Korean

An Essential Grammar

Young-Key Kim-Renaud

Routledge Essential Grammars

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Korean: An Essential Grammar is a concise, user-friendly guide to the basic grammatical structures of Standard Korean. Presenting a fresh and accessible description of the language, this engaging grammar is linguistically sophisticated uses clear, jargon-free explanations and sets out the complexities of Korean in short, readable sections.

Key features include:

- clear grammar explanations
- frequent use of authentic examples
- Korean alphabet used alongside McCune-Reischauer romanization system
- glossary of grammatical terms
- pronunciation guide

This is the ideal mature reference source both for those studying Korean independently and for students in schools, colleges, universities, and adult classes of all types to back up their studies.

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Preface

Korean: An Essential Grammar aims to fill a long-felt need, among both teachers and students of Korean, for a linguistically sound but generally accessible introductory reference grammar of the language. The book is informed by modern linguistic research and explains basic principles underlying a wide range of phenomena in Korean including the sound pattern, sentence structures, major class words (verbs and nouns), modifiers, negation, honorifics, and language protocol.

The language examples from Standard Korean are presented first in *han'gŭl*, which is followed by McCune-Reischauer romanization. Hyphens mark a grammatical boundary when they occur within a word or a sentence. When they occur next to an independent form, it indicates that the form is bound, i.e., it cannot stand by itself but must occur with some other form. An asterisk (*) indicates that the expression it is attached to is ungrammatical. Vowel length or lengthening is marked by a colon (:).

The general principle of M-R romanization is to represent a close proximation of the actual pronunciation. However, when words are broken into smaller units for clarification, basic forms rather than actual pronunciation are noted. Therefore, readers are strongly recommended to learn to read *han'gŭl*, which is much more systematic than romanization. Glosses are provided for each relevant component of a word or a sentence, and then an English translation of the whole string is provided, sometimes with a literal meaning given in parentheses ('*lit.*…'). When examples are embedded in the narrative text, romanization is given right after the Korean writing, and the two parts are always considered together as a unit and therefore are not separated by any punctuation marks. Reverse arrows indicate where the particular forms came from, and regular arrows indicate obligatory change into the following forms.

While working toward the completion of this book, I have benefited greatly from the moral support and practical assistance of various organizations and individuals. I thank the Korea Foundation and the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences of The George Washington University for their generous support of my sabbatical research. I owe a special word of gratitude to my two former deans, William F. Frawley and Diana Lipscomb, and the current dean, Marguerite Barratt, for their collegial support; my colleagues, Miok Pak and Yunkyoung Kang for having read my manuscript and provided valuable comments; my friends Lindsey Eck, Amin Y. Teymorian, and David Yoo for their fine editorial assistance; and my husband Bertrand Renaud, my daughter Nicole Renaud, and my brother Hoagy Kim for their constant support of everything I do.

I thank the University of Hawai'i Press for their permission for me to use Figure 2.1 and Figure 2.2 from *The Korean Alphabet: Its History and Structure*, edited by Young-Key Kim-Renaud and published by the UH Press (1997).

The book project took much longer than originally planned, and I am most grateful for the patience and professional assistance of the superb editorial staff at Taylor & Francis and Routledge Publishers including Sophie Oliver, Sonja van Leeuwen, Geraldine Martin, and Annamarie Kino.

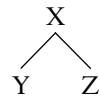
List of abbreviations and notations

Abbreviations

Act = Active
Adj = adjective
Adv = adverb
AH = addressee honorification
C = consonant
Caus = causative suffix
CL = numeral classifier
Comp = complementizer
Conj = conjunctive
Conn = connective
Cop = copula
Dat = dative
Dec = declarative
Def = deferential
Det = determiner
Dim = diminutive
Emph = emphatic
Exc = exclamation
Exist = existential
Fut = future tense
G = glide
Gen = genitive
Hon = honorific
Imp = imperative
Int = interjective
Loc = locative
Mod = modifier

N = noun
Neg = negative
Nom = nominative
Nominal = nominalizer
NP = noun phrase
Obj = object
OH = object honorification
Pass = passive
Past = past tense
Pl = plural
Pol = polite
Pres = present tense
Proc = processive
Prog = progressive
Pron = pronoun
Prop = propositive
Q = question
Quot = quotative
Rel = relative
Ret = retrospective
RH = referent honorification
S = sentence
SH = subject honorification
Sing = singular
SK = Sino-Korean
SOV = subject-object-verb
SS = sound-symbolic
Subj = subject
Sugg = suggestive
Sup = suppositional
Top = Topic
V = verb, vowel
VH = vowel harmony
Voc = vocative
Vol = volitional
VP = verb phrase
w = word
WH = wh- word

Notations

< >	graphic symbols
[ ]$_x$	grammatical category X
/ /	phonemic forms
[ ]	phonetic forms
[▶ X]	see X (cross-reference)
	X consists of Y and Z in that order
“ ”	quotation marks
‘ ’	gloss, meaning
?	possibly ungrammatical; unacceptable
*	ungrammatical; impossible; etymological
+	combines with
σ	syllable
SPACE	word and clausal boundary
- or .	word-internal boundary
.	syllable boundary
←	derived from
→	becomes
↓	low tone/pitch
↗	rising tone/pitch
↘	falling tone/pitch
↑	high tone/pitch
C¬	unreleased consonant
X_1	one or more/at least one X
~	varies with
S_x	clause, sentence within a sentence
’	word-internal graphic symbol boundary

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Chapter 1

Introduction: the Korean language and its speakers

A native language for some 72 million people on the Korean peninsula and a first or second language for 5 million more ethnic Koreans living in China, Japan, North America, and the former Soviet Union, Korean ranks eleventh in number of speakers among more than 3,000 languages of the world.

Korean does not have a proven close linguistic relative. Many accept that it is related to Japanese and that both belong to the Tungusic branch of the Altaic family of languages, spoken mainly in Siberia and Mongolia. Typologically, Korean and Japanese are remarkably close in syntactic, semantic, and discourse-pragmatic features. Even more strikingly, Japanese and Korean show such sociolinguistic features as grammatically encoded honorifics [▶6.8, 10.1] in a way not shared with any other languages. The two languages also are extremely rich in sound-symbolic expressions called *mimetics* that are not sporadic, arbitrary words as in most languages, but are an integral part of their respective grammars.

Korean does not belong to the same language family as Chinese and also greatly differs from Chinese in structure. However, as an important member of the Sinitic civilization and a direct neighbor to China, Korea has had a close relationship with the Middle Kingdom. A huge portion of the Korean lexicon, therefore, is based on Sino-Korean roots borrowed from classical written Chinese. Today, loanwords from Western languages, especially English, are increasingly used as a result of globalization and contact with foreign trade goods, ideas, cultures, and customs. Contemporary Korean is a descendant of the language of the Silla kingdom (57 BCE–935 CE), one of the three kingdoms that ruled over the Korean peninsula and a large part of Manchuria, which unified the peninsula in 668.

The basic Korean word order is Subject-Object-Verb. Korean is an *agglutinative* language, in which words are formed by concatenating various

meaning-bearing units. Typically noun phrases or verb stems are followed by suffix-like elements. There are no prepositions, but rather postpositions. For example, noun phrases consist of nouns followed by particles indicating their relationship to other elements in a sentence such as subject, object, dative, etc. Verb stems cannot stand alone but must be followed by suffixes such as those indicating tense, aspect, mood, and the expressed attitude of the speaker vis-à-vis the interlocutor and the referent. Therefore, different word orders are possible, as grammatical markers make the basic meaning of the sentence clear. However, all modifiers must precede the words they modify.

When different roots come together, their forms often influence each other. Many sound alternations are due to universal principles governed by physical and other human characteristics. However, many other seemingly complicated pronunciation changes in Korean are explainable by three important but simple metaforces in Korean: (1) the tendency for consonants between vowels to soften; (2) the tendency for Koreans to unrelease the syllable-final consonant, i.e., retain its contact position in the mouth [▶3.4.6]; and (3) the strong nature of the utterance-initial position.

Two salient features of the Korean language are intricate systems of *honorification* and *sound symbolism*. In Korean, rather narrowly defined interpersonal relationships are grammatically coded, and a speaker cannot open his or her mouth without considering linguistic protocol. Sound symbolism is the direct or iconic representation of meaning in sounds, which categorizes the world in a Korean-specific way through sound and meaning but still follows certain natural linguistic tendencies such as certain kinds of vowels or consonants occurring with similar sounds. Vowel harmony, which used to be much more systematic in Korean, is now most productive in sound-symbolic words, also called *mimetics* or *ideophones*.

Korean is written in *han'gŭl*, a unique alphabet invented in the mid-1400s, that shows a remarkable linguistic fit between its letter forms and various phonological units of the language. Chinese script was used in writing the Korean language for two millennia, and it is still mixed with Korean script in some academic or legal documents, although writing in *han'gŭl* only recently has become the norm even in those cases.

Chapter 2

Han'gŭl, *the Korean alphabet*

Korean is written in an alphabetic system, commonly known today as *han'gŭl* ("Han [Korean, great, unique] script") in South Korea and elsewhere, but called *chosŏn'gŭl* in North Korea. This simple, yet systematic and efficient, alphabet invented in the mid-1400s is a source of great pride for Koreans. In the Republic of Korea, October 9 is celebrated as *han'gŭl* Day, a rare national day of celebration honoring a linguistic achievement. Various foreign linguists, especially specialists in writing, have noted *han'gŭl*'s many unusual qualities, calling it, for example, "one of the great intellectual achievements of humankind" (Sampson 1985: 144), "perhaps the most remarkable [script] in the world" (Ledyard 1966: 370), and "probably the most remarkable writing system ever invented" (Coulmas 1989: 118).

Han'gŭl did not evolve over a long period like most alphabets but was invented, and we know its inventor – a sage king and brilliant linguist, Sejong the Great (r. 1418–50). Furthermore, the scientific, humanistic, and philosophical principles underlying its invention are clearly recorded. The original name of the alphabet was *Hunmin chŏng'ŭm* ("correct sounds for the instruction of the people") when it was proclaimed in 1446. The proclamation, also entitled *Hunmin chŏng'ŭm* (hereinafter *HC*), was a kind of handbook for learning the alphabet; it contained explanatory treatises and examples called *Hunmin chŏng'ŭm haerye* ("explanations and examples of the correct sounds for the instruction of the people," or *HCH*). This historic publication miraculously resurfaced in 1940 after having been lost for centuries. In 1997 UNESCO voted to include it in its Memory of the World register – the first and probably the only linguistic treatise honored in this manner.

Sejong wanted to devise a writing system that would be easy for all Koreans to learn and to use, as clearly stated in his famous Preface to *HC*:

> The sounds of our country's language are different from those of the Middle Kingdom (China) and are not smoothly communicable with literary (Chinese) characters. Therefore, among my dear people, there are many who, though they have something they wish to tell, are never able to express their feelings [in writing]. Commiserating with this, I have newly designed 28 letters. I desire only that everyone acquire them easily, to make them convenient and comfortable for daily use.
>
> (trans. Kim-Renaud)

Sejong was also eager and confident that the new system would become universal. As Chŏng In-ji put it in his Postface to *HCH*:

> Though only twenty-eight letters are used, their shifts and changes in function are endless; they are simple and fine, reduced to the minimum yet universally applicable. Therefore, a wise man can acquaint himself with them before the morning is over; a stupid man can learn them in the space of ten days . . . There is no usage not provided for, no direction in which they do not extend. Even the sound of the winds, the cry of the crane, the cackle of fowl and the barking of dogs – all may be written . . .
>
> (trans. Ledyard 1966: 258–9)

2.1 Inventory of the Korean alphabet

This section gives a complete list of the Korean alphabet as used today, in dictionary order. Note that sounds vary depending on the position in which they occur, as shown in Table 2.1. English examples containing similar sounds are underscored.

2.2 Design principles of *han'gŭl* letters

Han'gŭl is an alphabet, originally composed of 28 letters, but now consisting of 14 consonants and 10 vowels (in reality, either simple vowels or diphthongs – sequences of two vowels one of which is pronounced as a glide, i.e., a [w] or [y] sound). It originally had systematic accent markers, when pitch was a significant part of the Korean language. *Han'gŭl* is unlike all other alphabets, because its letter shapes are not arbitrary but are designed to represent various characteristics of the Korean sound system.

Table 2.1 Consonants

Letter	Name	Initial	Intervocalic	Final
ㄱ	기역 [kiyŏk]	[k] baker	[g] ago	[k] book
ㄴ	니은 [niŭn]	[n] no	[n] china	[n] in
ㄷ	디귿 [tigŭt]	[t] into	[d] Sunday	[t] what
ㄹ	리을 [riŭl]	[r] radio	[r] bury	[l] cool
ㅁ	미음 [miŭm]	[m] man	[m] Thomas	[m] dam
ㅂ	비읍 [piŭp]	[p] super	[b] sober	[p] tip
ㅅ	시옷 [siot]	[s] nice	[s] nicer	[t] but
ㅇ	이응 [iŭng]	[Ø] –	[ng] singing	[ng] sing
ㅈ	지읒 [chiŭt]	[ch] inches	[j] unjust	[t] pit
ㅊ	치읓 [ch'iŭt]	[ch'] church	[ch'] church	[t] pit
ㅋ	키읔 [k'iŭk]	[k'] kit	[k'] cookie	[k] book
ㅌ	티읕 [t'iŭt]	[t'] took	[t'] guitar	[t] sit
ㅍ	피읖 [p'iŭp]	[p'] pie	[p'] import	[p] nap
ㅎ	히읗 [hiŭt]	[h] hat	[h] vehicle	[t] sit

Table 2.2 Geminate consonants (doubled letters but single sounds)

Letter	Name	Approximate pronunciation
ㄲ	쌍기역 [ssang kiyŏk]	[kk] backgammon
ㄸ	쌍디귿 [ssang tigŭt]	[tt] hot dog
ㅃ	쌍비읍 [ssang piŭp]	[pp] tapebox
ㅆ	쌍시옷 [ssang siot]	[ss] dissimilar
ㅉ	쌍지읒 [ssang chiŭt]	[tch] sweet juice, blackjack

HCH makes it clear that the alphabet Sejong created for the purpose of universal literacy was based on his sophisticated understanding of the Korean sound system. He strongly believed that native speakers have a subconscious knowledge of linguistic units, and a writing system that reflects phonological aspects of the language iconically is easier to learn and use than arbitrary symbols.

In *han'gŭl*, consonants and vowels are represented by two clearly distinguishable kinds of graphic shapes. Basic consonantal shapes are geometric and depict graphically the place and manner of articulation. Vowels also are iconically represented to express different classes according to articulatory and acoustic characteristics.

Table 2.3 Basic vowels and *y*-diphthongs (*y* + basic vowels)

Letter	Name	Approximate pronunciation
ㅏ	아 [a]	alms
ㅑ	야 [ya]	yard (NB: here and below, the extra short stroke represents a [y] sound.)
ㅓ	어 [ŏ]	caught, tough
ㅕ	여 [yŏ]	young
ㅗ	오 [o]	boy, tow, society
ㅛ	요 [yo]	Yosemite, yoga
ㅜ	우 [u]	two, spoon
ㅠ	유 [yu]	you
ㅡ	으 [ŭ]	book, petite, support
ㅣ	이 [i]	eat, key, pill

Table 2.4 Complex vowels with optional *w* or *y*

Letter	Name	Approximate pronunciation
ㅐ	애 [ae]	cat, ask
ㅒ	얘 [yae]	Yankee
ㅔ	에 [e]	phonetic
ㅖ	예 [ye]	yes
ㅚ	외 [oe]	quench
ㅟ	위 [wi]	queen, twig
ㅘ	와 [wa]	Hawaii
ㅙ	왜 [wae]	wagon
ㅝ	워 [wŏ]	wonder
ㅞ	웨 [we]	west

Note: 애, 에 and 외, although graphically complex, are single vowels today but originally were diphthongs ending in y, as the letter shapes show.

2.2.1 *Consonants*

According to *HCH*, the consonant letterforms schematically show the shapes of speech organs – such as the tongue, teeth, or mouth – articulating the sound in question.

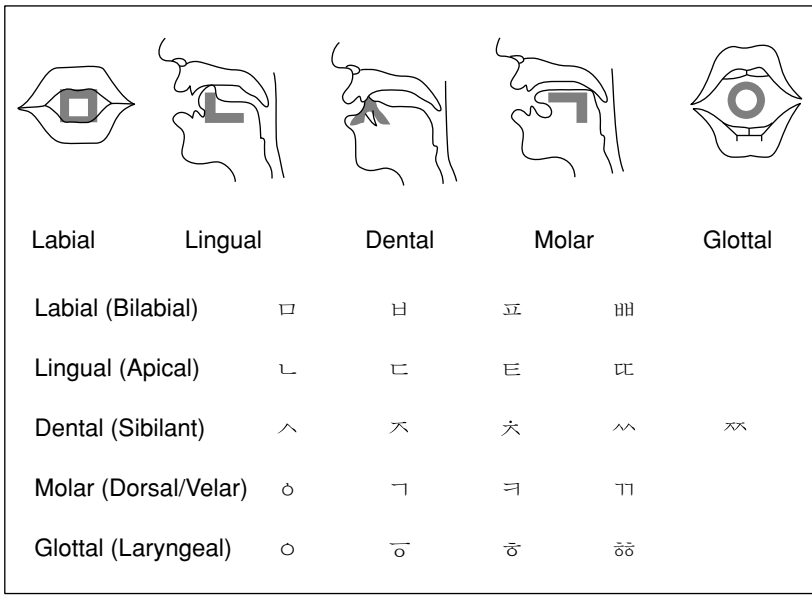

Figure 2.1 The letterforms of *han'gŭl* consonants
Source: Kim-Renaud (ed.) 1997: 279

All of the original 28 letters, including the four no longer used, were arranged in categories that related shape to function. First, five basic categories of the 17 consonants were identified according to their positions of articulation, and a simple, geometrical form was designed for each one. For example, the letter <ㄴ> depicted the tongue touching the back of the teeth, <ㄱ> the back of the tongue being raised to block the air from the throat, and <ㅁ> the mouth or the lips coming together in producing the respective sounds. Figure 2.1 gives a schematic representation of articulatory positions of the five types of consonants.

Then, strokes were added to create the remaining consonant letters.

Table 2.5 Categories of consonants and the principle of adding strokes

		→	Stronger		
Labial	ㅁ/m/	→	ㅂ/p/	→	ㅍ/p'/
Lingual	ㄴ/n/	→	ㄷ/t/	→	ㅌ/t'/
Dental	ㅅ/s/	→	ㅈ/ch/	→	ㅊ/ch'/
Molar	(ㆁ/ng/	→)	ㄱ/k/	→	ㅋ/k'/
Glottal	ㅇ/fi/	→	ㆆ/ʔ/	→	ㅎ/h/

The result is that sounds that belong to the same category of pronunciation (the same *natural class*) all contain the identical basic form. For example, the *lingual* sounds, ㄴ/n/, ㄷ/t/, ㄸ/t'/, ㄸ/tt/, and ㄹ/l/, which are produced by placing the tongue on the ridge above and behind the teeth, all have shapes that include the basic symbol ㄴ ***n*** that represents that articulatory position. In contemporary Korean, the sound /ng/ occurs only in a syllable-final position while the small circle, zero, occurs only in a syllable-initial position when there is no initial consonant; therefore, the two symbols, ㅇ and ㅇ, have graphically merged. Both shapes still coexist, but they are no longer distinctive but perceived as only stylistic variants of the same symbol.

HCH explains that each time a stroke is added the sound becomes more severe, while the type of consonant remains the same. The design principle of "adding strokes" is based on a representation of the Korean consonantal-strength scale, which explains many phonological phenomena elegantly.

2.2.2 *Vowels*

The 11 vowel letters were designed according to different but equally systematic principles as the consonant letters. The vowel letters are composed of a long, horizontal or vertical stroke with one, two, or no short strokes (originally dots) attached to one side of it. At the time of their invention, the three basic vowel sounds were /ʌ/ (the vowel of English *judge*), /ŭ/ (the vowel of *good*), and /i/ (the vowel of *meet*). The symbols representing these vowels, a dot < · > symbolizing heaven, a horizontal line < — > earth, and a vertical line < ㅣ > a human being, derive, respectively, from three basic symbols in East Asian cosmology (Figure 2.2).

The remaining vowel symbols were created by combining the dot with either the horizontal or vertical line in such a way that they pair off neatly into two groups of vowels, called *yin* and *yang* (or dark and bright), thus graphically contrasting vowel letters and remarkably capturing the vowel-harmony phenomenon in Korean [▶3.3.3]. Again, symbols for vowels belonging to the same harmonic class share certain features: The dark vowels have the dots placed below the horizontal line or at the left side of the vertical line, while the bright vowels have the dots above the horizontal line or at the right side of the vertical line. In other words, when the sun or sky is above the earth or on the right side of a person, it is bright, and when it is in the opposite directions it is dark.

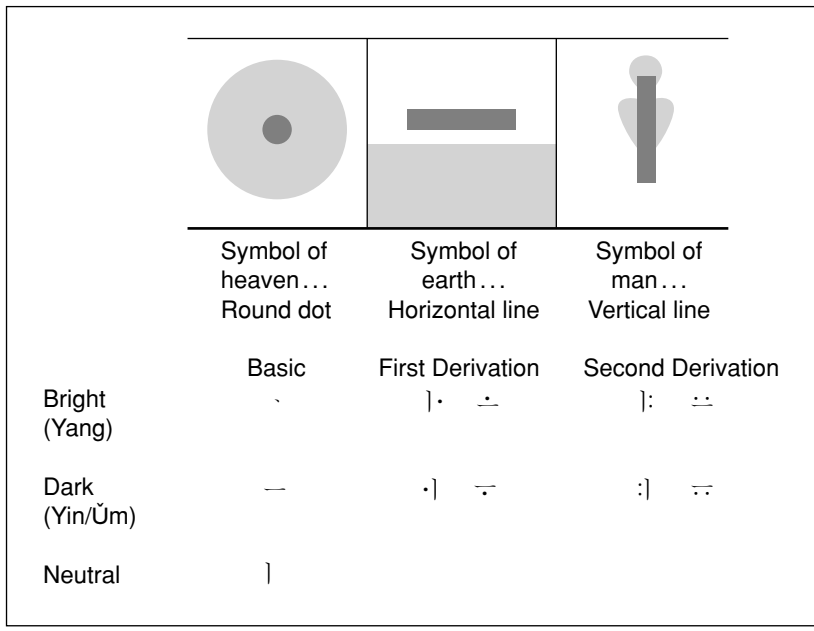

Figure 2.2 Letterforms of *han'gŭl* vowels
Source: Kim-Renaud (ed.) 1997: 280

Table 2.6 Categories of vowels and the principle of adding strokes

	First derivation	Second derivation
Yang/Bright Vowels	• + ㅡ → ㅗ	• + ㅗ → ㅛ
	• + ㅣ → ㅏ	• + ㅏ → ㅑ
Yin/Dark Vowels	• + ㅡ → ㅜ	• + ㅜ → ㅠ
	• + ㅣ → ㅓ	• + ㅓ → ㅕ

Vowels emerging from the first derivation are simple vowels, and those from the second derivation are diphthongs. Adding strokes gives vowels more weight.

Soon after the invention of the Korean alphabet, the dot was replaced by a short line, most probably for ease of calligraphy done by brush. The sound represented by a single dot disappeared from the language, and therefore the symbol is no longer in use.

The vowel-harmony principle [▶3.3.3] is strictly observed in the design of Korean letterforms. For example, when two vowels are combined to create