

# 1 Characteristics of the Korean language

In this chapter, we will provide an overview of the Korean language and briefly discuss its main characteristics. In 1.1, we will discuss the origin, history and distribution of the Korean language; in 1.2, the Korean alphabet and its romanisation will be discussed; 1.3 focuses on the characteristics of the Korean lexicon; in 1.4, the structural characteristics of Korean will be explored; and in 1.5, the socio-pragmatic characteristics of Korean will be discussed.

## 1.1 Origin, history and distribution

### 1.1.1 The Korean language in East Asian history

It is impossible to think about the history of Korea without considering the history of Northeast Asia. In the same vein, the history of the Korean language cannot be considered without reference to the influence of Korea's neighbours; namely, China, Japan and Mongolia. Figure 1.1 shows how the Korean language has evolved from Old Korean into Contemporary Korean within the bigger picture of East Asian history. The classification is based on K.-M. Lee (1998).

As seen in Figure 1.1, social and political changes at home and abroad became the crucial factor in shaping the Korean language. For instance: the unification of the Three Kingdoms (676) resulted in the Silla language, the first unified language on the Korean peninsula; later on, the establishment of the Koryo dynasty (918) gave rise to the central dialect of Korean, which became the basis of modern Korean; the Imjin War (1592–8) marks the division between late Middle Korean and Modern Korean; and lastly, the Korean War (1950–3) yielded the language division between North and South Korea.

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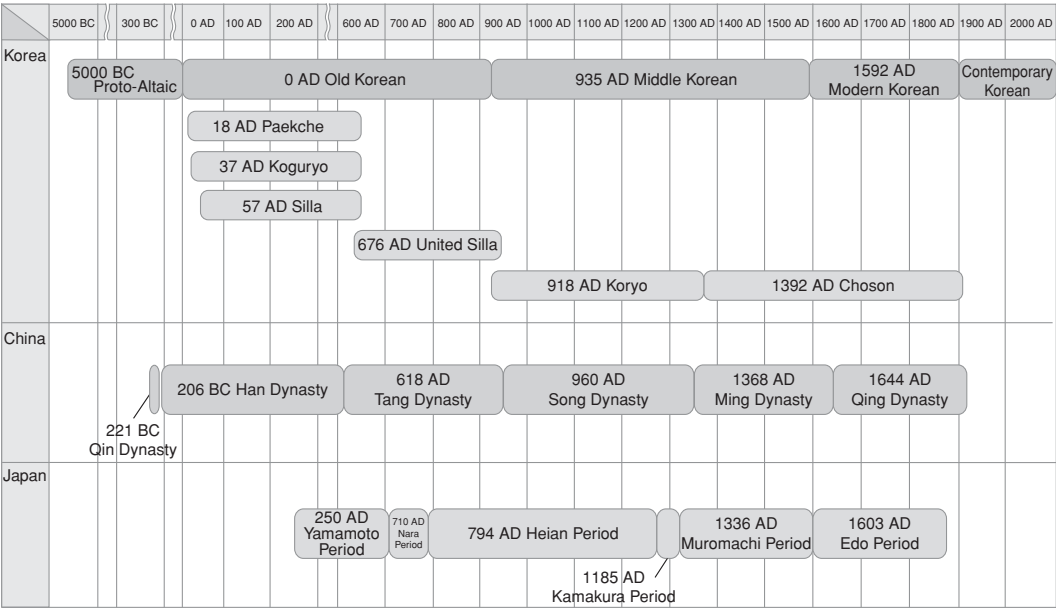


Figure 1.1 The Korean language in the East Asian history

1.1.2 Where is the Korean language from?

The origin of the Korean language is still not clearly known. Although there were some predecessors, it was the Finnish linguist Ramstedt (1873–1959) who first proposed the genetic affinity between Korean and Altaic languages such as Manchu, Mongolian, Tungus and Turkish, through a systematic comparison. These languages share grammatical properties with Korean such as agglutinative morphology; that is, grammatical relations such as a subject or an object are mainly realised by attaching (or ‘gluing’) particles to nominal expressions. Nevertheless, it is hard to prove this genetic affinity with Altaic languages due to the lack of reliable evidence.

1.1.3 Korean vs. Chinese and Korean vs. Japanese: are they related, and if so, how?

Korea and Japan, under the umbrella of the Chinese cultural sphere, have not only shared socio-cultural heritages, but also a shared linguistic heritage. This is represented in the lexicons of the Korean and Japanese languages. As we will see in 1.3, roughly 57 per cent of the Korean vocabulary is Sino-Korean and derived from Chinese. Yet structurally, the two languages are completely unrelated.

Chinese has a strict subject–verb–object word order and does not have grammatical particles like those found in Korean. Korean and Japanese, however, share a great deal of structural similarity. For instance, Japanese and Korean share an almost identical particle system. Nevertheless, it is still debatable whether Korean and Japanese belong to the same language family. Vovin (2008) recently argued that there is no genetic relation between the two languages. Once again, however, a lack of reliable evidence makes it difficult to prove any linguistic affinity.

#### 1.1.4 Korean as a global language: is the Korean language for the Korean peninsula only?

Korean is no longer simply the language of the Korean peninsula, nor simply the language of Terra Incognita. This is due to the increase of the Korean ‘diaspora’, now consisting of roughly 7 million people. They include both descendants of early emigrants from the Korean peninsula, as well as more recent emigrants. Most of them live in China (2.34 million), the United States (2.1 million) and Japan (0.9 million). As a result, Korean is increasingly more widely spoken. With 79 million people speaking it across the globe (48.6 million in South Korea, 23.8 million in North Korea, 7 million overseas according to Statistics Korea), Korean is now the seventeenth most widely used amongst all the world languages (Ethnologue, 2008, [www.ethnologue.com/web/asp](http://www.ethnologue.com/web/asp)). Figure 1.2 shows the distribution of the Korean language outside Korea as of 2010.

Education in the Korean language overseas has also been expanded over the last few decades. For instance, the number of students in the USA choosing Korean as their SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) foreign language has been steadily on the rise in recent years. In 2007, the Korean Embassy in the USA reported that Korean was the fourth most popular foreign language chosen by SAT students.

Economic development, cultural exchange and trade also provide motives for foreigners to learn Korean. From the late 1990s, there has been a rapid increase in the influx of foreign labour into Korea, particularly from South Asia, as well as an increase in international marriages between Korean men and South Asian women. According to a recent survey by Statistics Korea, the number of students (of primary to high-school level) with foreign mothers was about 18,778 in 2009. Korean pop culture, or *Hallyu*, has also played an important role in raising interest in the Korean language and culture, particularly in China, Japan and Southeast Asia.

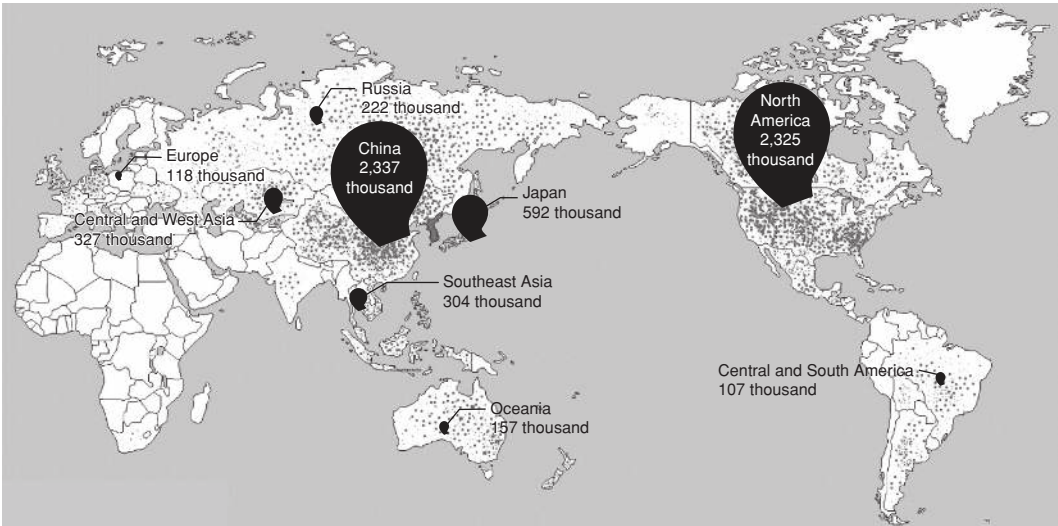


Figure 1.2      Distribution of the Korean language outside Korea

1.2 Korean alphabet and romanisation

1.2.1 Hangeul: the Korean alphabet

Hangeul 한글, invented in 1443, is the unique alphabet used to write the Korean language. Hangeul 한글 is a phonemic alphabet; in other words, there is one-to-one correspondence between a phoneme and a letter.

Consonants and vowels are given in alphabetic order in (1). There are twenty-four basic letters and sixteen complex letters. Among the twenty-four basic letters, fourteen are consonants and ten are vowels.

- (1) Korean alphabet
  - a. Basic letters for consonants (14)  
ㄱ, ㅋ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ
  - b. Basic letters for vowels (10)  
ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ, ㅡ, ㅣ
  - c. Complex letters for consonants (5)  
ㄲ, ㅋ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ
  - d. Complex letters for vowels (11)  
ㅖ, ㅗ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ, ㅡ, ㅣ

Systematic correspondence is observed between letters. For instance, an addition of a stroke makes a lax sound into an aspirated sound (e.g., ㅏ → ㅑ, ㅓ → ㅕ, ㅗ → ㅛ, ㅜ → ㅠ), whilst consonant doubling results in the tensing of sounds

Table 1.1 Comparison of three romanisation methods

Word	M-R	Revised ROK	Yale	Meaning
평가	p'yŏngga	pyeongga	phyengka	valuation, rating
진리	chilli	jilli	cinli	truth, fact
햇볓	haetpyŏt	haetbyeot	hayspyet	sunlight
첫사랑	chŏtsarang	cheotsarang	chessalang	a first love
협회	hyŏphoe	hyeopheo	hyephoy	a society, association, league
학회	hakhoe	hakheo	hakhoy	an institute, academy
비빔밥	pibimpap	bibimbap	pipimpap	common Korean dish (rice topped with vegetables, usually with an egg and mincemeat)
더욱	tŏuk	deouk	tewuk	still more
여덟	yŏdŏl	yeodeol	yetelp	eight
핥다	halta	halda	halthta	lick
모든	modŭn	modeun	motun	all, whole, every, each
재미	chaemi	jaemi	caymi	interest
여기	yŏgi	yeogi	yeki	here; a hobby
서울	Sŏul	Seoul	Sewul	Seoul (Korea's capital)
세기	segi	segi	seyki	a century
빨리	ppalli	ppalli	ppalli	fast, rapidly, quickly
자주	chaju	jaju	cacwu	often, repeatedly
곶감	kotkam	gotgam	kockam	dry persimmons

(e.g., ㅏ → ㅑ, ㅓ → ㅕ, ㅗ → ㅛ). Lastly, the sounds that are pronounced in the same place of articulation show visual similarity (e.g. (ㅏ ㅑ ㅓ), (ㅓ ㅕ ㅗ), (ㅗ ㅛ ㅜ), (ㅜ ㅠ ㅡ)).

In 1933, the Korean Language Council (*Joseoneohakhoe* 조선어학회) decided that words should be spelled as they sound, but should also conform to grammatical principles. They also decided that there should be a space between each word in the sentence and the particles attached to the previous word. These two rules became the basis of orthography in Contemporary Korean. This means that although the noun 사람 *saram* ‘person’ plus a subject particle -이 *-i* is pronounced 사라미 [sa.ra.mi], the written form remains 사람이, respecting the morphological combination of noun plus particle. This is in contrast to Middle Korean orthography, where Korean is written as it is pronounced.

1.2.2 Romanisation: how many styles and how different is each option?

There are three ways to romanise the Korean language: the McCune-Reischauer (M-R) system, the Revised Republic of Korean (ROK) system, and the Yale system. Inside Korea, the Revised ROK system is invariably used. (See [www.korean.go.kr/09\\_new/dic/rule/rule\\_roman\\_0101.jsp](http://www.korean.go.kr/09_new/dic/rule/rule_roman_0101.jsp) for the Revised ROK Romanisation system.) Outside Korea, the McCune-Reischauer system and Yale system are mainly used. Whilst the McCune-Reischauer system respects the actual pronunciation of Korean, the Yale system follows the original morphological form. The former system is used by most Koreanologists and Korean studies authorities including the Library of Congress. The latter system is mainly used by linguists. The following table shows how the three systems romanise each sample word.

1.3 Lexicon

1.3.1 What is the proportional ratio between Sino-Korean and pure Korean words?

In terms of vocabulary, the Korean language has been heavily influenced by the Chinese language. (This is also true for Japanese.) Most conceptual or professional terms are Sino-Korean. The more basic terms, however, tend to be pure Korean. According to the *Standard Korean Dictionary* edited by the National Institute of Korean Language (NIKL, 2000), and containing some 440,000 words, the ratio of (i) pure Korean (PK) words; (ii) Sino-Korean (SK) words; (iii) other foreign loanwords is 25.28 : 57.12 : 17.6.

1.3.2 Increase of English loanwords

The proportion of loanwords is closely related to a nation’s socio-cultural and political situation. As western influence grows rapidly in South Korea, the number of English loanwords has risen dramatically in the last fifty years. The number of loanwords became one of the main causes of discrepancy between the North and South Korean languages. Whilst the South has adopted English loanwords, the North has replaced them with PK words wherever possible.

1.3.3 New words in the twenty-first century

A language’s lexicon vividly reflects the socio-cultural change of a particular society. This is also the case in the Korean lexicon. Korea University’s *Korean Language Dictionary*, published in 2009, contains words such as those presented in (2)–(4). The words in (2) are information technology-related terms that have appeared in the last ten years. The vocabulary in (3) reflects the

socio-cultural aspects of present-day Korean society. For instance, *gireogiappa* 기러기아빠 ‘Wild Goose Father’ in (3) means a father who sends his wife and children abroad to further the children’s early foreign-language education, whilst he himself remains in Korea to earn money to send to the family. As shown in (4), some terms are English in origin, but are only used in Korea.

- (2) 악플 *ak-peul* ‘internet bullying’, 네티맹 *net-maeng* ‘internet-illiterate’, 스팸 메일 *spam-mail* ‘e-mail spam or junk email’, 악성 코드 *akseong-kodeu* ‘malignant-code’, 프로 게이머 *pro-gamer* ‘professional gamer’
- (3) 기러기아빠 *gireogiappa* ‘wild goose father’, 꽃미남 *kkonminam* ‘pretty-boy’, 생얼 *saengeol* ‘makeup-free face’, 비호감 *bihogam* ‘muddled reputation’
- (4) 원샷 *one-shot* ‘bottoms up!’, 스킨십 *skin-ship* ‘physical contact’, 커닝 *cunning* ‘cheating’

How many blues and blacks?

Colour terms are well developed in Korean. Consider (5)–(6). All words in (5) refer to the colour blue and (6) refer to the colour black.

- (5) Blue  
새 파랗다, 파랗다, 파르스름하다, 파릇파릇하다, 퍼렇다, 푸르다, 푸르텡텡하다, 푸르스름하다, 푸르죽죽하다, 푸릇푸릇하다, 시퍼렇다
- (6) Black  
가맣다, 거멓다, 거무스레하다, 거무스름하다, 거무죽죽하다, 거무튀튀하다, 검다, 검붉다, 검퍼렇다, 까맣다, 까무잡잡하다, 새까맣다, 새까맣다, 시커멓다, 시꺼멓다

1.3.4 Motion- and sound-symbolic words

Mimetic words (i.e., motion-symbolic words) and onomatopoeic words (sound-symbolic words) are also well developed in Korean. According to NIKL, the Korean language contains some 2,900 motion- or sound-symbolic words. Consider (7) and (8).

- (7) 지나가 침을 꿀꺽 삼켰다. (sound-symbolic)  
Jina-SUBJ spit-OBJ *kkulkkeok* swallowed.  
‘Jina swallowed with a gulp.’

Table 1.2 Lexical differences between South and North Korea

English loanwords			Sino-Korean vocabulary		
South (EL)	North (PK)	English gloss	South (SK)	North (PK)	English gloss
노크	손기척	knock	관절	뼈마디	joint (bone)
레코드	소리판	record	교목	키나무	a tall tree
스프레이	솔솔이	spray	능력	일본새	ability
시럽	단물	syrup	멸균	균짱그리죽이기	sterilisation (pasteurisation)
젤리	단묵	jelly	살균	균죽이기	sterilisation
카스텔라	설기과자	sponge cake	월동	겨울나이	wintering
커튼	창문보	curtain	인력	끌힘	labour force
코너킥	모서리蹴	corner kick	추수	가을걷이	harvest
훅	맞단추, 걸단추	hook	홍수	큰물	deluge, flood

(8) 지나가 나긋나긋 미소를 지었다. (motion-symbolic)  
Jina-SUBJ *nageunnageut* (tenderly) smile-OBJ made.  
‘Jina smiled tenderly.’

1.3.5 Can South Koreans and North Koreans understand each other?

The answer to this question is yes. However, it is not easy for South and North Koreans to understand each other one hundred per cent. This is due to the difference in vocabulary. As mentioned above, whilst the South has adopted English loanwords (EL) as they are, the North has invented corresponding PK words instead. In the North, not only EL, but also many SK words were replaced with PK words as shown in Table 1.2.

1.4 Structural properties of Korean

1.4.1 How are words and sentences composed?

The smallest meaning-bearing unit in Korean is called a morpheme. Morphemes are divided into *free* and *bound morphemes* according to whether the morpheme can be used independently of any other host category or not. At the same time, a morpheme is classified according to whether it has *lexical* meaning, or whether it only represents *grammatical* meaning. For instance, the verbal suffix -았 cannot be used on its own (i.e., it is a bound morpheme),



Table 1.3 Examples of compound and derivational words

	Simple words	Derived words		Compound words
		Prefix	Suffix	
Pure Korean	손	맨- + 손 → 맨손	가위 + -질 → 가위질	밤 + 나무 → 밤나무
	‘hand’	‘bare hands’	‘scissoring’	‘chestnut tree’
	사랑	첫- + 사랑 → 첫사랑	멋 + -쟁이 → 멋쟁이	사랑 + 싸움 → 사랑싸움
	‘love’	‘first love’	‘dandy’	‘love quarrel’
Sino-Korean	강(江)	대(大)- + 선배(先輩)	교육(教育) + -계(界)	초등(初等) + 학교(學校)
	‘river’	→ 대선배	→ 교육계	→ 초등학교
	산(山)	‘great senior’	‘the world of education’	‘primary school’
	‘mountain’	미(未)- + 완성(完成)	가정(家庭) + -용(用)	정치(政治) + 조직(組織)
		→ 미완성	→ 가정용	→ 정치조직
		‘incompletion’	‘home use’	‘political structure’

but it contributes to the meaning of the past tense (i.e., it is a grammatical morpheme). Verbal stems contribute to the meaning of a word (i.e., they are lexical morphemes), but cannot be used on their own (i.e., they are bound morphemes).

The smallest free or independent grammatical unit is a word. Korean words can have one of the following structures:

- (9) Types of words
- a. simple word: root (e.g., 나무 ‘tree’)

b. derived word: prefix + root (e.g., 첫- + 사랑 ‘first-love’)

c. root + suffix (e.g., 가위 + -질 ‘scissoring’)

d. compound word: root + root (e.g., 밤 + 나무 ‘chestnut tree’)

Table 1.3 shows examples of compound and derivational words.

The next grammatical unit after a word is the *eojeol* 어절 ‘word-phrase’. Word phrases are separated by a space in Korean orthography, and each is composed of a lexical morpheme (e.g., a noun) and a grammatical morpheme (e.g., a particle). Simply speaking, a word phrase is a basic grammatical unit that can function as a subject or object within a sentence. Note that in (10) the word 지나 itself does not have any grammatical role, but with the case particle – 가 attached, it becomes the subject.

- (10) 지나-가 아침-에 우유-를 마셨어요.
- Jina-SUBJ morning-at milk-OBJ drank
- ‘Jina drank milk in the morning.’

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A nominal expression with a particle attached forms one word phrase, and a verb plus verbal suffixes also forms one word phrase, regardless of the number of suffixes attached. In Korean orthography, each word phrase is individually spaced. Consider (11). L stands for lexical morpheme, F stands for free morpheme, G stands for grammatical morpheme and B stands for bound morpheme. Therefore (11) consists of three word phrases and seven morphemes.

(11) Word phrase	{지나-가}	{밥-을}	{먹-는-다}	‘Jina is having a meal.’
	Subject	Object	Verb	
Morpheme	지나-가	밥-을	먹-는-다	
	L/F-G/B	L/F-G/B	L/B-G/B G/B	

It is still an unsettled issue whether to regard a particle as an independent word or not. In South Korean grammar it is considered an independent word, but in North Korean grammar it is not. However, we will not dwell on this issue in this book.

Word phrases whose host categories are nouns take particles, whereas word phrases whose host categories are verbs take inflectional suffixes. We will return shortly to discussion of particles and suffixes. Word phrases form a longer phrase such as a noun phrase or verb phrase, and these longer phrases then constitute a clause and finally a sentence.

1.4.2 Is the word order rigid or free?

The word order in Korean is freer than in English, the only general rule being that the verb tends to come at the end of a sentence. Yet there are cases where the word order is more rigid; for instance, a modifying expression will always precede the noun being modified. Consider (12). \* denotes an ungrammatical sentence.

- (12) a. 유나-가 새 구두-를 신었다.  
Yuna-SUBJ new shoes-OBJ put-on  
‘Yuna put on new shoes.’  
b. \*유나-가 구두 새-을 신었다.  
Yuna-SUBJ shoes new-OBJ put-on  
(modifiee precedes modifying expression)

1.4.3 If it is not through word order, how are grammatical roles and relations expressed?

Grammatical functions are realised by ‘attaching’ or ‘gluing’ particles to the content words. For instance, regardless of the location of 지나-가, the agent