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 14th-century Korea:

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.
He started to look around for 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 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 Hangul. 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 16th 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. Hangul played a key role in turning these figures around
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 Hangul 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 Hangul, 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.

References

Gnanadesikan, A. E. (2009). The Writing Revolution: Cuneiform to the Internet. Malden, MA and