

## INTRODUCTION TO THE KOREAN LANGUAGE

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### 1. The Distribution of Korean

The Korean language is the language spoken as a mother tongue by all Koreans throughout the Korean peninsula. Koreans like to emphasize that the Korean people are a single people and the Korean language is a single language. Korea is most definitely a monolingual society. Everyone learns Korean as their mother tongue, that is, as their first language, and they spend their entire lives communicating only in Korean. From elementary school to university, they are taught in Korean, and various broadcasts are aired in Korean as well.

There are a rather large number of Korean speakers, considering how little is known about the Korean language abroad. In 2004, the population of South Korea was 48,100,000, while the population of North Korea was 22,700,000, making a total of 70,800,000 people who speak Korean. This figure is similar to the figure for Italian speakers, and corresponds to the 13th to 15th largest group in the world. In terms of language speakers, then, Korea can be considered a powerful nation despite her size.

The Korean language is also widely used by ethnic Koreans living overseas. In 2005, a total of 6,640,000 ethnic Koreans were living in 174 countries, including 2,150,000 in the United States, 1,940,000 in China, and 640,000 in Japan. There are Korea Towns in both New York and Los Angeles, and the Korean language is so well preserved there that one can find rows of shops displaying signs in Korean and independent Korean-language newspapers. The Korean language is preserved even more intact in China, primarily in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture.

There are also some 500,000 ethnic Koreans living in former Soviet Union nations, and they continue to keep the Korean language alive, and many ethnic Koreans use the Korean language in Central and South America and Canada. With Korea becoming more powerful in recent times, more and more foreigners are learning the Korean language as well.

## 2. The Korean writing system

Korean has long been a recorded language. Hangeul, the unique Korean writing system, was invented in 1443 (or 1444). It was at this time that Korean began to be recorded using a completely phonemic writing system, and these records still exist in abundance today.

Yet even before this time, Korean was written using borrowed Chinese characters, and these Chinese characters allowed the flourishing of a very active written culture. The Korean people were the first to create movable metal type. There are records that books were printed using movable metal type as early as 1234--far earlier than Gutenberg's creation of movable metal type in the 1440s--and a book printed using movable metal type in 1377 is currently owned by the National Library in Paris, France. At this time the type was set in Chinese characters, and the text was classical Chinese, but this was still part of Korea's vibrant written culture.

By the Three Kingdoms period (early fourth century), Koreans had already developed a method of writing Korean place and people names using the pronunciations and Korean renderings of Chinese characters, and during the Silla period (which lasted until the tenth century), the Korean form of poetry known as *hyangga* was written using this method. This method of writing Korean using the pronunciation and Korean renderings of Chinese characters is known as *Idu*, and if we count *Idu* as written Korean, then the Korean language appeared in writing as early as the fifth century.

Yet not many texts recorded in *Idu* survive today. Even the genre of *hyangga*, which shows the most complete picture of the Korean language, is represented by only 25 surviving examples. Thus it is the invention of Hangeul in the fifteenth century that must be considered the starting point for written Korean.

In recent times, the influence of Romanization has been increasing, a trend that is not limited to Korea. Yet Hangeul still plays the central role in Korea's written culture.

The lineage of the Korean language has not been definitely established. Yet many Korean scholars, drawing on the views of G. J. Ramstedt (1928, 1952, 1957) and N. Poppe (1960), believe that there is a good possibility that Korean belongs to the Altaic language family. They reason that, while Korean may not be as closely related as the three traditional Altaic language groups of Turkic, Mongolian, and Manchu-Tungus, it is part of the same language family, and of these three it is

most closely related to Manchu-Tungus.

Korean has characteristics in common with other Altaic languages that are too striking to be coincidental. Firstly, if we divide languages into isolating languages, inflectional languages, and agglutinative languages, Korean, like the other Altaic languages, is a typical agglutinative language. It is a language in which inflectional suffixes are regularly attached to word roots. There is also the matter of vowel harmony. In a single word, "positive" vowels can only combine with other positive vowels, while "negative" vowels can only combine with other negative vowels. There is also the so-called "initial sound rule." The "l/r" sound cannot begin a word, and two or more consonants cannot appear in the initial position. There are no relative pronouns and no conjunctions. Verbs are combined with word endings that correspond to relative pronouns and conjunctions in Indo-European languages. These characteristics of the Korean language apply to Altaic languages as well.

Noteworthy results have been achieved through comparison of specific words and grammatical forms (Yi Gimun, 1972). The comparison in Example 1 below proves a phonological correspondence between the Old Korean "a" and the proto-Altaic "\*a."

1) Middle Korean arae (<\*al) "below", Evenki alas "foot", Mongolian ala "crotch", Old Turkic al "downward", and Middle Turkic altın "below"

The comparison in Example 2 shows that the Korean consonant b/p corresponds phonologically with the proto-Altaic \*p and \*b.

2) Middle Korean beuz- "pour",  
Manchu fusu- "to sprinkle water",  
Mongolian üsür- "to sprinkle or pour",  
Monguor fuzuru- "to pour",  
Turkic üskür- "to spew from the mouth"

There are also some grammatical forms that have been discovered to have an exceptional correspondence. The Korean locative particle ro, used to indicate direction, is comparable to the Old Turkic rü and the Mongolian ru, and is a reconstruction of the proto-Altaic \*ru/rü. The correspondence of the gerund endings -\*r, -\*m, and -\*n has been shown to play a large part in the establishment of a relationship between Korean and Altaic.

In this way, Korean scholars feel that there is a high probability that Korean belongs to the Altaic language family, contrary to the opinions of scholars outside Korea. Even though they are keenly aware of limitations due to the lack of ancient

materials, they do not think that there is any possibility that Korean belongs to a language family other than the Altaic language family. It is the conclusion of Yi Gimun (1972) and the representative opinion of the Korean academic world that, even if it is not directly descended from proto-Altaic, at the least Korean shares a common root with proto-Altaic.

Japanese is very closely related to Korean. It shares most of the common characteristics and formal characteristics that were used to describe the Korean language above. In contrast with this perfect correspondence, the weak correspondence in terms of specific words and grammatical forms has proven an obstacle, but scholars have maintained the opinion that the two languages belong to the same lineage. Of course, Japanese is known as a language whose lineage is more difficult to establish than Korean. Scholarly opinion says that the chances of Japanese belonging to the Altaic language family are even slimmer. Furthermore, the so-called "southern theory" has attempted to find a relationship between Japanese and the Austronesian language family. Yet the opinion that Japanese is both closely related to Korean and probably a member of the Altaic family is the one that receives the most support from Japanese scholars.

In conclusion, if the Korean language does indeed belong to a language family, at present it is certain that there is the highest probability that it belongs to the Altaic language family. Yet there are still those who doubt the existence of an Altaic language family, so in order to establish a more solid foundation for the lineage of the Korean language, it is necessary to definitively prove the existence of an Altaic language family.

#### 4. Structural Characteristics of Korean

Korean differs from Indo-European languages such as English in a number of aspects. First and foremost, languages like English are SVO (subject-verb-object) languages, while Korean is a SOV (subject-object-verb) language. In Korean, the verb always comes at the end, making it a verb-final language.

As mentioned above, Korean is also an agglutinative language. As seen in Example 1 below, a noun can take a number of particles, and there are an astonishing number of endings that can be combined with verbs (and adjectives). These endings perform important grammatical functions

- 1) a) Gangaji-ga gwiyeopda.  
Puppy SUBJ. cute
- b) Gangaji-reul jal dolboara.

- Puppy OBJ. well look after  
 c) Gangaji-ege mureul jueora.  
 Puppy to water OBJ. give

As seen in Example 2, tense is also determined by word endings, and Example 3 shows that the word ending at the end of a sentence determines if the sentence will be declarative, interrogative, or imperative. The honorific speech that will be discussed later is also almost entirely determined by word endings. It is said in jest that the important part of the sentence comes first in English, whereas it comes last in Korean, but there is certainly truth to this statement.

- 2) a) Kkochi eonje pi-ni?  
 Flowers when bloom?  
 b) Kkochi eonje pi-eot-ni?  
 Flowers when bloomed?
- 3) a) Minhoga chaegeul ilg-neunda.  
 Minhoo book reads  
 b) Minhoga chaegeul ilg-ni?  
 Minhoo book reads?  
 c) Minhoga chaegeul ilg-eora.  
 Minhoo book read

In Korean, modifiers must be placed in front of the word they modify. Prenominals come before nouns and adverbs come before verbs. Clauses that modify the head noun are placed before that noun as well. This contrasts with languages like French, where adjectives can be placed after the nouns they modify, and English, where clauses must be placed after the nouns they modify and adverbs regularly come after the modified verb. Also, Korean words that correspond to prepositions in English must come after nouns, making them "postpositions." In a word, English is a prepositional language and a right-branching language, in which clauses branch to the right, while Korean is a postpositional language and a left-branching language, where clauses branch to the left.

Another characteristic of Korean that cannot be overlooked is the highly developed honorific language. The English "you" can be used to refer to a friend, one's father, or a teacher, but this is not the case in Korean. It is almost as if there is a rule against using a pronoun to refer to one's father or teacher. Also, the status of the subject of a sentence determines the verb ending, as seen in Example 9.

In English, the phrase "the bus is coming" can be used in the same form no matter

who the addressee is, but in Korean there are four to six different sentence endings used depending on the status of the addressee, as demonstrated in Example 10.

9) a) Aiga ttui-nda.

child runs

b) Abeojiga ttui-si-nda.

Father runs

10) a) Beosuga o-nda.

(college professor to a son, daughter, or other young person, or to an old friend)

b) Beosuga o-ne.

(college professor to graduate student)

c) Beosuga o-wyo. (wayo)

(college professor to wife, or to an unfamiliar young person)

d) Beosuga o-bnida. (omnida)

(college professor to father, old teacher, or an unfamiliar older person)

Korean also has several phonological characteristics that are not found in English. Firstly, Korean does have the labiodentals *f* and *v* or the interdentalals  $\Theta$  and  $\delta$ . Korean also does not distinguish between voiceless and voiced stops, fricatives, and affricates. That is, there is no distinction between the following pairs in Korean: *p/b*, *t/d*, *s/z*, *tʃ/dʒ*, and *k/g*. This is a rather unique phenomenon even when compared with Chinese and Japanese. Instead, Korean distinguishes between lenis, fortis, and aspirated sounds. That is, distinctions are drawn between the following sounds: *p/pʰ*, *t/tʰ*, *tʃ/tʃʰ*, and *k/kʰ*. Thus the distinction between the Korean words for "moon" (*dal*), "daughter" (*ttal*), and "mask" (*tal*) proves difficult to master for Westerners. Another significant characteristic is that consonants at the ends of syllables are unreleased. The aspiration of *t* and *p* at the end of the English "hat" and "help" is impossible in Korean. In order to introduce aspiration, a vowel that does not exist in English (*i*) must be added to the end of the word so that the words are pronounced [het*i*] and [help*i*]. This practice can be seen in foreign words that have been introduced to Korean, such as "kaempeu" ("camp") and "belteu" ("belt").

1. How many Korean speakers are there? Where do they use the language?
2. What kind of scripts do Korean people have used in their history?
3. Explain the hypotheses on the genealogy of the Korean language.
4. What are the typological/structural characteristics of Korean?