LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE KOREAN WRITING SYSTEM

M.D. Odilova
Lecturer, Department of Korean Language and Literature, National Pedagogical University of Uzbekistan Named after Nizami
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Abstract. *This article examines the linguistic features of the Korean writing system, Hangeul, with particular attention to its historical development, structural organization, phonological principles, and morphophonemic nature. The Korean written tradition historically developed under the strong influence of Chinese writing, especially through the use of hanja and hanmun, which functioned for many centuries as the language of education, scholarship, administration, and elite literary culture. However, due to the structural differences between Chinese and Korean, Chinese characters could not fully represent the phonetic, morphological, and syntactic characteristics of the Korean language. This need for a more suitable writing system led to the creation of Hangeul in the fifteenth century under King Sejong the Great. The article emphasizes that Hangeul is a phonographic and alphabetic system based on the principle of correspondence between letters and phonemes. At the same time, it differs from most European alphabetic systems because its letters are not written in a purely linear sequence, but are combined into syllabic blocks. Each syllabic block consists of an initial consonant, a medial vowel, and, when present, a final consonant. This structural principle, known as moa-sseugi, gives Hangeul a unique graphic form while preserving its alphabetic character. Special attention is given to the modern composition of the Korean alphabet, which includes 40 letters: 19 consonants and 21 vowels. The article also discusses the classification of vowels into vertical, horizontal, and compound types, as well as the formation of different syllable structures. The role of the final consonant, or batchim, is examined as an important factor influencing pronunciation and phonetic processes such as assimilation, palatalization, consonant tensification, and resyllabification. The study further highlights the morphophonemic character of modern Korean orthography, which preserves the morphemic structure of words despite phonetic changes in pronunciation. Thus, Hangeul is presented not only as an efficient and systematic means of writing, but also as an important object of linguistic analysis, reflecting the close relationship between graphic representation, phonology, morphology, and language teaching.*

Keywords: *hangeul, korean writing system, syllabic block, batchim, morphophonemic orthography.*

Introduction

Among some Korean scholars, there is a hypothesis that the national writing system of the Korean people emerged as early as the prehistoric period, that is, before the beginning of active influence from the Chinese hieroglyphic tradition. According to this view, its earliest form is considered to have been *sinji* (신지), the creation of which is attributed to the mythical founder of the Korean nation, Dangun (단군). Later, as proponents of this concept claim, another writing

system known as *garimto* (가림토) was developed, which they regard as a possible predecessor of the modern Korean alphabet. The modern Korean writing system is called *Hangeul* (한글) in the Republic of Korea and *Chosŏn'gŭl* (조선글) in the DPRK. However, such views have not gained wide recognition in academic scholarship and are not supported by most specialists, since the creation of Hangeul in the fifteenth century under King Sejong is considered a historically reliable fact (조두상, 1998).

Throughout the history of the development of Korean alphabetic writing, certain changes took place: the composition of graphemes, the order of letters in the alphabet, and the methods of representing particular sounds underwent modifications. At the same time, the early stage of the formation of the written tradition in Korea is usually associated with the beginning of the Common Era, when Chinese hieroglyphic writing, known as *hanzi* in Chinese and *hanja* (한자) in the Korean tradition, entered the Korean Peninsula from China. Along with Chinese characters, the classical Chinese written language – *wenyan*, or *hanmun* (한문) in Korean – was also introduced into Korea. In the cultural sphere of East Asia, it functioned as a prestigious written language comparable to the role of Latin in medieval Western Europe (Куротченко К. Б., 2006).

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, *hanmun* retained the status of the language of high education and elite written culture. It was used in the creation of poetry, literary prose, historical works, scholarly, philosophical, and official texts. Mastery of *hanmun* was regarded as an essential attribute of an educated person. However, significant structural differences between the Chinese and Korean languages made the direct use of Chinese characters for recording Korean speech difficult. Chinese writing could not fully convey the specific features of Korean phonetics, morphology, and syntax, which later became one of the reasons for the search for more adequate means of writing the Korean language.

Materials and Methods

This study is based on a descriptive and analytical review of scholarly sources on the Korean writing system. The article analyzes historical, phonological, graphic, and morphophonemic features of Hangeul using linguistic literature and examples from Korean syllabic structure.

In the first half of the fifteenth century, during a period of significant cultural and political development in the Joseon state, the fourth ruler of the dynasty, King Sejong the Great (세종대왕), initiated the creation of a new national writing system. By that time, the Korean intellectual environment was already familiar not only with Chinese hieroglyphic writing, but also with several other writing traditions, including Tibetan, Sanskrit, Old Mongolian scripts, as well as the Japanese syllabic systems – hiragana and katakana (Карпека Д. А., 2018).

For the development of the writing system, King Sejong involved a group of scholars, many of whom were associated with the royal academy Jiphyeonjeon (집현전), literally translated as the "Hall of Worthies." The work on the creation of the alphabet was completed in late 1443 or early 1444. However, the official date of the proclamation of the Korean writing system is considered to be October 9, 1446, that is, the twenty-eighth year of King Sejong's reign. It was

then that the edict *Hunminjeongeum* (훈민정음), whose title is translated as “The Proper Sounds for the Instruction of the People,” was published.

This document, written in Chinese, presented information about the sounds of the Korean and Chinese languages, described the graphemes of the new Korean writing system, and set forth the basic principles of its structure. The central principle of the system was the correspondence of “one letter – one phoneme.” At the same time, the letters were not written in a linear sequence, as in most alphabetic systems, but were grouped into syllabic complexes. Two, three, or four letters could form one syllabic block, while one or several such blocks constituted a word. Typically, a syllable began with a consonant followed by a vowel; one or two consonants could appear at the end of the syllable. Diphthongs, in turn, were formed by combining two vowel graphemes.

Historically, the Korean written tradition represents a mixed system that combined elements of hieroglyphic and phonetic writing. This type of writing is referred to as *hanja-honyong* (한자 혼용), that is, the mixed use of Chinese characters and the Korean alphabet. Two main graphic subsystems can be distinguished within it.

The first subsystem is *hanja* (한자). It consists of hieroglyphic signs of Chinese origin, which were used to record words and concepts primarily associated with bookish, scholarly, administrative, and cultural traditions.

The second subsystem is *Hangeul* (한글), that is, Korean phonemic writing. In modern Korean, Hangeul includes basic and compound graphemes that represent consonant and vowel sounds. Its characteristic feature lies in the fact that individual letters are combined into syllabic blocks that approximately correspond to syllables. In this process, the graphemes are not arranged simply in a linear sequence, as in Russian or Latin script, but are fitted into an imaginary square, forming an integral syllabic sign (Карпека Д. А., 2018).

Hangeul was developed in the mid-fifteenth century and gradually became the principal writing system of the Korean language. In the modern Republic of Korea, it serves as the leading means of writing, although Chinese characters, *hanja*, may still be used in certain spheres. In the DPRK, by contrast, Hangeul, referred to as *Chosŏn’gŭl* (조선글), effectively functions as the sole official writing system.

Results and Discussion

The modern Korean alphabet, Hangeul, consists of 40 letters: 19 consonants and 21 vowels. The consonants include: ㄱ *(g/k)*, ㄴ *(n)*, ㄷ *(d/t)*, ㄹ *(r/l)*, ㅁ *(m)*, ㅂ *(b/p)*, ㅅ *(s)*, ㅇ *(silent/ng)*, ㅈ *(j)*, ㅊ *(ch)*, ㅋ *(k)*, ㅌ *(t)*, ㅍ *(p)*, ㅎ *(h)*, ㄲ *(kk)*, ㄸ *(tt)*, ㅃ *(pp)*, ㅆ *(ss)*, ㅉ *(jj)*. The vowels are represented by the following letters: ㅏ *(a)*, ㅑ *(ya)*, ㅓ *(eo)*, ㅕ *(yeo)*, ㅗ *(o)*, ㅛ *(yo)*, ㅜ *(u)*, ㅠ *(yu)*, ㅡ *(eu)*, ㅣ *(i)*, ㅐ *(ae)*, ㅒ *(yae)*, ㅔ *(e)*, ㅖ *(ye)*, ㅘ *(wa)*, ㅙ *(wae)*, ㅚ *(oe/we)*, ㅝ *(wo)*, ㅞ *(we)*, ㅟ *(wi)*, ㅢ *(ui/eui)*.

One of the main distinctive features of Korean writing is that letters are not arranged sequentially one after another, as in most alphabetic writing systems, but are combined into syllabic blocks, a principle known as moa-sseugi (모아쓰기). Each such block is inscribed within

an imaginary square and visually resembles a Chinese character. However, by its nature, Hangeul is a phonemic writing system, since each letter represents a particular sound.

In the formation of a syllable, Korean letters are arranged in a strict order: the initial consonant (choseong, 초성), the medial vowel (jungseong, 중성), and, if present, the final consonant (jongseong, 종성). If a syllable begins with a vowel, it must be preceded by the letter ㅇ, which is not pronounced in the initial position. For example: 아, 어, 이. In the final position, the letter ㅇ represents the velar nasal sound [ŋ], as in 강, 방, 송.

Korean vowels may conventionally be divided into *vertical* and *horizontal* types (한국어 (초급) Начальный курс корейского языка. NIIED 2006.). Vertical vowels, such as ㅏ, ㅓ, and ㅣ, are written to the right of the initial consonant: 가, 너, 미. Horizontal vowels, such as ㅗ, ㅜ, and ㅡ, are placed below the consonant: 고, 수, 드. When a final consonant is present, it is written in the lower part of the syllabic block: 간, 문, 밥. If the vowel is compound, the syllable may have a mixed structure: 와, 워, 의, 돼, 권.

Several types of syllables can be distinguished in Korean. Syllables of the vertical type include, for example: 아, 야, 너, 배, 히, 샤, 안, 양, 입, 방. The horizontal type includes: 오, 우, 으, 묘, 수, 고, 물, 목, 속. The mixed type is represented by syllables such as: 와, 워, 의, 돼, 최, 귀, 괜, 원, 권.

Some Korean syllables may consist of four letters and have the structure *consonant + vowel + two final consonants*. For example: 값, 앉, 읽, 삶, 닭. However, in the final position, two consonants are not fully pronounced simultaneously: usually only one of them is realized, while the other may appear when a vowel is added in the following syllable. For instance, the word **값** is pronounced as [갑], but in the form **값이**, the second consonant becomes phonetically realized: [갑씨].

Korean writing reflects the specific features of the phonological system of the Korean language. In Korean, an important role is played by the distinction between plain, aspirated, and tense consonants: ㄱ – ㅋ – ㄲ, ㄷ – ㅌ – ㄸ, ㅂ – ㅍ – ㅃ, ㅈ – ㅊ – ㅉ. For Russian-speaking learners, this presents a certain difficulty, since Russian does not have such a three-way consonantal opposition. Therefore, in teaching Hangeul, attention should be paid not only to memorizing the graphic forms of letters, but also to the accurate perception and pronunciation of phonemes.

An important feature of modern Korean orthography is its *morphophonemic character*. This means that the spelling of a word often preserves its morphemic structure, even when phonetic changes occur in actual pronunciation. For example, in the verbal stem **먹-**, the letter ㄱ is retained in writing in the form **먹어**, although its pronunciation is closer to [머거]. Thus, Hangeul conveys

not only the phonetic aspect of speech, but also the grammatical and morphological structure of Korean words.

Another important feature of the Korean language is the significant role of the final consonant, known as *batchim* (받침). The final consonant affects the pronunciation of the following syllable and may cause various phonetic processes, such as assimilation, palatalization, consonant tensification, and resyllabification. For example, in the word 한국말, pronunciation changes under the influence of adjacent sounds: **[**한궁말**]**. Therefore, when teaching Korean writing, it is necessary to explain the relationship between the graphic system, phonetics, and orthoepy.

Conclusion

Korean writing possesses a number of specific linguistic features. It is a phonographic and alphabetic writing system; its letters are combined into syllabic blocks, which distinguishes Hangeul from most European alphabets. The form of the letters reflects the articulatory and phonological characteristics of sounds. In addition, modern Korean orthography has a morphophonemic character, since it preserves the morphemic structure of words. All these features make Hangeul not only a convenient writing system, but also an important object of linguistic study.

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