

Korean Phonology and Hangul

By [Roger Keays](#), 18 February 2008

I've literally been dying to write this blog. Some topics get me very excited, but not many get me more excited than phonetics and phonology. Anyway, I wanted to make sure I got my stuff mostly right before posting. So what's all the fuss about then? Well it's Hangul that's what, and thanks to Sunny (), my new Korean friend I reckon I've pretty well got it sussed.

Hangul is the writing system used for the Korean language. What got me interested is not only that it almost perfectly phonemic, but that the letters (jamo) are arranged into syllables! I had never seen this before.. I'd never even *thought* this before. For example, my name in Hangul is arranged into the two syllables .

Okay, okay. First things first. Let's have a look at the individual jamo which make up each syllable. There are 24 characters in total, each one representing just one or two phonemes or diphthongs. First, the 14 consonants:

glyph	sounds	name	glyph	sounds	name
	[g], [k]	[gijk]		[k]	[kik]
	[n]	[nin]			
	[d], [t]	[digt]		[t]	[tit]
	[r], [l]	[ril]			
	[m]	[mim]			
	[b], [p]	[bip]		[p]	[pp]
	[s], [ʃ]	[iot]			
	[i]	[i]		[h]	[hit]
	[t], [d]	[jit]		[t]	[tit]

There are also five tensed consonants: , , , and .

But really the consonants don't interest me all that much. All those sounds can be found in English so it's not all that new. The vowels are (as always), much more difficult. It's taken me a long time to figure out, but I'm starting to get the hang of it. I have four different references for Korean vowels - two articles I found online, a CD I bought from the bookshop, and a recording of Sunny saying the vowels. Here are the vowel sounds as best I could make out from these sources:

a1	a2	cd	sun	a1	a2	cd	sun	a1	a2	cd	sun
[a]	[a]	[a]	[a]	[ja]	[ja]	[ja]	[ja]	[wa]	[wa]	[wa]	[wa]
[i]	[i]	[i]	[i]	[ji]	[ji]	[ji]	[ji]	[w]	[w]	[w]	[w]
[o]	[o]	[o]	[o]	[jo]	[jo]	[jo]	[jo]	[u]	[o]	[u]	[w]

[u]	[u]	[u]	[u]	[ju]	[ju]	[ju]	[ju]	[wi]	[u]	[wi]	[wi]
[]	[u]	[]	[]					[i]	[ui]	[i]	[i]
[i]	[i]	[i]	[i]								
[]	[]	[]	[]	[je]	[j]	[j]	[]	[w]	[w]	[we]	[w]
[e]	[e]	[]	[]	[j]	[je]	[j]	[j]	[we]	[we]	[w]	[w]

I have most difficulty with and , and and . Also I sometimes get and mixed up. It seems that for the Korean [r] your tongue must touch the roof of your mouth, which is why I sometimes hear [d]. I can't find the exact sound in IPA, but hopefully I have I'll be able to make some YouTube videos from Sunny's recording soon and post them here.

About Roger Keays



Roger Keays is an artist, an engineer, and a student of life. He has no fixed address and has left footprints on 40-something different countries around the world.

Roger is addicted to surfing. His other interests are music, psychology, languages, the proper use of semicolons, and finding good food.

[« Korean Phonology Video](#)

[Back to Korean](#)