



# A guide to Hunminjeongeum



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A guide to  
**Hunminjeongeum**

## The aim of this guide

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This brochure was written so that everyone can easily understand the graphic principles, scientific characteristics, and merits of Hun-min-jeong-eum, the representative cultural heritage of Korea.

## Notes

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1. This brochure is organized so that the main contents of the *Hunminjeongeum* (the *Haerye* version) can be easily understood by everyone. Its objective is to include only the things about Hunminjeongeum that everyone should know.
2. Descriptions in this brochure were refined according to the following criteria.
  - 1) Terminology is at a level of which high school students or the general public can understand.
  - 2) The contents of this brochure are based on those widely used in academic circles, and the brochure does not necessarily reflect different or controversial views held by scholars.
3. Some images, photos, and diagrams were included to aid understanding. Actual pictures taken of the original documents were shown as much as possible. In cases where the original documents are damaged to the point that they are difficult to read, images of restored versions were presented instead.
4. In cases where necessary additional explanations are quite difficult or technical, they are given as annotations in footnotes.
5. “The names of Hunminjeongeum letters” in this brochure is based on Choe Sejin’s *Hunmongjahoe*(1527). The book presents names of letters indicating their pronunciation at that time, which lead to names of Hangeul letters in use today.

## Terminology

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Terminology used in this brochure is defined as follows.

### (1) Hunminjeongeum

This word actually has two meanings. Its literal meaning is ‘correct sounds to instruct the people’ and it refers to the native script that King Sejong invented in 1443. The term Hunminjeongeum may also refer to the book published in 1446 describing, in Classical Chinese, the new script, Hunminjeongeum. This book was titled *Hunminjeongeum* and is known as *Hunminjeongeum* (the *Haerye* version, *haerye* meaning ‘explanations and examples’). In this brochure, the word is italicized to *Hunminjeongeum* when it designates the book.

### (2) Letters (alphabet)

Individual units that can be written down once a syllable is divided into its consonant and vowel parts. In Hangeul, there are consonant letters such as ‘ㄱ [k], ㅋ [kʰ]’ and vowel letters such as ‘ㅏ [a], ㅑ [ja]’.

### (3) Hangeul

Korea’s native script. Another name for Hunminjeongeum in use since the 20th century. It started to become more widespread in 1910 when Ju Sigyeong (1876-1914), a Korean linguist in the late Joseon period, proposed and popularized the term.

### (4) Eonmun ‘vernacular script’

Another name for Hunminjeongeum, meaning ‘a script for everyday speech.’

### (5) Unified Hangeul Orthography

A system of unified Hangeul orthography proposed in 1933 by Joseoneohakhoe (The Korean Language Research Society, now the Hangeul Hakhoe).

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# What is Hunminjeongeum?

## 1. Who devised Hunminjeongeum?

Hunminjeongeum was devised by King Sejong, the 4th monarch of the Joseon dynasty(1392-1910). *Hunminjeongeum*, which is the book that explains Hunminjeongeum, was co-authored by King Sejong and the scholars of the Jipyeonjeon (Hall of Worthies, a royal academy). In this book, King Sejong himself wrote the foreword and the Ye-ui (‘definitions’) part, and the rest was written by Jeong Inji, Choe Hang, Bak Paengnyeon, Sin Suk-ju, Seong Sammun, Yi Gae, Yi Seonro, and Gang Hui-an, all scholars of the Hall of Worthies.

## 2. Why did King Sejong invent Hunminjeongeum?

Before the invention of Hunminjeongeum the Korean language had no native script with which people could write things freely. The ruling class had a “bilingual” life in that they spoke Korean but wrote in Classical Chinese. This made it difficult to plainly express one’s thoughts and feelings in writing. Thus, people resorted to writing down the language by borrowing either the pronunciation or the meaning of Chinese characters. This was not easy for the general populace.<sup>1</sup>

King Sejong felt sorry for the masses who did not know Classical Chinese and thereby could not express themselves with ease. So he devised a new script called Hunminjeongeum which anyone could learn and use easily, to conduct daily life without any inconvenience in written communication.

King Sejong possessed excellent qualifications as the best linguist of the times. Not only did he know the writing systems of neighboring nations but he also commanded a superb knowledge of Chinese phonology and philosophy. Consequently, he devised the new script Hunminjeongeum, which not only perfectly matched the Korean phonological system but also contained elements of profound cosmological philosophy.

Indeed, the new script Hunminjeongeum is a great and creative invention of the superb linguist King Sejong. It is an important milestone in the history of Korea, and is a seismic event in its cultural history.

<sup>1</sup> Choe Manli’s letter of appeal, as found in the Veritable Records of King Sejong, cites cases where the officials in charge of the prisoners would misread their statements written in Classical Chinese or in *Idu*, and accordingly give out unjust sentences. *Idu* was a way of transcribing Korean with Chinese characters. Chinese words (and characters) were borrowed for nouns, verbs, and adjectives, but for particles and endings, only the pronunciation, and not the meaning, of Chinese characters was borrowed. For example, in order to write the Korean particle –고 [-go], meaning ‘and’, the Chinese character 古 [go], meaning ‘old’, was used (disregarding its meaning and adopting its pronunciation only).

## 3. Commentaries on Hunminjeongeum

### • Hunminjeongeum (the Haerye version)

*Hunminjeongeum* is a book, written in Classical Chinese, describing the usage of the new script, Hunminjeongeum. Although King Sejong completed the work of devising the new writing system with 28 letters in 1443, a book with detailed explanations and examples of the new script came out in 1446. This book was titled *Hunminjeongeum* and is known as *Hunminjeongeum* (the *Haerye* version, *haerye* meaning ‘explanations and examples’).

The *Haerye* version of *Hunminjeongeum* contains detailed descriptions of the background, intent, and design principles of the letters (graphics) of the new script. According to the investigations done so far, this *Hunminjeongeum* is the only book in the world that has left the detailed records of a script’s creation. This value has been recognized both at home and abroad. The book was designated as National Treasure No. 70 in 1962 in Korea, and it was registered in UNESCO’s Memory of the World in 1997.

The book is organized into four parts: Royal Foreword, Definitions, Explanations and Examples, and Remarks by Jeong Inji.<sup>2</sup>

| Royal Foreword              | Definitions                                      | Explanations & Examples                         |          |         |        |          |                                | Remarks by Jeong Inji                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------|---------|--------|----------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                             |                                                  | Graphic                                         | Initials | Medials | Finals | Clusters | Usage examples                 |                                                                                                                   |
| Background and purpose      | Shape, pronunciation and usage of the 28 letters | Explanation of the graphic principles and usage |          |         |        |          | Examples of the letters in use | The purpose and characteristics, the inventors, the time of invention, the compilers, and the time of compilation |
| Sejong’s writing (4 sheets) |                                                  | The subjects’ writing (29 sheets)               |          |         |        |          |                                |                                                                                                                   |

Table 1 Organization of *Hunminjeongeum* (the *Haerye* version)

<sup>2</sup> Dividing the book into two sections, the initial part by King Sejong is called the *Jeongeum* part (or the text part), and the sections written by the subjects are called the *Jeongeum* explanations part.

*Hunminjeongeum* (the *Haerye* version) had been lost for a long time, until a copy was discovered in 1940 by Yi Yongjun in Andong, North Gyeongsang province. The book was purchased by Jeon Hyeongpil (penname: Kansong), and it has been kept in Kansong Gallery in Seongbuk-gu, Seoul, ever since.<sup>3</sup>

The version found in Andong consists of 33 sheets in one volume, but the first two sheets are not original, but restored ones, and in the restoration process a few errors were made.<sup>4</sup>

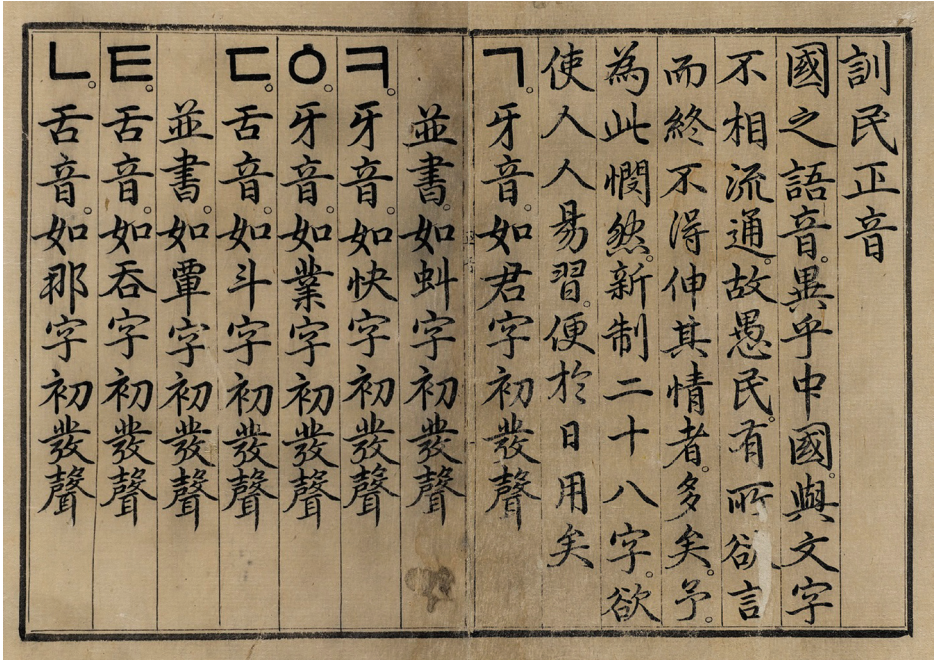


Photo 1 The first two pages of *Hunminjeongeum* (the *Haerye* version)  
Kansong Gallery Collection. Photo provided by Kansong Arts and Culture Foundation

• *Hunminjeongeum* (the Vernacular version)

This book is a version of *Hunminjeongeum* in which the first two parts (the Royal Foreword and Definitions) of the *Haerye* version were translated into Korean. There are many extant versions, of which the oldest, and the one carrying the highest scholarly value, is the one at the front of Volumes 1 and 2 of *Worinseokbo* (1459). It is currently kept in the Sogang University Library, in Seoul.

In this translated version there are a few items not found in the original *Haerye* version. For example, slightly varied forms of ‘ㅅ, ㅆ, ㅈ’ (extending either the left or the right legs) to transcribe the phonetic values of Chinese are found toward the end of the book. This shows that *Hunminjeongeum* letters were also used to transcribe foreign sounds.

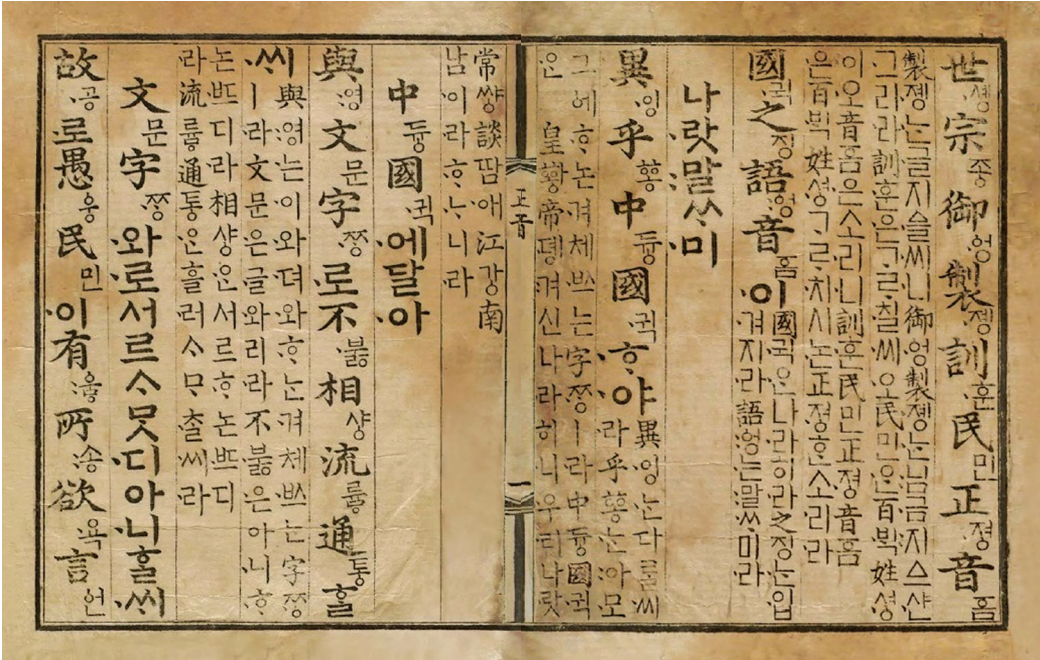


Photo 2 The first two pages of *Hunminjeongeum* (the Vernacular version)  
Photo restored and provided by Cultural Heritage Administration

3 Another copy of *Hunminjeongeum* (the *Haerye* version), thought to be a woodblock print like the Kansong version, was recently discovered in Sangju, North Gyeongsang province, but its authenticity has not yet been verified.

4 For example, ‘耳’, the last letter in the Royal Foreword, is erroneously written as ‘矣’, and there are also some cases of misplaced punctuation.

# Graphic principles in Hunminjeongeum

## 1. Letters imitating the shapes of vocal organs

• Five basic consonant letters (ㄱ, ㄴ, ㅁ, ㅅ, ㅇ)

There are five basic consonant letters of Hunminjeongeum that were designed to look like the shape of vocal organs (e.g. the lips, tongue, and throat) or their movements.

Thus, the letter ㄱ[k] depicts schematically the back of the tongue making contact with the velum,<sup>5</sup> ㄴ[n] depicts the tongue tip touching the upper teeth, ㅁ[m] depicts the shape of the mouth when viewed head-on, ㅅ[s] depicts the shape of a tooth, and ㅇ[h]<sup>6</sup> depicts the shape of the throat (pharynx).

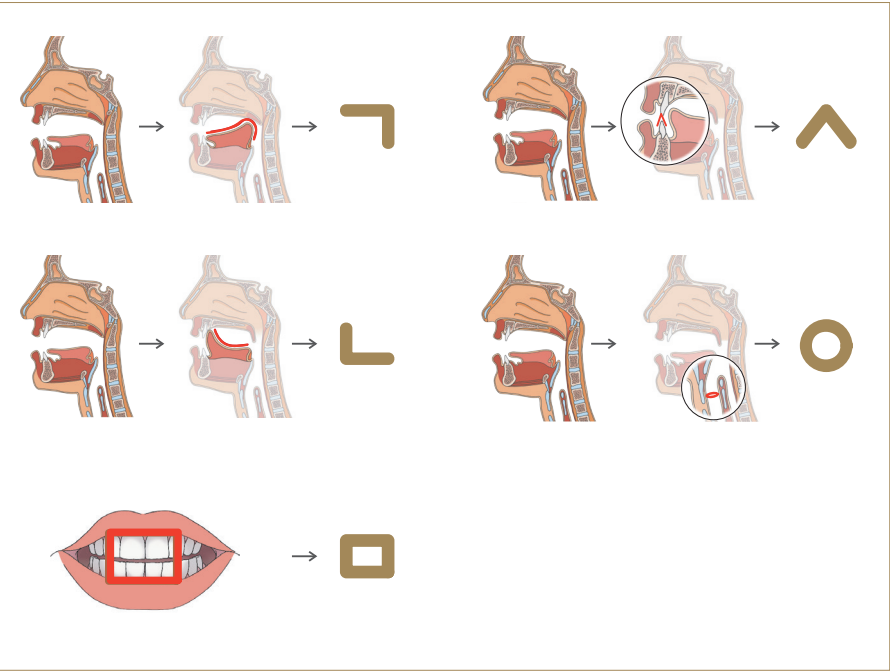


Illustration 1 Explanatory drawing of making basic consonant letters

5 The velum is the soft palate; that is, the soft part of the roof of your mouth, at the back of the mouth.

6 ‘ㅇ’ could also represent a null pronunciation in some cases.

• Three basic vowel letters (ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅣ)

There are three vowel letters of Hunminjeongeum that depict the (round) heaven (ㅏ [a]), the (flat) earth (ㅑ [u]), and the (erect) human (ㅣ [i]). In addition, ㅊ represents yang, ㅍ represents yin, and ㅊ represents both.

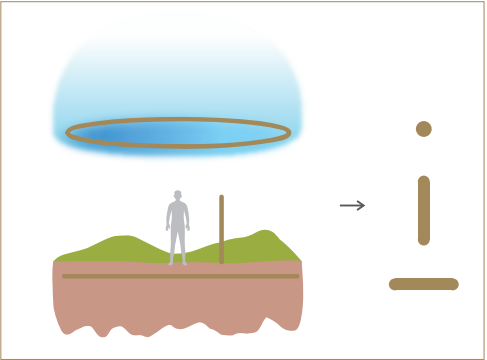


Illustration 2 Explanatory drawing of making basic vowel letters

## 2. Stroke-adding to basic consonant letters

Some other consonant letters besides the five basic ones were made by adding a stroke to the basic letters. For example, adding strokes to ㄱ[k] gives ㅋ[kʰ], a stronger (aspirated) ㄱ. The same goes for ㄴ[n] ⇨ ㄷ[t] ⇨ ㅌ[tʰ], ㅁ[m] ⇨ ㅂ[p] ⇨ ㅍ[pʰ], and ㅅ[s] ⇨ ㅆ[ts] ⇨ ㅈ[tʃ].<sup>7</sup> Adding a stroke to ㅇ[h] gives ㅎ[ʰ], and another stroke gives ㆁ[ʌ]. Besides these, ㅇ[ŋ], ㆁ[r], and ㆁ[z] were also made by adding strokes to basic letters. However, since they are not “stronger” sounds in any sense, they are called *icheja* ‘variant form letters.’

As can be seen, the consonant letters are scientific and systematic in that the letter shapes reflect their pronunciation. Also, since other consonants are formed by adding strokes to the basic letters, anyone who is familiar with this principle can easily learn the script.

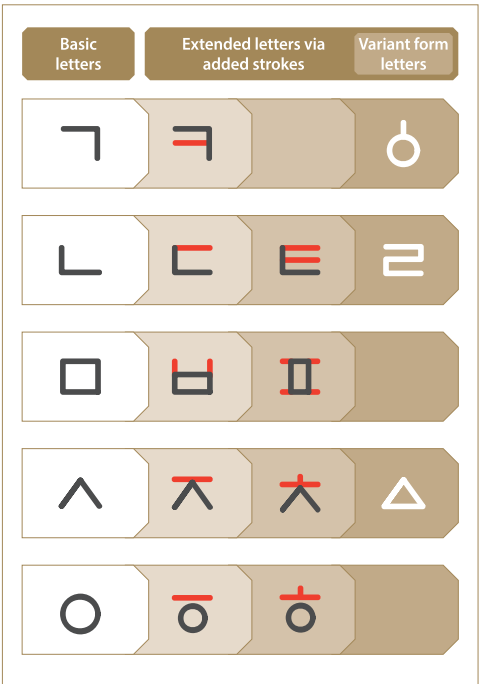


Illustration 3 Explanatory drawing of making other consonant letters by stroke-adding

7 ‘ㅆ’ and ‘ㅈ’ were originally alveolars which were later palatalized.

In *Hunminjeongeum*, the five basic consonant letters were also described in terms of five *haeng* (elements) of the yin and yang principles in Chinese cosmology, such that the five letters (molar, lingual, labial, dental, and glottal) correspond to five notes in a pentatonic scale (*gak*, *chi*, *gung*, *sang*, *u*, respectively), to five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, respectively), to five seasons (spring, summer, late summer, autumn, and winter, respectively), and to five directions (east, south, center, west, and north, respectively).

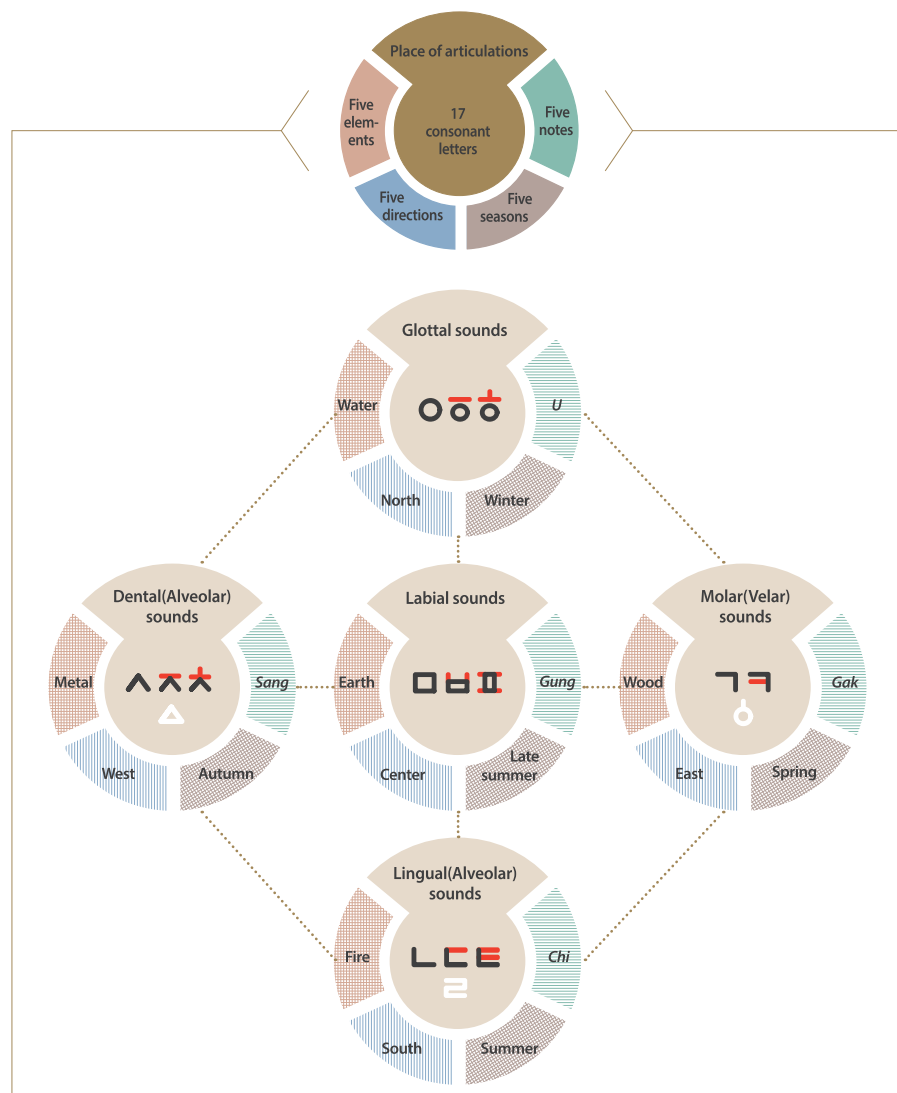


Illustration 4 Consonant letters reflecting the five *haeng* of the yin and yang principles

In summary, of the 28 letters of *Hunminjeongeum*, 17 are consonants, which consist of 5 basic ones, and 12 more derived from the basic ones by adding strokes (including 3 variant form letters). Of these, 3 letters (◌ (old *ieung*), Δ (half *siot*), ◌ (soft *hieut*)) are no longer in use today. (◌ merged with ◌, which represents a null pronunciation in syllable-initial position but [ŋ] in syllable-final position in the current orthography.)

|         | 5 Basic letters | Extended letters via added strokes (9+3 letters) |                      | Notes                        |
|---------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
|         |                 |                                                  | Variant form letters |                              |
| Molar   | ㄱ [k]           | ㅋ [kʰ]                                           | ㆁ [ŋ]                | '◌', Δ, ◌ are not used today |
| Lingual | ㄴ [n]           | ㄷ [t] ㅌ [tʰ]                                     | ㄹ [ɾ]                |                              |
| Labial  | ㅁ [m]           | ㅂ [p] ㅃ [pʰ]                                     |                      |                              |
| Dental  | ㅅ [s]           | ㅈ [t͡s] ㅉ [t͡sʰ]                                 | Δ [z]                |                              |
| Glottal | ㅇ [ɰ]           | ㆁ [ʔ] ㅎ [h]                                      |                      |                              |

Table 2 17 consonant letters in *Hunminjeongeum*

### 3. Combining basic vowels

In the case of vowel letters, they were formed by combining the three basic vowel letters (◌, ◌, ◌). The first derivation letters 'ㅏ, ㅑ' were formed by placing '◌' above '◌' and to the right of '◌', respectively. Likewise, the first derivation letters 'ㅓ, ㅕ' were formed by placing '◌' below '◌' and to the left of '◌', respectively.<sup>8</sup>

|               |               |
|---------------|---------------|
| ◌ + ◌ → ◌ [o] | ◌ + ◌ → ◌ [a] |
| ◌ + ◌ → ◌ [u] | ◌ + ◌ → ◌ [ə] |

To the four vowel letters thus made, 'ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ' was further added to yield four more letters with an onglide [j] in pronunciation, 'ㅛ, ㅝ, ㅞ, ㅟ', namely,<sup>9</sup>

|                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| ◌ [o] + ◌ → ◌ [jo] | ◌ [a] + ◌ → ◌ [ja] |
| ◌ [u] + ◌ → ◌ [ju] | ◌ [ə] + ◌ → ◌ [jə] |

<sup>8</sup> The vowel letters in combination with basic letters are called First Derivation Letters.

<sup>9</sup> Those letters formed with the addition of a dot (◌), now simplified to a short stroke 'ㅛ', are called Second Derivation Letters.

The new vowel letters derived in this way are also divided into yang and yin sets. ‘ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ’ were regarded as yang since ‘ㆍ’ was either on top or outside of ‘ㅡ, ㅣ’; while ‘ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ’ were regarded as yin since ‘ㆍ’ was either below or inside of ‘ㅡ, ㅣ’. In this way, ‘ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, ㅕ’ and ‘ㅗ, ㅛ, ㅜ, ㅠ’ were grouped separately having the contrastive meanings of yang and yin, respectively.

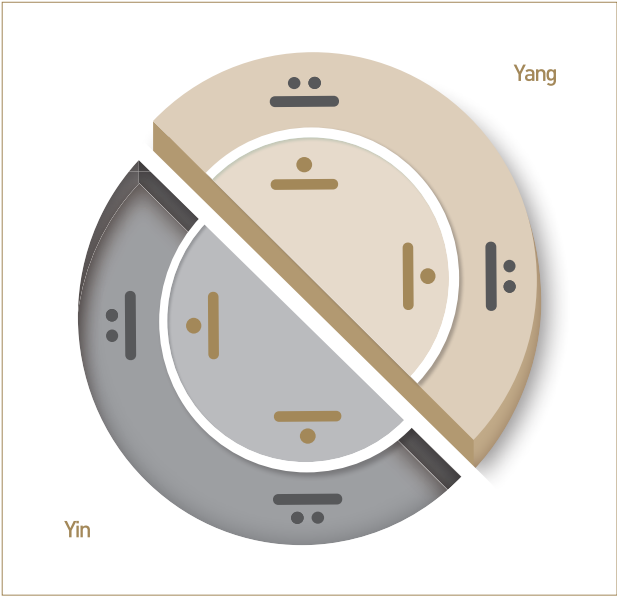


Illustration 5 Explanatory drawing of making the new vowel letters by combining basic letters

Summarizing the vowel letters of Hunminjeongeum, the number of vowel letters is 11 in all (3 basic + 8 derived). Of these, ‘ㆍ’ (‘lower a’) gradually lost its distinct phonetic value, and has not been used since the Unified Hangeul Orthography of 1933.

|      | 3 basic letters | 8 extended letters via combination |                              | Notes                 |
|------|-----------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
|      |                 | First derivation(4 letters)        | Second derivation(4 letters) |                       |
| Yang | ㅏ (heaven)      | ㅏ [o] ㅑ [a]                        | ㅓ [jo] ㅕ [ja]                | ‘ㆍ’ is not used today |
| Yin  | ㅗ (earth)       | ㅗ [u] ㅛ [ə]                        | ㅜ [ju] ㅠ [jə]                |                       |
|      | ㅣ (human)       |                                    |                              |                       |

Table 3 11 vowel letters in Hunminjeongeum

#### 4. Other expanded letters

Although not included among the original 28 letters, the following geminates are found in *Hunminjeongeum*: ‘ㄱㄱ, ㄷㄷ, ㅌㅌ, ㅍㅍ, ㅂㅂ, ㅅㅅ’.<sup>10</sup> Of these, the last (ㅅㅅ) is not used today, but the remaining 5 are used to represent tense consonants.

In addition, there are consonant clusters consisting of different letters, e.g., ‘ㄱㄷ, ㄴㅌ, ㅅㅈ, ㅈㅊ, ㅊㅌ, ㅌㅍ’.<sup>11</sup> At the time of their invention, they were used in both syllable-initial and syllable-final positions, but nowadays they are used only in syllable-final position (codas).<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, labial consonant letters ‘ㅁ, ㅂ, ㅍ’, formed by adding ‘ㅇ’ under ‘ㅁ, ㅂ, ㅍ’ were also found in *Hunminjeongeum*.<sup>13</sup> Of these, only ‘ㅁ’(light labial denoting labial fricative [β]) was frequently used briefly but fell into disuse soon. ‘ㅂ’ and ‘ㅍ’ were primarily used to transcribe Chinese pronunciation.

|                                             |          | At the time of invention     | Notes                       |
|---------------------------------------------|----------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Geminates (doubling the same letter)        |          | ㄱㄱ, ㄷㄷ, ㅌㅌ, ㅍㅍ, ㅂㅂ, ㅅㅅ       | ㅅㅅ is not in use today      |
| Clusters (combination of different letters) | Initials | ㄱㄷ, ㄴㅌ, ㅅㅈ, ㅈㅊ, ㅊㅌ, ㅌㅍ, etc. | all is not in use today     |
|                                             | Finals   | ㄱㄷ, ㄴㅌ, ㅅㅈ, ㅈㅊ, ㅊㅌ, ㅌㅍ       | ㄱㄷ, ㅈㅊ are not in use today |
| ‘ㅇ’ below labials                           |          | ㅁ, ㅂ, ㅍ (labial fricatives)  | all is not in use today     |

Table 4 Consonant geminates and clusters in Hunminjeongeum

10 Such writing is called *gakjabyeongseo* ‘self-doubled writing’ (geminates).

11 Such writing is called *habyongbyeongseo* ‘combined writing’ (clusters).

12 Syllable-final consonant clusters (codas) in contemporary use are ‘ㄱㄷ, ㄴㅌ, ㅅㅈ, ㅈㅊ, ㅊㅌ, ㅌㅍ, ㄱㅌ, ㄴㅍ, ㄷㅌ, ㄷㅍ, ㄹㅌ, ㄹㅍ, ㅅㅌ, ㅅㅍ, ㅈㅌ, ㅈㅍ, ㅊㅌ, ㅊㅍ, ㅌㅌ, ㅌㅍ’.  
A few original clusters have disappeared since pre-modern days.

13 Such writing is called *yeongseo* ‘overlapped writing’.

There are 28 letters in Hunminjeongeum, but the number of basic letters is only 8 (5 basic consonant letters plus 3 basic vowel letters). The rest are derived from the basic letters by adding strokes or combining letters. Thus, Hunminjeongeum is a simple and scientific writing system with a high systemicity, by combining consonant letters and vowel letters. With 14 consonant letters and 10 vowel letters in use today, one can create as many as 11,172 combinations.

|            | 28 letters at the time of invention                                                              | 24 letters in use today                                                             | Notes                                  |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Consonants | Ⴕ Ⴖ Ⴗ [k kh ŋ]<br>Ⴘ Ⴚ Ⴛ Ⴜ [n t th r]<br>Ⴝ Ⴞ Ⴟ [m p ph]<br>ၵ ၶ ၷ ၸ [s ts tsh z]<br>ၹ ၺ ၻ [ʃi ʔ h] | Ⴕ Ⴖ [k kh]<br>Ⴘ Ⴚ Ⴛ Ⴜ [n t th r]<br>Ⴝ Ⴞ Ⴟ [m p ph]<br>ၵ ၶ ၷ [s tɕ tɕh]<br>ၹ ၺ [ŋ h] | ‘ Ⴗ, ၸ, ၺ, ၻ, ၼ ’ are not in use today |
| Vowels     | ၾ ၿ ၽ [ʌ w i]<br>ၿ ၾ ၽ [o a u ə]<br>ၿ ၾ ၽ [jo ja ju jə]                                          | ၿ ၽ [w i]<br>ၿ ၾ ၽ [o a u ə]<br>ၿ ၾ ၽ [jo ja ju jə]                                 |                                        |

**Table 5** Hunminjeongeum letters and the 24 letters in use today

## The order of Hunminjeongeum letters

The order of the letters in *Hunminjeongeum* is not the same as the one currently in use. No particular order was shown in *Hunminjeongeum*, and different order criteria were used in the descriptions of the letters in different categories. No uniform standard was used.

In the case of consonant letters, the order was according to the place of articulation (i.e., molars, tongue, lips, teeth, and throat) in the Definitions, but within each place, yet a different order was applied. In the Graphics Principles section, the order was in general according to the complexity of letters (i.e., Basic letters  $\Rightarrow$  Extended letters via added strokes), but within each category, letters were arranged according to the place of articulation.

| Heading                 | The order of presentation                            | Order criteria                                                 |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Definitions             | ㄱ ㅋ ㆁ - ㄷ ㅌ ㄴ - ㅂ ㅃ ㅍ - ㅈ ㅊ ㅊ -<br>ㅇ ㅎ ㅅ - ㄹ ㅁ       | Place of articulation                                          |
| Graphic principles      | ㄱ ㄴ ㄷ ㅅ ㄹ - ㅋ ㅌ ㅍ ㅃ ㅈ ㅊ ㅊ ㅎ - ㆁ ㄹ ㅁ                  | Basic letters - Stroke-added letters<br>- Variant form letters |
| Explanation of initials | ㄱ ㅋ ㆁ - ㄷ ㅌ ㄴ - ㅂ ㅃ ㅍ -<br>ㅈ ㅊ ㅊ ㅊ ㅊ - ㅎ ㅎ ㅎ ㅅ - ㄹ ㅁ | Place of articulation: Addition of<br>'ㄱ, ㄷ, ㅂ, ㅈ, ㅊ, ㅊ, ㅎ'    |

**Table 6** The order of consonants in *Hunminjeongeum*

In the case of vowel letters, on the other hand, the order is uniformly according to the order of derivation from the basic vowels.

| Heading                | The order of presentation                                                                                                                                  | Order criteria                                                                                                 |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Definitions            | • —   - ˆ ˙ ˘ ˚ ˛ ˜ ˜˜ ˜˜˜                                                                                                                                 | In order of graphic principles<br>(Basic letters -<br>First derivation letters -<br>Second derivation letters) |
| Graphic principles     | • —   - ˆ ˙ ˘ ˚ ˛ ˜ ˜˜ ˜˜˜                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                |
| Explanation of medials | • —   - ˆ ˙ ˘ ˚ ˛ ˜ ˜˜ ˜˜˜ : - ˆ˙ ˆ˙˘ ˆ˙˘˚ ˆ˙˘˚˛ ˆ˙˘˚˛˜ ˆ˙˘˚˛˜˜ ˆ˙˘˚˛˜˜˜ -<br>˙˘ ˙˘˚ ˙˘˚˛ ˙˘˚˛˜ ˙˘˚˛˜˜ ˙˘˚˛˜˜˜ ˙˘˚˛˜˜˜˜ ˙˘˚˛˜˜˜˜˜ ˙˘˚˛˜˜˜˜˜˜ ˙˘˚˛˜˜˜˜˜˜˜ - |                                                                                                                |

**Table 7** The order of vowels in *Hunminjeongeum*

The order of the Hangeul letters in use today originated in Choe Sejin's *Hunmongjahoe*(1527).

# The names of Hunminjeongeum letters

The names of the Hangeul letters in use today first appeared in Choe Sejin's *Hunmongjahoe*(1527). Choe Sejin(1468-1542), a 16th century linguist from the Joseon dynasty, adopted and recorded in his book the order used among the people. In *Hunmongjahoe*, the letters used as both initials (onsets) and finals (codas) were named as follows: ‘ㄱ其役’ (기역 *gi-yeog*), ‘ㄴ尼隱’ (니은 *ni-eun*), ‘ㄷ池<sup>ㄷ</sup>’ (디귄 *di-geud*), ‘ㄹ梨乙’ (리을 *li-eul*), etc., while those letters used only as initials were given names such as ‘ㅋ<sup>ㄱ</sup>’ (키 *ki*), ‘ㅌ治’ (티 *ti*), ‘ㅍ皮’ (피 *pi*), etc.

In *Hunmongjahoe*, the vowels ㅣ *i* and — *eu*<sup>14</sup> were used in linking initial and final consonants, e.g., ㄴ (*ni-eun*), ㄹ (*li-eul*), ㅁ (*bi-eub*), etc. However, in the case of ‘ㄱ其役’ (기역 *gi-yeog*), ‘ㄷ池<sup>ㄷ</sup>’ (디귄 *di-geud*)<sup>15</sup>, and ‘ㅅ時<sup>ㅅ</sup>’ (시옷 *si-os*), because there were no Chinese characters representing the rhymes ‘*eug*, *eud*, *eus*’, similar sounding Chinese characters were used, i.e., ‘役’(역 *yeog* = 부릴 ‘work’), ‘末’(말 *mal* = 근 *geud* ‘end’), ‘衣’(의 *ui* = 옷 *os* ‘clothes’), respectively.

For this reason, irregular names ‘기역, 디귄, 시옷’, instead of what would be regular names ‘기, 디, 시’, are in use today in Hangeul orthography. In North Korea, however, the regular names are in use, namely, ‘기, 디, 시’.

|                       | ㄱ              | ㄴ              | ㄷ              | ㄹ              | ㅁ              | ㅂ              | ㅅ              | ㅇ              |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <i>Hunmongjahoe</i>   | 其役             | 尼隱             | 池 <sup>ㄷ</sup> | 梨乙             | 眉音             | 非邑             | 時 <sup>ㅅ</sup> | 異凝             |
| ROK<br>(South Korea)  | 기역<br>gi-yeog  | 니은<br>ni-eun   | 디귄<br>di-geud  | 리을<br>li-eul   | 미음<br>mi-eum   | 비읍<br>bi-eub   | 시옷<br>si-os    | 이응<br>i-eung   |
| DPRK<br>(North Korea) | 기, ㅅ<br>gi-eug | 니, ㅅ<br>ni-eun | 디, ㅅ<br>di-eud | 리, ㅅ<br>li-eul | 미, ㅅ<br>mi-eum | 비, ㅅ<br>bi-eub | 시, ㅅ<br>si-eus | 이, ㅅ<br>i-eung |

Table 8 A comparison of some consonant names in *Hunmongjahoe*, ROK and DPRK

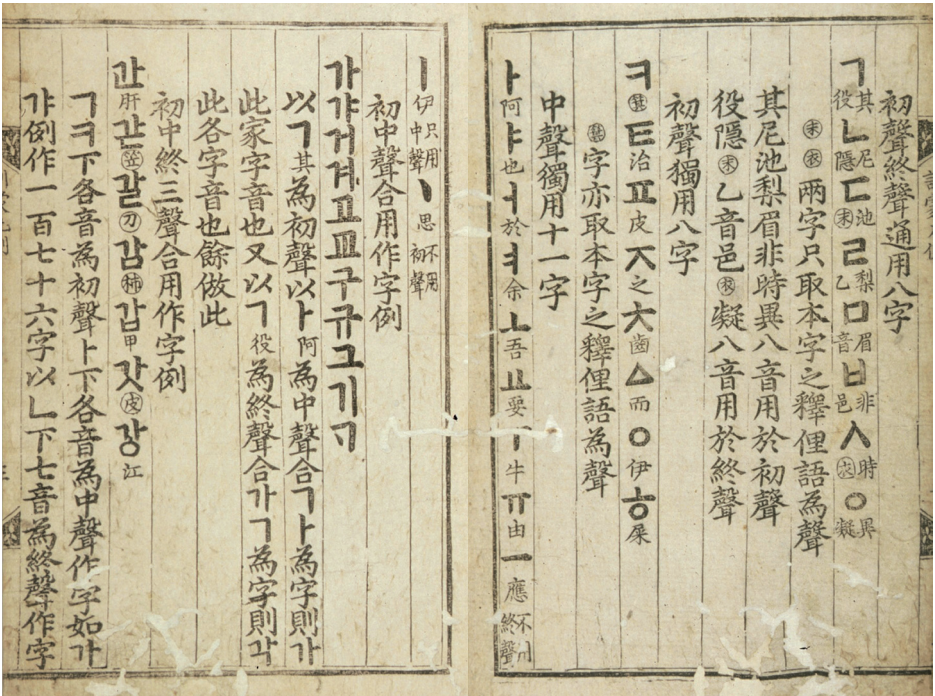


Photo 3 Vernacular letters in *Hunmongjahoe*  
National Library of Korea

14 This vowel is similar to the vowel in the American pronunciation of “good”.  
15 ‘池’ 디 was then pronounced [ti], although it is currently pronounced [tɕi] (with palatalization). Likewise, the meaning-reading of ‘末’ 근 was then [kut], although it is currently [kɯt] (with tensification of ㄱ).

Attribute to : National Institute of Korean Language, Hunmin jeongeum Society, Korean Language Society(Hangeul Hakhoe), Naramal(National Association of Korean Language Teachers)

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