

Korean Language and Hangul

Origin of the Korean Language

The Korean language is believed to have been spoken for roughly 9,000 years, dating back to the Neolithic period. Korean belongs to the **Transeurasian language family**, together with Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, and Japanese. Although these languages developed independently in different regions, they share similarities such as common vocabulary and similar word order.

As it evolved through ancient Korean and later into Middle Korean during the Goryeo Dynasty, the language existed purely as a **spoken language** without a writing system.

To record the language, Chinese characters began to be borrowed. However, Chinese belongs to the **Sino-Tibetan language family**, which differs greatly from Korean. This created difficulties because Chinese characters could not represent Korean sounds and expressions accurately.

Origin of Hangul

Chinese characters were difficult to learn, could not represent Korean pronunciation well, and limited written communication. Because this problem affected society as a whole, **King Sejong of the Joseon Dynasty** initiated the creation of a new writing system specifically for Korean.

Among the world's writing systems, **Hangul is unique** because both its inventor and the period of its creation are clearly known. Nevertheless, developing and establishing it as the official script of Korea faced many challenges.

The Hangul Creation Story (Hunminjeongeum)

King Sejong sought to solve these linguistic inconveniences and, out of compassion for his people, wished to enable "the uneducated commoners to express their thoughts easily." With this humanitarian spirit, he began the creation of a new writing system.

- **Creation Process and Period:**

Working secretly with scholars of the Hall of Worthies, King Sejong completed 28 new letters in December 1443 (the 25th year of his reign).

- **Publication and Naming:**

Three years later, in September 1446, the script was officially proclaimed under the name **Hunminjeongeum**, meaning "The Proper Sounds for the Instruction of the People."

- **Scientific Principles:**

Hangul is a scientific and original script based on the shapes of the speech organs.

Consonants reflect the shapes of the tongue, lips, and teeth, while vowels are formed on the philosophical principle of the **Three Elements (Heaven • Earth • Human)**.

- **From Hunminjeongeum to Hangul:**

Initially called *Hunminjeongeum* or *Eonmun*, the name **Hangul**, meaning "the great and perfect script," began to be widely used in the early 20th century by linguists such as Ju Si-Gyeong.

Hangul democratized access to written communication, enabled full expression of the Korean language, and became a foundation for Korea's cultural and technological development. The original Hunminjeongeum manuscript is designated as **Korean National Treasure No. 70** and registered as a **UNESCO Memory of the World**, recognized globally for its value.

Why Hangul Matters

The ability to express Korean freely using Hangul brought tremendous advances:

- Clear human communication
- Record of history and events
- Literary development
- Sharing of information
- Creative activities based on knowledge

Ultimately, Hangul contributed to technological, cultural, and national growth.

Although the Korean language has existed since ancient times, Hangul—created in the mid-1400s—is **easy to learn, scientifically designed, and highly suitable even in the age of AI**.

Structure of Hangul

Hangul consists of **14 basic consonants** and **10 basic vowels**.

When combined, each character represents **one syllable (gulja)**—a single sound.

Including double consonants (5) and compound vowels (11), Hangul has **40 total letters (jamo)**.

By combining consonants and vowels, Koreans can produce **11,172 possible syllables**.

Anyone who knows the letters can read all 11,172 syllables without memorizing them separately.

For comparison:

- Japanese produces fewer than **300 sounds**
- Chinese produces around **400 sounds**
- Hangul can represent **over 7,000 distinct sounds**

Hangul is exceptionally **flexible and expandable**.

For example, the **Cia-Cia tribe of Indonesia**, which historically had no writing system, officially adopted Hangul. They even use additional consonants originally included in early Hangul, enabling more sounds than those used in modern Korean.

King Sejong wrote in the preface of the *Hunminjeongeum Haerye* (the explanatory text of Hangul):

“A wise man can learn it before the morning is over, and even an uneducated person can learn it in ten days.”

Hangul in the Modern and AI Era

Hangul is extremely easy to type on computer keyboards, and the one-sound-per-symbol nature makes pronunciation straightforward. Combined with its rich expressive capacity and scalability, Hangul is considered **ideal for the AI era**.

Try writing your name in Hangul—

If you can say it, Hangul can express it!