

# Happy Hangul Day!

By Ingrid Piller | October 9, 2017 | Literacies

 25 Comments

 49

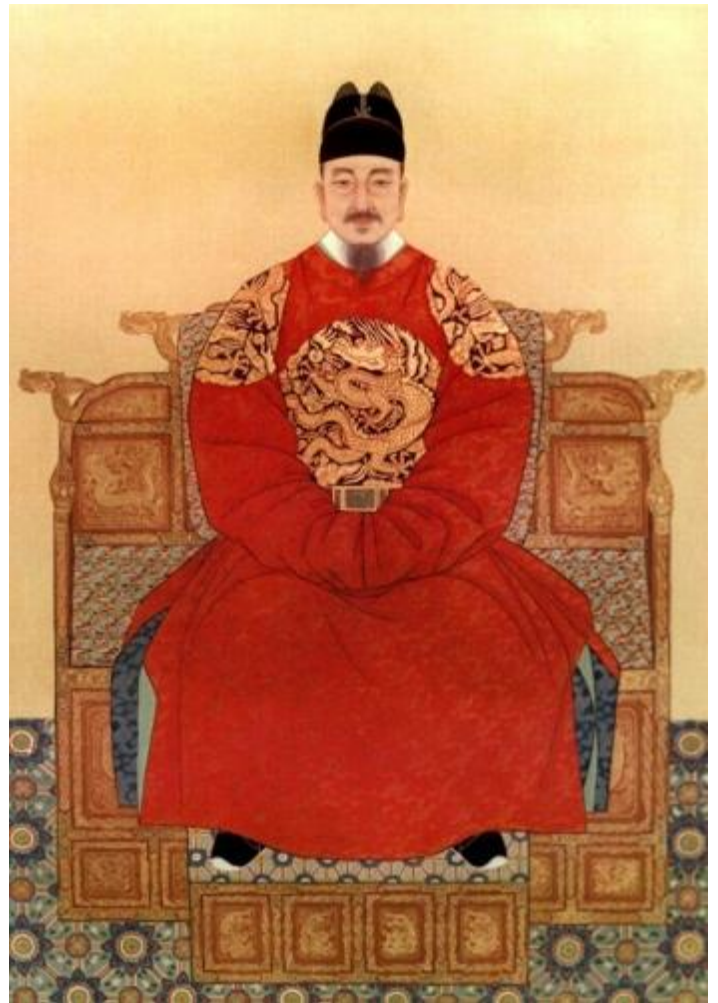
1,393 views

Today, South Koreans celebrate Hangul Day. Hangul Day is a national holiday to celebrate the Korean script. I am not aware of any other national holiday anywhere else to celebrate a particular script (except for the North Koreans who also have a national day to celebrate the Korean script but they call it Chosŏn'gŭl Day and celebrate on January 15). What is so special about the Korean script that it gets a national holiday in both Koreas you might ask?

There is actually a good reason: the invention of Hangul is not only a major linguistic achievement but also of significant social importance.

Hangul was invented by King Sejong the Great who lived from 1397 to 1450 CE and was the fourth king of Korea's Joseon dynasty (1392–1910).

As a small nation, Korea at the time was overshadowed by its powerful Chinese neighbor which was styled as "elder brother". As is often the case in such relationships, and is still true today, powerful nations not only rule over less powerful ones but they also come to be seen as providing the standard of all fashion, culture and knowledge. As today, subaltern people are apt to misrecognize the language and culture of the powerful as an intrinsic feature of their power. The hegemonic nation comes to be seen as the source of knowledge and local ways are often denigrated and dismissed as lacking value. Same old story back in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Korea:



King Sejong the Great (1397-1450) (Image source: Wikipedia)

China was considered the source of all culture and learning. The Korean elite therefore thought it natural that becoming literate meant learning the Chinese language: everything worth reading was

Despite all the Chinese learning, not all was well in the kingdom of Korea; in fact, it was a rather backward place. Unlike many feudals, King Sejong was not content with living the good life at the expense of his subjects. On the contrary, committed to serving the good of his nation, he wanted to improve his country and better the lot of all Koreans. In addition to being the king, he had a lot going for him: he had received an excellent education (through the medium of Chinese, of course), he was bilingual in Korean and Chinese and he was an immensely talented scholar with wide-ranging interests. All his reading and writing obviously was in Chinese but Chinese publications were the only game in town.

One of King Sejong's interests was related to agriculture, an area with obvious potential to improve the lot of Koreans: the growing population needed food. So, he started numerous scientific and technological projects to help increase agricultural production. However, all the agricultural knowledge of the time was based on Chinese climatic conditions and he realized that existing knowledge could not just be taken holus-bolus from China but needed to be adapted to Korean conditions. He saw the need for localization, if you will. One example of such a localization measure was the development of a specifically Korean agricultural calendar to determine sowing and harvesting times that were ideal for the Korean peninsula.

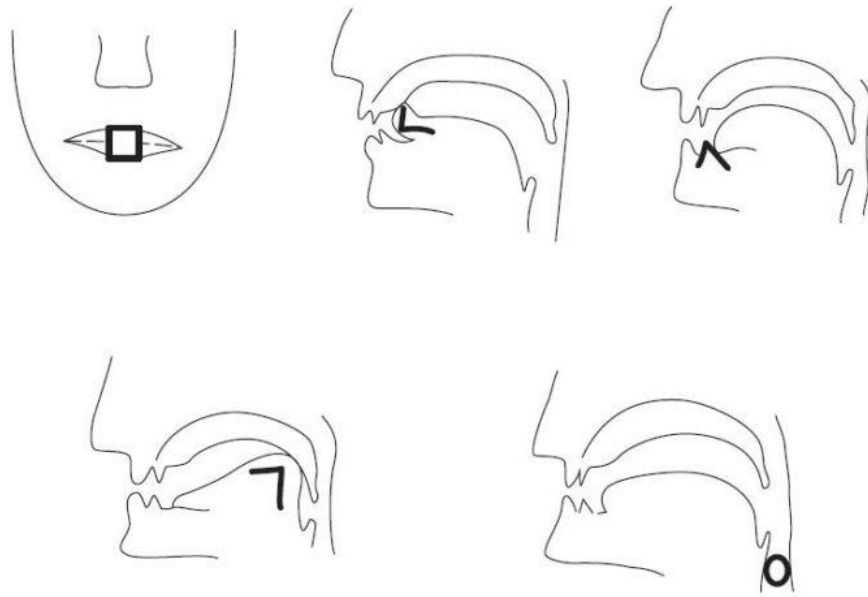
Another example of his wisdom in adapting Chinese knowledge to the Korean situation related to medicine where he commissioned a medical encyclopedia that focused on native Korean herbs and remedies and described their uses and where to find them.

King Sejong also was interested in jurisprudence:

Throughout his reign he showed a passion for justice, working to improve prison conditions, set fairer sentencing standards, implement proper procedures for autopsies, protect slaves from being lynched, punish corrupt officials, set up an appeals process for capital crimes, and limit torture. Nevertheless, one problem continued to vex the king: the litigation process was carried out in Chinese. Were the accused able to adequately defend themselves in a foreign language? Sejong doubted it. (Gnanadesikan 2009, p. 195)

The justice system was not the only area where King Sejong discovered that all his reform attempts continually ran into a language barrier: whether it was agriculture, medicine, law or any other area of life: dissemination of knowledge, development and progress were stymied by the fact that only a tiny minority of Koreans could read. As mentioned above, all writing was in Chinese and Chinese literacy was restricted to a tiny elite. The vast majority of Koreans had no access to all the knowledge that was available. Teaching everyone how to read and write in Chinese was obviously not practical.

King Sejong concluded that, in order to achieve broad dissemination of knowledge, Korean needed a writing system of its own; not one based on Chinese but one that was based on Korean and easy to learn.



The basic consonant signs of the Korean alphabet representing their pronunciation (Source: Gnanadesikan 2009, p. 198)

impressive feat in the absence of any phonetic models.

Having identified the phonetic characteristics of the sounds of Korean, he devised signs that represent pronunciations. This is in contrast to all other writing systems where signs initially started out as ideograms representing objects. At the danger of overusing the expression “stroke of genius” – that’s precisely what it was!

The new script was published in early October 1446 and the preface, written in Chinese, states:

The speech sounds of our country’s language are different from those of the Middle Kingdom and are not communicable with the Chinese characters. Therefore, when my beloved simple people want to say something, many of them are unable to express their feelings. Feeling compassion for this I have newly designed twenty-eight letters, only wishing to have everyone easily learn and use them conveniently every day. (Quoted from Gnanadesikan 2009, p. 204)

Maybe unsurprisingly, the Korean elite hardly welcomed the new script. They probably saw the threat it posed to their monopoly on learning and education. In any case, they did not like it and the script was widely denigrated as “morning script” (because it was so easy it could be learnt in a morning) or even as “women’s script” (because it was so easy even women could learn it ...)

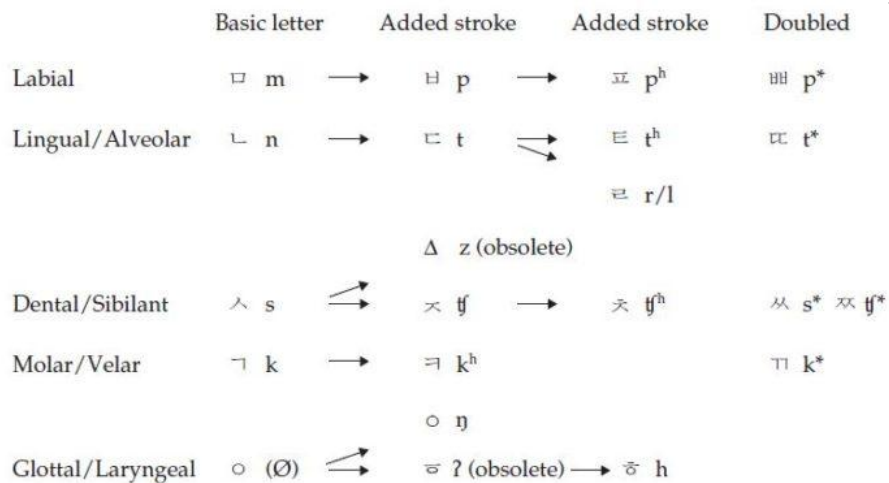
Wise King Sejong did not risk a fight and did not impose the exclusive use of Hangeul. As a result, Korean elites let the script slip into oblivion after his death and it almost did not survive the Japanese invasions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which devastated the country.

In fact, history has hardly been kind to Korea; and in 1945, after the ravishes of wars and colonization, the illiteracy rate in the country stood at close to 80 percent. Hangeul played a key role in turning these figures around

He started to look around ^ ^ ways to develop a script for Korean. In addition to Chinese, he was able to study Japanese, Jurchen and Mongolian scripts. While these syllabary-based scripts provided some inspiration, it must be considered a stroke of genius that he figured out the difference between consonants and vowels – characteristic of alphabetic writing – by himself. In a next step, he divided the consonants into groups according to their place of articulation – another

and the illiteracy rate in both Koreas is today close to zero: testament to the continued relevance of the vision of a centuries-old wise ruler intent on serving the common good.

The story of Hangeul presents an inspiring case study in the ways in which language arrangements can form obstacles to progress and social justice and the ways in which these can be overcome. For details on the story of Hangeul, read Chapter 11 “King Sejong’s One-Man Renaissance” of Gnanadesikan (2009), on whose account I have drawn here. For a general discussion of the relationship between linguistic diversity and social justice, see Piller (2016) – today and tomorrow is your last chance to tweet about [#linguisticdiversity](#) and enter our draw for a copy of the book.



**Figure 11.1** The derivation of the han’gŭl letters from their pronunciations. Above, the positions of the lips, tongue, and throat that Sejong used to derive the basic shapes of the consonants. Below, the derivation of further consonants from the basic ones. Note that ㅇ and ㆁ are now a single letter.

Korean consonant letters. Easy to learn, right? Even if you’ll need to allow for some more time to learn the vowels, too ... (Source: Gnanadesikan 2009, p. 198)



**Research Blogging**

### References

Gnanadesikan, A. E. (2009). *The Writing Revolution: Cuneiform to the Internet*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Piller, I. (2016). *Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice: An Introduction to Applied Sociolinguistics*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Facebook 91
 Twitter
 Google
 Email
 Print
 More

ACADEMIC LITERACIES
 BILINGUAL EDUCATION
 BILINGUALISM
 CHINESE
 DEVELOPMENT
 EDUCATION
 INEQUALITY
 KOREAN
 LANGUAGE POLICY
 LITERACY
 SOCIAL INCLUSION
 SOCIAL JUSTICE

