

Hangeul: Korean Writing System

Documented history on Korean Peninsula begins in the 24th century BC. Chinese characters were introduced to Korea around the 2 century BC and came into widespread use within the ruling class and the intelligentsia around the 4th and 5th centuries. The people on the Korean Peninsula had their own language but did not have the script to write it down.

Hangeul is the only script, the only writing system in the world for which we can exactly specify who created it, when it was created, why it was created for and on what principles it was created on.

In 1443, King Sejong, the fourth king of Jeoson dynasty, invented the Korean writing system, Hangeul. After three-year testing period had finished, Hangeul was given into widespread use in 1446. Hangeul's original denomination is **Hunminjeongeum**.

Hun (훈, 訓) stands for amend, reform, instruct. Min (민, 民) is people. Jeong (정, 正) means correct, proper and Eum (음, 音) means sound. The Correct/Proper Sounds for the Instruction of the People. Hunminjeongeum was **a secret project** under the leadership of King Sejong, in which his daughter(s), son(s) and a few other young academics also participated.

Why did King Sejong keep this project a secret? Because King Sejong thought the bureaucracy and China will oppose this project. The intellectual and the governing classes of the period studied Chinese philosophy and thought. Many among them imitated the Chinese philosophy and thought, namely, becoming supporters of Sinocentrism. The Chinese philosophy and thought represented a universal system of values in Korea. When King Sejong published the beta version of Hangeul in 1443, intellectual changes similar to those of the Copernican theory occurred.

Hunminjeongeum is composed of Yeui and Haerye. Yeui is a document written by King Sejong in which he explains the reasons for creating Hunminjeongeum and the ways of its usage. Haerye is a document detailing the examples and principles of consonant and vowel creation by the academics who assisted King Sejong in creating Hangeul. Haerye included 28 basic characters. But four of those characters (ㆍ, ㅇ, ㆁ, ㆏) are not in use anymore, therefore there are **24 basic characters**.

Hangeul is a segmental script, it consists of **consonants and vowels**. The Initial position is taken by Consonants, the Medial positions are taken by Vowels and the Final position is taken by Consonants.

The Vowels

This principle is also known as the **Cheonjiin principle**. Cheon means sky, Ji means ground and In means man. In the ancient times, the sky means the sun, the sun was round, the ground was flat, and the man was standing. In the present, the meaning of the sun, the dot is expressed by bar -.

19 vowels were created with these three basic elements (cheonjiin).

First, it is bright, when the sun is in front of the man ㄷ, this sound is "A"

it is bright when the sun is above ground. ㄹ, this sound is "O"

it is dark, when the sun sinks below ground. ㅈ, this sound is "U"

it is dark, when the sun is behind the man. ㅊ, this sound is " "

Therefore, the ㄷ and the ㄹ are bright vowels, also called **yang vowels**.

And the ㅈ and the ㅊ are dark vowels, also called **yin vowels**.

The yinyang principle, the basic principle of Eastern philosophy has been applied.

Through usage of the Cheonjiin (principle), 4 basic vowels 아, 오, 어, 우, were created.

Add a dot to 4 basic vowels of 오, 아, 우, 어

요 was created by adding a dot to 오,

야 was created by adding a dot to 아.....

Now we have 8 vowels, 아, 야, 어, 여, 오, 요, 우, 유.

By adding ㅡ (yin vowel) and ㅣ (neutral vowel) to those, 10 vowels were created.

(아, 야, 어, 여, 오, 요, 우, 유, 으, 이)

Through a combination of these basic ten vowels another eleven vowels can be added.

Nevertheless, the yin vowels and the yang vowels are never used together in one syllable.

If we look at the slide 12, first we see that the yang vowels 오 and 아 are combined into 와. Then there are also 우 and 어 joined into 워.

But the vowel 오ㅣ, where the yang vowel 오 and the yin vowel ㅣ would meet, does not exist. For the same reason, the vowel 우ㅣ, does not exist.

But there is the neutral vowel 이, that can be friends with all other.

오 and 이 become 외, 아 and 이 become 애,

Other vowels were created in the same manner.

애 & 에, 예&애, 왜&워&외 are very similar. We, Koreans also can not distinguish when we hear them. But we remember the words and we can write them properly. In English, there is a similar case with here, hear.

The consonants

The basic consonants originate in the articulatory shapes of the vocal organs.

어금니 소리 ㄱ ㅋ (옛이음) Velar consonants

(아음, 牙音 *a-eum* "molar sounds"):

The character ㄱ received its form from the tongue closing the throat shape of the mouth when the sound is made.



혀소리 ㄴ ㄷ ㄹ (반설음 ㄹ) Coronal consonants

(설음, 舌音 *seoreum* "lingual sounds"):

The character ㄴ received its form from the tip of the tongue touching the gums shape of the mouth when the sound is made.



입술소리 ㅁ ㅂ ㅍ (반치음) Bilabial consonants

(순음, 唇音 *suneum* "labial sounds"):

ㅁ from the shape of the mouth



이소리 ㄷ ㅌ ㄱ ㅋ Sibilant consonants

(치음, 齒音 *chieum* "dental sounds"):

ㄷ from the shape of the teeth



목구멍소리 ㅇ (아래아) ㅎ Dorsal consonants

(후음, 喉音 *hueum* "throat sounds"):

ㅇ from the shape of the throat



Even though we say created, we have to be aware of the fact, that King Sejong and his researchers were not able to use x-ray at that time. Therefore, the actual sounds might be made at slightly different places than these pictures show. Division of sounds into molar, lingual, labial, dental and throat sounds, represents a strong proof that King Sejong and the research team studied the phonetics in depth.

Different characters of the alphabet were created by adding strokes to these five elementary characters or by repeating them.

ㄷ was created by adding a stroke (一) to ㄱ
 ㄹ was created by adding a stroke (一) to ㄴ,
 ㅌ was created by adding a stroke (一) to ㄷ
 other consonants were created in the same way.

And the option of writing the characters twice was also made possible.

ㄱ ㄷ ㅌ ㅍ ㅈ are the ones that have stayed in use until this day.

Combine Consonants and Vowels

Hangeul is a segmental script. And each syllable of Hangeul consists of at least one consonant and one vowel. With this principle as a base, three types of basic combinations exist.

Type 1, **one consonant and one vowel** type

for example, ㄱ + ㅏ = ㄱㅏ, ㄴ + ㅏ = ㄴㅏ, ㄷ + ㅏ = ㄷㅏ...

ㄱ + ㅗ = ㄱㅗ, ㄴ + ㅗ = ㄴㅗ...

As you can see, consonant takes the first position and vowel takes the second position.

ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ are combined horizontally,

ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ are combined vertically.

Type 2 is type 1 plus **a consonant added on the bottom**.

For example, ㄱ + ㅏ + ㄴ = ㄱㅏㄴ, ㄴ + ㅏ + ㅌ = ㄴㅏㄷ, ㄷ + ㅏ + ㅌ = ㄷㅏㄷ, ㅏ + ㅑ + ㅓ = ㅏㅑㅓ

Type 3 is type 1 plus two consonants added on the bottom.

This type 3, is not in frequent use nowadays.

There are **19 consonants** that can be in the position of the Initial, there are **21 vowels** that can be in the position of Medials and there are 31 consonants that can be in the position of Finals: 12369 is the total number of characters that can be created in Hangeul. This slide 19 shows some letters that include ㄱ.

Hangeul as official script

It appears that Hangeul has spread to lower classes of society until the year 1500, but its usage for writing of official documents did not start until the last part of Jeoson period, in 1894. Hangeul, the National Writing, has been used as the basic script for writing official documents.

The Hangeul that we are using now was originally called **Hunminjeoneum**. The name Hangeul has been created by **JU Shi-kyeong** and since 1913 this script is called Hangeul.

Why was the name changed? Even though the characters were in use, it was not known who, when and why created them. Hunminjeoneum Haerye was discovered in 1940.

Korean character, Hangeul was created by King Sejong, but JU Si-gyeong was the one, who enabled Hangeul to really come into universal, general, wide-spread use, by making it easier to write and to remember.

In Korean native words, Han means great. It is just a coincidence that the Han from HanGug and han from hanja are pronounced identically since the basis of both words is totally different. Geul is a Korean native word for characters and text, writing.