

Assignment 2: Documentary Describing a Pre-Digital Communication Technology

“Hangeul” and its Effect on Mass Literacy and Politics

ETEC 540 66A

Text Technologies: The Changing Spaces of Reading and Writing

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## Introduction:

Wherever we are, wherever we look we are surrounded by words, but rarely do we ever stop to think about where all these letters and symbols came from and how they came to represent words. Many of the world's written languages came about thousands of years ago. Some were first developed from simplified drawings and others were created by borrowing from existing writing systems to create their own. Still others came about as completely new creations in the course of a few years, such as the Korean written language known as "Hangeul". Modern linguists consider Hangeul as one of the most scientifically advanced phonetic alphabets in the world (Cock, 2016). For this documentary I chose to present the history behind the Korean writing system, "Hangeul" and its effect on mass literacy and politics.

## King Sejong and the Birth of Hangeul:

The Korean language itself is one of the oldest living languages in the world. But it was only in the 1440s that it developed its own writing system, known as "Hangeul". Before the invention of Hangeul, Koreans used "Hanja" to write, which uses Chinese characters that have been adapted to transcribe the Korean language. However, because Chinese characters are logographic, the use of Hanja was not the easiest nor was it the most ideal writing system for Korean words and grammatical structures (Kim-Renaud, 1997). What made it difficult was that Hanja requires one to memorize thousands of different characters to represent words that do not necessarily match the Korean spoken language. The only people who had enough time or resources to devote to learning and mastering Hanja were the rich and powerful Korean nobles called the "yangban". As a result, commoners were largely illiterate except for a select few.

Hangeul was created under King Sejong, who held the throne from 1418 to 1450 during the Joseon Dynasty. King Sejong is considered to be one of the greatest rulers in the history of Korea (Kim-Renaud, 1997). In order to bring literacy to his people, King Sejong gathered scholars under the Royal Academy and established a group called the Alphabet Commission of the Hall of Worthies. The first Korean alphabet was introduced in 1446 and with it a book called “Hunmin Jeongeum”, which literally translates to “the correct sounds for the instruction of the people” to explain the principles of Hangeul. “Hunmin Jeongeum” was in fact the original name for Hangeul and in its foreword King Sejong explains his purpose for inventing Hangeul as, “[s]addened by this [widespread illiteracy], I have developed 28 new letters. It is my wish that people learn these letters easily and that they be convenient for daily use” (Cock, 2016, para. 19).

Hangeul today has 24 letters, of which 14 are consonants and 10 are vowels. Its letters are composed of a combination of lines and circles only, combined to form 12,000-odd phonemes (“The Economist”, 2013). Its three main vowels (o, —, | ) represent the sky, the earth and man (“The Economist”, 2013). The shape of its consonants is derived from that of the mouth, lips and tongue in forming their sounds (“The Economist”, 2013). Hangeul’s letters in the alphabet are grouped into characters representing a whole syllable (The Economist, 2013). Hence, Hangeul is a cross between an alphabet and a syllabary, in that “the symbols transparently reflect the individual sounds in each word, but are also assembled into clear syllabic blocks” (Cock, 2016, para. 9). Until the 1980s Korean was usually written from right to left in vertical columns. However, since then Korean has been written in horizontal lines from left to right.

Implementing Hangeul into Korean Society:

Although King Sejong had invented an alphabet that appropriately reflected the Korean language, which was easy to learn and allowed the uneducated men and women to read and write for the first time, Hangeul was met with strong opposition and criticism from King Sejong's advisors, the yangban, and subsequent monarchs. According to those who opposed Hangeul, it was barbaric, primitive, unnecessary, and needed to be eliminated (Taylor & Taylor, 1995). They opposed the idea of using Hangeul as the Korean written language because it would undermine the yangban and possibly create disruption within the government if the uneducated common people had access to written material. There were concerns that this written language would reflect poorly on the nation, as it would be associated with other uncultured nations who did not use Chinese script (Taylor & Taylor, 1995). Hangeul with its simple script compared to the highly honoured Chinese script was looked upon as bringing disgrace to the nation and had no value amongst the yangban (Taylor & Taylor, 1995).

For this reason, the scholars called the Alphabet Commission of the Hall of Worthies worked in secrecy for three years to develop an alphabetic writing system that could compliment the spoken Korean language and be learned easily by the masses. Finally, in 1446, King Sejong unveiled the new Korean alphabet and began to promote "Hunmin Jeongeum" or "The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People" as he called the new writing system. He made great efforts to popularize its use by setting up institutions to promote it, having books and poems be written in it, and having classical writings be translated into the new script. The yangban did everything to try and suppress the use and spread of the new written language. However, King Sejong continued to promote Hangeul, determined to bring literacy to the masses. In 1450, just four years after "Hunmin Jeongeum" was published King Sejong passed away and his predecessors, his eldest son and grandson, were both forced by their advisors and the yangban to

close the institutions promoting Hangeul. Later in 1504 during the reign of the notorious King Yeonsan, an anonymous letter written in Hangeul was printed criticizing the king and his reign of terror. King Yeonsan ordered his men to find the person who was responsible for the letter. In an unsuccessful search for the perpetrator, King Yeonsan had important Hangeul texts burned and even banned males from studying Hangeul altogether.

Hangeul's place in politics continued to be turbulent for centuries afterwards. It was only during the Gabo reform in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Hangeul was adopted as the official script for government documents. When the Japanese colonized Korea in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they banned everything related to Korean culture, including speaking and writing in Korean. Hangeul became associated with Korean nationalism, and it became increasingly popular eventually becoming the default script for Koreans.

### Conclusion:

King Sejong said to his people that “[a] wise man can acquaint himself with [hangeul] before the morning is over; a stupid man can learn [it] in the space of ten days” (Cock, 2016, para. 11). Currently, both South Korea and North Korea have near complete literacy among their people (~98%) (“UNESCO”, 2017). Advances in technology and the Internet have also been attributed to the ease with which Hangeul can be typed using a Korean keyboard. According to Bolter's theory of remediation, “a newer medium takes the place of an older one, borrowing and reorganizing the characteristic of writing in the older medium and reforming its cultural space” (2002, p. 18). Consequently, Hangeul illustrates Bolter's theory of remediation in that it was created to replace Hanja for the purpose of eliminating problematic Chinese script and its logographic origins which did not compliment the Korean language. In both modern-day Koreas, Hanja has since been phased out of general use. Although South Korea continues to teach a list of 1,800 essential Hanja in

middle school and high school. North Korea on the other hand has completely removed Hanja because it was seen as a form of cultural imperialism (Song, 2015). In South Korea, Hangeul Day is celebrated on October 9<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the release of the “Hunmin Jeongum” by King Sejong. In North Korea, it is commemorated on January 15<sup>th</sup>, which makes it the only writing system to have its own national holiday. Finally, most notably every year UNESCO awards the King Sejong Literacy Prize whereby, “[honouring] the outstanding contribution made to literacy over 500 years ago by King Sejong, who created the native Korean alphabet ‘Hangul’ which is still a valuable model and reference for the world today” (“UNESCO”, 2017).

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