

## More on Korean linguistic exports

Backed by Ms Lee, a 75-year-old real estate millionaire, the [Hunminjeongeum Society](#) is on a mission to save small languages from extinction by giving them a written form. She has donated a large part of her fortune to this project and likes to think of herself as the linguistic equivalent to Médecins Sans Frontières. In that she is no different than a plethora of linguists and missionaries, mostly out of North America, who devote their efforts to saving endangered, dying and dead languages. [I reported on one such project recently](#). How come the Hunminjeongeum Society is drawing so much media attention then? Instead of the Roman alphabet, they are proposing to use the Hangul script to bring literacy to the speakers of those endangered languages!

So far, the Hunminjeongeum Society seems to have met with limited success: according to the [New York Times](#) article, to date the Hangul script has been introduced to only one language, [Cia-Cia](#) of [Buton Island](#) in Southeast [Sulawesi](#), Indonesia, and actually to only about 50 speakers of that language. Nine of those were recently visiting Seoul and signed a memorandum of understanding for Ms Lee's foundation to create a Korea Center in [Bau-Bau City](#), Buton Island's center of 60,000 inhabitants. According to the [Korean Herald](#)

The [Korea] center, which is expected to open next spring on the island, will teach Hangeul and Korean to local people and document the Cia-Cia's culture, history and folktales.

The combination of the provision of literacy in the native language and the teaching of a metropolitan language is clearly modeled on the practices of missionary linguists who for some time have relied heavily on literacy support for endangered languages combined with English teaching as their way to spread the gospel (Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003).

Missionary linguists from the English-speaking world count their successes in millions rather than double digits. Even so, they do not seem to get as much negative press as the efforts of the Hunminjeongeum Society do. The [New York Times](#) quotes the Indonesian ambassador to South Korea as saying "The Cia-Cia [...] don't need to import the Hangul characters. They can always write their local languages in the Roman characters." – as if the Roman alphabet were an inherently superior choice.

On the [Language Log](#), Victor Mair lists a range of questionable assumptions surrounding the project. One such questionable assumption is that having a written form will save the language from disappearing. Very true – as Peter Mühlhäusler documents in his 1996 book *Linguistic ecology*. Mühlhäusler shows that codifying a vernacular language by giving it a written form can actually hasten rather than halt a language's demise. This is because, for one thing, one variety out of many has to be chosen for codification resulting in a loss of linguistic diversity. Second, once speakers have learnt how to read and write in their own language they look around and see that apart from graded readers and the bible there is very little reading material available in their newly-written language and thus they take their newly-acquired reading habits elsewhere: to a language where more interesting reading materials are available. Problem with Mair's critique is that the principle of codification per se is problematic rather than in which alphabet you do the codifying.

On the [Language Museum Blog](#), Michelle tut-tuts “What do you think? Is it appropriate to apply the Korean alphabet to completely different languages?” Well, it doesn’t bother me any more than applying the Latin alphabet to “completely different languages” – it has worked out ok for, let’s say, English.

I agree with all the concerns out there – even the [China Daily](#)’s worry that there might be cultural imperialism at work. Of course, there is. According to [Seoul Village](#), Professor Kim Ju-Won, the president of the Hunminjeongeum Society doesn’t even mince words about the ulterior motives of the project:

In the long run, the spread of Hangeul will also help enhance Korea’s economy as it will activate exchanges with societies that use the language.

It is the double standard that irks me: when the Koreans are trying to spread their script and their language in the same way the British and American empires have been spreading their script and their language for centuries, it suddenly dawns on all those critical thinkers out there that there might be something wrong with the practice...

The way I see it, the Cia-Cia have acted as discerning consumers of development aid in the global marketplace: the Korean offer of literacy and language tuition comes with a range of concrete benefits and material goodies thrown in and the offer was obviously better than any they might have received from anyone trying to save their language with Roman characters. I say good on the Cia-Cia! I wish them well, and I’m sure we’ll see more and more of this kind of language competition.



Mühlhäusler, Peter (1996). Linguistic ecology: language change and linguistic imperialism in the Pacific region  
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Pennycook, A., & Coutand-Marin, S. (2003). Teaching English as a Missionary Language Discourse, 24 (3),  
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