



Heritage Voices: Language – Korean

About the Korean Language

Korean is the language of approximately 49 million inhabitants of South Korea; 24 million of North Korea; and 7 million Koreans living in Central Asia, China, Japan, Russia and the United States (Lewis, 2009; World Bank, 2009). In terms of number of speakers, Korean is ranked as the twelfth most spoken language (Lee & Ramsey, 2000) and one of the most-used languages on the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2010). Although regional and standard dialects differ, they are mostly mutually understandable (Kim, 2010). Some linguists believe that Korean is affiliated with the Altaic languages, which include Turkish, Mongolian, Machu-Tungus, and Finnish (Kim, 2010; Sohn, 1999).

Although Korean is not genealogically related to Chinese, a large number of Chinese words and characters have become an integral part of Korean vocabulary due to historical contact. As a result, Korean vocabulary is composed of native Korean words (35%), Chinese loan words (60%), and other loan words (5%) primarily from English (Sohn, 1999). Chinese loan words are derived from Chinese character words and can be written both in the Korean alphabet and in Chinese characters. For example, "weather" can be written in Korean as "일기 (ilgi)" as well as in Chinese characters "日氣". English loan words, such as "bar", "restaurant", and "tailor" became familiar to Koreans after intensive contact with American culture and language after the Korean War. English words, such as "computer", "hamburger", "fashion", and other words related to new technology are frequently used due to Korea's rapid modernization and economic development (Tyson, 1993).

Characteristics of the Korean Language

The basic structure of Korean is based on SOV (subject-object-verb) order, while English follows the SVO (subject-verb-object) order. Korean is an agglutinative language, and verbs are formed by attaching various endings to the stem. Verb endings serve various functions, such as tense, questions, and honorific.

A special characteristic of the Korean language is its honorific system or speech protocol. The way to address someone depends on the speaker's relationship to the person being addressed and the level of formality. For non-native speakers, the proper usage of this speech protocol is one of the most difficult aspects of the language to master (Lee & Ramsey, 2000).

Writing System

The Korean alphabet was invented by King Sejong in 1443. Since the Korean alphabet was created through an intensive analysis of Korean phonology and speaking patterns, it is now praised as one of the greatest intellectual achievements and one of the most scientific writing systems (Kim, 2010; Sohn, 1999). The original name of the alphabet was *Hunmin jeongeum* or “the correct sounds of the instruction of the people.” This alphabet was, however, looked down upon by the ruling class at that time, who preferred Chinese characters.

The Korean alphabets are called *Hangŭl* in South Korea and *Chosŏn-mal* in North Korea. Both words mean “the language of Korean”, the symbol of national culture and cultural pride. In South Korea, the importance of Chinese characters has decreased since 1945, and most modern Korean literature, newspapers, and informal writing are written entirely in *Hangŭl*, while academic papers and official documents tend to be written in a mixture of *Hangŭl* and Chinese characters. In North Korea, all publications are written in *Chosŏn-mal*, and Chinese characters are used in only a few specialized books.

Hangŭl consists of 14 basic consonants and 10 basic vowels, of which variations can be generated by doubling the basic one. For example, “ㄱ” (*giyeok*) is out of “ㄱ” (*giyeok*). The syllable structure of words is a combination of consonants and vowels, where either one consonant or one vowel cannot stand alone. (See Table 1)

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|---|----------------------------|
| ㄱ/ㄴ/ㄷ/ㄹ/ㅁ/ㅂ/ㅅ/ㅇ/ㅈ/ㅊ/ㅋ/ㆁ/ㅌ/ㅎ | 14 consonants |
| ㅏ/ㅑ/ㅓ/ㅕ/ㅗ/ㅛ/ㅜ/ㅠ/ㅡ/ㅣ | 10 vowels |
| 한 [ㅎ(H) + ㅏ(A) + ㄴ(N)] 글 [ㄱ(G) + ㅡ(ŭ) + ㄹ(L)] Syllable structure: CVC + CVC | 한글 (<i>Han-gŭl</i>) |

Table 1. Syllable structure and 24 letters in modern Hangŭl (Lee & Shin, 2008)

Korean Language in the United States

One million Koreans live in the United States, comprising the fifth largest Asian group following Chinese, Filipino, Indian, and Vietnamese (US Census Bureau, 2000). A large number of Korean immigrants came to the United States between 1970 and 1980 for better economic opportunities, social and political stability, and educational options (Kim, 2010).

Studies report that Koreans experience a significant language shift from Korean to English between the first and second generation in the United States (Cho & Krashen, 1998). Among first-generation Korean immigrants, Korean is used extensively due to strong affiliations with Korean organizations and churches and Korean ethnic media. In contrast, second-generation Koreans do not use as much Korean as their immigrant parents and have very low proficiency in Korean (Kim, 2010).

Recently, the number of temporary residents from Korea has increased rapidly; nearly 94,000 Korean foreign students and exchange visitors entered in the United States in 2002 (Lee & Shin, 2008). A new type of temporary residents is called "goose families." The wife and children reside in the United States for the children's education, and the father stays in Korea to support them. Having different motivations for staying in the United States and maintaining contact with their Korean culture, these families make the pool of Korean heritage language speakers more diverse (Lee & Shin, 2008). There have been several efforts to revitalize Korean among young adult second-generation Korean Americans as a result of increased interaction with other Korean youth coming to the United States for higher education, the popularity of Korean pop culture, and online communities (Kim, 2010).

Spotlight on Korean Speakers

Angela and Simon Park



Angela and Simon Park are siblings and are 15 and 12 years old respectively. Angela attends high school, and Simon attends middle school in Maryland. Their family is a "goose family" from South Korea. The mother and children live in the United States for the sake of the children's education and to learn English, while their father stays in Korea and supports the family. When Angela was 7 and Simon was 4, their mother took them to New Zealand for four years to educate them in an English-speaking environment and their father, a professor at a Korean university, joined them during summer and winter vacations. Before they moved in the United States in 2008, Angela and Simon returned to Korea for 1 year to learn Korean and Korean culture.

At home, they speak Korean with their mother and read Korean books to maintain their native language. At school, both Angela and Simon use only English with their friends and socialize primarily with American or other international friends rather than with Koreans. Angela believes that learning English is very important and that is pointless to mingle with only Korean friends and speak Korean at school, because her family came to the United States to learn English. At the same time, Angela identifies herself as a Korean and recognizes that maintaining her Korean identity is important. She explains, "I think it is important to know your own language and heritage. It's important because I am Korean, and it's crucial that I know my culture very well, so that I don't lose my heritage and become completely Americanized."

Simon has been exposed to English and other cultures longer than his sister, and he is very aware of the importance of being bilingual in Korean and in English. "As a Korean, you need to learn English and Korean. If you don't know Korean but know English only, it doesn't make sense." Simon finds it interesting that their family is living in "a Korean way" in America by speaking Korean, eating Korean food, and celebrating Korean culture and adds, "I like being a Korean. I like the language and culture, because my whole experience and my whole life have been Korean, and nothing will ever change this."

Dr. Sarah Shin



Dr. Sarah Shin migrated with her family to the United States in the 1970's when she was 13 years old. She has studied different languages, such as French, Japanese, and Chinese as a part of her linguistics degree. However, her native language is Korean, and she learned English as a second language. She is currently a professor and co-director of the M.A. TESOL program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

She learned English in 8th grade in middle school, when she first came to the United States. It took her almost a full year to really understand English and a few years to become comfortable with it. During her high school years, she hung out with Chinese friends and, in this way, improved her English skills. English is the language that she uses most of the time. She believes that her Korean has remained at an 8th grade level, and she can better express academic topics in English rather than in Korean.

Korean and English are both very important to Dr. Shin but for different reasons. She uses English in her profession, but at home with her family and children, she uses a mixture of Korean and English. As an expert in bilingualism, she believes that maintaining Korean language and culture is very challenging in the United States, as most native languages of immigrants get lost by the 2nd or 3rd generation. Therefore, she and her husband have tried different ways to raise their children as bilinguals: "We tried very hard when my older son was born. We were thinking that we wanted to speak Korean to him and wanted him to become a bilingual. But when he started to go to an English-speaking pre-school 2 hours a day, we could definitely see a remarkable shift in his language use patterns. He was much more Korean dominant before and, once Kindergarten started, it was very much English." To help their two children learn Korean language and literacy, they sent them to a Korean language school, found a Korean tutor, and showed them Korean books and movies. However, these did not work out as they expected: "Kids don't find the Korean school and books very interesting. We tried to show them movies in Korean, children's shows in Korean, all these things. We tried quite hard, but it's very difficult to stick to Korean when everything else is requiring them to be an American and speak English."

Dr. Shin believes that it is important for her children to know their own language and culture as ethnic minorities in the United States. She maintains, "At one point in your life, you start to question 'Where do I come from?' For example, when my younger son was in his early elementary years, he came home and said, 'Mom, these friends are darker than me, and these friends are lighter than me'. Children notice these things and ask themselves 'Why do I look like this and not like my other friends?' It is very important for them to know who they are, and their physical appearance is definitely a part of them. If it is not their immediate experience, it is an experience of their parents, their grandparents, and their ancestors, and you can't erase that. So I want them to have the option of further exploring issues of identity through language."

Teresa and Steve Cho



Teresa and Steve Cho are married and came to the United States with their respective families in the 1970's, when Teresa was 4 and Steve was 5. At that time, the Korean economy was not as developed as it is now, and many Koreans immigrated to the United States to look for better economic opportunities. For that reason, Teresa's family migrated to the United States and settled in Maryland. Teresa communicates in Korean with her parents and her grandmother, who speak only Korean, while she speaks English with her siblings and other friends.

Although she does not speak Korean as much as she used to, she believes that there are advantages to being bilingual in Korean and English: "Even now, there are some words and descriptions that I can explain better in Korean than in English. So it's definitely an advantage in that sense. You can explain things in different ways and a little more clearly by knowing both languages." In addition, she finds her Korean ability helpful whenever there is a need to converse in Korean. However, the complex honorific system in Korean is still very difficult for her: "I used to speak to my mother and my grandmother and I spoke like a child because I was growing up; it's now hard to speak very fluently with adults, in a formal language, and I felt very inadequate, very uncomfortable, and it is very stressful."

On the other hand, Steve, originally from New York City and working as a medical doctor in Baltimore, Maryland, did not use much Korean while he was growing up. He only spoke Korean with his mother, because his father was already proficient in English and wanted his children to adopt English and American culture quickly: "I guess my family is more Americanized than most Korean-American families, because my dad spoke English and really liked the American culture. I don't think my dad is a typical Korean man. I think he is less formal and, even eating, he didn't want to use a regular Korean metal rice bowl. Because of him, we ate on regular plates. He wanted us to be Americanized as much as possible at the beginning."

Although the family has some challenges in maintaining the Korean language, they appreciate Korean culture and values, which they want to integrate and pass on to their children. As Steve says, "There are a lot of good things about American culture, but there are some weaknesses, too. You can take the best things from American culture and Korean culture, blend it, and make it your own. I think a lot of values in Korean culture, such as strong family bonds, respect for elders, and educational aspiration, are important. I think those things are the key."

In the Korean heritage language schools that they attended in their childhood, Teresa and Steve learned a lot about Korean culture, such as Korean Tai-Kwon-Do, songs, performances, and dances. However, they do not think it was sufficient to learn Korean in just the Korean weekend schools due to limited instruction time and traditional instructional styles. Therefore, they want to find a good Korean school so that they can send their children to learn the Korean language and culture and to improve their own Korean skills.

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Hye-Sook Lee is from South Korea and is enrolled in the Ph.D. program of Language, Literacy, and Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She earned a Bachelor's degree in German Language and Literacy in South Korea and Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Information Science and Comparing Cultural Studies in Germany. Her doctoral research focuses on the impact of an online teacher training program on teachers working with English language learners. She works with the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritages Languages at the Center for Applied Linguistics documenting Korean, Turkish, and German heritage language programs and writing about their importance in the United States.

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