

K-LGR Proposal Misrepresents the Reality of Korea

Keonbum Lee, President of Solidarity for Hangul Culture (<http://www.urimal.org/>)

25/march/2018

KGP's K-LGR proposal distorts the fact that Hangul-only writing has been stabilized within the last 20 years and Hanja is no longer in use in Korea. The proposal misleads readers into believing that Hangul-Hanja mixed-script writing -- a legacy from before the 1990s -- is still currently the dominant form of writing the Korean language. This is not a regulation based on the reflection of reality, but a fabrication of reality for a regulation. Therefore, the K-LGR proposal by KGP must be revised.

Despite being the script used by the ancestors, Hanja is a second-rate foreign script that does not come close to the Latin alphabet and its prevalent usage. If it becomes necessary to mix various scripts, ICANN will eventually implement such policies not only for Korean users, but also for all Internet users. It is completely unnecessary to mix Hanja into Hangul and disrupt the Korean language environment.

1. KGP's arguments do not correctly reflect the reality of Korea

While society might change over time, some things from the past live on as relics, as does Hanja in Korea. Although the proposal admits to the comparably low usage of Hanja, it justifies the usage of Hanja by mentioning special cases. The proposal claims that "As shown in Appendix H from different angles, Hanja is still critical and still used quite a lot in Republic of Korea. Therefore, it is necessary that Hanja shall be included in K-LGR." (Section 3.4)

However, Appendix H of the proposal is immensely exaggerated as to mislead readers into believing that Hanja usage is prevalent among Koreans. This must be corrected as follows.

1) While 57% of Korean words have Hanja roots [1], writing these words without using Hanja does not hinder communication. Therefore, textbooks, newspapers, magazines and web pages are written in Hangul only. Hanja was solely used before the 20th century, Hangul and Hanja were used in tandem for nearly a hundred years of the 20th century, but Hangul has become the only script to be used since the late 20th century.

2) Corporate registration: Effective 2008, corporate names must be written in Hangul only, and Hanja and foreign characters can be written in parentheses if needed [2]. Corporate names mixing Hangul and Hanja are anachronisms of pre-1990s.

3) Public signboards: They should be presented in Hangul in principle. When using foreign scripts, it needs to be accompanied by Hangul unless any special ground exists [3]. According to a research on 8,000 signboards in Seoul, Hangul-only signboards were 54.4% of total, Hangul and other foreign scripts 28.5%, foreign-scripts-only 17.1%. Hanja-only signboards were only 0.3% of total, significantly low even among foreign scripts [4].

4) In an attempt to promote Hanja education, the Ministry of Education of Korea announced in 2014 to implement parallel usage of Hangul and Hanja (example: 한국(韓國)) in primary school textbooks. However, it was met with fierce backlash, and the Ministry retreated to putting Hanja in footnotes, which was eventually withdrawn in the end of December 2017 [5]. In 2016, the Constitutional Court of Korea dismissed the claim that prohibiting the mixing of Hangul and Hanja in government documents and textbooks is unconstitutional, and declared that there is no problem with the Hangul-only policy.

In fact, what best reflects the reality of Korea in KGP's proposal is this sentence: "However, Korean is written mostly and only in Hangul, and Hanja are simultaneously added for additional information only in exceptional cases where it is deemed necessary by the author to clarify the meaning or to avoid potential confusion or vagueness in understanding the meaning of the words." (Appendix G.1 (5) Modern Korean)

As such, Hanja is intended for additional description, not used as an independent script for writing the Korean language. Mixing Hangul and Hanja in top-level domains (TLD) fails to reflect the reality

of Korea, and is a regressive idea that reverts the written Korean language, now free from the shackles of Hanja, back to its primitive state.

2. How Hanja usage in Korea eventually died out

Hanja has been used in Korea for more than 1,500 years. Writing in Hanja followed the syntax of the Classical Chinese language, creating a discrepancy between spoken and written languages. In 1443, King Sejong created Hangul (called Hunminjeongeum at the time), which is much easier for Koreans to learn than Hanja since it enabled Koreans to write the Korean language according to its sound and word order. Hangul was officially recognized as the national script at the end of the 19th century, during which opinion leaders published a Hangul-only newspaper "The Independent" for about five years. However, after Japan annexed Korea, the Korean language began to be written in a mixture of Hangul and Hanja, much like the Japanese language which is written in a mixture of Kana and Kanji. This style of writing was commonly used even after Korea gained independence from Japan, but Hangul usage greatly increased due to the people and the government's efforts to write official documents and textbooks in Hangul. Since the 1970s, primary and secondary school textbooks have been exclusively written in Hangul, and Hangul-only writing significantly increased in official documents and laws.

The switch to Hangul-only writing in daily newspapers played a decisive role in the eventual decline of Hanja and the consolidation of Hangul-only writing. Started by The Hankyoreh in 1988, prominent Korean newspapers began to exclusively use Hangul, the last of them being The Chosun Ilbo in 1999. This concluded the script revolution driven by people. Thanks to the invention of the Internet -- which allowed people to directly post opinions on public online spaces -- Hangul-only writing was rapidly consolidated. Today, except some scholars, most Koreans do not use a single Hanja character in a year. Now Koreans are liberated from the bane that is Hanja.

3. Status of Hanja in Korea

Although Hanja in Korea has a status of traditionally used characters, in reality, it can never surpass the status of "foreign scripts" like the Latin alphabet. Despite being the script used by the ancestors, Hanja is a second-rate foreign script that does not come close to the Latin alphabet and its prevalent

usage. Due to an increase in English usage, Koreans are much more exposed to the Latin alphabet than to Hanja in advertisements, web pages and books.

In primary and secondary schools, Hanja classes are optional and can never exceed a total of 100 classroom hours. On the other hand, English classes are mandatory and occupy more than a total of 1,200 classroom hours [6]. Classical Chinese classes in Korean secondary schools had been mandatory for years, but in the late 1990s they became optional, much in line with secondary foreign language classes, reflecting the trend of rapidly shrinking Hanja usage. Since then schools and students who choose Classical Chinese classes are ever decreasing in number; this gives indisputable evidence of the fact that Hanja is not in daily use [7].

No language other than Japanese uses mixed-script writing. Starting from the 17th century in Russia, the French language became popular among nobles and the Latin alphabet was used more frequently than the Cyrillic alphabet. But today, the Russian language is exclusively written in the Cyrillic alphabet. The Byzantine Empire used medieval Greek and Latin languages as lingua franca, written in Greek and Latin alphabets respectively. Since the 15th century, the Turkish language began to be written in the Arabic script under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in early 20th century, Turkey abandoned the Arabic script and returned to the Latin alphabet. Despite this history of alternation, Turkish text is not written in a mixture of the Arabic script and the Latin alphabet. Vietnam used Chinese characters until the 18th century, when it replaced them with chữ Quốc ngữ which is based on the Latin alphabet. The modern Vietnamese language also does not mix Chinese characters and the Latin alphabet. Similarly, Hanja is just a script of Korea's past with diminishing modern usage, now reduced to a foreign script used by Chinese and Japanese people.

4. Mixing Hangeul and Hanja in top-level domains is a manifestation of greed

Besides Japan, no country in the world mixes two different scripts whether in daily life or in Internet domain names, including top-level domains. Russian IDNs only allow the Cyrillic alphabet, Turkish IDNs only the basic Latin alphabet, Vietnamese IDNs only chữ Quốc ngữ, and Chinese IDNs only Hanzi. To mix two different scripts in Korean IDNs is but a manifestation of greed that is incongruous to the reality of Korea. To use multiple scripts is not an indication of diversity, but a product of crudeness and confusion.

One of the signboards listed as an example in the K-LGR proposal is "coffee 볶는 男子." Mixing the Latin alphabet and Hangeul in public signboards is illegal in Korea, but overlooked for commercial reasons. If Hanja and Hangeul were allowed to be mixed in TLDs, why not mix Hangeul and the Latin alphabet? ICANN implemented IDN policy in order to achieve broader accessibility for non-English speakers, not to fulfill such commercial ends.

In Korea, the Latin alphabet is used hundreds of times more frequently than Hanja. This trend will persist, if not continue to grow stronger. But it seems that Korea has no plans to mix Hangeul and the Latin alphabet in TLDs, like any other country. If it becomes necessary to mix various scripts, ICANN will eventually implement such policies not only for Korean users, but also for all Internet users. It is completely unnecessary to mix Hanja into Hangeul and disrupt the Korean language environment.

References

- [1] https://www.korean.go.kr/common/download.do?file_path=reportData&c_file_name=089edc41-f609-4030-afb0-ad58a925bcd3_0.pdf&o_file_name=%ED%91%9C%EC%A4%80%EA%B5%AD%EC%96%B4%EB%8C%80%EC%82%AC%EC%A0%84%20%EC%97%B0%EA%B5%AC%20%EB%B6%84%EC%84%9D.pdf&downGubun=reportDataViewForm&report_seq=40 이운영 (2002), "표준국어대사전 연구 분석 (An Analysis on the Standard Korean Language Dictionary)," 국립국어연구원 (National Institute of Korean Language)
- [2] <http://glaw.scourt.go.kr/wsjo/gchick/sjo330.do?contId=2200025> 상호 및 외국인의 성명 등의 등기에 관한 예규 (Regulations on the Registration of Trade Names, Foreign Personal Names, Etc.)
- [3] http://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=44508&lang=ENG 옥외광고물 등의 관리와 옥외광고산업 진흥에 관한 법률 시행령 (Enforcement Decree of the Act on the Management of Outdoor Advertisements, Etc. and Promotion of Outdoor Advertisement Industry)
- [4] 한글문화연대 (Solidarity for Hangeul Culture) (2017), "서울시 옥외광고물(간판) 한글표기 실태 조사 (A Research on Hangeul Usages in Public Signboards in Seoul)"
- [5] <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/schooling/827055.html> 한겨레신문 (The Hankyoreh) (2018-01-10), "교육부, 초등교과서 한자 병기 정책 폐기 (Ministry of Education shelves plan to use

Chinese characters in parallel with Hangul in elementary school textbooks)"

[6] <http://moe.go.kr/boardCnts/view.do?boardID=316&lev=0&boardSeq=62381> 교육부 (Ministry of Education of Korea) (2015), "2015 개정 교육과정 (2015 Revised School Curriculum)"

[7] http://www.gyohanjin.com/bbs/board.php?bo_table=data02&wr_id=9 전광진 (2015), "한자병기의 이론 기초 및 기대 효과 (The Base Theory and Expected Benefits of Writing Hangul and Hanja in Parallel)," 초등학교 한자교육 활성화를 위한 공청회 (Public Hearing on Encouraging Hanja Education in Primary Schools), 교과서한자어교육진흥회 (Gyogwaseo Hanjaeo Education Promotion Association)