Korean Pronunciation & Accents

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1. *Korean* is an Altaic language. The *traditional neutral* accent may have a length opposition for its vowels (but only on the very first –or only– syllable of words, and not distinguished in writing), realized as more or less narrow diphthongs, as, for instance: *mal* [ˈmalˈ] "horse", *mal* [ˈmaalˈ] "speech".

However, in the *modern neutral* accent (and in the *mediatic* accent, too) this very limited length opposition is no longer distinctive. In fact, such lengthenings can freely occur, sometimes for expressive reasons, with no actual semantic value at all, nowadays. We present three main vocograms: for the three general accents.
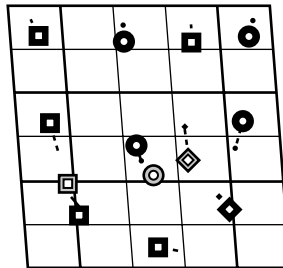
Thus, modern Korean has 10 phonemically short *V*, while traditional Korean has ten both short and long *V*.

Regionally, /e, ɛ/ can merge into [ɛ] (or [ɟ], in the mediatic accent). So, mediatic Korean has just seven 'short' *V*, as the central rounded phonemes, /ʉ, ɵ/, are, generally, substituted with /wi, we/, as shown in the vocogram. The phoneme /ʌ/ varies a lot, as can be seen from the vocograms: traditional [ʌ̞], modern [ʌ̞, ↓ɤ̞ɤ], mediatic [ɵ(ɔ)].

Modern neutral	/i/ [i(i)] /ʉ/ [ʉ(ʉ)] /e/ [e(ɛ)] /ɵ/ [ɵɵ, ɵ] /ɛ/ [ɑɛ, ɛ]		/ɯ/ [ɯ(ɯ)], /ɯi/→'/ɥi/' [ɥi] /u/ [u(ɯ)] /o/ [o(σ)] /ʌ/ [ʌ̞(ʌ̞), ↓ɤ̞(ɤ)] /a/ [a(a)]
Traditional neutral	/i/ [i], /ii/ [ii] /ʉ/ [ʉ], /ʉʉ/ [ʉʉ] /e/ [e], /ee/ [eɛ] /ɵ/ [ɵ̞], /ɵɵ/ [ɵɵ] /ɛ/ [ɛ̞], /ɛɛ/ [ɑɛ]		/ɯ/ [ɯ], /ɯɯ/ [ɯɯ], /ɯi/ [ɯi] /u/ [u], /uu/ [uu] /o/ [o], /oo/ [oσ] /ʌ/ [ʌ̞], /ʌʌ/ [ʌ̞ɤ] /a/ [a], /aa/ [aɑ]
Mediatic	/i/ [i(i)] /ʉ/→'/wi/' [ɥi(i), ↓ɯi(i)] /ɵ/→'/we/' [ɯɟ(e)] /e/ [ɟ(e), ₒe#] /ɛ/ [ɟ(e), ↑ɟ(ɛ), ₒe#] /a/ [a(a)]		/ɯ/ [ɟ̵(ɯ)], /ɯi/ [ɟ̵(ɪ)] /u/ [ɥ(u)] /o/ [o(o)] /ʌ/→'/ɔ/' [ɵ(ɔ)]
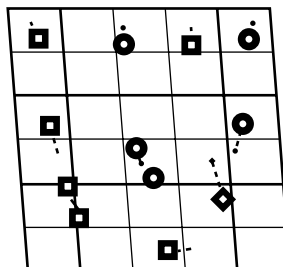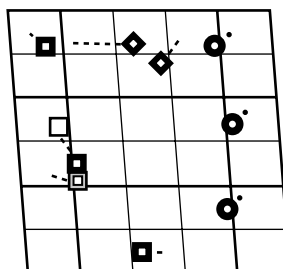
We also give five other vocograms: for the *northwestern* and *northeastern* accents, with six vowel phonemes (or eight or nine, due to two possible broad ones, shown in brackets); for the *central* accents, with seven vowels; and for the *southern* accents, with six vowels (or seven for the insular one).

In addition, there are six /jV/ sequences: /je, jɛ, ja, jʌ, jo, ju/ [ɟ-]; and 4 /wV/ sequences /we, wɛ, wa, wʌ/ [ɰ-]. The diphthong /ɯi/ is very peculiar, because it generally corresponds to traditional [ɯi] (sometimes [ɯ'i]), modern [ɥi(i)] '/ɥi/', and mediatic [ɨ(ɪ)] '/ɨ/'.

Northwestern accent	/i/ [ɪ̈(i)]	/u/ [ɵ(u)]
	/ʉ/→'/wi/' [ɯɪ̈(i)]	/ɯ/ [ɨ̈(ɨ)]
	(/ɛ/ [↓ɘ(ɘ)])	/ɯi/→'/ɥi/' [ɥɨ̈(ɨ)]
	/e, ɛ/ [ɜ(ɘ)]	(/ʌ/ [↓ɤ(ɤ)])
	/ɵ/→/we/ [ɯɜ(ɘ)]	/o, ʌ/ [ɒ(ɒ)]
		/a/ [a(ʌ)]

Northeastern accent	/i/ [i(i)]	/u/ [u(u)]
	/ʉ/→'/wi/' [ɯi(i)]	/ɯ/ [ɯ(ɯ)]
	(/ɛ/ [↓ɘ(ɘ)])	/ɯi/→'/ɥi/' [ɥɨ̈(ɨ)]
	/e, ɛ/ [ɜ(ɜ)]	(/ʌ/ [↓ɒ(ɒ)])
	/ɵ/→/we/ [ɯɜ(ɜ)]	/o, ʌ/ [ɔ(ɒ)]
		/a/ [a(ɐ)]

Central accent	/i/ [ɪ̈(i)]	/ɯ/ [ɨ̈(ɨ)], /ɯi/→'/ɥi/' [ɥɪ̈(i)]
	/ʉ/→'/wi/' [ɥɪ(i), ↓ɯɪ̈(i)]	/u/ [ʉ(u)]
		/o/ [o(ʊ)]
	/ɵ/→'/we/' [ɯɜ(ɛ)]	
	/e, ɛ/ [ɜ(ɛ)]	/ʌ/→[ɤ̞(ɤ̞)]
	/a/ [a(a)]	

Southern accent	/i/ [ɪ(i)]	/u/ [u(u)]
	/ʉ/→'/wi/'	/ɯi/→'/ɥi/' [ɥi(i)]
	[ɥɪ(i), ↓ɯɪ(i)]	/ɯ, ʌ/ [ɤ(ɘ)]
	/e, ɛ, -jʌ/ [ɛ(ɜ)]	/o/ [σ(ɒ)]
	/ɵ/→/we/ [ɯɛ(ɜ)]	/a/ [a(ʌ)]
		(*SW* /m-p(p-ʔ)a/ → /o/ ↓[σ(ɒ)])

Insular accent	/i/ [i(i)]	/u/ [u(u)]
	/ʉ/→'/wi/' [ɥi(i)]	/ɯi/→'/ɥi/' [ɥi(i)]
		/ɯ, ʌ/ [ɤ(ɯ)] (/ʌ/ [ʌ(ɤ)])
	/e, ɛ/ [ɛ(e)]	/o/ [σ(o)]
	/ɵ/→/we/ [ɯɛ(e)]	/a/ [a(ɐ)]

2. Here we prefer to show a more 'natural' phonemic structure for Korean (with three series of stop –and a stopstrictive– *C*), rather than a more abstract one, al-

though apparently more 'economical' (as we used to do in the past).

Thus, we have a 'plain' series /p, t, k; tʃ/, together with a sequential 'aspirated' series, /ph, th, kh; tʃh/, and a further sequential 'glottalized' series, /pʔ, tʔ, kʔ; tʃʔ/. Before /j/ or front V, /k/ is prevelar [k̟].

The plain series is realized as voiced, in voiced contexts: [b, d, g; ʤ] (but as half--voiced in a slower, or more careful, speech style, [b̥, d̥, g̊; ʤ̥]). On the contrary, the whole series is realized as lenis voiceless word-initially, [#p̊, #t̥, #k̊; #t̥ʃ] (possibly even with 'voiced aspiration', [#p̊ɦ, #t̥ɦ, #k̊ɦ; #t̥ʃɦ]). /p, t, k/ followed by /N/ become [m, n, ŋ].

In the mediatic accent, /tʃ/ has rather a prepalatal articulation [tʂ], with all necessary taxophones. Notice that /tʃ, ʤ, ʃ/ have spread lips: [t̠ʃ, d̠ʒ, ʃ].

The 'aspirated' sequences, /ph, th, kh; tʃh/, are realized as 'aspirated' voiceless, [ph, th, kh; tʃh], with their 'aspiration' having a *palatal* color before /i, j/, [pç, tç, kç; tʃç], a *velar rounded* color before /u, w/, [pʍ, tʍ, kʍ; tʃʍ], and a *velar* one before /ɯ/ (or, in slower or more careful speech, in the previous cases, too), [px, tx, kx; tʃx].

The same holds for /h/ in the same contexts, eg *him* /ˈhim/ [ˈçim], *hïm* /ˈhɯm/ [ˈxɯm], *huchu* /huˈtʃhu/ [hʍˈtʃʍu]; in voiced contexts, /h/ is [ɦ] (or [∅]), including coarticulatory taxophones.

The glottalized sequences /pʔ, tʔ, kʔ; tʃʔ/ are realized either with simultaneous glottalization and lengthening, [p̰ː, t̰ː, k̰ː; t̰ʃː], or with the laryngealization of subsequent vocalic elements ([V̰], including possible voiced C).

/s/ [s] becomes [z̥] between V or between N and V; we also have the glottalized phonemic sequence, /sʔ/, which is realized as [sː] (or, if word-initial, as [#sh]) + [V̰]. Before /i/ (and for /sʔj/, as well), we have [ʃː] (or [#ʃh]) + [V̰].

The phoneme /l/ has the following taxophones [ɾV, ʐV, ɭV], [ʎi, ʎj]; [ɭC, lC, ɭC]; [ɭ#, l#, ɭ#]. Also [ɲi, ɲj]. As a rule, final C are inaudibly released, because they are unexploded: [C̚] (including sonants, generally).

3. A few examples follow: *pul* /ˈpul/ [ˈp̊uɭ; ˈp̊ɦuɭ] "fire", *p'ul* /ˈphul/ [ˈphʍuɭ] "grass", *ppul* /ˈpʔul/ [ˈp̊ːṵɭ] "horn"; *ipul* /iˈpul/ [iˈbuɭ, iˈb̥uɭ] "this fire", *ip'ul* /iˈphul/ [iˈphʍuɭ] "this grass", *ippul* /iˈpʔul/ [iˈp̊ːṵɭ] "this horn".

Korean is particularly known for its typical use of consonant sequences, that undergo several assimilations, simplifications and elisions, which are generally extensively described and exemplified in general books on the Korean language.

4. Here, we present the kind of *transliteration* that we use in this paper (adding the variants we frequently happen to find in other works, including some less useful or less justifiable ones, given in brackets). However, for the city names we will use the more usual transliteration found in the West, although certainly not the best one!

Vowels: *i* /i/, *e* /e/ (*ey*), *ä* /ɛ/ (*ae, ay*), *a* /a/, *o* /o/, *u* /u/ (*wu*), *ë* /ʌ/ (*eo, ŏ*), *ï* /ɯ/ (*eu, ŭ, u*), *ö* /ɤ/ (*oe, oy*), *ü* /ʉ/ (*wi*). The false 'diphthongs' are really verging on the ridiculous.

They may be preceded by *y/w* /j, w/, forming /CV/ sequences, unscientifically called 'diphthongs'. But there is a diphthong, *ïi* (*uy*) /ɯi/, realized as traditional [ɯi], and mediatic [ɨ(ɪ)], or modern (/CV/ sequence) '/ɰi/' [ɰi]. Other real diphthongs exist, too, in some words, like *kwai* /ˈkwa(a)i/.

Consonants: *m n ng* /m, n, ŋ/, *p t k c* /p, t, k, tʃ/ (*b d g j*), *p' t' k' c'* /ph, th, kh, tʃh/ (*ph th kh ch*, which might risk suggesting '[f, θ, x]' and simple '[tʃ]'), *pp tt kk cc* /pʔ, tʔ, kʔ, tʃʔ/ (*p t k c/tch*), *s s'* /s, sʔ/ (*s ss*), *h y w l* /h, j, w, l/.
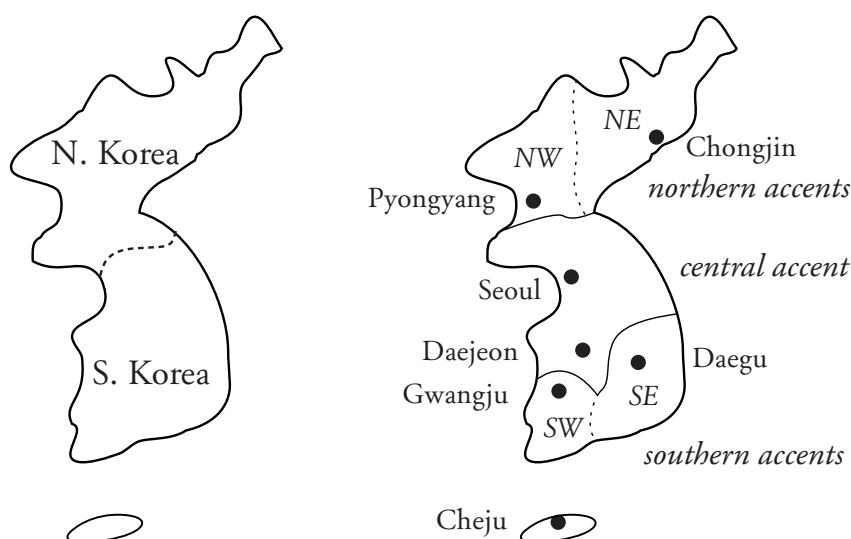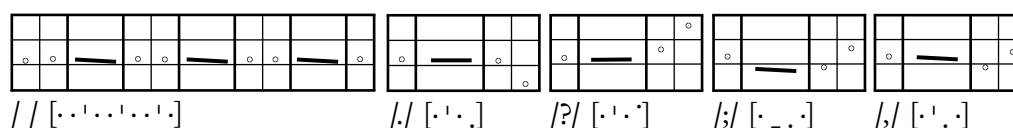
5. It is very important not to confuse the descriptions of Korean *dialects* (also having different words and grammars) with Korean *accents*, which influence the pronunciation of Korean native speakers.

In addition to NEUTRAL *modern* and *traditional* pronunciation (including its *mediatic* variant), we will present the regional accents of modern Korean, by means of five additional vocograms and some observations about consonants.

In north-western accents /tʃ, tʃh, tʃʔ/ may become [tʂ, tʂh, tʂʔ; ts, tsh, tsʔ]. In south-eastern accents /sʔ/ may become [s]; /j, w/ after consonants are weaker than [ɾ, ɰ] and may be dropped completely, also in broad central accents.

South-eastern accents also have a peculiar slow tempo of speech. In central accents, word-initial /p, t, k, tʃ/ may become /pʔ, tʔ, kʔ, tʃʔ/, while, in the insular accents of Cheju, they may become /ph, th, kh, tʃh/.

North-western and south-western (and southern central) accents may keep the traditional 'long' vowels (actually diphthongized).

6. Indeed, while other regional accents add a tonetic peculiarity after the intonation patterns presented for neutral Korean, the north-eastern and south-eastern accents have that same peculiarity, but even more evident. Such speakers may sound 'aggressive' to other native speakers.

The tonetic movements of protunes (shown in the tonogram) are modified by the fact that each phonetic phrase that form current sentences add the following changes.

The tonetic height is lowered on the first or first two syllables while it is raised on a following syllable, but lowered again on another syllable, including the last one of that phonetic phrase, which receives a secondary stress depending on the structure of the tunes used. All this happens even with no pause at all.

Such (secondary) stress is low with /./, but it is middle with continuative /,/ or suspensive /;/ tunes, but higher with the interrogative one /?/.

The extension of each phrase depends on the number of syllables each word has in it. Let us show a typical structure: [_$(·$)ꞌ$(ˌ$)ˌ$]. Another frequent pattern is [ꞌ$·$(ˌ$)(ˌ$)ˌ$]. Their broader versions are: [_$(ˌ$)⁻$(ˌ$)ˌ$], [⁻$·$(ˌ$)(ˌ$)ˌ$].

North-eastern and south-eastern accents may keep traces of their dialectal (distinctive) tonemes, and they are more likely to use the broader versions just seen. However, neutral accents should not have such tonetic modifications (more or less possible in the mediatic accent).

See the administrative and accent maps of Korea.