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GENERALITY AND DISTINCTIVENESS OF  
KOREAN LANGUAGE MODERNIZATION

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# Generality and Distinctiveness of Korean Language Modernization

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## Abstract

This present paper attempts to explore the general and unique characteristics of Korean language modernization in its early stage (1894-1910) in order to rethink the Europe-centered model of linguistic modernity. The main concern of this paper is twofold: whether the vernacularization is the essence of language modernization, and whether the phoneticism is identical to the pursuit of Westernization. It was common that the breakdown of pre-modern diglossia took place during the course of language modernization through the vernacularization; however, this does not mean that there was only one way that the conventional diglossic structure came to be dissolved. Both Europe and East Asia at large witnessed the fall of their classical language and the rise of the vernacular, whereas the Arab nations saw the evolution of the diglossia evolving into triglossia through modernizing its classical language, not the vernacular. The key factors determining the direction of language modernization were not matters of communication or culture, but rather the formation of modern national identity and power struggles. Multiple trajectories are also found when it comes to the matter of implementing phonograms. At the turn of the twentieth century in East Asia, phonetic script was considered the emblem of the civilized world, in other words, the West. The pursuit of phonograms was a shared concern in East Asia however it was only Korea that ended up implementing the phonetic script exclusively. The idea of phoneticism emerged after the encounter with the West, but this impact from the West did not just render East Asia into phonetic world. For the other East Asian countries, the adoption of a phonetic script was something foreign, Western, and futuristic; on the contrary, to Koreans, the idea of adopting a phonetic system was modern but not foreign, as there was a phonetic system, *hangul* created by its King in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Early modern period reformers, on the one hand, encouraged the use of *hangul* and tried to prove its superiority over Chinese characters, but on the other hand they attempted to glorify King Sejong, and in doing so they insisted that the Korean nation was originally wise and smart, just like its king, but that the Chinese influence was to blame for suppressing Korea's superiority. Therefore, to the Korean people of the early twentieth century, adopting a phonetic system did not mean Westernization in the sense that it did in other countries, but rather the recovery of ancient glory and cultural pride. Linking the invention of *hangul* to the innate preeminence of Korean nation has significant importance in terms of creating Korea's modern identity.

## 1. Introduction

This paper attempts to demonstrate the general and distinctive characteristics of Korean language modernization in its early stage. My focus will be on the time period from the *Gabbo* Reform (甲午改革) of 1894 to the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910; this period, often referred to as the Enlightenment Period

(開化期 or 啓蒙期), shows fundamental sociocultural upheavals including linguistic turmoil. During the last two centuries, the progression of Korean language modernization followed a sequential path, including an awakening to the modern outlook on language, the unification of spoken and written languages, the development of print language for modern media, and the codification and standardization of orthography, grammar and vocabulary, dictionary compilation, and public education, etc. The period from 1894 to 1910 was the early stage of this serial progression when Korea was struggling to achieve linguistic independence by replacing Classical Chinese with the vernacular.

By examining both the generality and distinctiveness of Korean language modernization, we can reconsider the current, Europe-centered model of linguistic modernity and show the existence of multiple trajectories of language modernization. Regarding linguistic modernity, the leverage of Benedict Anderson's renowned book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* cannot be underestimated. He discussed the roles of the vernacular and print-language in the spread of nationalism and stated that "in varying combinations, the lessons of creole, vernacular, and official nationalism were copied, adapted, and improved upon."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, he argued that a European model of modernity and vernacularization was later sought by numerous countries, which made the vernacular movement a transnational phenomenon.

There have been criticisms of his argument that the last wave of nationalism and the vernacular movement in the colonized regions were the result of imitating the European model. Anderson used the term "piracy"<sup>2</sup> or "pirating"<sup>3</sup> in his book when describing Asian or African nationalism, to which Gang Zhou raised the question of whether he implied that "all the language revolutions in other countries are illegitimate copies, while the European one is the only original."<sup>4</sup> Once we shift our focus to non-European regions, we can easily find discrepancies between Anderson's European model and the actual progression of language modernization in those regions. For example, Niloofar Haeri pointed out that Egyptian linguistic modernization took a very different path from Anderson's European model; he criticized Anderson's brief treatment of Classical Arabic as the equivalent of European vernaculars and stated that print capitalism "has not been operative in Egypt in exactly the same ways as in Europe."<sup>5</sup> In fact, the influence from European vernacular movements did not simply result in copycat movements. While the European impact did encourage the ferocious attack on Classical Chinese and the dramatic elevation of the vernacular in East Asia, it only served to boost a resurgence of Classical Arabic in most of the Arab regions and did not bring the rise of the vernacular. Moreover, the same European model inspired the revival of Sanskrit at the same time of the development of the vernacular in India.<sup>6</sup>

The core of Anderson's theory on the creation of the concept of nation is the imagination of a community through printed language in modern media based on the vernacular. The impact of printed language in Korea was also significant with respect to the development of language modernization; however, its role as a medium for creating a cohesive community was not as crucial in Korea as it was in European countries, because Korea

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised edition), London: Verso, 140.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 67, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Zhou, G. (2011). *Placing the Modern Chinese Vernacular in Transnational Literature*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 141.

<sup>5</sup> Haeri, N. (2003). *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 70.

<sup>6</sup> Zhou, G., op. cit., 60-71.

has already been a unified political community for thousands of years and was therefore homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and language.<sup>7</sup> Tae-Rin Cho has pointed out that this exceptional ethnic and linguistic homogeneity is an important factor in the process of Korean language modernization.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile Cho also shed a light on the generality of Korean language reform with respect to the roles of nationalism and relativism in the formation of the modern consciousness of the Korean national language. While his discussion focused mainly on the creation of the concept of “national language,”<sup>9</sup> the current paper focuses more on the transition of the views on language and the conflict between conservative and progressive perspectives.

## 2. Demolition of Diglossia

C. A. Ferguson’s term *diglossia* denotes a situation in which two different language varieties are used by a single language community for distinctive purposes.<sup>10</sup> In general, the two varieties have hierarchical differences: the low variety is language of street, and the high variety is language of high culture. By the late nineteenth century, Korea represented a typical diglossia where two language varieties had been stably performing different roles without trespassing on each other’s boundaries. Classical Chinese was the scholarly literary language, the command of which was the major criteria of a civil service exam, while the Korean vernacular was the vulgar and profane language of the illiterate masses.

The collapse of diglossic structure took place at the end of the nineteenth century in Korea. It was not because of any particular linguistic changes, but rather because of politico-ideological changes. Classical Chinese *per se* represented the teachings of Confucius in the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), when Confucianism was deeply rooted in society in terms of politics and also culture. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, many intellectuals in Korea insisted on the eradication of Confucian ethical and sociopolitical teachings because they were deemed no longer appropriate in the modern world. Confucianism itself was criticized as a hindrance towards modernization, and so was Classical Chinese.

The indictment of Classical Chinese and Confucianism was one of the many phenomena that appeared when East Asia witnessed the fragmentation of the traditional Sinosphere. Korea used to be a tributary state of China, sending a regular token of submission to the superior power and obtaining recognition and protection from it. However, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, the superior power did not appear to be capable of protecting its tributary states any more, which meant that the tributary states now had no trustworthy umbrella to protect them. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Korean newspapers often published articles acknowledging that the catastrophe unfolding in China was in fact their own emergency.

- (1) When discussing the Qing Dynasty’s circumstances, the political situation is in disorder and the public sentiment is scattered; its vast extent of land is about to come asunder, and its overflow populations are

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<sup>7</sup> However, the linguistic homogeneity of Korea in historical terms does not actually refer to its self-acknowledgement as a nation in the modern sense. Apart from the age-old linguistic barriers that enable the distinction between “us” and “others,” it wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that reference to the group of people who spoke Korean implied political motivations.

<sup>8</sup> Cho, T. (2009). Geundae gugeo uisik hyeongseong’ui bopyeonseonggwa teuksuseong (Generality and particularity in the formation of modern *gugeo* (Korean national language) consciousness.) *Hanguk Eoneo Munhwa*, 39, 81-108.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the formation of the concept of national language in Korea, also see Kim, B. (2014). *Eoneojeok geundaeui gihoek* (The project of linguistic modernity), Seoul: Somyong.

<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, C. A. (1959). Diglossia. *Word*, 15, 325-340.

in danger of dispersion. How can Qing help other countries if it is unable to protect its own?<sup>11</sup>

As stated in (1), the initiation of de-Sinocentrism in Korea appeared in the wake of realizing China's loss of power in the modern world. For those in the Sinosphere taught in the traditional belief system, following the ethical rules of Confucianism was thought to bring about world peace; however, the new threats of cannon balls and gunfire from the West instantly taught them the errors of their thinking. The quotations below in (2) and (3) show that doubts about the validity of such beliefs, or *hanhak* 漢學, were highly motivated by the awareness of the threat from the West.

- (2) How can we defeat the threat from the West and protect ourselves only with the power of Classical Chinese in this world where the bigger countries annex the smaller ones, and where the law of the jungle prevails?<sup>12</sup>
- (3) If we continue to spend our time in the present day only composing beautiful sentences with the dregs of study from Qing, then how can we defend ourselves from the ferocious Powers' attack with frost-like knives and hail-like cannon balls?<sup>13</sup>

In pre-modern Korea, where the elite groups considered themselves the true custodians of Confucianism, all they needed to do for their academic advancement was recite the Confucian Classics and compose Chinese poetry. This traditional knowledge came to be harshly denounced from the late nineteenth century, and the scholars of *hanhak* were often ridiculed, as shown in (4), (5), and (6).

- (4) Other than gaining knowledge in Chinese characters, all they are capable of is eating; therefore it would be correct to say that they are useless; these freeloaders are an obstacle to the economy.<sup>14</sup>
- (5) In summary, scholars of the Chinese Classics live their whole lives as bookworms. What they see with their eyes and hear with their ears is so antiquated that they do not have any sense of reality. They are lazy as they do not diligently move their arms and legs. Many of them are just as stupid as not being able to distinguish between beans and barley, and therefore they are no more than an idle rice container. They will end up being lonely since their roles are basically the same as that of a stone goblin or a wooden doll. Moreover, they would never be able to share responsibility with those who have the enterprising strength of the state.<sup>15</sup>
- (6) Therefore, with respect to geography and history, the men of letters in Korea memorize the flowing history of the Qing Dynasty, and they know all of the Qing's mountains, streams, climates, and agricultural products like the back of their hands; on the contrary, they have no idea about their own history, mountains, streams, climates, or agricultural products. Thus, their enterprise represents the study of slaves.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Jeguk sinmun* 제국신문, 17 January 1900, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Gang, J. (1907). Gungmun pyeonli geub hanmun pyehaeui seol 國文便利及漢文弊害의說 (A discussion on the advantages of national writing and the disadvantages of Chinese writing). *Taegeuk hakbo* 太極學報, 7, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Gungmun sinbo balgan 국문신보발간 (Publication of the vernacular edition). *Daehan maeil sinbo* 大韓每日申報, 23 May 1907, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Shin, H. (1897). Hanmunjawa gungmunui sonik yeoha 漢文字와 國文의 損益如何 (Profit and loss of Chinese characters and national writing). *Daejoseon dongnip hyeophoe hoebo* 大朝鮮獨立協會會報, 16, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Gang, J., op. cit., 16.

<sup>16</sup> Gungmun sinbo balgan 국문신보발간 (Publication of the vernacular edition). *DMS*, 23 May 1907, 1.

Traditional men of letters are referred to as freeloaders and obstacles to economic progress in (4), to bookworms, idle rice containers, stone goblins, and wooden dolls in (5), and in (6) the study they have devoted their entire lives to is criticized as the study of slaves. What lies beyond this kind of harsh criticism is the urgent desire to adopt modern science, technology, and social systems to defeat the possible attack from the West and protect themselves in a period of numerous upheavals; this awakening to the modern world was the initial driving force behind language modernization.

Harsh criticism of Classical Chinese and Confucianism was not only found in Korea, but also even in China, the birth place of both. Lu Xun 鲁迅 compared Chinese characters to *insidious germs* and warned that if China did not get rid of them, then the Chinese people would also end up dead.<sup>17</sup> In early twentieth century China, some radical reformative scholars like Qian Xuantong 錢玄同 even insisted on abolishing the Chinese language itself and adopting a new language such as English, French, or Esperanto; they thought it was necessary to eliminate the Chinese language to get rid of Confucianism.<sup>18</sup> It is noteworthy here that such reformers of China actually suggested much more extreme solutions than the Japanese or Korean reformers. To Japan and Korea, breaking off the traditional connection with Confucianism could be achieved by pursuing cultural independence from China, which was mainly related to their common written language; however, it seemed impossible for China to become free from Confucian traditions unless it cut off the entire relationship with its own past.

Likewise, the downfall of Classical Chinese was triggered by the breakdown of the conventional knowledge norm in East Asia, i.e., Confucianism. This shared destiny of classical knowledge and classical language is also found in European history during the course of the transition from pre-modern to modern society. The fall of Church Latin coincided with the collapse of Christendom. Church Latin was a dead language, not unlike Classical Chinese, but there had been no issues with its being dead by the time questions arose about the authority of the Catholic Church. In the fourteenth century, when conflicts between church and state were growing, Italian writer Alighieri Dante composed *La Divina Commedia* in the Italian vernacular. Prior to this, he had elaborated his thoughts on language in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (on eloquence in the vernacular) by stating that Church Latin was a dead language and thus artificial to the contemporary Italians of the time; hence it was inferior to the vernacular, which is living and natural.<sup>19</sup> The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century accelerated the development of the vernacular movement all around Europe. In short, the fall of Church Latin in Europe and Classical Chinese in East Asia was commonly caused by the disintegration of their respective traditional worlds, although their specific causes were different.

Regarding the close ties between the outlook on language and the conventional knowledge norm, it is also worth taking a look at Arabic language modernization, in which the direction was the opposite that of the European and East Asian language reform movements; the battle between the vernacular and the classical ended in victory for the classical in Arab regions at large, while it ended in victory for the vernacular in Europe and East Asia. In all Arab countries, the contemporary official language remains Classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, and the vernaculars are still typically used in spoken situations. In the course of modernization and the rise of nationalism, it was Classical Arabic that was considered the very target of language modernization, and this sacred classical language has evolved into Modern Standard Arabic by simplifying its

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<sup>17</sup> Zhou, G., op. cit., 36.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 35-37.

<sup>19</sup> Botterill, S. (ed. and tr.) (1996). *Dante: De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

grammar and expanding its vocabulary. Modern Standard Arabic now functions as the language of administration, education, publication, and modern media.

In other words, while European and East Asian countries witnessed the process of vernacularization, Arabic countries saw the progression of “Arabization.”<sup>20</sup> The major cause of this difference is highly related to the formation of modern national identity. Whereas the downfall of Confucianism as a ruling ideology triggered the demise of Classical Chinese in East Asia and the fall of the medieval church was followed by the demise of Church Latin in Europe, the supremacy of Classical Arabic at the moment is as strong as the absolute authority of Islam in contemporary Arab nations. Although there also have been confrontations between the advocates of Classical Arabic and of the vernacular in the Arab world,<sup>21</sup> the strong belief in Islam has never been questioned<sup>22</sup>, while the Islamic faith has been increasingly resonating with nationalist thought.<sup>23</sup> Europe and East Asia abandoned their pre-modern identities as members of Christendom and the Confucius world, respectively; however, the Arab world has successfully kept its Muslim identity owing to the widespread popularity of Pan-Arab nationalism in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>24</sup>

Among the traditional Arab countries, Turkey’s language modernization shows an exceptional path; the administrative and literary language of Turkey used to be Ottoman, which is the mixture of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, while the colloquial language is Turkish.<sup>25</sup> From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the rise of Turkish nationalism was followed by a tide of language reform movements; Turkish reformers attempted to eliminate Arabic and Persian grammatical features and loanwords in their writing.<sup>26</sup> This language reform was accompanied by letter reform, and the official script of Turkish was changed from the Arabo-Persian alphabet to the Roman alphabet as the law ‘On the Adoption and Application of the New Turkish Letters’ came into effect in 1928.<sup>27</sup> This contrastive decision by Turkey vis-à-vis other Arab nations was due to its determination

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<sup>20</sup> Abu-Absi, S. (1986). The modernisation of Arabic: Problems and prospects. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 28, 338.

<sup>21</sup> There also were debates between the advocates of classical and the colloquial in the Arab world. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a cultural renaissance called the Al-Nahda Movement began a new period of literature, media, and also language. The Al-Nahda Movement first started in Egypt and later spread into Lebanon, Syria, and other Arabic-speaking regions. There were efforts to translate European and American literature, and Arabic literature itself saw the emergence of novels addressing modern themes. The introduction of modern printing technology led to the birth of a modern press, such as al-Ahram (1875-) in Egypt and many other newspapers and periodicals. As was the case in East Asia at the turn of the twentieth century, the impact of the Al-Nahda Movement included heated debates on whether to use Classical Arabic or the colloquial as the vehicle of modern knowledge. The advocates of Classical Arabic emphasized the high value of their heritage language with respect to the unity of Arabs and the coherence of Muslim’s religious community; meanwhile, the proponents of the colloquial insisted that Classical Arabic was a dead language, which no longer could function as the medium of the modern world due to its lack of scientific vocabulary and its far too complicated grammar (ibid., 338-339).

<sup>22</sup> According to Dale F. Eickelman, Muhammad Shahrur from Syria published *The Book and the Qur’an: A Contemporary Interpretation* and insisted that Muslims should reinterpret the Qur’an and apply its teachings to contemporary situations; this has been considered a serious challenge to the authoritative tradition, and its circulation has been banned in some Arab countries; however, although his arguments are reformative, he still acknowledges the value and significance of Islamic wisdom. See Eickelman, D. F. (2000). Islam and the Languages of Modernity. *Daedalus*, 129, 119-135.

<sup>23</sup> Suleiman, Y. (2003). *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

<sup>24</sup> Haeri, N., op. cit., 10-11.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, G. (1999). *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 2, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, G., op. cit., 37.

to change its national identity from Arabian to European. Under the strong leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Republic of Turkey was reborn as a secular, modern nation-state; while the majority of Turkish people are Muslims, the Republic of Turkey is a secular state without an official state religion. Along with the other political and institutional reforms, the change of alphabet was a clear declaration of breaking its ties with the Islamic East and becoming a member of the West.<sup>28</sup>

Thus far, we have examined the initial stages and macroscopic directions of various cases of language modernization. While there is common ground among them, their degrees of conservativeness or progressiveness vary, ranging from reforming the classical language rather than discarding it, to abolishing the classical language and reforming the vernacular with or without drastic script revision, to abolishing both the classical language and the vernacular while adopting a new language. Historically, most cases, including Korea, have followed the second scenario, with different degrees of script reform. Meanwhile, there have also been cases of the first scenario mostly in the Arab regions, while the third scenario was seriously considered in China, although it was not actually chosen in the end.

As we have explored, language modernization has much to do with power struggles and national identity, which reminds us of E. J. Hobsbawm's words that the heart of linguistic nationalism does not concern problems of communication, or even culture, but of power, status, politics, and ideology.<sup>29</sup> In regard to communication, the Korean vernacular was far from being able to function as a full-fledged language of writing at that time, and neither was it the language of culture. The ideological victory of the vernacular over Classical Chinese in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Korea does not at all owe its success to the usefulness of the vernacular, but rather the pursuit of an autonomous political entity which requires a proper national language as an emblem of its sovereignty.

### 3. Linguistic Independence

Overcoming Sinocentrism was the first priority for Korea to survive in the modern world. In this respect, the term *dongnip* 獨立 was often used in the context of defeating the political and cultural influence from China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

(7) Mastering a national script is an indicator of national independence (...)<sup>30</sup>

(8) It is hard to say that a state without a national language is a fully independent state.<sup>31</sup>

Both (7) and (8) describe national language as a hallmark of an autonomous state; this is a very new concept of language which did not exist in the pre-modern world. It was from around this period that the unity of linguistic independence and political autonomy came to light.

The publication of *Dongnip sinmun* (hereafter: *DS*) 獨立新聞 (1896-1899) manifests its self-determination of pursuing cultural independence from China by adopting the sole use of *hangul*, the Korean script. While there

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>29</sup> Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nation and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 110.

<sup>30</sup> Pilsang jaguk eonmun 必尙自國文言 (Necessity of respecting one's own spoken and written languages). *Hwangseong sinmun* 皇城新聞, 1 April 1907, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Park, T. (1907). Gugeo yujiron 國語維持論. *Yaroe* 夜雷, 1.



were a few newspapers published before *DS*, all of them were written in Classical Chinese or a mixed script of Classical Chinese and the vernacular (hereafter: mixed script). The editorial published in the inaugural issue of *DS* elaborates on the reason to implement only vernacular writing rather than including Classical Chinese or mixed script.

- (9) We set the price low, as we do not intend to make a profit by publishing this newspaper, and adopted *eonmun* 諺文 (vulgar writing) so as to make men and women, high and low, and noble and mean, read it, (...) It is for people of all ranks and classes to read that we do not use Classical Chinese, but only use *gungmun* 國文 (national writing).<sup>32</sup>

As shown in (9), the reason for implementing the vernacular was to allow people of all classes and both sexes to read the newspaper. This statement clearly shows the newspaper's goal to enlighten the commoner by using the language of the street.

It is noteworthy that this first vernacular newspaper was also published in English. The English version, *The Independent*, was printed as the last page of the newspaper until the last issue of 1896, after which it was published as a separate volume of four pages from the first issue of 1897 onward. The language that connects Korea to the outside world used to be Classical Chinese, but *DS* replaced it with English. Thus, together with the strict adoption of the vernacular, the enthroning of English as a new lingua franca was a clear declaration of denying the traditional thought of China as the center of the world.

These reformative events, however, seemed to be rather pioneering than general in nature; the majority of intellectuals at the time still felt far more comfortable writing in Classical Chinese than in the vernacular. The preface of *Seoyugyeonmun* 西遊見聞 by Yu Kil-chun 俞吉濬 illustrates the hesitant attitude toward the vernacular of the mainstream elite groups. The book was written in mixed script, but the author's original intention was to exclusively use the vernacular.<sup>33</sup> He noted in the preface that he did not dare to adopt pure vernacular writing because his fellow scholars were too repulsed by the new writing style.

The case of *Daehan maeil sinbo* (hereafter: *DMS*) 大韓每日申報 also reveals the intellectuals' unfavorable attitude towards vernacular writing. From 18 July 1904 to 10 March 1905, *DMS* published four pages of vernacular articles and two pages of English articles. The first edition of the vernacular newspaper asserts the necessity of writing in the vernacular. However, after a five month break from 11 March 1905 to 10 August 1905, *DMS* stopped publishing in the vernacular and started publishing a mixed script edition and English edition from 11 August 1905 to 22 May 1907. This switch from the vernacular to mixed script was due to the fact that male elites were not willing to read a newspaper written in the vernacular, despite the fact that they were the ones who first needed to be enlightened.<sup>34</sup> In the end, *DMS* resumed its vernacular version from 23 May 1907. These frequent policy shifts of *DMS* illustrate how the gap between the ideal and the real was bigger than the editorial board had originally expected.

Likewise, the lack of willingness among intellectuals to accept the vernacular as a primary means of written communication was another major challenge at this time. It was necessary to win over mainstream intellectuals who were still in favor of Classical Chinese to achieve linguistic independence. The rest of this section will be

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<sup>32</sup> *DS*, 7 April 1896, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Kim, Y. (2009). A Study on the Literary Style of Early Modern Korea: Focused on Yu, Kil-chun. *Dongbanghakji*, 148, 391-428.

<sup>34</sup> *DMS*, 23 May 1907, 1.

devoted to examining the logic and strategy used to persuade them.

### 3.1. Classical Chinese as a Foreign Language

Proponents of the vernacular attempted to overthrow the traditional center and periphery relationship by describing Classical Chinese as a foreign language. Conventionally, Korean people referred to their vernacular as *eonmun* 諺文 which literally means ‘vulgar writing,’ while in actual social contexts the word was used to represent ‘foreign languages.’ Indeed, in Classical Chinese this word referred to periphery languages other than Han Chinese, such as Korean, Manchu, and Mongolian, etc.<sup>35</sup> In pre-modern East Asia, Classical Chinese was considered the one and only central language, while all the other periphery languages were regarded as barbaric. As a member of the Sinosphere, the Korean people’s worldview was also China-centered; they considered China to be the center of the world, and Chinese to be the central language of the world. Therefore, denoting Classical Chinese as a foreign language was quite revolutionary given this widespread traditional worldview.

Progressive scholars published articles asserting that Classical Chinese was not the language of the “center” for Koreans, but merely one of many foreign languages. What they intended was to oust Classical Chinese from its throne and appoint the vernacular as the new language of the center. However, the development of this logic almost always included a third party: Western languages.

- (10) Generally speaking, every state has its own writing, which we call *gungmun*; for instance, *hanmun* is Qing’s *gungmun*, *yeongseo* (English writing) is English *gungmun*, and *eonmun* is our country’s *gungmun* (...)<sup>36</sup>

We can find a logical flow consisting of three steps in (10). The first step is to state a major premise that each state inherently possesses *gungmun*, a national writing. The second step is putting *hanmun* at the same level of Western languages, in this case English, and in doing so depriving its traditional privilege as the single most important language. The last step is to show that Korean *eonmun* is also a member of *gungmun*, just like all the other languages; thus its status is no different than that of *hanmun*.

It is worth considering the role of Western languages in the logic found in (10). The purpose of including Western languages here is twofold: dethroning *hanmun* to the level of many other foreign languages, and elevating the status of *eonmun* to the level of one of the modern languages. In this way, the Western languages mediate the long-standing hierarchical distance between Classical Chinese and *eonmun* by placing both on a new map of the modern world. Simply put, the fall of Classical Chinese and the rise of the vernacular through the mediation of third party languages resulted in the equation ‘*hanmun* = English = French = German = *eonmun*.’ However, this equation has further developed into the inequation ‘*hanmun* < *eonmun* = English = French = German,’ thereby proving the superiority of the Korean vernacular over Classical Chinese, which will be discussed in 3.2.

### 3.2. Ideograph versus Phonograph

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<sup>35</sup> Hong, Y. (2013). *Hangul Iyagi* (Story of Hangul), Paju: Thaeaksa, 18-22.

<sup>36</sup> *Jeguk sinmun* (10 January 1900).

The repositioning of Classical Chinese at the same level of all other foreign languages was only the first step taken by the progressive scholars; their final goal was to disparage it under the level of the Korean vernacular. The common strategy they used was classifying Classical Chinese into one of the existing linguistic categories and diminishing that category according to seemingly objective criteria. The categorization that is often found in this regard is that of ideogram and phonogram. An ideogram is a written symbol that represents a particular idea or thing, such as individual Chinese characters, while a phonogram is a written sign that stands for a sound, such as the Roman alphabet or *hangul*.

Let us first take a look at the argument put forth by Ju Si-gyeong 周時經, one of the most representative linguists of the time.

- (11) Generally, there are two types of script:<sup>37</sup> one represents shapes, and the other represents sounds. In general, scripts representing shapes were used in the non-civilized old times, while scripts representing sounds have been used in the civilized recent times. However, there are many countries still using scripts representing shapes. Classical Chinese, which has been used in China, is one such script. The rest are mostly scripts that represent sounds, such as the scripts of Italy, France, Germany, and England; Japanese *kana*; and our *jeong'eum* 正音(the correct sounds).<sup>38</sup>

Ju Si-gyeong applied syllogism to prove the preeminence of *jeong'eum*, which is the other name for *hangul*. The major premise here is that ideograms are backwards, while phonograms are forward oriented. Next, the minor premise is that Chinese characters are ideograms, while *hangul* comprises phonograms. He did not clearly make a conclusion in (11), but it is obvious that he intended to say that Chinese characters are backwards while *hangul* is forward oriented and modern. From his syllogistic reasoning, we can clearly see that phonetic representation came to be considered a prerequisite feature of modern scripts. Before this new yardstick emerged, Chinese characters had been regarded as a script encompassing wisdom and truth, and hence they had been called *jinseo* 眞書 (truth writing). The meaning said to be contained in every stroke had been considered something of great virtue; however, the modern script barometer was now defining Chinese characters as has-beens.

The main reason phonograms were preferred was their practicality: phonograms are far easier to learn than ideograms, and thus more suitable for mass education. In the case of ideograms, the relationship between symbol and representation is one-to-one; we need as many symbols as the number of representations. Therefore, it usually takes quite a long time to master ideographic scripts. Moreover, the relationship between symbol and representation is arbitrary, which means the characters themselves do not mean anything, but just deliver the sound. Thus, if one were to memorize a limited number of characters, then they could basically be freely implemented as the user wished. For this reason, phonograms were considered the mark of modern civilization, as shown in (12).

- (12) Why, in general, is the world using ideograms uncivilized, whereas the world using phonograms is civilized? This must be because the script's level of difficulty affects the learning level of the general populace, and it is this level of knowledge that determines how strong the state can become. This is

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<sup>37</sup> With respect to the word 'script,' the original version of (11) in Korean used the term *guel* 글, which literally means 'the written form of language.'

<sup>38</sup> Ju, S. (1907). *Gugeowa gungmunui pillyo* 국어와 국문의 필요 (The necessity of national language and national characters). *Seou* 西友, 2, 30.

what lies before our eyes.<sup>39</sup>

The author insists that the easier the script is to learn, the higher the level of education is, and thereby the more powerful the state can become. This direct connection between phonograms and the level of civilization was also discussed in historical contexts. Shin Hae-young 申海永 pointed out that the most critical decision the Western civilization had made in terms of its advancement was its adoption of the Phoenician alphabet.

- (13) The oldest country preceding the Zhou Dynasty in ancient history is Egypt, which came to exist around BC 2000. Egyptians invented script by imitating the shapes of things, which are called logograms. (...) Subsequently, from around BC 1100, Phoenicia, located in western Asia, created a phonetic script made according to the way the mouth pronounced sounds. All social classes, including high, middle, and low, could use the script and study with ease, so that agriculture, commerce, the mining and textile industries, and manufacturing businesses came to prosper. Then, by trading with other countries Phoenicia's influence spread around the world. This is all because of the phonetic script; this is how the West produced the seed of the current advanced civilization.<sup>40</sup>

The author first shows that the West also had a history of using ideographs created by Egyptians, just like the Chinese characters used in East Asia. Then, he claims that the adoption of the Phoenician alphabet served as momentum for the development of Western civilization. From his perspective, the huge gap between the civilized West and the uncivilized East was mainly caused by the type of the script that each side implemented; while the East was still stuck using ideographs, the West had moved forward by adopting phonographs thousands of years ago.<sup>41</sup>

The pursuit of a phonetic system was a common phenomenon in East Asia at the turn of the twentieth century. Japan also witnessed a *hiragana* movement while it was in competition with a Romanization movement. Meanwhile, in China and Taiwan, where there is no native phonetic script, discussions on adopting the Roman script received serious attention. Despite such heated debates on adopting a phonetic system in East Asia at the turn of the century, however, in the end only Korea adopted the exclusive use of phonograms through a choice made by its people.

Japan, on the one hand, saw the rise of *hiragana* writing theory, which was initiated by some Meiji scholars including Maejima Hisoka 前島密 and Shimizu Usaburo 清水卯三郎.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, Nishi Amane 西周

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<sup>39</sup> Gungmun hanmun nonsang 國文漢文論上 (Argument on national writing and Classical Chinese writing). *Hwangseong sinmun*, 28 September 1898, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Shin, H. (1897). Hanmunjawa gungmunjauui soning yeoha 漢文字와 國文字의 損益如何 (Gain and loss of Chinese characters and national characters). *Daejoseon dongnim hyeopoe hoebo* 大朝鮮獨立協會會報, 15, 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> The battle between phonograms and ideograms consequently ended with a victory of phonograms with respect to Chinese characters and *hangul*; however, the ideographic features of script were also sought in various ways. As Byung-Moon Kim emphasized, the Korean reading of Chinese characters was one way to still take advantage of ideograms while implementing a phonetic script. Moreover, the ideographic features of characters was also utilized when applying *hangul*; Modern Korean orthography follows a morphophonemic principle. While it basically expresses sounds, it does not, however, manifest allophones, of which the variations of sounds are predictable by phonological rules. Instead, allophones are written in a representative form so that it is easy to interpret their meaning visually. On the issue of supplementing ideographic features to phonograms, see Kim, B. (2014) *Geundae gyemonggi hanja hundoksic pyogie daehan yeongu* (A Study of Chinese Writing Based on Korean Reading in Early Modern Korea), *Dongbanghakji*, 165. 101-128.

<sup>42</sup> Lee, Y. (2006). *Gugeoraneun sasang* (The idea of 'national language') (Y. Ko & K. Lim, Trans.). Seoul: Somyong, 59, 61.

promoted the Romanization of Japanese.<sup>43</sup> In the 1880s there were heated debates between the advocates of *hiragana* and those of the Roman alphabet, but they shared the view that it was urgent to find a phonetic script that best fit the Japanese language.

Meanwhile, from the late Qing period onward, China also witnessed increasing interest in a phonetic system of writing. Kang Youwei 康有為 suggested the creation of a new language with the lightest, clearest, and roundest sounds along with a phonetic writing system representing those sounds.<sup>44</sup> May Fourth intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 and Hu Shi 胡適 proposed more realistic ideas of keeping the Chinese language for the time being but replacing Chinese characters with a phonetic system like the Roman alphabet.<sup>45</sup>

Taiwan was no exception; it saw the progression of the Romanized Taiwanese movement propagated by Cai Peihuo 蔡培火 during the Japanese colonial period. Later, he even devised a new phonetic system consisting of twenty-eight symbols while refuting the colonial government's pressure to use Japanese *kana*.<sup>46</sup>

However, the pursuit of a phonetic script did not gain wide public support in the end. In China, where Chinese characters originated, the abrupt abolition of the traditional script was seen as too radical in hindsight. Instead of getting rid of it, China decided to just simplify its characters by decreasing the number of strokes while also implementing the *pinyin* system of Romanization in the mid-twentieth century. By doing so, China partly adopted some of the advantages of phonograms while maintaining its conventional use of ideograms.

Meanwhile, Japan also was unable to go any further toward adopting the exclusive use of *kana*; instead it promulgated various restricted sets of Chinese characters during the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, Japan was the epicenter of the *genbun itchi* (unification of spoken and written language) movement, which initially implied the abolition of Chinese characters; however, Meiji intellectuals later realized the modern value of *kanji* as a useful means to achieve the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere 大東亞共榮圈.<sup>47</sup> With the ambitious goal of taking over the traditional Sinosphere as a whole and rendering it into the Japanized world, Chinese script was regarded as a useful channel to control its soon-to-be colonies.

In addition, the Romanization of Taiwanese faced both a lack of social acceptance as well as the colonial government's opposition.<sup>48</sup> The majority of Taiwanese scholars insisted on preserving the use of Classical Chinese and its characters; keeping its language and script was one way to resist Japan's assimilation policy. Moreover, allowing Taiwan to adopt the Roman script instead of Japan's native phonetic alphabet was surely intolerable to the colonial government as well.

Let us now turn our attention to the reason why the elimination of Chinese characters only succeeded in Korea. It was not until the late twentieth century that South Korea fully adopted *hangul* writing in textbooks and newspapers; during the first half of the twentieth century, publications by and large used a mixed script of *hangul* and Chinese characters, with some exceptions. Despite the efforts of the reformers, the Korean vernacular in the early twentieth century was not yet able to function as a full-fledged language of writing.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>44</sup> Zhou, G., op. cit., 25.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>46</sup> Heylen, A. (2012). *Japanese Models, Chinese Culture, and the Dilemma of Taiwanese Language Reform*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 52-93.

<sup>47</sup> Lee, Y., op. cit., 71.

<sup>48</sup> Heylen, A., op. cit., 95.

This paper argues that the strong national sentiment adhering to *hangul* was the major contributor of the elimination of Chinese characters in Korea. The Korean national writing system, *hangul*, was created by the fourth king of Joseon, Sejong the Great (r. 1418–1450), in the mid-fifteenth century, and he was often mentioned in articles on language during the early twentieth century. The following section 3.3 will examine how the nationalistic sentiment toward *hangul* was made by idolizing and glorifying King Sejong.

### 3.3. The Legend of Sejong the Great

Although it is undeniable that King Sejong is one of the greatest kings in Korean history, the full-blown idolization of him has much to do with the rise of linguistic nationalism. Early twentieth century Korea witnessed many intellectuals highlighting the foresight of King Sejong, who had created *hangul* in 1443. What they argued in unison was that King Sejong's outlook on the phonetic script was absolutely pioneering in nature, thus proving the superiority of the Korean nation. Meanwhile, what they also uniformly regretted was that Korea had the chance to make significant progress by adopting *hangul* half a millennium previously but failed to do so because *hanhak* scholars were busy pursuing Classical Chinese. Ju Si-gyeong was one of many who admired King Sejong while lamenting over the past.

- (14) From ancient times we have been living in our peninsula as a separate ethnic group with our language, but we did not have our own way of writing, and therefore we borrowed Classical Chinese from China. In the meantime, Sejong the Great, who was so talented, revised and standardized *gunmun* and promulgated it all over the country; he lamented the fact that every other country had its own writing system with which to write down their languages, whereas Korea only had a deficient way of writing. Although King Sejong performed divine work, his descendants did not respect his intentions but rather worshiped Classical Chinese. Even though they put all their efforts into Classical Chinese without doing anything else from childhood up through their twenties and thirties, in reality only less than one in a hundred actually became proficient at reading and writing Classical Chinese. This was due to the fact that Classical Chinese is very hard since it represents shapes, and also because it is a foreign language.<sup>49</sup>

As he stated, the past generations were to blame since they had not shared King Sejong's determination. A few months later, he published a longer article in *Hwangseong Sinmun* and placed more emphasis on Sejong's achievements.

- (15) How beautiful the words of this holy man! He looked after his people and cared fairly about everyone, and that helped them to do what they wanted and gain wisdom. How great the works of this holy man! He left behind a remarkable achievement which will be enjoyed forever by creating our country's own script; this script manifests the natural supremacy of our peninsula and our nation in the world.<sup>50</sup>

It is noticeable that Ju Si-gyeong used the term *natural* 天然的 to describe Korea's supremacy. Despite the fact that *hangul* had been largely despised and ignored up to that point, from the late nineteenth century the creation of *hangul* itself was used as evidence to prove the innate preeminence of the Korean nation. The glorification of King Sejong and his invention of *hangul* had significant importance in terms of creating the

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<sup>49</sup> Ju, S., op. cit., 31-32.

<sup>50</sup> Pilsang jaguk eonmun 必尙自國文言 (Necessity of respecting one's own spoken and written languages). *Hwangseong sinmun* 皇城新聞, 5 April 1907, 1.

modern identity of the Korean nation. Identity matters when it is threatened, and thus the legend of King Sejong became more prominent as Korea faced its heretofore biggest crisis of identity. Almost nothing of Korea of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century met modern standards. However, there was one thing that did measure up to the Western yardstick: Korea's phonetic script *hangul*. *Hangul* was convincing evidence that verified the fact that the Korean people were naturally as talented and modern as Western people. Then, what caused the interruption of its manifestation of excellence? Again, Classical Chinese was to blame.

Therefore it became the mission of Korean scholars to revive the glorious past and restore the natural supremacy of the Korean nation by abolishing Chinese characters and implementing *hangul*. In other East Asian countries, the discourses on phonetic scripts were mainly concerned with practicality; in Korea, however, the phonetic script was considered a tool for not only taking pragmatic advantages of a phonetic system, but also for recovering the country's national identity and cultural pride. For the Chinese and Taiwanese, a phonetic script was something foreign and futuristic. For the Japanese, it was part of their old customs but not powerful enough to defeat the country's fondness of Chinese characters. For Koreans, however, the phonetic script represented their *old future*: a cultural heritage that would reinstate their innate but forgotten supremacy.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the late nineteenth century onward, Western modernity exercised a far-reaching influence on the worldwide progression of modernization; however, the European model of modernity was not just copied in non-European regions. As far as language modernization is concerned, its development did not follow a single trajectory but rather demonstrated numerous variations according to the linguistic traditions and sociopolitical situations in each area. It was commonplace that the breakdown of pre-modern diglossia took place during the course of language modernization; however, this does not mean that there was only one way that the conventional diglossic structure came to be dissolved. Both Europe and East Asia at large witnessed the fall of their classical language and the rise of the vernacular, whereas the Arab nations saw the evolution of the traditional diglossia evolving into triglossia: Classical Arabic for religion, Modern Classical Arabic for media and education, and the vernacular for everyday conversation. While it did not succeed in the end, in early twentieth century China there had also been serious discussions about adopting Esperanto as the national language while abolishing both classical and colloquial languages. In this respect, the earliest stage of language modernization, which set the stage for the subsequent stages, shows multiple trajectories all around the world.

The case of Korea has two unique background elements: ethnic and linguistic homogeneity and a writing system specially designed for the Korean vernacular by its king. These two factors significantly contributed to the growth of linguistic nationalism in Korea. From the late nineteenth century onward, East Asian countries all struggled to erase the long-standing influences of Classical Chinese, and there were heated debates about whether to implement a phonetic script. China had no phonetic system of its own, and therefore it considered adopting a foreign script such as the Roman alphabet. Despite the disadvantages of Chinese characters that were harshly criticized by reform-minded intellectuals, however, it was not simple to abolish the age-old traditions that Chinese characters represented. There had to be a compromise between the traditional and modern perspectives. On the contrary, to Koreans, the idea of adopting a phonetic system was modern but not foreign, as there was *hangul*, which had been waiting for several hundred years under the shadow of Chinese characters. Early modern period reformers, on the one hand, encouraged the use of *hangul* and tried to prove

its superiority over Chinese characters, but on the other hand they attempted to glorify King Sejong, and in doing so they insisted that the Korean nation was originally wise and smart, just like its king, but that the Chinese influence was to blame for suppressing Korea's superiority. Therefore, to the Korean people of the early twentieth century, adopting a phonetic system did not mean Westernization in the sense that it did in other countries, but rather the recovery of ancient glory and cultural pride.

The discussions so far remind us of recent theory on multiple modernities initiated by S. N. Eisenstadt.<sup>51</sup> He argues against the prevailing assumption that the European cultural program of modernity and institutional constellations has taken over all modern societies; he asserts that the actual manifestation of modernity shows ideological and institutional patterns in multiple ways.<sup>52</sup> If we apply his assertion to linguistic modernity, we can also find much evidence to support its multiple-ness. However, we also need to consider where we should place emphasis: the differences between contemporary variations, or those between the pre-modern and modern worlds. Volker H. Schmidt questions the appropriateness of the concept of multiple modernities by insisting that “[t]he trouble with much of the multiple modernities literature is that it does not really tell us a great deal about what precisely these differences consist in, how significant they are, and why they might justify speaking of modernity in plural, rather than a singular.”<sup>53</sup> An alternative he suggests is the concept of *varieties of modernity*, which focuses more on the revolutionary shifts from pre-modern to modern society than the differences among various cases. When it comes to linguistic modernity, whether to employ the concept of multiple modernities or that of varieties of modernity remains an open question that will require more in-depth and broader examinations.

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<sup>51</sup> Eisenstadt, S. N. (2000). Multiple Modernities. *Daedalus*, 129, 1-29.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Schmidt, V. H. (2006). Multiple Modernities or Varieties of Modernity?. *Current Sociology*, 54, 77-97.