



*Hangul, the Korean Script
'the world's best' alphabet*

WE HAVE seen so far scripts of the cultures of certain antiquity developed to suit their needs. All of them served their purpose, namely, of communication, more or less. But none can be called perfect. In all these cases, the language preceded writing. Among the ancient scripts that survived there had been attempts to improve them with various degrees of success. The attempt by the Chinese in the last century is an example. But whether attempt was an improvement or a regression has been subject of academic discussion.

Some scripts, because of their religious association, became venerated scripts. Siddham is one such script that is worshipped, as we are going to see in the next presentation.

Aesthetic dimension of writing has also been explored. The Arabic script offered unlimited scope for graphic rendering, while the Chinese was suited for artistic expression of individuals. The former would be presented in the last.

But if a mere alphabet can be hailed as an outstanding intellectual achievement of humankind and compared with best of classical art, with that of Parthenon, the Sistine Chapel etc, this would go to the Korean script.

If a search for a perfect script is made, the Korean script would be the nearest in the world. In its simplicity, efficiency and elegance, it has no parallel. And this Esparanto script was the work of an individual, that too, a ruler, in the 15th century.

Let us look at the historical context.

By 700 CE, Korea became a unified nation. But its sophisticated society was deeply influenced by its 'big brother' China, and the Chinese script is one among the Chinese influences that permeated it.

But the Chinese script was ill-suited to the Korean language, for Chinese and Korean are not related: Chinese builds sentences of small words, while Korean adds suffixes to modify roots.

The first stage in the ingenuity of adaptation was in the complicated system of transliteration that used some Chinese characters for their meaning and others that sounded 'vaguely' like Korean. This is for only the laity. The scholars were comfortable with the Chinese language, an excellent way of insulating themselves from the plebian.

Then came a true scholar-compassionate ruler, who was also a statesman. In 1418 came to the Korean throne Sejong, only 22 at that time. He was a rare combination of determination and tolerance. He was committed to Neo-Confucian philosophy, a vision of a world in which men lived in harmony with mankind, and mankind lived in harmony with nature. He was man determined to do good to people, and fortunately, with a power to do it.

And a new script is born.

Now an edited list of his accomplishments:

- set up his own 'research institute'
- reorganized ritual and protocol
- equipped an observatory
- revised the calendar
- standardized weights and measures
- set up guidelines for the study of history
- oversaw the syllabus of an interpreters' school
- presented all these through books published
using movable metal types
- founded a dynasty that lasted five centuries

We shall seek parallel in the sub-continent:
Asoka? Kanishka? the Guptas? Mahendra?
Harshavardhana? Rajaraja? Bhoja? Krishnadevaraya?
Akbar? Closer in our time Nehru?

We shall now come to the topic, how Sejong came to invent a script.

He was very keen to spread the message of good living: of Confucian virtues of piety, loyalty and monogamy. He was convinced that people would do what is right if only they knew what it was.

He published a primer, (and it had to be in Chinese) initiating a proto-cultural revolution. He urged teachers to get out into the countryside with the primer, and ‘gloss and repeat the text, even to women and girls’.

But the common people were ignorant of Chinese and he was aware of the limitation.

“Since the common people generally do not know (Chinese) characters, even if this book is distributed, how can they know its meaning and act upon?”

Then came an original and brave idea of creating a suitable script. The ruler was quite aware of the difficulties: of inventing one that would be challenging by itself, and pushing it through the throats of his own establishment and the Chinese-speaking and Chinese-worshipping 'intelligentsia'.

Now the wonder script. In the 28th year of his rule, he published his ‘invention’. Its name explains its aim and content: **The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People**. His introduction was revealing.

“The sounds of our language differ from those of China and are not easily conveyed in Chinese writing. In consequence, among the ignorant, there have been many who, having something put into words, have in the end been unable to express their feelings. I have been distressed by this, and have newly designed a script of 28 letters, which I wish to have every one practice at their ease and use to advantage in everyday life.”

The introduction was in Chinese!

He was confident of its simplicity and effectiveness.

“A wise man may acquaint himself with (the letters) before the morning is over. An ignorant man can learn them in the space of ten days. . . . There is no usage not provided for, no direction in which they do not extend. Even the sound of the winds, the cry of the crane, the cackle and the barking of dogs – all may be written.”

The new script owes nothing to tradition – ‘it has been perfected out of nature itself’. And here lies the intellectual height of the inventor. Hangul means ‘great script’, and truly so! “There is nothing like it in all the long and varied history of writing.’

I may mention some of the astonishingly original features:

The letters are based on an accurate analysis of Korean phonemes. The difference between vowels and consonants can be seen visually.

The shapes of basic consonant have physical significance, which would be explained later. Other consonants are formed using certain simple rules.

There is a specific mode of joining the consonants and vowels within a syllable.

The letters themselves consist of small curves and short lines, making the writing easy to learn even by children.

It adapts ingeniously the Chinese practice of combining letters into 1096 Korean syllables, which are written in blocks.

To avoid breaking from the tradition, the syllables of Hangeul resembled the Chinese characters in the shape and the capacity to be written horizontally or vertically.

Let us understand the script now and follow its logic.

Though designed for practical use, it reflects the inventor's Neo-Confucianism.

The three basic Confucian symbols, a vertical for Man, a horizontal for Earth and a circle for Heaven are adapted for vowels.

The shape of symbols for basic consonants resembles a person's speech organ.

It was just not the scientific method that shaped the letters. The king considered human sounds as being more than mere physical phenomena. An invisible yet more powerful principle was the controlling force behind these phenomena, according to him. The principle that human sounds and all universal phenomena, he reasoned, are all based on yin-yang (positive-negative) and the *pancha-bhutam* (the five primary elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth). Then it is natural that there be a common link between sounds and the changing of the seasons and between sounds and music.

Being so scientific and with its philosophical overtones, did it have a smooth sailing? Of course not!

The patricians were appalled. According to them only non-Chinese barbarians like the Mongols and the Tibetans have their own scripts. They cautioned: The culture of the Right which our country has amassed and accumulated, will be swept from the earth. They felt that this easy learnability would make even women literates, trivializing the process of scholarship!

True, despite Sejong's authority, it did not sweep. Being clever and practical, he used his script in some of his pet projects, in Buddhist literature, poetry and novels.

The script came alive only towards the end of the 19th century, when in the first newspaper was published in Hangul in 1896. Japanese, during the first and second world wars forcibly suppressed it.

It was the post-war dictator of North Korea, Kim Ilson g who had the political will to push through the reform. And the South Koreans eventually adopted it.

So logical and simple is the script the children learn it with little effort and illiteracy is unknown in Korea. No mean achievement!

Thus we have the best alphabet any language can hope for. My own personal experience is that I required just three hours learning the script.



Hangul, the Korean script

Korean script, called *Hangul*, is considered to be the most efficient, scientifically designed alphabet in the world.

It was created by King Sejong of Korea in 1446.

Its original name was *Hunmin chong-um*, "the correct sounds for the instruction of the people."

Hangul, the Korean script



The king's motivation was to solve the difficulties faced by the common people in using complicated Chinese characters for writing Korean.

Hangul, the Korean script

"Being of foreign origin, Chinese characters are incapable of capturing uniquely Korean meanings. Therefore, many common people have no way to express their thoughts and feelings.

Out of my sympathy for their difficulties, I have created a set of 28 letters.

The letters are very easy to learn, and it is my fervent hope that they improve the quality of life of all people."

- King Sejong



The Chinese connection

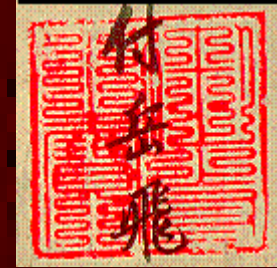


Belonging to Altaic family, the Korean language is genetically unrelated to Chinese.

But Korean, like Japanese and Vietnamese, looked to China for inspiration, as China was the ancient fount of culture in the region.

Hence Korean language borrowed vocabulary from Chinese on a massive scale adapting Chinese roots to Korean pronunciation.

The Chinese connection



The earliest writing in Korean, from about the 7th century, was an adaptation of Chinese characters to write Korean.

Certain Chinese characters were adapted for their sound values, whereas others for their meanings.

But this adaptation of the logographic system of Chinese to a totally different language was cumbersome.



The Korean Language and writing

The Chinese language was the scholarly language;
and Korean was given only a low-status.

It is in the 15th century that the king of Korea
created an alphabet, called Hangeul for Korean,
now considered to be the world's best alphabet.



Hangul

Some characteristic features

Sounds are divided into vowels and consonants, and can be differentiated at the symbols level too.



Hangul

Some characteristic features

A remarkable feature is that
the symbols for basic consonants
resemble a person's speech organ
and the remaining consonants
are formed by additional strokes to these.

The basic vowels, on the other hand,
are created in the image of
the sky, land, and man
and the remaining are variations of these.



Basic consonants resemble speech organs

There are five basic consonants – *m, n, s, k* and *voiceless*.

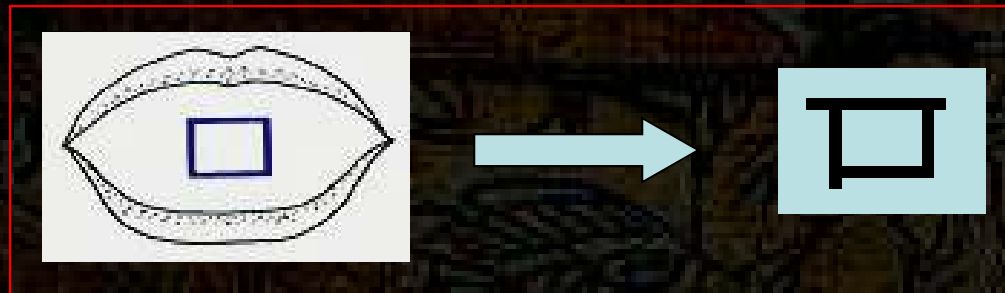
Let us see the remarkable feature of the script that signs for consonants resemble a person's speech organs.



Basic consonants resemble speech organs

'm'

To pronounce this letter upper and lower lips are joined. The shape of the letter is based on the form of the joined lips.



This is also the Chinese character for 'mouth'

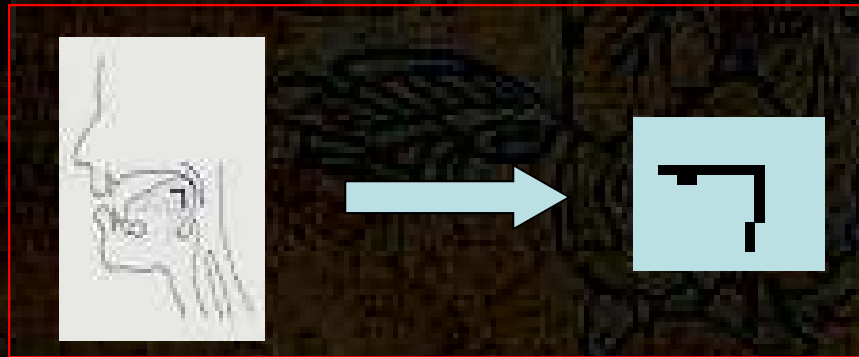


Basic consonants resemble speech organs

'k'

To pronounce this letter, part of the tongue touches the molar teeth and sticks near the uvula.

The shape of the letter is based on the lateral form of this process.



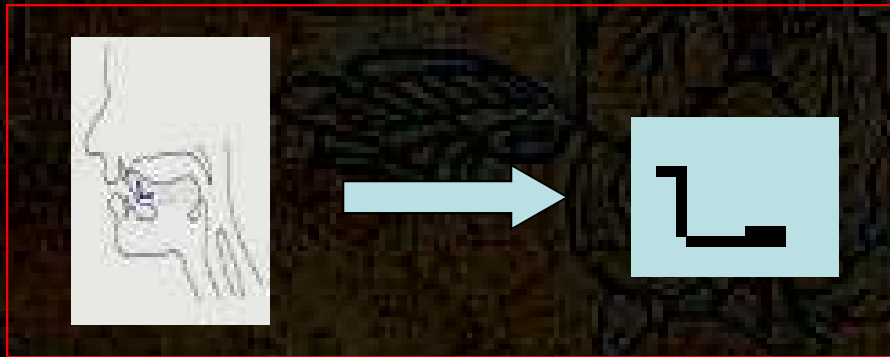


Basic consonants resemble speech organs

'n'

To pronounce this letter, the front of the tongue curves and the tip of the tongue sticks to the upper gums.

The shape of the letter is based on the lateral form of this process.



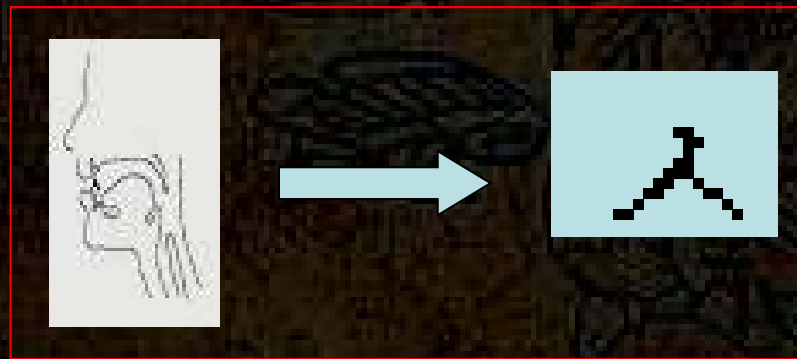


Basic consonants resemble speech organs

's or sh'

To pronounce this letter, the tip of the tongue and the upper teeth are brought close together, and sound is created by blowing through the narrowed passage.

The shape of the letter is based on the form of the teeth during the process.

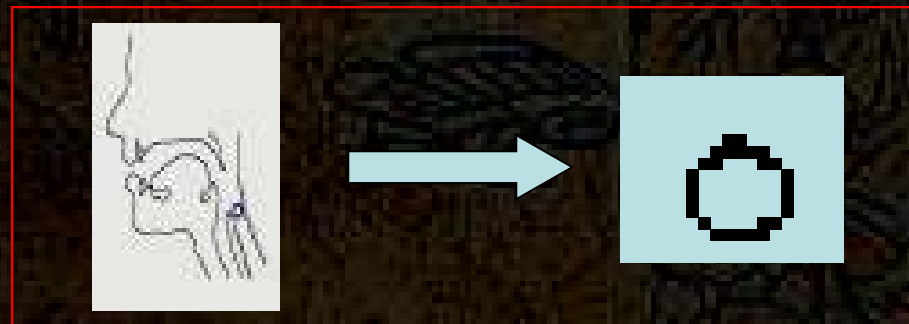





Basic consonants resemble speech organs

'voiceless'

To pronounce this letter
that is created by stimulating the uvula,
the throat assumes a round shape,
hence the form of the consonant.



Basic consonants

				
				
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s/sh</i>	-	<i>k</i>
continuants				stop

The first four are called 'continuants'
as these sounds are continuous in nature, and
The last is called a 'stopped' consonant

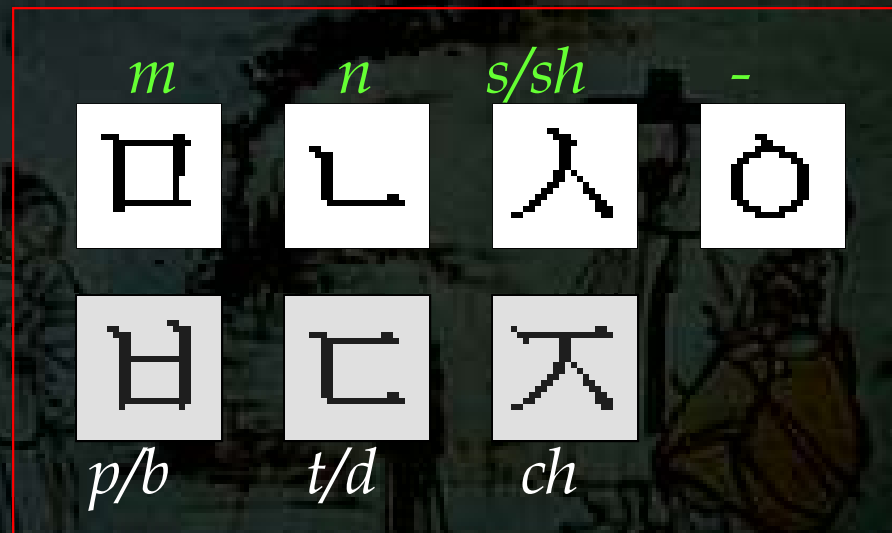


Other consonants

Nine additional letters were made by adding strokes to the five basic consonants based on the strength of the sounds



Stopped consonants



Letters for 'stopped' consonants are made by adding a horizontal line

Aspirated consonants



				
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s/sh</i>	-	
				
<i>p/b</i>	<i>t/d</i>	<i>ch</i>	<i>k</i>	
				
<i>ph/bh</i>	<i>th/dh</i>	<i>chh</i>	<i>kh</i>	<i>h</i>

Letters for aspirated 'stopped' consonants are made by adding one more horizontal line

Liquid consonant



The liquid consonant is made by adding an angular mark.
These are the 14 consonants of Korean alphabet

Basic strokes of vowels



Three basic strokes that are used to create vowels are in the image of the sky, land, and man.

‘o’ a small circle, resembles the roundness of the sky, later became a short line



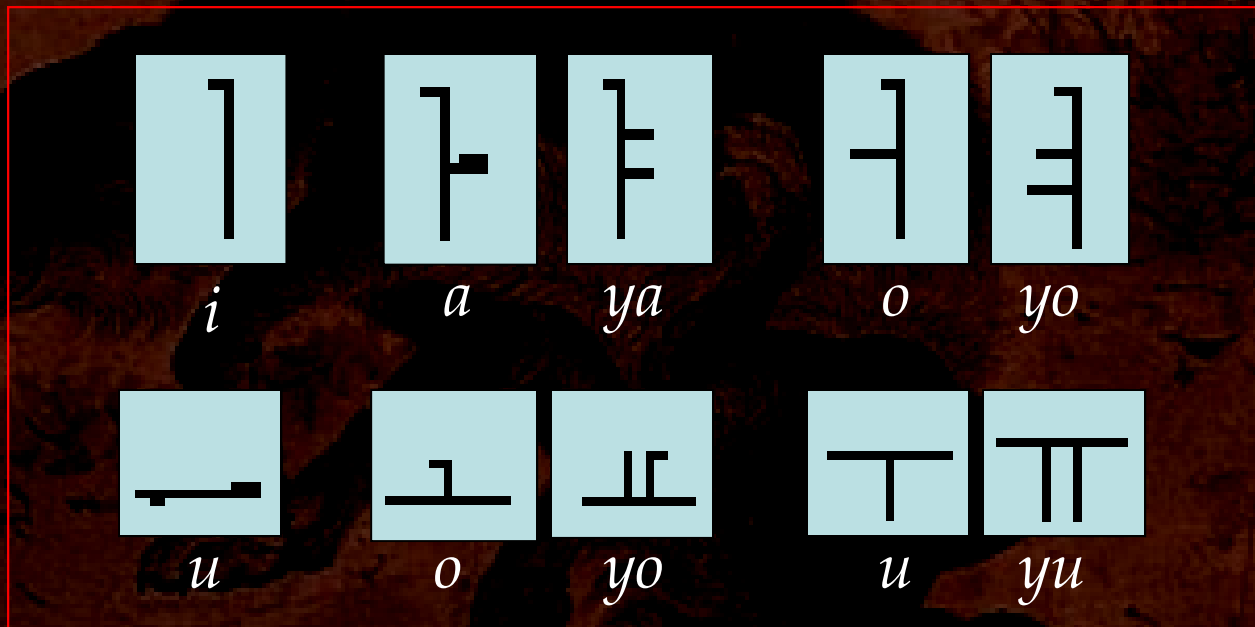
represents the flat land



is the image of a standing man.

Basic vowels

The vowels are made using the three basic strokes.



These are the 10 vowels of the Korean alphabet



Other letters

There are a few other letters:
double consonants and diphthongs.
All these are variations of the basic letters.



Syllabic character

Each character is a syllable, and is written in a square box.

A syllable always begins with a consonant.

A syllable has at least one consonant and one vowel; there can be an end consonant also.

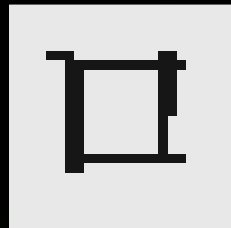


Writing a syllable

Placement of consonants and vowels
within the character of a syllable depends on
whether the vowel is vertical or horizontal.

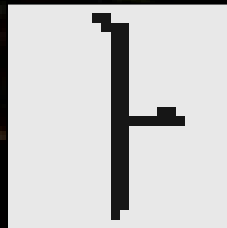
Writing a syllable

A syllable that consists of
a consonant and a vertical vowel
is written with the consonant on the left of the vowel.



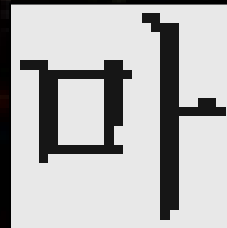
m

+



a

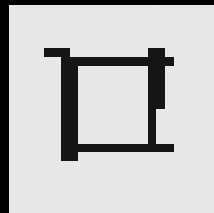
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ma

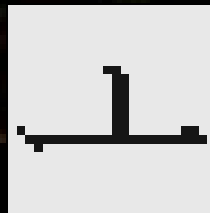
Writing a syllable

A syllable that consists of
a consonant and a horizontal vowel
is written with the consonant on the top of the vowel.



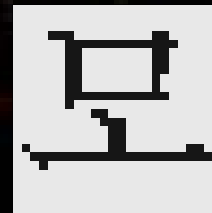
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o

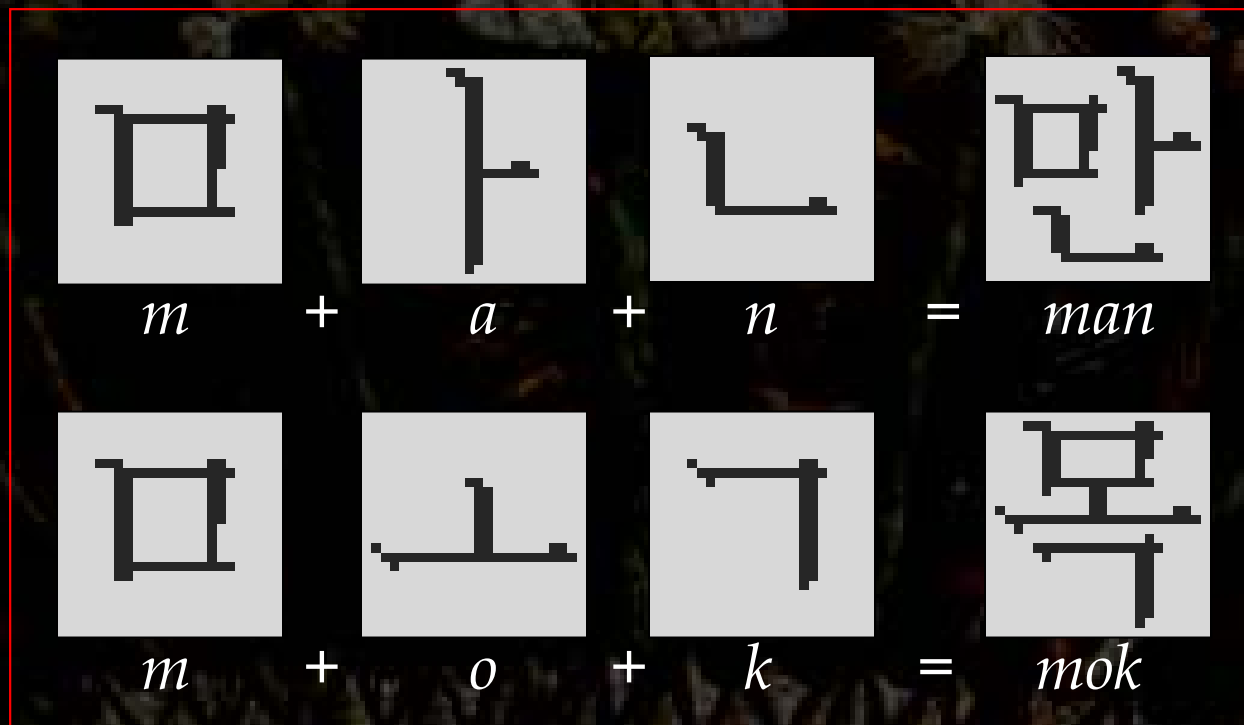
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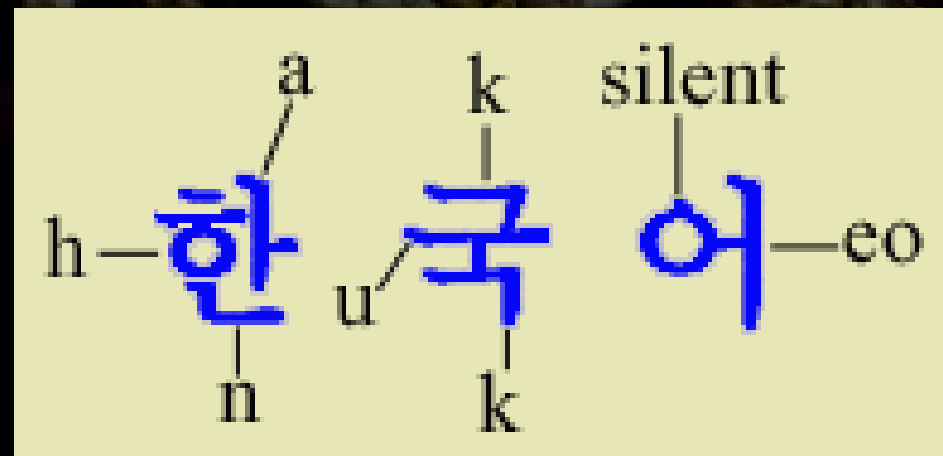
mo

Writing a syllable

If a syllable has a consonant, a vowel, and a final consonant, the final consonant goes to the bottom of that syllable.



Writing a syllable





Features of the Korean script

Hangul is considered to be most efficient script because of a number of special features.

For each character its structure itself reveals its pronunciation.



Features of the Korean script

The syllabic grouping consists of a small number of easily identifiable graphic units consisting of consonants and vowels.

In addition, its large size makes it easy to read.



Features of the Korean script

This script does not make a complete break
with the Chinese system of writing:

The syllabic-sized grouping
looks similar to Chinese,
is pronounced as one syllable like Chinese, and
can be written from top to bottom like Chinese.



Features of the Korean script

With only 14 consonants and 10 vowels,
it is claimed that
it is capable of expressing virtually any sound.

Because of its simplicity and the small number of letters,
even children and foreigners
can learn it easily.



Features of the Korean script

It is ironic that the strongest protest against its easy learnability came from scholars.

For the scholars who had spent years learning the complicated letters of the Chinese language, *Hangul* was too simple to be worthy of learning.

Hangul's Contribution to Korea



Throughout modern history, *Hangul* has been at the root of the Korean culture, helping to preserve its national identity and independence.

Thanks to its easy learnability illiteracy is virtually nonexistent in Korea.

Before concluding this presentation
of an unique script
let me write my name in Hangul

스와미나탄

S wa mi na than

A sample passage

모든 인간은 태어날 때부터 자유로우며 그 존엄과 권리에 있어 동등하다. 인간은 천부적으로 이성과 양심을 부여받았으며 서로 형제애의 정신으로 행동하여야 한다.

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