Western Attitudes toward the Korean Language: An Overview of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Mission Literature

David J. Silva

Descriptions of Korea’s linguistic situation written by Westerners during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only reveal native and foreign attitudes toward the Korean language but also provide insight into language-focused evangelization tactics embraced by Christian missionaries. Upon their arrival in Korea during the 1800s, Westerners encountered a long-standing system of diglossia: socio-historical relations between China and Korea gave rise to the use of various Korean “lects” in which the degree of Chinese elements differed. Moreover, the nation’s indigenous writing system, han’gul, was widely regarded by Koreans as culturally subordinate to Chinese script, an attitude that garnered much attention from Western observers. These sorts of language attitudes were further reinforced by Westerners’ deterministic interpretations of Korea’s linguistic situation; believing the Korean language to be linguistically defective, many Westerners concluded that the Korean people suffered from corresponding deficiencies of intellect, education, and morality. In a campaign to “educate” the Korean populace, Christian missionaries worked to raise the status of the native language and orthography as part of what would prove to be a highly effective evangelization strategy.

Introduction

Differences between two cultures are perhaps best evidenced through the medium of language. Consider the cross-cultural significance of the following exchange, reconstructed from the author’s experience in Seoul during the academic year 1989–90; the interlocutors are the author and a fellow boardinghouse resident (하숙생 hasuksaeng):

Hasuksaeng: How do you say 제수생 (jaesusaeng) in English?
Author: Do you mean “a student who sat for the college entrance examination, failed it, and is now studying at a 학원 (hagwŏn ‘academic institute’) so he can take the exam the next year”?
Hasuksaeng: Yes! How do you say that in English?
Author: Uhm . . . Well, you have to say “a student who sat for the college entrance examination, failed it, and is now studying at a 학원 so he can take the exam the next year.”

Hasuksaeng: Yes—what’s the English word for that?

Author: There isn’t one.

Hasuksaeng: Really? So how do you talk about 業 in English?

Author: You don’t. There’s no such thing as a 業 in America.

Hasuksaeng: So what happens when a student fails the college entrance examination?

Author: Nothing, because there’s no way to “fail” the exam. You might earn a low score, but there’s no specific passing grade.

Hasuksaeng: How strange.

How strange indeed! It is well recognized that the study of a language can reveal much about how its speakers think, both as individuals and as members of the culture. While the majority of contemporary linguists have rejected the strongest versions of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis—that one’s language constrains the ways in which one habitually thinks—there is no doubt that every human language reflects the particular schemas whereby humans encode their thoughts and, by extension, organize themselves socially, politically, economically, and so forth. As Ray Jackendoff argues, this relationship between language and thought is dynamic. In formulating his “Argument for Construction of Experience,” he writes, “the experience of spoken language is actively constructed by the hearer’s mental grammar.” Given that this mental grammar is, in part, a product of the hearer’s cultural experience, an examination of language—particularly metalanguage, or “language about language”—in the context of cultural contact can provide insights about the relative attitudes of the two communities involved.

In this article, we investigate Western foreigners’ attitudes toward the Korean language by examining more than twenty published sources written from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century, a time during which Korea had its first substantive experience with Westerners, primarily Christian missionaries. Through a close reading of accounts written by these Western visitors to the contentiously named “hermit kingdom,” one can ascertain many of the underlying attitudes held by their authors, thereby coming to a fuller understanding of how many from the West viewed Korea. More specifically, we will focus on the vital role played by language issues in the development of Korean-Western relations, particularly in the context of a hugely successful mission agenda: without a doubt, Christian evangelization has proven far more successful in Korea than in any other East Asian nation. According to various sources, the Republic of Korea is home to some 11 million to 23 million Christians, who represent from 26 percent to 50 percent of the country’s population. As compared with the more meager percentage of Christians found elsewhere in the region—Japan, 0.7 percent to 3.6 percent; China, 1.1 percent to 7.1 percent; and
Taiwan, 2.7 percent to 6.3 percent—the establishment of Christianity in Korea is nothing short of remarkable. As argued herein, Western missionaries effectively exploited Korea’s language situation as part of a larger plan to evangelize the inhabitants of the peninsula.

**Early Western Accounts of the Korean Language**

Among the earliest published accounts of Korea by Western sources, there is little specific information about the kingdom’s language. Rather, authors emphasize two themes that elucidate the language situation: Korea’s cultural domination by neighboring China and Korea’s isolation from the West.

In his landmark 1670 record of early European contacts with Korea, Hendrik Hamel briefly discusses the language, noting that Korean is difficult to learn; that the people write using several systems, including Chinese characters and a “more coarse” system (i.e., han’gul); and that this latter orthographic vulgate is easy to learn. What little Hamel mentions is noteworthy inasmuch as his description establishes linguistic themes that reemerge in subsequent Western writings. Hamel mentions, for example, some type of “mixed script,” but does not elaborate. Some two hundred years later, Klaproth likewise notes the tremendous influence of Chinese language and culture in Korea: “Quant à la langue de ce peuple, elle est mêlée de beaucoup de mots chinois, absolument comme la japonaise.” While little mention is made of Korean *per se*, these earliest accounts suggest that in matters related to language, Korea was not fully autonomous: it was (at least historically) culturally indebted to the Chinese.

As regards Korea’s relative isolation, John McLeod writes in 1818 that “China has very little communication with the barbarians of the west, . . . Japan still less, and Corea none at all” (italics in the original). He adds that the “little knowledge we possess of Corea is mostly derived from the Jesuits of China, who certainly were not infallible guides in all matters. . . .” Cultural corollaries to this historical isolationism reveal themselves in accounts whereby Koreans attempted to project to Westerners the supremacy of Chinese characters, all the while adopting a protective stance toward their spoken language and native writing system. Charles Gützlaff explains in 1833 that he and his associates “endeavored to obtain some native books; but in this we failed; and indeed, we were not allowed even to have a sight of them.” These themes of Chinese domination and Korean isolation intersect forty-four years later, when John Ross, discussing “this long-sealed language of a still-sealed people,” writes:

... Koreans are unwilling to acknowledge the existence of a written national language, always declaring that they write only Chinese; and when it is known to exist they are unwilling to teach it, and more unwilling to write words in it. This is of course because of their jealousy of foreigners, and their fear that the latter are yearning to acquire their hilly lands. Besides, they do not regard the ability to read
and write their own language as sufficient to entitle to the rank of an educated man. This term is applied only to those familiarly acquainted with Chinese...³

Ross’s observation that the Chinese language claimed a position of linguistic superiority over Korean is echoed by subsequent descriptions of the linguistic situation in Korea during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, as such, rings true. Far more suspect, however, is the motive he attributes to the Koreans’ unwillingness to teach and write in their “national language.” Koreans’ relatively low estimation of their own language was less motivated by fears of foreign infiltration than by the long-standing parent-child relationship between China and Korea. This cultural asymmetry gave rise to diglossia, a situation deeply embedded in the country’s linguistic practices and attitudes.

The Language Situation in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea

KOREAN DIGLOSSIA

One of the most common observations made about the linguistic situation in Korea concerns the nation’s de facto bilingualism. Perhaps the boldest statement on this matter is provided by George W. Gilmore, who opens chapter IV of his 1892 book thus: “Chapter IV: The Languages. Korea is bilingual. Not that two languages are spoken, but that two are used.”⁹ The French Roman Catholic missionaries who authored their substantial 1881 grammar provide a similar assessment: “... en Corée, il faut savoir deux langues: le coréen pour parler, et le chinois pour lire et écrire.”¹⁰ Gale provides a morally negative assessment of this putative bilingualism, arguing that “Their speech too bears upon it the mark of the beast, for there are two different languages, where one easy one might serve.”¹¹ These two languages he refers to as the “written or eye-language” and the “spoken or ear-language.” While Gale does not make clear that he is talking specifically of Chinese versus Korean, one can infer as much from his claim that “The languages in their character and construction differ as widely as English differs from Syriac; for they belong to different families and are in no sense related whatever.”¹² In the context of his role as a missionary, hoping to provide the Korean people with Christian scripture, Gale concludes on a pessimistic note: “No more hopeless confusion exists than in the use of the original languages in Korea. From this confusion we are hoping to bring forth a Christian literature that will be understood and appreciated by the mass of the people.”¹³ As we shall see, Gale’s prognosis did not prove completely dim, as the missionaries ultimately developed materials that would prove critical to successfully Christianizing the nation.

The key to this ultimate success lay in better understanding the nature of multilingualism in late nineteenth-century Korea. Curiously enough, the first rays of clarification appeared in print in the same year as Gale’s gloomy as-
essment: Horace G. Underwood, in An Introduction to the Korean Spoken Language (1890), rejects the overly simplistic notion that “Korea is bilingual.” Despite its length, Underwood’s explanation merits full reproduction here:

In the writing of Korean, two forms of characters are used, the native Ernmun and the Chinese. In all official correspondence, philosophical books, and in fact in nearly all books of real value, the Chinese character is used, the native Ernmun being relegated to a few trashy love stories and fairy tales. This difference in the written language, has led to the assertion that there are two languages in Korea, and we sometimes hear foreigners talk of “speaking in the Ernmun.” There are not two languages and this expression is wrong, for the “Ernmun” is simply a system of writing, and it would be as sensible to talk of “speaking in Munson’s system of short hand.” The idea that there are two languages in Korea is strengthened by the fact that foreigners, who are perhaps tolerably well acquainted with words purely Korean, have, when they heard conversations carried on between officials and scholars, been unable to understand what was said. They have been on their way to the houses of the officials and passing through the streets and hearing the merchants, the middle classes, and the coolies, talking among themselves, have been able to understand, while when they came into the presence of the officials, they have been unable to comprehend the meaning of statements and questions addressed directly to them. At once they have said “There are two languages” while the truth is that the officials have simply been using those Korean terms which have been derived from the Chinese. Chinese may be called the Latin of Korea. It is more polite and scholarly to used “Latinized” Korean; but among merchants, middle classes, and in common daily conversation this is not used: the learner does not hear it, hence the difficulty. This however being the case, it becomes necessary to make a study of these Sinico-Korean terms, for which he will find frequent and important use.  

In analyzing Underwood’s description of language use, we find ourselves in agreement with Young-Key Kim-Renaud’s claim that the multilingual situation in Korea can be viewed in terms of diglossia: the use of two speech varieties (either two different languages or two varieties of a single language) in specific functional domains in such a way that reflects and reinforces the community’s social structure. On the one extreme, the Korean power structure employed a variety of Chinese as the “High” language for official purposes. On the opposite extreme was Korean per se, “the vernacular spoken by everybody from the king down,” which served as the “Low” language. Complicating matters is the fact that numerous varieties (or “lects”) of Korean appeared to co-exist along a socially based continuum, with the highest varieties bordering upon the nativized Chinese used as the country’s language of official affairs and the lowest varieties exhibiting the lowest degree of Chinese influence. As such, one can infer the existence of an implicational scale of language use, a scale that reflects the parallelism between the functional domains of the High and Low languages, as well as the rigid Confucian hierarchy of the society in which these multiple lects were used. In this hierarchy, ability to function in a particular linguistic variety implies the ability to function in the varieties to the right (fig. 1).
Given the rigidity of Korea’s Confucian social structure, as well as the prevailing attitudes and practices regarding education, the most prestigious variety of the High language was accessible by relatively few. This situation, in turn, is clearly reflected in the relative attitudes toward Korea’s two orthographic systems: Chinese characters (or hanja), associated with the High language, and the Korean’s indigenous alphabet, han’gul or ᄂᆞㅣ𝒸.factor.19

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**ATTITUDES TOWARD HANJA AND HAN’GŬL**

Turn-of-the-twentieth-century authors make it clear that of the “two languages” used in Korea, native linguistic and orthographic forms held lower status than corresponding forms borrowed from Chinese. A Korean’s ability to read and write Chinese characters was often the sole criterion by which one would be judged “learned.” As is well documented by both Western and Eastern sources, advancement in Korean society, particularly in the domains of government and public administration, was completely dependent upon a candidate’s performance on state-sponsored Chinese character examinations. In his assessment of the Korean education system, George Heber Jones explains the primacy of hanmun (“Chinese literature”):

Education is through the medium of the Chinese classics, which are bawled out by the boys in the first years of their school life at the top of their voices. At first the boy learns only the sounds and meaning of the characters, and after he has acquired about two thousand of these he is taught to explain them in their grammatical and textual sense. The course of study in these schools is on a religious foundation. The Korean scripture—that is, the Confucian Classics—is the chief text-book, and though a Korean may come from these schools knowing very little of arithmetic, geography, or history, he does know the religious faith of his people, and how to conform to its requirements. One of the supreme objects of Korean education is to

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**Fig. 1. Implicational Scale of Language Use.** An individual’s location along this continuum implies an ability to control the lects to the right (but not the left).
 impress upon the boy that life without religion reduces him to the level of birds and beasts.  

Korean society’s infatuation with hanja promoted at least one author to mistakenly believe that Chinese characters were used more widely than they were: in 1833, Gützlaff writes that “[t]hough the majority of the inhabitants [of Korea] know how to read the Chinese written language, they have, nevertheless, for greater convenience, adopted an alphabet suited peculiarly to their own tongue.”  

Approximately fifty years later, the French Roman Catholic missionaries provide a certain degree of clarification on this matter, claiming that Chinese is the “learned and official language of Korea,” adding that “Dans les huit grandes écoles du gouvernement, on n’étudie que la littérature et les sciences chinoises, tandis que la langue nationale est négligée et méprisée.”

While Koreans exhibited the utmost respect for Chinese characters, Western observers were far less willing to accept hanja as a reasonable means of written expression, particularly in light of the more readily acquired han’gul. Campbell specifically indicts Chinese characters as a serious barrier to advancement, both spiritual and otherwise, noting that “few even of the gentry can read the Chinese character well, so by its difficulty it has been the means of keeping them in darkness and ignorance.” This negative attitude toward hanja is perhaps best expressed by Anglican Bishop Mark Trollope, who writes the following about Chinese characters: “[their] usefulness in almost every walk of life is only equaled by their difficulty and inconvenience.”

The difficulty of learning hanja, coupled with the attendant mystique, made the acquisition of “letters” inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of Koreans.

By contrast, han’gul appeared to have achieved the ultimate ends envisioned by the Great King Sejong: to provide the Korean people with an effective means of expressing themselves in a written form. The ease of learning to read and write han’gul was noted by many of the earliest Western visitors to Korea (e.g., Hamel in 1670) and echoed by subsequent authors: han’gul is described as “extremely simple, but at the same time very ingenious”; “claimed by scholars to be the second-best alphabet in the world”; “said to be one of the most perfect [alphabets] in existence”; “one of the best and most convenient [alphabets] that the world has ever seen”; “extremely simple and very easily learned.” W. R. Carles describes han’gul thus: “The language is alphabetical, and contains eleven vowels and fourteen consonants. These being purely phonetic, to read and write Corean are considered feats so easy as not to require teaching.”

For han’gul, however, the cost of ease was its social debasement. The French Fathers comment on the fact that Korean-style writing was reserved exclusively for women, making it less respectable than the Chinese-based system. Elizabeth M. Campbell explains how “the native writing is despised by the men,
who have a great admiration of the Chinese character.” Carles reinforces these perceptions:

Owing to the great ease with which Coreans can learn to read and write their own language, as a written language, it is regarded with great contempt, and its use is in great measure confined to women and uneducated men. In official documents it is seldom employed except in proclamations to the people or on business relating purely to the courts. The literature is exceedingly small, but it is worth noting that circulating libraries on an exceedingly petty scale do exist in the capital. James Scott speaks more directly about the relatively low status of han’gül in its native land: “Native conservatism, however, proved insurmountable, and Chinese has continued to be used as the medium of correspondence, both by officials and by the educated classes generally—the native script being relegated to women and the uneducated masses.” Such associations are further evidenced by the fact that the use of han’gül appears to have been relegated to the more unsavory literary genres. Gilmore observes that “[m]any books are printed in Korean [as opposed to Chinese], but they correspond to our cheap fiction.”

Underwood likewise laments the lack of respectable printed material in han’gül: “For literature, if we search for books in their own native script, we shall find practically none. With the exception of a comparatively few cheap, trashy, and miserably printed novelettes and books of songs, there has been almost nothing.” Although han’gül’s lack of resources and respectability was initially characterized as a shortcoming, it would prove invaluable to the missionaries, who took it upon themselves to fill the void.

**Han’gül as a Key to Effective Evangelization**

Despite the readily observable lack of social prestige and power associated with han’gül, Western visitors to Korea quickly recognized its potential power as a tool for education and evangelization. According to the French Fathers, Roman Catholic missionaries made it standard policy to print all of their religious materials in han’gül. One might argue that in doing so, they risked the possibility that their work would not be taken seriously by the populace, who held hanja-based forms of writing in far higher esteem. Any such risk, however, was apparently deemed reasonable, as han’gül’s lack of prestige was outweighed by its accessibility. Indeed, taking advantage of han’gül’s vulgarity (in the dictionary sense of the word) was paramount to evangelistic success. Ross makes explicit the effectiveness of han’gül as the preferred medium for mission literature:

Their alphabet is so beautifully simple that half an hour’s study is sufficient to master it; and as, like Pitman’s Phonography, it is employed phonetically, it is universally known and used by men, women and children. So much so that a Corean, who “did not know a single character,”—implying Chinese,—sat down to a M.S.S. copy of John’s Gospel, and left it off only when he had read it all, not a single word
having escaped him. This proves the great superiority of Corean over Chinese for the purposes of translation.37

Campbell likewise makes clear the importance of han’gul in the evangelization strategy, but adds an important observation: although han’gul was deemed the most effective means of communication to the Korean masses, it needed to be relieved of “the undeserved contempt in which it has held by the men [of Korea], and to bring it into general use.”38 Here we find the mission movement recognizing the need to take a proactive role in the culture by working to change Koreans’ attitudes toward their native writing system. Without such a shift in attitude, promoting han’gul-printed Christian literature would be all the more difficult.

Perhaps the most intriguing statement regarding the role of han’gul as an evangelization tool appears in Gale’s book Korea in Transition (1909). In revealing the “Divine Providence” of han’gul, Gale writes:

Korea’s native script is surely the simplest language in the world. Invented in 1445 A.D., it has come quietly down the dusty ages, waiting for, who knew what? Never used, it was looked on with contempt as being so easy. Why yes, even women could learn it in a month or little more; of what use could such a cheap script be? By one of those mysterious providences it was made ready and kept waiting for the New Testament and other Christian literature. Up to this day these have had almost exclusive use of this wonderfully simple language. This perhaps is the most remarkable providence of all, this language sleeping its long sleep of four hundred years, waiting till the hour should strike on the clock, that it might rise and tell of all Christ’s wondrous works. They call it Un-mun, the “dirty language,” because it is so simple and easy as compared with proud Chinese picture writing. God surely loves the humble things of life, and chooses the things that are naught to bring to naught the things that are.39

A mélange of overstatement and anthropomorphism, Gale’s assessment of han’gul provides a powerful justification for the entire mission endeavor in Korea, despite the relative sloppiness with which he treats the facts. Consider, for example, Gale’s confounding of “script” and “language,” which flies in the face of Underwood’s 1890 admonition against making such fundamental errors of description. And although Gale’s claim that han’gul was “never used” is far from the truth, his apparently sarcastic comments regarding the contempt in which it was long held are in concert with other observations of the time. Mindful of the audience for whom he has written his text, Gale turns to overtly religious metaphor to bolster his arguments, drawing upon resurrection imagery: he writes of the “language sleeping its long sleep” so that “it might rise.” Parallels to the life of Christ continue, as Gale emphasizes the humbleness of han’gul as the tool for executing divine will. Particularly troubling is his translation of ónmun as “dirty language,” a highly emotional but wholly inaccurate rendering of what others referred to as “vernacular language” or, in Kim-Renaud’s terms, “vernacular writing.”40 The final line of this section of Gale’s text—“God . . . chooses
the things that are naught to bring to naught the things that are”—finds counterparts in Christian scripture: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matt. 19:30, NRSV); “. . . for the least among all of you is the greatest” (Luke 9:48); “. . . for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:14). In the end, Gale crafts his prose to convince his reader that the work to be done in Korea is no accident: it was preordained by the Almighty. How might one otherwise explain the “tool” provided to the missionaries for connecting with the masses?

As the missionaries learned, however, access to an easy-to-learn, divinely ordained orthography would not be sufficient means for achieving their ultimate goals. The Korean language presented itself as a formidable intellectual and cultural obstacle to the mission. Western observers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century made much of the fact that Korean was an inherently difficult language to learn. In support of such claim, they pointed to the language’s high degree of synonymy, its complex system of honorific forms, and a laundry list of other grammatical structures that contributed to its complexity (real or imagined): SOV word order, minimal use of personal pronouns, lack of verbal inflections for person and number, and so forth. Perhaps most telling about Western attitudes toward these sorts of grammatical details is the fact that the majority of sources refer to those linguistic structures that Korean lacks in comparison to much more familiar (and apparently superior) Western languages. Such a view directly contributed to the ways in which many Western authors viewed Koreans as intellectually deficient.

**The Relationship between Language and Thought**

Given the blinders with which so many Western authors wrote about Korean grammar, how ironic it thus appears when we consider how authors such as Percival Lowell draw direct connections between language and thought: “Mirroring, as the speech of a people must mirror, the character of that people, let us glance a moment at the quality as it shows itself in the tongue.” W. G. Aston makes a similar assertion: “. . . the habits of thought which characterize the language of a nation may also be traced in their religion, their art, and their political and social development.” Such a philosophy is evident in discussions of linguistic differences, which were often offered as evidence for how the Korean mind differed from the Western mind. In some cases, the authors make clear that the Korean mind is inferior to others. Gützlaff puts forth such a claim in a rather convoluted way:

Their language is expressive, not on account of the great number of ideas which they convey through this medium, for the natives are poor in thoughts, but because of its sonorous nature. We meet in it all the terms for abstract ideas which the Chinese language contains; but for many of those ideas, they have nothing more than the sound of the Chinese characters, and not an original word.
This purported weakness of thought is further explained by both Aston and Lowell in terms of East Asians’ inability to conceptualize in subjective, original terms. As Aston claims, such an “impersonal habit of mind” is reflected in the language by the lack of grammatical forms that distinguish animate from inanimate or masculine from feminine. Lowell, in his extensive discussion of Koreans’ “Quality of Impersonality” (to which he devoted chapter 13 of his 1888 monograph), argues that any language so incapable of conveying any sense of subjectivity is indicative of a people who themselves are not subjective, personal thinkers. For Lowell, the linguistic facts ultimately justify the need for Western assistance (or intervention) in Korea’s future socio-political development.

To what might one attribute these cross-linguistic differences in language-thought? Underwood suggests that the physical setting of Korea provides a logical explanation:

It must be borne in mind, that not only are the characters and words different from those to which we have been accustomed, but also the forms of expression and the idioms. The surroundings of the Korean are entirely different and his habits of thought are necessarily as unlike ours as his surroundings; hence “Put yourself in his place” should be the motto of the student; he must early learn to put himself in the place of the Korean.

Aston, however, makes explicit that the problem to be addressed has a spiritual source:

These races [Japanese and Korean] have a comparatively feeble grasp of the distinction between the living being and the inanimate object, between God and the material universe, between mind and matter, between the individual and the multitude, between the ‘I’ and the ‘not I’. . . . It may be traced in the comparative weakness of their religious beliefs. All the great religions of the world have had their origin with Aryan or Semitic races. The educated Chinese or Japanese is a downright materialist, and even the lower classes are but little influenced by the foreign religion which most of them profess. The Confucian system of morals is their real guide through life . . .

Such assessments play an important role in the history of Korea’s relations with the Western world, as they set the stage for what would be considered necessary evangelization. However, there was yet one further impediment to effective interaction between Korea and the Western world: a paucity of adequate teaching resources.

Lack of Effective Pedagogical Resources

Having established a need for mission work among a population with an undervalued orthographic system and a complicated, unfamiliar language, many authors addressed the need for developing useful Korean language-learning materials. Much to their consternation, however, Westerners found little to help them in their language-learning endeavors. Chief among Western complaints are a lack of both qualified teachers and adequate written materials.
wood addresses both of these points at the very outset of his grammar: “The study of Korean is as yet in its infancy, ways and means are few, good books written in the native character are still fewer, Koreans who have any accurate knowledge of the rules of grammar and the methods of spelling are rare, and native teachers in the true sense of the word cannot be found.” Although we do not know for certain how Underwood would further characterize “accurate knowledge of the rules of grammar” and “teachers in the true sense of the word,” we might surmise that his assessment was founded on his own cultural experiences as a nineteenth-century Western-trained thinker: Latin grammars as explicated by a college-educated magister.

Not only were han’gul-written materials in scarce supply, those in existence were apparently of questionable quality. Carles laments this fact, claiming that “Even in well-printed books, the faults of pronunciation committed by a careless speaker are perpetuated, and the final and initial letters of syllables are assigned to the wrong syllable.” This lack of adequate printed materials is cited by Jones as an obstacle to effective pedagogy: “The educational work in Korean has been necessarily handicapped by the lack of practical text-books in the Korean language. Instruction has therefore been largely through the medium of the English language, though some attention is being paid to the organization of proper courses of study in the Korean tongue and the preparation of text-books.” So despite the presence of an effective and easy-to-learn writing system, and despite the Koreans’ expressed respect for learning, the Christian missionaries perceived that there was much education work to be done, particularly in taking fuller advantage of the literacy tool that was han’gul. That said, no real progress could be made until enough dedicated—and linguistically gifted—missionaries could succeed in learning such a difficult language.

Thwarting the realization of this goal was a simple fact: language instructors who met the expectations of the foreign missionaries were rare. Annabel Nisbet refers to her language instructor as a “so-called ‘teacher,’” adding that “no Korean knows anything of pedagogy.” Lillias Underwood, the physician wife of Horace G. Underwood, describes her earliest language-learning experiences thus:

We were presented to a Korean gentleman knowing not one syllable of English, or the first principles of the constructions of any language on earth, or even the parts of speech, and without the glimmering of an idea as to the best methods or any method of teaching, who yet was called, probably ironically, “a teacher,” from whom we were expected to pump with all diligence such information on the language as he was able to bestow.

Gilmore expresses similar sentiments: “It must also be borne in mind by those who may study the Korean grammar that the natives have very little idea of the science of philology, and hence but little help must be expected from them in the direction of scientific derivation, and hardly any reliance can be placed on
their statements." Given observations of these sorts, the missionaries found it incumbent upon themselves to compensate for the indigenous population’s purported lack of decent teaching materials by taking educational matters into their own hands, not only in teaching themselves Korean, but for educating the Korean people as to the potential value of han’gul as a respectable means of communication and information dissemination.

Annie L. A. Baird’s Fifty Helps, for example, lists several pages of Korean-language expressions that were invented by the foreigners to aid in the teaching of the language. Examples include:

전말이요 [chyon.mal.i.o] It is past talk; or, Is it past talk?
후말이요 [hu.mal.i.o] It is future talk; or, Is it future talk?
가온대말이요 [ka.on.dae.mal.i.o] It is middle talk; or, Is it middle talk?

Baird maintains that such non-Korean utterances had to be created to help Westerners elicit important linguistic information, as access to such information was not likely to be readily offered by native-speaker teachers. As Baird claims, “unless the student is so fortunate as to secure [a Korean instructor] who is experienced, he may find that his first task is to teach his teacher how to teach.”

Baird’s text also features a section toward the end titled “A Few Things to be Avoided,” which includes exhortations to drop personal pronouns, to embrace the full range of socially dictated “high” and “low” forms, to avoid the use of half talk (one assumes pan-mal) until “after you know just how, when and where to do it,” and to “not be satisfied with what is sometimes euphemistically styled a ‘good working knowledge’ of the language.”

Honest Assessments and Words of Encouragement

Given the linguistic and social intricacies of Korea’s diglossic situation, the extreme complexities of the language’s grammar, the society’s devaluation and under-exploitation of han’gul, and the lack of effective teaching resources, it is no wonder that many authors put forth only tepid encouragement to potential Korean language learners. In the preface to his grammar of Korean, Scott paints a bleak portrait: “the Corean language presents so many difficulties both of grammatical construction and of verb inflection that the task of the student who attempts to acquire a mastery of its colloquial is well nigh hopeless.” Baird conveys an equally grim prognosis in the prefatory epigraph of her text, characterizing the Korean people and their language in terms of a marginal reading of Isaiah 33:19: “A people of a deeper speech than thou canst perceive; of a ridiculous tongue that thou canst not understand.” These are hardly assessments that were likely to draw any but the most committed future missionaries.

With all of these apparent difficulties in working with the Korean language, one might be left wondering, “Why bother?” One can only assume that those who took on the challenge of working in Korea were driven by their faith,
coupled with a sincere sense that the Korean people were worthy of salvation. A sincere investment of time and effort would lead to success in acquiring the language, which, in turn, would ultimately bear the spiritual fruit that lay at the heart of mission work.

Despite the nature of her book’s prefatory remarks, perhaps it is Annie Baird who provides the most balanced assessment of a commitment to the Korean language and people: “Drudge faithfully through the first five years, and at the end of that time, the promised land, tho’ yet far distant, will be in view, and study will be a pleasure and acquisition a delight.”

With the remarkable success of these Western missionaries in just over one hundred years, it appears that Mrs. Baird’s encouragement proved fruitful. Despite the fact that these early emissaries from the West saw the sociolinguistic situation to be needlessly complex, the language to be grammatically deficient, the people to be intellectually and morally challenged, and the educational system to be woefully inadequate, they persevered with great success. While such attitudes are likely to come across as disparaging, naïve, ignorant, or patronizing to contemporary readers, they are important indicators of the social climate of a time of great change in Korean history: with national pride on the rise and a sense of their own identity finally established, Koreans embarked upon a journey toward fuller participation in the global community, a journey taken with the blessings and encouragement of numerous Christian missionaries who had faith in their adopted nation’s potential for change.

NOTES

Many thanks to all who have contributed to the development of library resources at both The University of Texas at Arlington and the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University; access to the books, microfilms, microfiche and personnel at each library allowed me to turn curiosity into research. Thanks, too, for the comments offered by Young-Key Kim-Renaud and two anonymous reviewers. As ever, all shortcomings of fact, interpretation, and rhetorical style are property of the author.


2. As the figures provided indicate, statistics regarding religious affiliation vary widely. According to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s 2000 on-line World Factbook (http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html), 50 percent of Koreans are Christians. The U.S. State Department’s Web site (http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/gbn/) indicates that as of 1995, 26.3 percent of the Korean population was Christian; this statistic likewise appears in the Britannica Book of the Year 2002. The World Christian Encyclopedia puts South Korea’s year 2000 Christian population at 19 million, or 40.8 percent. In all of these cases, “Christian” includes Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and other Christian denominations.

3. In an extensive historical investigation about the Jesuit missionaries in East Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Chul Park makes clear that the first Westerners in Korea—Jesuits who accompanied Japanese armed forces into the country during the late 1500s—said very little about the country or its people, including the lan-


5. “As regards the language of this people, it is mixed with many Chinese words, just like that of the Japanese.” M. Klaproth, Mémoire sur l’introduction et l’usage des caractères chinois au Japon, et sur l’origine des différens syllabaires japonais; suivi d’un vocabulaire coréen (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1829), 28. This and all subsequent translations are those of the author.

6. John McLeod, Narrative of a Voyage, in His Majesty’s Late Ship Alceste, to the Yellow Sea along the Coast of Corea, and through it Numerous Hitherto Undiscovered Islands to the Island of Lewchew, with an Account of a Shipwreck in the Straits of Gaspar (Philadelphia: M. Carey and Son, 1818), 39.


10. “. . . in Korea, it is necessary to know two languages: Korean for speaking and Chinese for reading and writing. Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, Grammaire Coréenne (Yokohama: L. Lévy et S. Salabelle, 1881), iv. Italics in the original.


15. Young-Key Kim-Renaud, “Mixed Script and Literacy in Korea.” Paper presented at the 54th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, April 5, 2002. Diglossia, with its clearly discernible High and Low forms, is contrasted with more familiar cases of bilingualism in which a speaker’s decision as to which language (or dialect) to employ in a particular situation is made primarily on the basis of socially proscribed norms associated with specific social or cultural functions, for example, performing religious rites or engaging in legal proceedings. An individual’s decision as to which language to employ is governed by situational factors above all others. For more details, see David Crystal, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 43, and Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30–31.

16. As is well known among Koreanists, this language variety is not Chinese as one might understand it to be used in China (either then or today); while the orthographic forms remain true to their source, the phonology and (to some extent) the semantics underwent a certain “Koreanization.”

17. Gilmore, Korea from its Capital, 55.

18. It is assumed that the continuum under discussion entered into an orthogonal relationship with regional dialects, which are not under consideration here.


20. George Heber Jones, Korea: The Land, People, and Customs (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1907), 35–36.
22. “In the eight great government schools, one studies only Chinese literature and sciences, while the national language is neglected and scorned.” Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, Grammaire Coréenne, ii.
26. Horace H. Underwood, The Call of Korea: Political, Social, Religious (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1908), 71. Interestingly enough, Underwood does not tell the reader which alphabet claims the world’s top ranking. Could it be the Latin system? Or is it the Sanskrit alphabet, one possible source of han’gul? The issue is left unaddressed.
29. Anabel Major Nisbet, Day In and Day Out in Korea: Being some Account of the Mission Work that has been Carried on in Korea since 1892 by the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1919), 58.
32. Carles, Life in Corea, 311.
34. Gilmore, Korea from its Capital, 64.
38. Campbell, The Land of the Morning Calm, 6.
42. Percival Lowell, Chosön, the Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea (Boston: Ticknor and Co., 1888), 121.
46. Lowell, Chosön, the Land of the Morning Calm. Lowell’s insights, though interesting from a socio-historical perspective, are somewhat suspect from a linguistic point of view. He fails to inspire confidence in his reader when he makes the following claim about English: “In our own language, having passed through the period of inflection, we are coming back again in many ways to former simplicity.” Whatever stage of “former simplicity” Lowell might be referring to is unclear; it is worth noting that Lowell was not a linguist.
49. In attempting to explain the perceived deficiencies in the Korean education system, L. W. Eckard suggests that the root of the problem lies in the lack of regard given to original thinking. Such an account seems reasonable in light of the historical structure of the Korean educational system, with its emphasis on memorizing Chinese characters. See Abraham Gosman and L. W. Eckard, *Historical Sketches of the Missions of Japan, Korea* (Philadelphia: Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church, 1891).
58. Baird, *Fifty Helps*, 57. As many contemporary learners of Korean as a second language can attest, these assessments and admonitions ring true even today.
59. In a published appeal to American women, missionaries Jennie F. Willing and Mrs. George Heber Jones make explicit their perceived need to continue the difficult work in Korea: “We comfortable American Christians may have to cut down our expenses, so that we can help them climb up out of the horrible pit of heathenism.” Jennie Fowler Willing and Mrs. George Heber Jones, *The Lure of Korea* (Boston: Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1910), 45.