken from the shape of the circular sky, the flat earth, and the standing human being.

The other letters are created by either adding additional strokes to the basic letters or combining two letters. For instance, ‘ㅋ[kʰ]’ is produced by adding a stroke to ‘ㄱ[k, g]’; ‘ㄸ[t, d]’ comes from ‘ㄴ[n]’; and ‘ㅌ[tʰ]’ comes from ‘ㄷ[t, d].’

ㄱ [k, g]	→	ㅋ [kʰ]		
ㄴ [n]	→	ㄸ [t, d]	→	ㅌ [tʰ]
ㅁ [m]	→	ㅃ [p, b]	→	ㅍ [pʰ]
ㄷ [s]	→	ㅆ [ʃ, ʒ]	→	ㅊ [tʃʰ]
ㅂ [p]	→	ㅇ [ʔ]	→	ㅎ [h]

Systematic and Easily Learned Alphabet

It is often said that *Hangeul* is one of the most scientific and unique letter sets in the world. King Sejong the Great invented ideal letters for writing Korean after a thorough observation of the vocal organs and a study of the principles of pronunciation and characteristics of sound. As noted previously, the letters look like the human vocal organs, which makes forming the letters very simple but is unique compared with those of other countries.

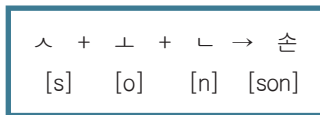
The relationship among the letters of *Hangeul* is highly logical and systematic. Letters in the Roman alphabet like ‘k’ and ‘g’ or ‘t’ and ‘d’ have similar sounds, but the letters themselves have nothing in common morphologically. However, King Sejong the Great derived other letters from the five basic consonants and three basic vowels by adding strokes according to consistent rules. Therefore, when two sounds in *Hangeul* are similar and are produced in the same area of your mouth, they have similar written shapes. You can



see this in the following examples: ‘ㄱ[g, k]’ vs. ‘ㅋ[kʰ],’ and ‘ㄷ[d, t]’ vs. ‘ㅌ[tʰ].’

The ease with which one is able to learn *Hangeul* can be summarized by a statement from the *Hurminjeongeum*: “A wise person can understand the letters by noon, and even a stupid person is able to learn them in 10 days.” *Hangeul* is very easy to learn, but you will be able to learn it more easily if you understand its principles and the background of its letters.

Assembled Writing and Vertical Writing

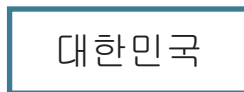


» Assembled writing

Though *Hangeul* is a phonetic alphabet that distinguishes consonants and vowels, when written it adopts a unique method

of assembling consonants and vowels into syllabic units. This assembled writing in *Hangeul* makes it easy to read books and

» Horizontal writing



» Vertical writing



understand their meaning.

Hangeul is generally written horizontally from left to right, but it is also possible to write it vertically, which make it possible to use margins effectively when taking notes.

Letters That Suit the Information Age

Hangeul was once seen as an unfavorable alphabet for mechanization because of its uniquely assembled style. This was because there were difficulties in processing *Hangeul* using the typewriter or computer, which had been devised for the Roman alphabet.

However, it is now being reevaluated thanks to recent advances in information technology (IT). It is no longer a problem to type in *Hangeul* using a computer. Indeed, *Hangeul* allows for information

» Korean Keypad on Mobile Phones



processing that is quite fast and accurate, and it could be argued that it is well suited to the information age.

Since all letters in *Hangeul* are derived from the eight basic vowels and consonants, it is possible to make effective use of the keypad of a mobile phone, which has ten buttons available. In addition, it is possible to input letters quickly and easily utilizing the principle of stroke addition.

8

Literacy in Life – Yesterday and Today

Borrowing from Chinese Characters

Though it is impossible to know exactly when Chinese characters were introduced into Korea, it is assumed that they have been used since the 6th or 7th century, when the era of the Three Kingdoms was established.

People of that time period had to use Chinese characters because there were no alternatives for transcribing the language. However, it was difficult to learn Chinese characters due to their excessive number. Also, it was not easy to write compositions using Chinese characters because Chinese



grammar was so different from Korean. Consequently, phonetic transcription was used, borrowing either the sounds or meanings of Chinese characters. The leading phonetic transcription methods were *Hayngchal*, *Idu*, and *Gugyeol*. These methods mostly involved arranging Chinese characters to fit the style of the Korean language and then supplying particles, which varied according to the transcription method. *Idu* was used until the 19th century after the invention of *Hangeul*.

Birth of Hangeul

Transcribing Korean words using Chinese characters was an imperfect method. Because of this, the fourth king of the Joseon Dynasty, King Sejong the Great, invented the indigenous alphabet *Hangeul* in 1443. That year was his 25th after ascending to the throne. It became possible for those who could not read Chinese characters to acquire literacy easily.

Hangeul was widely used to publish books on agriculture and etiquette, and *Hangeul* literature, including both poetry and prose, began to be created. In addition, some



people exchanged letters in *Hangeul*.

However, many *yangban* (noblemen) did not like the new alphabet since they valued Chinese characters at that time. In the Joseon Dynasty, *Hangeul* was referred to as *eonmun*, and sometimes disparagingly called *amkeul* ("female letters") because it was popular among women. It was also called *gungmun*, meaning the letters used by a country in order to let anybody learn to read and write easily during the modernization period. Eventually, the standard name became *Hangeul*.

Literacy in Daily Life after the Birth of *Hangeul*

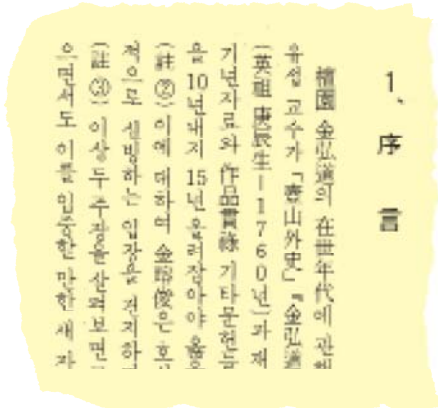
Even after the invention of *Hangeul*, Chinese characters remained central to literacy in the *yangban*'s life. Personal records were mostly written in Chinese characters, as were major official documents of the nation. Before the 20th century, village schools, called *Seodang* or *Seowon*, were institutes for Chinese education. The state examination, or *Gwageo*, designed to select outstanding individuals for government office, was also administered using Chinese characters. As a result, literacy in daily life took three different forms by the 19th century, after the invention of *Hangeul*: pure Chinese characters, *Idu*, and *Hangeul*.

Wide use of *Hangeul* in official areas began in late 19th century when efforts at enlightenment of the nation were pursued. The *Dongnip Simmun* (meaning "the independent"), the first newspaper written in *Hangeul* only, published its first edition in April 1886. Gojong, the 26th King of the Joseon Dynasty, gave an imperial order on November 21, 1894, stating that all official documents were to be written in *Hangeul*, and at last *Hangeul* was recognized as an official alphabet.

Hangeul Only or a Mixture with Chinese Characters?

There has been an ongoing conflict between those who insist on using only *Hangeul* and those who want to use a mixture

of *Hangeul* and Chinese characters. Accordingly, Koreans still use a mixture of *Hangeul* and Chinese characters today. Many specialty publications and daily newspapers are written in *Hangeul* mixed with Chinese characters. On the other hand, the rate of exclusive use of *Hangeul* has been high in areas with large popular appeal.



» Mixture of *Hangeul* and Chinese Characters in the Book



Common Usage of Roman Alphabet

Recent trends reflect an increase in the use of Romanization, including the English alphabet. It is easy to find billboard advertisements written in the Roman alphabet on many urban streets. In Korea, signposts on the road and direction boards located in tourist attractions are written in both *Hangeul* and the Roman alphabet. Romanized abbreviations such as TV, UN, PD, and MC are more commonly used than *Hangeul* in daily life.



» Signboards with Roman Alphabet on the Street in Korea