

# Language styles of Korean in chat-rooms

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This study investigates language styles of Korean in online chat-rooms. Data were collected in a chat-room in which several members were simultaneously talking about various topics. I found that there are several tendencies in the use of Korean language online. First, people tend to write online conversation based on the verbal interactions (the actual pronunciation). Second, people also tend to finish syllables with additional nasal consonants such as /m/ or /ŋ/ which are not necessary in Korean standard writing. There are some other cases in which syllables can be simplified by omitting phonemes which are obligatory in standard Korean writing. People also tend to break the syllable structure into simplified one. For instance, the last consonant in the syllable structure CVC or CVCC tends to be omitted. People also tend to use only the syllable onset consonant instead of the whole syllable to deliver a message. I suggest that people employ these strategies in online interaction in order to express their attitude toward the addressee. It is certain that people have already established these specific linguistic forms in an online speech community.

## 1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has impacts on aspects of communication in which certain norms of language use have already been established. Conventionalized linguistic forms among English users in CMC can be frequently found. For instance, OMG stands for *oh my god*, 4 U for *for you*, and U R for *you are*. These are versions of standard English writing which are accepted in an online speech community. A great deal of research has also discussed that the language in CMC is different depending on the status (low vs. high) of speech groups in the same speech community (Dino, Reysen & Branscombe 2009) and different speech communities (Nishimura 2008).

However, there is no research on linguistic forms of the Korean language in CMC. This study examines how Korean language users in chat-rooms establish certain norms in the use of written language. In other words, the discussion will cover the usage of Korean consonants, vowels and syllable structure in chat-rooms. This study will be composed of the following sections: 1) a broad discussion on the vowels and the consonants of Korean, 2) a literature review covering research on language use online in

English and other languages such as German and Japanese, 3) presentation of data collection and analysis on vowel change, addition and omission of consonants, and syllabification in the use of the Korean language online.

**2. The Korean language**

There are 19 consonants (e.g., ㄱ, ㅋ, ㆁ, .../k, n, t, l/...) including four tensed stops(ㄱ, ㆁ, ㆁ, ㆁ, /k', p', t', c'/) and one tensed fricative (ㅅ, /s'/) (see Table 1 for details), as well as 10 vowels in Korean (e.g., ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅣ, ㅓ, ㅕ, ... /a, e, i, o, u/..., see Table 2 for details). Some dialectal zones lack a few of the consonants and/or vowels that appear in the overall inventory. The syllable is an important unit in Korean, but its syllabic structure is simpler than that of English. Korean syllables can take the form of CV, CVC, and CVCC structures, and the first consonant in a final consonant cluster in Korean CVCC words is usually not produced. There are no initial consonant clusters in Korean syllables, and final consonant clusters are limited.

Sohn (1999) points out several salient articulatory features in Korean. First, alveo-dental consonants are produced with the top (not the tip) of the tongue touching or approaching the back of the upper teeth and gum ridge area with the tongue tip touching the back of the lower teeth. Second, the palatal series and alveo-dental fricatives are produced with the lips flattened, unless they are followed by a round vowel. Third, Korean palatals are monotonous stops without the fricative quality such as [ʃ] and [ʒ]. Fourth, no Korean consonant is released in the syllable-final (coda) position. For instance, in producing the word *aph*, ‘front’, the lips are closed for /ph/ and the resultant sound is /ap/ despite the fact that its morphophonemic form is *aph*. The aspirated stops /ph/, /th/, /ch/, and /kh/ are never voiced and are produced with a strong puff of air.

There are three nasals in Korean; bilabial /m/, alveo-dental /n/, and velar /ŋ/. Each nasal can be placed in either syllable-initial or -final position in accordance with the rules of Korean writing (Hankul). In Korean online interaction, these nasal consonants are additionally used along with glottal /h/ in syllable-final position in the syllable structure of CVCC. The main discussion with regard to consonants will be focused on these nasals, particularly /m/ and /ŋ/, as well as glottal /h/.

place of articulation \ articulatory manner			bilabial	alveo-dental	palatal	velar	glottal
			stop	lax	voiceless or voiced	/p/ (ㅍ)	/t/ (ㄷ)

	aspirated	voiceless	/ph/ (ㅍ)	/th/ (ㅌ)	/ch/ (ㅊ)	/kh/ (ㅋ)	
	tensed	voiceless	/pʰ/ (ㅍ)	/tʰ/ (ㅌ)	/cʰ/ (ㅊ)	/kʰ/ (ㅋ)	
fricative	aspirated	voiceless		/s/ (ㅅ)			/h/ (ㅎ)
	tensed	voiceless		/sʰ/ (ㅆ)			
nasal		voiced	/m/ (ㅁ)	/n/ (ㄴ)		/ŋ/ (ㅇ)	
liquid	lateral or flap	voiced		/l/ (ㄹ)			

Table 1. The Korean consonants (adapted from Sohn 1999:153)

10 vowel phonemes can be arranged in terms of the oral place of articulation, lip shape, and the height of tongue as shown in the following table (see Table 2). Table 2 represents only the simple vowels of modern standard Korean. Korean has two pairs of non-low back vowels: high and mid rounded vowels, /u (ㅜ)/ and /o (ㅝ)/, and high and mid unrounded vowels, /i (ㅣ)/ and /ə (ㅓ)/. The unrounded back vowels are more forward than their corresponding rounded ones. The distance between two non-high front vowels, /e (ㅔ)/ and /ɛ (ㅚ)/ is so close that many Koreans may not distinguish them from each other. All Korean vowels are tense vowels, so that there is no tense-lax distinction such as /i/ vs. /ɪ/ and /u/ vs. /ʊ/ as in English.

In addition to 10 vowels, there are also semi vowels /w/ and /j/ which precede a vowel. They function as both vowels and consonants. They neither block a speech organ nor produce any friction just like vowel and become diphthongs with other vowels. They construct 12 diphthongs in Korean (diphthong: /je/ ㅟ, /jɛ/ ㅟ, /ja/ ㅟ, /jʌ/ ㅟ, /wi/ ㅟ, /we/ ㅟ, /we/ ㅟ, /wa/ ㅟ, /jo/ ㅟ, /ju/ ㅟ, /wʌ/ ㅟ, /ji/ ㅟ). They may also follow a consonant as in *kwak* /kwak/ and *pyek* /pjək/ meaning ‘box’ and ‘wall’ respectively. They also occur in syllable initial position before a vowel as in *wang* /wan/ and *yang* /jan/ meaning ‘king’ and ‘sheep’, respectively. In online interactions, some of these diphthongs are monophthongized due to certain limited environments of web chat.

place	low	/ɛ/ (ㅚ) front	/a/ (ㅏ) back	
	lips	unround	round	
tongue	high	/i/ (ㅣ)	/y/ (ㅡ)	/ɨ/ (ㅣ)
	mid	/e/ (ㅔ)	/ø/ (ㅟ)	/ə/ or /ʌ/ (ㅓ)

Table 2. Korean vowels (adapted from Sohn 1999:156)

### 3. Technology-mediated communication

Dino, Reysen & Branscombe (2009) found, in their research on online interactions, that messages were different in the degree of conformity, ingratiation, agreeing, requesting and instructing between group members of low status and high status. They collected data from online forums on which board users posted messages; users who posted fewer than 30 messages were defined as low status and those who had posted more than 200 as high status. Across all internet groups, they found consistent status position effects on social interaction and language; messages from lower status members were rated as more conforming and agreeable as well as more ingratiating than messages from higher status members in which lower status members were pressured to conform to group norms (Louis 1980, Williams et al. 2000) and strategically portrayed themselves as willing to act as a good group member (Jetten et al. 2003, Noel et al. 1995, Vonk 1998). They also found that low status members used first person singular pronouns (e.g., I, my, me) more extensively than high status group members. The exclamation marks and affective language, in addition to first person singular pronouns in lower status members' writing represent both their attempts to attract the attention of higher status members to their self-proclaimed merits and endeavor to impress high status group members to obtain their approval. Another piece of research on linguistic features such as politeness and identity in online community has been conducted on Japanese CMC.

Nishimura (2008) examined linguistic features in online communities on the basis of Japanese bulletin board system (BBS) websites. She examined the messages on two topics (a popular Hollywood film and English language study by Japanese speakers) from the two most popular anonymous BBS websites in Japan (channel 2 and Yahoo Japan BBS). She employed Herring's (2004) online community criteria such as 'identity', 'sociability' and 'support' along with the theory of discernment (*wakimae* in Ide, 2005:203), defined as "the practice of polite behavior according to social convention", which is linguistic behavior that is in agreement with the code of conduct in the Japanese speech community. She found that expressions indicating discernment (*wakimae*) were more identified specifically in Yahoo communities than channel 2. It seems that each community (channel 2 and Yahoo) has their own specific values in which members behave according to those values; "polite behavior in Yahoo is a reflection of that group's values while impolite language in Channel 2 is consistent with that group's shared norms and values" (p 13). Among the three online community criteria of identity, sociability and

support, the languages of channel 2 imply features of identity. More specifically, the presence of community-specific and unconventional languages in the group of Channel 2 denotes an identity while Yahoo does not.

Golato and Taleghani-Nikazm (2006) also investigated how social factors such as politeness and face are negotiated in web chats. The speech act of 'request' was used to examine negotiation in the first pair parts, and assessment in the second pair parts. They found that participants took practices from ordinary conversation and applied them to interact with one another smoothly and to support solidarity within web chat communication. One particular feature of online requests is the use of smiley faces and other emoticons to express gestures and other embodiments as well as the general mood of the chatter (Schonefeldt & Golato 2003:275) since visual access and information regarding the intonation contour of a given message is obviously missing. It seems that such positive emoticons are incorporated to soften the imposition of the request by displaying their orientation to the dispreferred action (which they have already performed or are about to perform) to their addressee.

Even though there is much research on language interaction online, there is little research on Korean online interaction. This study examines how Korean language users in chat-rooms establish certain norms in the use of written language. This paper also includes discussion on how internet users in Korean utilize honorific speech in order to express solidarity in addition to politeness.

#### **4. Data collection and discussion**

Data for the present study were collected from an internet chat site. In this web chat, a user usually creates a chat-room under a specific topic and other users can view the topic of chat outside the chat-room<sup>1</sup>. If they want to chat with other users about specific topic, they can enter the chat-room by clicking the room to participate. Multiple users (i.e., more than two) can simultaneously participate in one chat-room. The researcher

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<sup>1</sup>*Geopia* web chat site (<http://www.geopia.com>) was established in 1999 in Korea. It has more than 40 internet communities on the basis of region, age, and topic in which more than 3000 chat-rooms are available. It serves internet users messengers and emoticons in addition to chats, and people can participate in chats with no membership.

participated in the chats himself two times. However, active participation was not necessary since there are usually a few other chatters who actively communicate. The researcher entered the room and observed the conversation for two hours each day. When the meaning of the conversations became unclear due to the change of vowels or consonants in words, the researcher directly asked the meaning of words. A four-hour-long corpus of chat was collected. The chats were in the Korean alphabetic script (Hankul).

In (written) online interaction, there are fewer ways to deliver one's attitude toward the addressee compared to spoken language offline. Because of this limited environment of expression online, people employ various strategies to deliver one's attitude toward the addressee. The following sections discuss how vowels and consonants of Korean in online interaction are changing.

#### 4.1. Vowel change in the chat-room

Vowel change frequently occurred during online chat. People tend to write based on the verbal interactions in which vowel change occurs. That is, even though the mode of online communication is written, people often employ a strategy of pronunciation-based writing in order to convey attitudes to the addressee.

(1)

- a. Seoul 2jucha: *annyung hase-yeo*  
hi do-Polite  
'hi'
- b. Seoul 2jucha: *meo hase-yeo*  
what do-Polite  
'what are you doing?'
- c. Yahoo: *kkkk a chaetingbang?*  
(laugh) chat-room?  
'chat-room?'
- d. Yahoo: *kulsse... kkkk?*  
well... (laugh)  
'well...'
- ...
- e. Seoul 2jucha: *annyung-nim a*  
annyung-Honorific

- f. Annyung:           ‘annyung?’  
*wae-yeo*  
 why-Polite  
 ‘what’
- g. Annyung:           *malhae-yeo*  
 language-Polite  
 ‘say’

For instance, in example 1 *Seoul 2jucha* and *Annyung* tend to write –yeo (/jʌ/) instead of -yo, the diphthong for the polite speech style in Korean. It tends to be replaced with /-jʌ/ which sounds more like actual pronunciation in verbal interaction. There are some other cases for this deviant vowel change such as /ban-ga-wʌ-jʌ/ (nice to meet you), /sɛ-he-bok- ma-ni-ba-du-se-jʌ/ (happy new year), and /mi-an-he-jʌ/ (I am sorry), etc. Thus, the polite speech style –yo tends to be replaced with -yeo (/jʌ/) in online interaction regardless of contexts.

(2)

- a. Toumi:           *gulian-nim*           *yoso*   *ose-yo~*  
 gulian-Honorific quick come-Polite  
 ‘Gulian, welcome’
- b. Hongildong:   *um, cal*   *haessseo.*  
 m, good did  
 ‘well, did good’
- c. Gulian:           *souli anpoinunte.*  
 soul do not see  
 ‘Soul is not here’
- d. Hongildong:   *osinpun*           *hai-yeo*  
 coming person Hi-Polite  
 ‘Hi to entering person’
- e. Guest:           ...  
*annyung hase-yeo.*  
 good do-Polite  
 ‘Hello’
- f. Hongildong:   *gest-nim,*           *hai-yeo.*  
 Guest-Honorific hi-Polite  
 ‘Hi, Guest’

In greetings, sometimes English ‘hi’ is used between members when a new member enters the room to chat. However, this ‘hi’ alone does not convey politeness among chatters, so people tend to add polite speech style /-jΛ/ to the end of this English ‘hi’ as in Example 2. *Hongildong* repeats “hi” with Korean polite ending –yeo (/jΛ/) in which he tries to express politeness with English expression. However, the Korean informal polite speech –yo also changed into –yeo (/jΛ/) in this expression. The deviant vowel change of polite speech ending –yeo, the actual colloquial pronunciation, denotes speakers’ solidarity along with politeness toward the addressee.

- (3)
- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| a. Tinggimyalkya: | <i>na-man kiyokhae</i><br>me only remember<br>‘only remember me’ |
| b. Tinggimyalkya: | <i>kk</i><br>(laugh, laugh)                                      |
| c. Mitu:          | <i>k</i><br>(laugh)  |

*Notice: Tinggimyalkya attacked Hairu*

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| d. Tinggimyalkya: | <i>kk</i><br>(laugh)   |
| e. Yahu:          | <i>hochulun mə ya?</i><br>beep what?<br>‘what is beeping’          |
| f. Tinggimyalkya: | <i>*^^*</i><br>(emoticon)  |
| g. Mitu:          | <i>caltul nonae</i><br>good play<br>‘(you guys) are playing well’  |
| h. Mitu:          | <i>a, pikonhae</i><br>ah, tired<br>‘I am tired’                    |
| i. Tinggimyalkya: | <i>hochul.. pulununkeo</i><br>beep calling<br>‘beeping is calling’ |

Diphthongs can be monophthongized in online chat room. For instance, /mwə-ya/, ‘what’s (that?)’ often is written as /mə-ya/ (e.g., line 3e) in which diphthong /wə/ is monophthongized as /ə/. This monophthong was also found in other words such as /mən mal/ (‘what word’) for /mwən

mal/, and /mə hae/ (‘what are you doing?’) for /mwə hae/. Frequently the diphthong /wə/ also tends to be substituted to monophthong /o/ as in /mon dae/ (‘what’). This vowel simplification in online interaction can be explained in two aspects. First, in Korean, the monophthong is easier to produce than diphthong, and in colloquial expressions, the diphthong /wə/ is produced more like the monophthong /ə/ even if conventional written form suggests a difference between these two kinds of vowels. People might employ this strategy in their online written interaction. Secondly, technologically, the diphthongs requires twice the typing effort compared to monophthong requiring just one keypress on a Korean computer keyboard. I suggest this keyboard difference may also affect writing in online interaction.

#### 4.2. Additional consonants in the chat-room

Hankul depicts alphabetic characters in syllable blocks in which a syllable block can consist of either CV, CVC, or CVCC. However, even if these syllable structures are well-maintained in online interaction, there is a certain degree to which the syllabifying of words varies. First, people tend to finish syllables with consonants when such final consonants are not necessary. That is, in online interaction, people often use additional nasal consonants such as /m/ and /ŋ/.

(4)

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| a. Nalla♡woman:  | <i>kamsa-hapnita</i><br>thanks - do<br>‘thank you.’   |
| b. Nalla♡woman:  | <i>yeolopun-tulto saehae bok</i><br><i>mani patuse-yo-<b>ng</b></i><br>you-Plural also new year fortune<br>much take-Polite<br>‘happy new year to all’            |
| c. Peponeupcang: | <i>kulko-poni-ka Kul-nim pang cang</i><br><i>taseossne-yeo-<b>m</b></i><br>and-see-then Kul-Honorific room<br>leader became-Polite<br>‘well, Kul became a leader’ |
| d. Taebak:       | <i>nuni mani nelin yonu</i><br><i>kolmokkal..</i><br>snow much down which<br>corner road<br>‘a corner road with much snow’  |
| e. Peponeupcang: | <i>chukka-yeo-<b>m</b></i>  |

congratulation-Polite  
'congratulations'

In Example 4, *Nalla* ♡*woman* and *Peponeupcang* tend to use additional ng (/ŋ/) or m (/m/) after the polite ending of either -yo (4b) or -yeo (4c, 4e). The syllable structure of -yo (-yeo) is CV, but at the end of the vowel, the users added one more nasal consonant either /ŋ/ or /m/ constructing the syllable structure CVC in polite speech predicate. The addition of nasal consonants can be found in other ending words in addition to the polite speech style ending.

- (5)
- a. *Peponeupcang*: *iko wancon nait umak*  
*ine-ng*  
this totally clubhouse music  
is  
'this is a definitely clubhouse music'
- b. *Conkalcali*: *kkk*  
(laugh)
- c. *Taebak*: *kk*  
(laugh)
- d. *Peponeupcang*: *chonsa-nim koki ta tuseoss*  
*na-ng?*  
angel-Honorific meat all eat  
'angel, you finish eating meat?'
- e. *Conkalcali*: *taebak-nim*  
taebak-Honorific  
'Taebak?'
- f. *Taebak*: *ne-ng?*  
yes?  
'yes?'

In Example 5, the additional nasal ending occurs in (5a) and (5d) in which the syllable structure CVC is constructed. In (5a), *Ine* ('is') in Korean is composed of two syllables; (C)V/CV ending with a vowel. But the nasal ng (/ŋ/) is added to the end of vowel. This additional nasal /ŋ/ occurs repeatedly in the utterance of (5d) and (5f). These additional nasal consonants at the end of the syllable were found in many other cases during the interaction online (e.g., /was'-nun-deŋ/, 'came'; /ba-du-se-joŋ/, 'take', and so on), or /m/ (e.g., /baŋ-ga-jʌm/ 'nice to meet you'; /tu-lʌ-ju-se-jʌm/, 'please play' (this song); /con-bʌŋ-cwʌ-pwaŋ/, 'give me phone number'; /ne-ka-pul-s'aŋ-he-po-i-ciŋ?/, 'I look poor?' and so on. Interestingly, whereas the additional nasals such as bilabial and velar are

added to syllable-final position of the sentence, the alveo-dental nasal /n/, did not occur. In the next section, we see that not only are these additional consonants found, but syllables can also be simplified by omitting phonemes which are necessary in standardized Korean writing.

### 4.3. Syllabification in the chat-room

In *geopia* chats, I found a tendency toward simplified syllable structure. In the syllable structure CVC or CVCC, the last consonant tends to be omitted. For instance, the syllable structure CVC can be simplified to CV as in /co-ko/ for /coh-ko/ in the sentence /no-rɛ-co-ko/, ‘(it is) a good song’ (Example 6). The omission of the last glottal aspirated /h/ is frequently found during the interaction, as in /co-(o)un-sɛk/ for /coh-(o)un-sɛk/, and /co-wa-jo/ for /coh-wa-jo/, respectively ‘good color’ and ‘(it is) good’.

- (6)
- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| a. Pepone upchang: | <i>norae coko</i><br>song good<br>‘(It is a) good song’   |
| b. Param:          | <i>yoseo-ose-yo</i><br>quick-come-Polite<br>‘welcome’   |
| c. Taepak:         | <i>hehe</i><br>(laugh)  |
| d. manyunsulhwa:   | <i>pangaweo-yo</i><br>good (to see)-Polite<br>‘nice to (see you)’   |
| e. Taepak:         | <i>Kirin-nim cho-to iman-ha-myun</i><br><i>heochop siin</i><br>Kirin-Honorific me-also this-do-if<br>not good poet<br>‘Kirin, I am kind of a poet even if I<br>am not good’ |
| f. Pepone upchang: | <i>ne-ng</i><br>‘yes’   |

There are also some other cases in which simplified syllables are found. The aspirated /s/ in syllable-final position tends to be substituted for the alveo-dental fricative tense /s’/ as in /an-dø-sjʌs-(o)ʌ-jʌ/ for /an-dø-sjʌs’-/

(o)Λ-jΛ/ and /was-nyn-dɛŋ/ for /was'-nyn-dɛŋ/; respectively, 'too bad', and 'came'. In some case, people tend to use only the syllable-initial phoneme of each word to deliver messages. For instance, the word /kam-sa/, 'thank', was frequently represented only by the initial consonant of each syllable, /k/ and /s/, the word /ha-(o)i/, 'hi', was represented simply with /h/ and /i/. The researcher, who does not chat frequently, had to ask chatters the meaning of these acronyms while chatting. These conventions regarding initial syllables, can be quite frequently used in interaction without causing misunderstanding because in the online speech community there exist shared norms with regard to specific linguistic forms.

## 5. Conclusion and further research

In this study, I reviewed online interactions of Korean and found specific linguistic forms which have been established in an online speech community. I found several important tendencies in the use of Korean language online. People tend to substitute the diphthong of the polite speech style –yeo (/jΛ/) for –yo, the standard written polite form, and the diphthong /wə/ can be monophthongized /ə/ in online chat rooms. In Korean, the monophthong is easier to produce than diphthong, and in colloquial expression, diphthongs are produced more like monophthongs even if writing conventions make a difference between these two kinds of vowels.

I suggest that people tend to write utterances based on the pronunciation of verbal interactions. That is, even though chatrooms are a written mode of communication, people often employ a strategy of pronunciation-based writing to deliver emotion to the addressee. In offline interaction, people can use smiles, gestures and intonations as strategies to express one's attitude toward the addressee. However, in online interactions with limited channels of communication, pronunciation-based writing is one of the ways to express attitudinal factors such as solidarity and intimacy along with politeness toward the addressee. Regarding the consonants, people tend to add an extra syllable-final consonant which is not necessary in formal writing. That is, people often use additional nasal consonants such as /m/ and /ŋ/ in the final position of the syllable. However, interestingly, alveo-dental nasal /n/ never occurred as an additional consonant in my data. I also found that there are some cases in which syllables can be simplified by omitting phonemes which are necessary in Korean standard writing. People also tend to simplify syllable-final consonant clusters. For instance, in the syllable structure CVC or CVCC, the final consonant tends

to be omitted. Finally, people tend to use only the written representation of phonemic onset of each syllable to deliver messages.

I claim that Korean language users online have already established these specific linguistic forms since these particular usages do not cause any misunderstanding in the online speech community. Further research will be necessary to examine whether these specific linguistic forms are related to gender, age, or specific speech communities online.

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