

Sejong the Great and Hangul

Sejong the Great (1397-1450) is one of the most loved figures in Korean history. He didn't found a dynasty or fight any big wars. Sejong promoted science, art and good government. He established a "Hall of Worthies" which brought together talented scientists and scholars to promote technical improvements in agriculture and industry. He published books promulgating the best medical practices. He supported music and art. Sejong's reign (1418-1450) is generally regarded as a Golden Age of Korean culture and prosperity.

But all these achievements are dwarfed by his design and promulgation of the Hangul writing system. Before Sejong's reign the Korean language was written in Chinese characters. Literacy required memorizing thousands of different complicated shapes. The Chinese and Japanese still use the characters. Students in those countries spend years mastering them through thousands of hours of practice.

In Sejong's time government was officially based on Confucian principles. Confucianism is clear that all people are born equal. But it is also clear that people can improve themselves through education. In Sejong's time, good government jobs were largely distributed on the basis of scores on standardized tests, a system which had been used in China for well over a thousand years and was to continue into the twentieth century. This system ensured a literate ruling class and provided limited social mobility for very talented children from poor families. But it excluded the vast majority of the population on the basis of their illiteracy. Only rich people could afford to provide their children with the expensive education necessary for literacy.



Sejong the Great



Sejong statue in Seoul

Sejong changed that by changing the writing system to one that was enormously easier to learn. In the preface to the book promulgating the new system Sejong famously wrote:

Sejong: The sounds of our country's language are different from those of China and are not confluent with the sounds of characters. Therefore, among the unlearned people, there have been many who, having something they want to put into words, have in the end been unable to express their feelings. I have been distressed because of this, and have newly designed twenty-eight letters, which I wish to have everyone practice at their ease and make convenient for their daily use.

Sejong did not choose letters arbitrarily or adopt an existing script. Sejong and the team of scholars helping him chose letters which reflected the position of the mouth when they were pronounced.



Velar sound



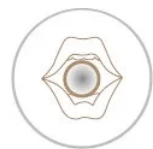
Lingual sound



Labial sound



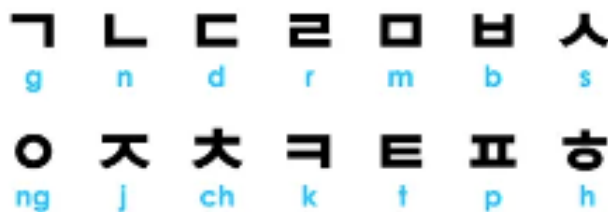
Dental sound



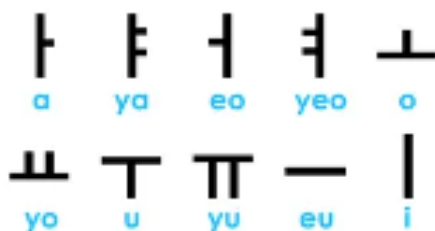
Guttural sound

Working from these five basic consonants Hangul adds strokes for emphasis. For example the basic lingual sound ㄴ (n) becomes ㄷ (d) by adding a stroke and ㅌ (t) by adding two strokes. Adding the Hangul vowels the whole system is:

1-1. Consonants



1-2. Vowels



Note that the modern system has 24 letters, less than the 28 Sejong promised. In the last 580 years 4 of the original letters fell into disuse.

In the Hangul system, letters are combined to make syllables which can be either two letters, a consonant and a vowel, or three letters, a consonant, a vowel, and another consonant. This is shown in the below example.

Hangul is a phonetic alphabet designed for the Korean language. It is perfectly possible to write other languages in Hangul although the sounds will come out as Korean. For example, suppose you saw this shop on a street:



We will break down the sign into its constituent letters and syllables

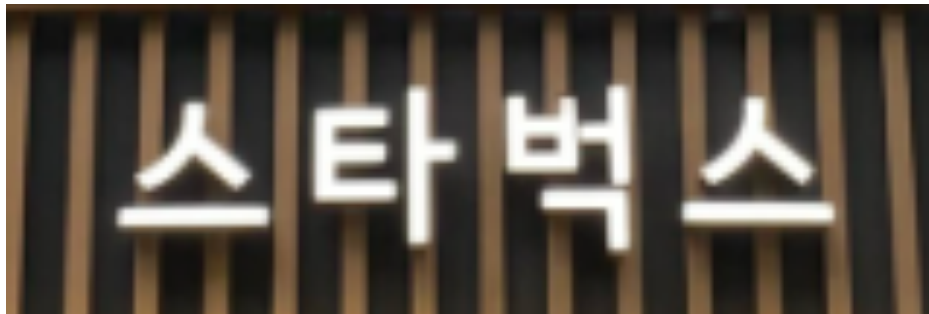
1-1. Consonants

ㄱ	ㄴ	ㄷ	ㄹ	ㅁ	ㅂ	ㅅ
g	n	d	r	m	b	s
ㅇ	ㅈ	ㅊ	ㅋ	ㅌ	ㅍ	ㅎ
ng	j	ch	k	t	p	h

1-2. Vowels

ㅏ	ㅑ	ㅓ	ㅕ	ㅗ
a	ya	eo	yeo	o
ㅛ	ㅜ	ㅠ	ㅡ	ㅣ
yo	u	yu	eu	i

Let's decipher the sign with the above table.



s-eu t-a b-eo-g s-eu

That is how “Starbucks” would be pronounced in Korean.

That's it! There are a couple of minor complications. Sometimes two vowels are combined and sometimes consonants are doubled to make a particularly harsh sound. But the basic system is very easy to learn. It is completely consistent. There are none of the pronunciation challenges of English sentences like “Learning English is rough, but it can be understood through tough thorough thought though.” It is enormously easier than memorizing thousands of Chinese characters.

Sejong's preface emphasized the advantage of literacy in enabling all people to express themselves. This is perfectly true. But there were tremendous practical advantages too.

Sejong's Hall of Worthies could produce great manuals for scientific agriculture, but what use are they if farmers can't read?

Hangul did face political resistance. The established Confucian scholar class believed, accurately, that Hangul would undermine their monopoly on knowledge. Hangul empowered the poorer classes. Hangul also empowered women, who, even if rich, had been traditionally excluded from classical education in Chinese.

Because of conservative resistance, Hangul did not become universal in Korea until early in the 20th century. Perhaps one of the reasons Korea is 30% Christian today was the fact that 19th century Protestant missionaries embraced Hangul

Today, most Koreans are very proud of having a writing system scientifically designed to serve the people. Sejong is universally admired.