

Korean

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0. Basics

0.1 Korean Alphabet (한글)

0.1.1 Introduction

Hangul (한글) is the writing system used for the Korean language. Similarly to Latin, it is a **phonetic alphabet** unlike Chinese or Japanese, which are logographic scripts.

0.1.2 Basic Structure

Each character represents a **syllable** or **syllabic block**, and each syllable is composed of individual letters called **jamo** (자母), which represent consonants or **jaeum** (자음) and vowels or **moeum** (모음), read from left to right and top to bottom.

There are a total of 14 basic consonants and 10 monophthong vowels, following 5 double consonants and 11 additional vowels formed by combining two monophthongs in the same syllable (diphthongs).

Each syllable typically consists of:

- An initial consonant (**Choseong** 초성)
- A medial vowel (**Jungseong** 중성)
- An optional final consonant (**Jongseong** 종성)

Something to note is that the vowels ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ and ㅡ are written to the **right** of the initial consonant, while the rest are written to the **bottom**.

Throughout this text, in order to facilitate the learning process, all Hangul writing will be written with the following format:

annyeonghaseyo
안녕하세요

Or, in case there is the need for translation:

annyeonghaseyo
안녕하세요
hello

Here's a table for the possible initial, medial and final letters:

Initials 초성				Medials 중성			
한글	Latin	IPA	Key	한글	Latin	IPA	Key
ㄱ	g	/k/	D	ㅏ	a	/a/	K
ㄲ	kk	/k̟/	⤴D	ㅑ	ae	/ɛ/	O
ㄴ	n	/n/	S	ㅓ	ya	/ja/	I
ㄷ	d	/t/	E	ㅕ	yae	/jɛ/	⤴O
ㄸ	tt	/t̟/	⤴E	ㅖ	eo	/ʌ/	J
ㄹ	r	/r/	F	ㅗ	e	/e/	P
ㅁ	m	/m/	A	ㅛ	yeo	/jʌ/	U
ㅂ	b	/p/	Q	ㅜ	ye	/je/	⤴P
ㅃ	pp	/p̟/	⤴Q	ㅝ	o	/o/	H
ㅅ	s	/s/	T	ㅜ나	wa	/wa/	
ㅆ	ss	/s̟/	⤴T	ㅜ내	wae	/wɛ/	
ㅇ			X	ㅜ니	oe	/ø/	
ㅈ	j	/t͡ɕ/	W	ㅜ뇨	yo	/jo/	Y
ㅉ	jj	/t͡ɕ̟/	⤴W	ㅜ터	u	/u/	N
ㅊ	ch	/t͡ɕʰ/	C	ㅜ테	wo	/wo/	
ㅋ	k	/kʰ/	Z	ㅜ티	we	/wɛ/	
ㅌ	t	/tʰ/	X	ㅜ티	wi	/wi/	
ㅍ	p	/pʰ/	V	ㅠ	yu	/ju/	B
ㅎ	h	/h/	G	ㅡ	eu	/ɯ/	M
				ㅡ이	ui	/wi/	
				ㅣ	i	/i/	L

Finals 종성 (Optional)					
Normal Finals			Double/Complex Finals		
한글	Latin	IPA	한글	Latin	IPA
ㄱ	g	/k̟/	ㄲ	kk	/k̟/
ㄴ	n	/n/	ㄴㄱ	gs	/k̟/
ㄷ	d	/t̟/	ㄴㅇ	nj	/n/
ㄹ	l	/l/	ㄴㅎ	nh	/n/
ㅁ	m	/m/	ㄹㄱ	lg	/k̟/
ㅂ	b	/p̟/	ㄹㅇ	lm	/m/
ㅅ	s	/t̟/	ㄹㅂ	lb	/p̟/
ㅇ	ng	/ŋ/	ㄹㄱ	ls	/t̟/
ㅈ	j	/t̟/	ㄹㅌ	lt	/t̟/
ㅊ	ch	/t̟/	ㄹㅍ	lp	/p̟/
ㅋ	k	/k̟/	ㅁㅅ	bs	/p̟/
ㅌ	t	/t̟/	ㅁㅆ	ss	/t̟/
ㅍ	p	/p̟/			
ㅎ	h	/t̟/			

0.1.3 Vowels

Vowels have distinct properties that should be taken into account before trying to do anything in Korean.

Bright, Dark and Neutral Vowels

Hangul vowels follow a certain harmony which is applied when forming them

Bright Vowels yangseong moeum
양성모음 : ㅏ, ㅑ and ㅓ¹

Dark Vowels eumseong moeum
음성모음 : ㅕ, ㅗ and ㅛ²

Neutral Vowels jungseong moeum
중성모음 : ㅜ

This is really useful for when trying to study etymologies or sound symbolism, since words were often associated what type of vowel do they use³.

Here we can see how compound monophthongs are formed:

ㅈ = ㅏ + ㅊ (Bright) ㅊ = ㅏ + ㅈ (Bright)
ㅊ = ㅕ + ㅊ (Dark) ㅊ = ㅕ + ㅊ (Dark)

Then, based on these "basic vowels", we have the rest of the diphthongs as a combination of bright+bright or dark+dark:

ㅊ = ㅏ + ㅑ (Bright) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅏ (Bright) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅑ (Dark)
ㅑ = ㅏ + ㅕ (Dark) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅈ (Bright) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅑ (Dark)
ㅑ = ㅏ + ㅓ (Bright) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅏ (Bright) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅑ (Dark)
ㅑ = ㅏ + ㅗ (Dark) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅕ (Dark) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅑ (Dark)

There are also certain vowels that are considered extinct or obsolete, but you may see them in older texts

ㅑ = ㅏ + ㅏ (Bright) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅏ (Bright) ㅑ = ㅑ + ㅑ (Dark)

This text will use this concept when talking about grammatical rules, although it is mostly an interesting fact about how Korean phonology is formed, it is absolutely optional to learn about this and I don't think Korean schools even teach about this concept.

¹ ㅑ is an extinct character called araea
아래아
lower a

² ㅑ is considered both partially dark and partially neutral

³Fun fact: namja 남자 uses bright vowels and yeoja 여자 uses dark vowels
man woman

0.2 Basic Sentence Structure and Particles

Unlike English, which follows an *Subject – Verb – Object* order, Korean follows *Subject – Object – Verb* ordering.

Also, Korean relies heavily on particles to show each word's grammatical role, here are some examples⁴ with literal translation

Role	Particle	Example			Meaning	
Subject	이 / 가	jega 제가 I	sagwareul 사과를 apple	meogeoyo 먹어요 eat	I eat an apple	
Topic	은 / 는	jeneun 저는 I	sagwareul 사과를 apple	meogeoyo 먹어요 eat	As for me, I eat an apple	
Object	을 / 를	jega 제가 I	sagwareul 사과를 apple	meogeoyo 먹어요 eat	I eat an apple	
Possession	의	jega 제가 I	sinui 신의 God's	sagwareul 사과를 apple	meogeoyo 먹어요 eat	I eat God's apple
Location	에서	jega 제가 I	jeongwoneseo 정원에서 at the garden	sagwareul 사과를 apple	meogeoyo 먹어요 eat	I eat an apple at the garden

In informal speech, these particles are often dropped if the context is clear. Also note that there are much more particles than the ones in this table, however, they will be explained in their respective sections.

0.3 Pronouns

In Korean, pronouns (and most things) are divided between **informal** and **polite or formal** context:

Person	Number	Informal	Formal
1st	Singular	na 나	jeo 저
2nd	Singular	neo 너	dangsin 당신
3rd	Singular (M)	geu 그	geubun 그분
	Singular (F)	geunyeo 그녀	geubun 그분
1st	Plural	uri 우리	jeohui 저희
2nd	Plural	neohui 너희	yeoreobun 여러분
3rd	Plural	geudeul 그들	geubundeul 그분들

Note that in Korean subject pronouns are the same as object pronouns (He and Him)

⁴With the particles: use left if ends in a consonant, right if it ends in a vowel

0.4 Numbering

Korean has two distinct numbering systems: **Native and Sino**⁵. Each is used in different contexts:

Sino vs Native		
	Sino	Native
Range	0–∞	1–99
Formality	More formal	More casual
Use	Abstract, precise things	Familiar, natural things
Counting	×	✓
Hour	×	✓
Minutes / Seconds	✓	×
Dates	✓	×
Phone numbers	✓	×
Money	✓	×
Floor numbers	✓	×
Math / Units	✓	×

0.4.1 Sino

Similarly to English, Sino-Korean combines the numbers 1 to 9 to form greater magnitudes. Here is the list of numbers from 0 to 9:

0. 영 ^{yeong}	2. 이 ⁱ	4. 사 ^{sa}	6. 육 ^{yuk}	8. 팔 ^{pal}
1. 일 ^{il}	3. 삼 ^{sam}	5. 오 ^o	7. 칠 ^{chil}	9. 구 ^{gu}

If we want to add a digit, it is almost exactly like English. For example, if we want to say 94, we say ninety-four (*nine-ten-four*). In Korean, we say ^{gusipsa}구십사₉₋₁₀₋₄. This is the list of some magnitudes:

10. 십 ^{sip}	1000. 천 ^{cheon}	100000. 십만 ^{sipman}	10000000. 천만 ^{cheonman}
100. 백 ^{baek}	10000. 만 ^{man}	1000000. 백만 ^{baekman}	100000000. 억 ^{eok}

Note that unlike English, in which we divide every 3 zeroes (100,000 is a hundred **thousand** ($100 * 10^3$)), in Korean we divide every 4 zeroes (100,000 is **십만** ($10 * 10^4$)).

Also it is worth noting that these numbers should be written like we do in English, using the **Arabic numeric** symbols. This helps when understanding the difference between Sino and Native: If we would intuitively write them using numbers (*12*, *5*), then we use Sino, if we would write them how they are spelled (*twelve*, *five*) we use Native.

⁵Sino refers to Korean words of Chinese origin

0.4.2 Native

Fortunately, the Native numbering system only goes from 1 to 99, and then it starts counting exactly like Sino.

1. ^{hana} 하나	3. ^{set} 셋	5. ^{daseot} 다섯	7. ^{ilgop} 일곱	9. ^{ahop} 아홉
2. ^{dul} 둘	4. ^{net} 넷	6. ^{yeoseot} 여섯	8. ^{yeodeol} 여덟	

However, instead of counting magnitudes like in English, since it has such a limited range, it has specific words for 20, 30, 40, and so on

10. ^{yeol} 열	30. ^{seoreun} 서른	50. ^{swin} 쉰	70. ^{ilheun} 일흔	90. ^{aheun} 아흔
20. ^{seumul} 스물	40. ^{maheun} 마흔	60. ^{yesun} 예순	80. ^{yeodeun} 여든	

1. Verbs

1.1 Speech Levels

All verbs conjugations in the Korean language have distinct paradigms depending on the level of formality (*informal vs formal*) and politeness (*low vs high*) towards the listener, which are the following:

Higher Levels

hasoseo-che

하소서체 ¹² Very formally polite, used to address royalty or in religious texts.

hasipsio-che

하십시오체 Formally polite, used to address colleagues in formal settings or between strangers at the start of a conversation.

Middle levels

haeyo-che

해요체 Casually polite, used between strangers and colleagues.

hao-che

하오체 Formally neutral, used in signs or among civil servants and the older generation.

hage-che

하게체 Neutral, used for those under one's authority.

Lower levels

haera-che

해라체 Formally impolite, used with close friends or relatives and by adults to children.

hae-che

해체 Casually impolite or intimate, Between close friends and relatives.

However, there are a lot of levels that are either archaic or contextually limited, so this text will be focusing only on: **해체**, **해라체**, **해요체**, **하십시오체** and will be called *informal low*, *formal low*, *informal high* and *formal high* respectively for convenience. This will only be for verb conjugations since the four levels previously mentioned cover 99% of real-life usage.

Also it is worth warning that this text will try to use the least amount of verbs possible. It is recommended to use a dictionary, texts or conversations in order to expand one's vocabulary. This text should be used in order to learn how to structure said vocabulary.

¹**Etymology** **체** ^{che} Comes from the word *style, form* or *body* in Sino-Korean.

²**Etymology** **하** ^{ha} Comes from the non-honorific imperative form of the verb *to do* **하다** ^{hada}

1.2 Endings

1.2.1 Grammatical Mood Endings

Depending on the grammatical mood ^{hyeong}형 of the sentence, each level has a specific ending. The four most important grammatical moods and the ones explained in further detail are *indicative*, *interrogative*, *imperative* and *propositive*.

Indicative 평서형			
Level	Ending	Rule (ends with)	Examples (present)
IL	-아 -어	bright vowel → -아 otherwise → -어	gada → 가 meogda → 먹어
IH	-아요 -어요	bright vowel → -아요 otherwise → -어요	gada → 가요 meogda → 먹어요
FL	-ㄴ다 -는다	vowel → -ㄴ다 consonant → -는다	gada → 간다 meogda → 먹는다
FH	-ㅂ니다 -습니다	vowel → -ㅂ니다 consonant → -습니다	gada → 갑니다 meogda → 먹습니다

Interrogative 의문형			
Level	Ending	Rule (ends with)	Examples (present)
IL	-니? -어?	bright vowel → -니? otherwise → -어?	gada → 가니? meogda → 먹어?
IH	-아요? -어요?	bright vowel → -아요? otherwise → -어요?	gada → 가요? meogda → 먹어요?
FL	-느냐? -냐?	vowel → -느냐? consonant → -냐?	gada → 가냐? meogda → 먹느냐?
FH	-ㅂ니까? -습니까?	vowel → -ㅂ니까? consonant → -습니까?	gada → 갑니까? meogda → 먹습니까?

Imperative 명령형			
Level	Ending	Rule (ends with)	Examples (present)
IL	-아라 -어라	bright vowel → -아라 otherwise → -어라	gada 가다 → 가라 meogda 먹다 → 먹어라
IH	-세요 -으세요	bright vowel → -세요 otherwise → -으세요	gada 가다 → 가세요 meogda 먹다 → 먹으세요
FL ^a	-아라 -어라	vowel → -아라 consonant → -어라	gada 가다 → 가라 meogda 먹다 → 먹어라
FH	-십시오 -으십시오	vowel → -십시오 consonant → -으십시오	gada 가다 → 가십시오 meogda 먹다 → 먹으십시오

^aNote that, in this grammatical mood, it sounds exactly the same as in *informal low*

Propositive cheongyuhyeong
청유형

1.3 Grammatical Tenses

1.3.1 Declarative Present Tense (평서형현재시제)

This grammatical tense is used to **state facts**, **describe habits** or **give information**

Informal Low : -아 (if ends with a bright vowel) / -어 (if anything else)

Informal High : -아요 (if ends with a bright vowel) / -어요 (if anything else)

Formal Low : -는다 (if ends with a consonant) / -니다 (if ends with a vowel)

Formal High : -습니다 (if ends with a consonant) / -습니다 (if ends with a vowel)

Here are some examples:

Verb Stem	Informal Low	Informal High	Formal Low	Formal High
gada 가다 to go	ga 가	gayo 가요	ganda 간다	gabnida 갑니다
meogda 먹다 to eat	meogeo 먹어	meogeoyo 먹어요	meogneunda 먹는다	meogseubnida 먹습니다
masada 마시다 to drink	masyeo 마셔	masyeoyo 마셔요	masinda 마신다	masibnida 마십니다

Korean has several groups of verbs that don't follow these standard conjugation rules, and there are certain verbs that should count as irregular but are not for some reason in particular, it is advised to take these groups with a grain of salt.

Here's a quick cheat sheet for all the groups:

Vowel after ㄷ—ending stem Rule : ㄷ → ㄹ E.g : geodda 걷다 to walk				Vowel after ㅁ—ending stem Rule : ㅁ → 우/오 ³ (Only in IL/IH) ⁴ E.g : dobda 돕다 to help			
IL geoleo 걸어	IH geoleoyo 걸어요	FL geodneunda 걷는다	FH geodseubnida 걷습니다	IL dowa 도와	IH dowayo 도와요	FL dobneunda 돕는다	FH dobseubnida 돕습니다
아 / 어요 after ㄹ stem Rule : Add ㄹ to last syllable E.g : daleuda 다르다 to differ				Vowel after ㅅ—ending stem Rule : Drop ㅅ E.g : nasda 낫다 to surpass			
IL dalla 달라	IH dallayo 달라요	FL daleunda 다른다	FH daleubnida 다릅니다	IL naa 나아	IH naayo 나아요	FL nasneunda 낫는다	FH nasseubnida 낫습니다
Stems ending in ㅎ⁵ Rule : Drop ㅎ, Use ㅎ (Only in IL/IH) E.g : hayahda 하얇다 to be white				Stems ending in ㅡ Rule : Drop ㅡ, vowel merge (Only in IL/IH) E.g : sseuda 쓰다 to write			
IL hayae 하애	IH hayaeyo 하애요	FL hayahneunda 하얇다	FH hayahseubnida 하얇습니다	IL sseo 써	IH sseoyo 써요	FL sseunda 쓰다	FH sseubnida 쓰니다

1.3.2 Declarative Past Tense (평서과거시제)

Informal Low : -았어 (if ends with a bright vowel) / -었어 (if anything else)

Informal High : -았어요 (if ends with a bright vowel) / -었어요 (if anything else)

Formal Low : -았다 (if ends with a consonant) / -었다 (if ends with a vowel)

Formal High : -았습니다 (if ends with a consonant) / -었습니다 (if ends with a vowel)

Verb Stem	Informal Low	Informal High	Formal Low	Formal High
gada 가다 to go	ga 갔어	gayo 갔어요	ganda 갔다	gabnida 갔습니다
meogda 먹다 to eat	meogeo 먹어	meogeoyo 먹어요	meogneunda 먹는다	meogseubnida 먹습니다
masada 마시다 to drink	masyeo 마셔	masyeoyo 마시요	masinda 마신다	masibnida 마십니다

³Left if the verb has dark vowels, right if bright.

⁴It was previously used in Formal High as well, so some dictionaries may accept both as valid

⁵Usually adjectives or *descriptive verbs*

As you can see, the syllable ㄲ is present regardless of the speech level, this is what we will call *pre-final ending*