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**Accent and Vowel Length in Korean**

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Textbooks of Korean and teachers of Korean generally assert that the standard dialect of the Korean language has no accentual system. In spite of that assertion, an attentive student of the language will notice that there is a rising or falling of the pitch of the voice on certain syllables that is fixed, i.e., that cannot be moved to a different syllable in the same word without sounding wrong or at least strange.

Native speakers and normative speakers who have a fairly good command of Korean can test this for themselves by taking a very common word and comparing how it sounds pronounced the usual way with how it sounds when any shift in pitch that may be present is moved to a different syllable. The holiday name Kwangbokchol is a good one to try. Normally, the pitch drops after the first syllable. If we move the drop in pitch to one syllable later in the word, the pronunciation sounds wrong. Now take a different but similar three-syllable word such as Kaech’onjol. Note that the pitch in this case drops after the second syllable. If you pronounce this word with the same pitch pattern as Kwangbokchol, you will still be understood but your pronunciation will sound a bit off. This is an indication that the drop in pitch is not merely a matter of sentence or phrase intonation but is inherent in the word itself.

The casual Korean speaker who tries to figure out what rules, if any, govern this shifting in pitch is likely to come to the conclusion that it is completely irregular when he discovers, for example, that the same Chinese character is pronounced with a higher pitch than a following syllable in some words but involves no drop in pitch at all in others. Look at some sample words that contain the character chung(‘middle’): Chungdong (‘Middle East’) and chungang (‘central’) are pronounced with even pitch throughout or the second [page 44] syllable may be slightly raised, but in chungnip (‘neutral’) and Chungguk (‘China’) the pitch drops on the second syllable.

This is not haphazard; there is a system behind it, and this article attempts to give an overview of that system. It is not intended for linguists but for general readers or students of Korean. Therefore, the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization has been used rather than the Yale system.

This material is based primarily on a book by Son Chongsop entitled Uri marui kojo changdan (‘Pitch Accent and Vowel Length in Korean’) and published in 1999 by Chongsin Segyesa. However, the organization and format of this article, the choice of English terminology used in it, and some of the examples are solely the responsibility of this writer. This is not a translation of Son’s book or even of parts of it but a summary that presents the basic aspects of the system that are of relevance to someone learning modern Korean. No attempt is made to give extensive word lists or to cover the irregularities that occur in certain verb forms and some noun-plus-particle combinations.

Although the writer has consulted other works about pitch accent in Korean (in particular, the parts of works by Samuel Martin and by Kim Ch’a-gyun relevant to this topic), these works deal not with modern standard Korean but with 15th-century Korean or the southern and eastern dialects of modern Korean. They are not, therefore, referred to in this article.

Lexical Accent and Pitch vs. Stress

Lexical accent is accentuation that is part of each word itself and is not an accident of intonation, emphasis, or contrast. In an English utterance such as “I said ‘RENdition’ not ‘CONdition,’” the first syllable of the words in question is accented, but that accent is only a “temporary” one used for emphasis to show contrast. The lexical accent of those two words is on the second syllable, as you can see by looking in the dictionary (i.e., the lexicon).

In this connection, a word of forewarning is called for. Unfortunately, in the case of Korean you can not look up lexical accent in the dictionary, because modern Korean dictionaries do not indicate accent except for initial long syllables.

In English and most other Western languages accent is a matter of stress. Each word or phrase of more than one syllable has at least one syllable that is prominent in that it is pronounced louder than its neighbors. In some such languages (take English or Russian, for example), weakly stressed vowels may even lose some or all of their distinctive quality (like the second e in [page 45] telephone); in others (e.g., Spanish) vowels are never so weakly stressed as to change their fundamental quality. Korean fits this latter category, but we need a disclaimer here because in Korean, accent is a matter not of stress but of shifts in pitch, and vowel length also plays a part. Variations in stress may occur in Korean speech, but they are side effects of the speaker’s emotion or desire to emphasize something; they are not built into the word itself.

Speakers of stress-accented languages may point out that pitch changes accompany the stress patterns of their own languages and may wonder how we can be sure that Korean pitch changes are not merely secondary effects of some underlying system of stresses. Evidence that stress is not the fundamental factor in the Korean accent system includes the fact that Koreans do not bother to match up the accented syllables of lyrics of songs with the downbeats of music and the fact that words borrowed from English do not follow the English accentual pattern but are usually treated as if they were flat throughout.

The Pitch of Accented and Nonaccented Syllables

For this discussion, the reader should note that the final syllable is never accented. When the final syllable is high, as though it were accented, this is because of intonation, not lexical pitch.

The pitch of an accented syllable is typically higher than that of its neighbors. In the standard dialect it is common to raise the pitch of syllables preceding the accent (if there are any) to nearly the same height as the accented syllable. When more than one syllable precedes the accent, this raising may occur in one step on the second syllable or may be gradual and spread over all the syllables preceding the accent, as in “Annyong hasimnikka” (accent on ha>) or “Han sigan chone watta” (accent on chon).

Syllables following the accent belong to the realm of intonation. When no special intonation or emphasis is involved, the pitch drops on the syllable following the accent. In the middle of a sentence this drop may be only slight, but at the end of a declarative sentence, it is quite distinct. At the end of an interrogative or imperative sentence or at the end of a phrase followed by a pause, the syllable after the last accent may actually be higher than the accented one. In any case, there is a shift in pitch following the accented syllable.

The pitch of words with no accented syllable is, in principle, even [page 46] throughout, but when such words are pronounced in isolation, as for example when they are read as part of a list, the final syllable is usually raised, as if it bore an accent. This holds true even for monosyllables.

Examples of words with no accent: sigan (‘time’), Pusan, yongo (‘English’), annyong (‘well-being’).

Examples of words accented on the first syllable: Soul, Namdaemun, Ilbon (‘Japan’), hanul (‘sky’).

Examples of words accented on the second syllable: chumoni (‘pocket’), paguni (‘basket’), Miari (a place name in Seoul), Pusan-hang (‘Pusan Harbor’).

The sharp-eyed reader will have noticed that Pusan is listed both as having no accent and as having one on -san. This is because of the peculiar way accent is determined in Korean, which is explained in the next section.

Types of Syllables: How Accent and Vowel Length Determined

In order to determine if a word has an accent and, if so, which syllable bears it, one has to know what types of syllables the word is composed of. There are two types of syllables in Korean: unmarked and marked. Markedness is the underlying or, as linguists might say, “deep structure” feature that determines accent, Koreans traditionally use the Chinese prosodic terms p’yong for unmarked and ch’uk for marked. The choice of English terms was based on the fact that in Middle Korean p’yong syllables were left unmarked, while ch’uk syllables were indicated by having either a single dot resembling a raised period or a double dot resembling a colon placed to their left.

Unmarked syllables and syllables with a single dot are always short Syllables marked with a double dot are long when they bear an accent; otherwise, they are short.

In this article a period has been used for the single dot and a colon for the double dot. These marks precede the syllable they belong to.

Put in their simplest form, here are the rules for determining which syllable bears the accent:

Rule 0: A word can have no more than one accented syllable. [page 47]

Rule 1: If the first syllable of a word is marked, it bears the accent. If it is marked with a double dot, it is also long.

Rule 2: Otherwise, the unmarked syllable immediately preceding the first marked syllable in a word bears the accent.

Rule 3: A word that has no marked syllable, has no accented syllable.

Now that the marks have been described and the rules stated, we can explain why Pusan has no accent by itself and yet acquires one in the compound Pusan: hang. This is because : hang is a marked syllable, and by Rule 2, san gets the accent because it is unmarked and immediately precedes :hang. Note that :hang, although marked for length, is not long in this word, because it is not accented. In the full word for ‘harbor,’ :hang:gu, by Rule 1 :hang does bear the accent and is therefore long.

Now we can see why chung, in the examples given near the beginning of this article, is accented in some words and not in others. Written with their accent markings, those examples look like this: Chungdong, chungang, chung.nip, Chung.guk.

Note that unaccented words acquire an accent when particles that begin with a marked syllable are attached to them. Thus we get Pusan.e (‘to Pusan’) and Pusan.i (‘Pusan’ as a subject), both with an accent on the second syllable, but Pusanboda (‘than Pusan’), with no accent. This doesn’t happen to words that already have an accented syllable: compare Chungdong (‘Middle East’) and Chungdong. e (‘to the Middle East’) with Chung.guk and Chung.gug.e.

The reader may wonder why we don’t simply mark the high syllable in each word instead of giving a lot of “extra” information by writing in all those dots. Why bother to mark the .e in Chung.gug.e or the :gu in :hang:gu when these syllables have no effect on the accent in those words? We are following the same principle as used in Han’gfil orthography: each morpheme (meaning unit) is written the same no matter how it is pronounced as long as the actual pronunciation can be determined by some rule. Thus we always write the particle .e, meaning ‘to,’ with the dot since we can tell from the rules given above that when it is preceded only by unmarked syllables it will affect the accent but will not have an effect when preceded by a marked syllable. In any case, it is also helpful to the learner to know, for example, that :gu (which is [page 48] the Sino-Korean morpheme for ‘mouth’) is long. Then when he sees a word beginning with that character, such as :gu.mi (‘taste’), he will already know how to pronounce it.

That having been said, there are quite a number of Sino-Korean morphemes that are marked in some words and not in others. For instance, given the words on:o (‘language’) and :o.hak (‘linguistics’), one would expect the word for ‘English’ to be pronounced yong.o, with an accent on the first syllable, but it is not. As shown in an earlier example, it is pronounced as yongo, with no accent at all. Nevertheless, in the vast majority of cases, morphemes do not show such irregularity.

The Need for a Proper Dictionary

Readers who have studied some Korean are probably aware that, as was mentioned above, there are no dictionaries of modern Korean that mark words for accent. Korean monolingual dictionaries do mark initial long syllables, but they do not agree with each other on this and almost all contain some errors. Until such time as a proper pronouncing dictionary is produced, students will have to depend upon their teachers and their sharp ears to learn Korean accentuation.