

# A Sociolinguistic Assessment of Changes in the New Romanization of Korean

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**Kim Yoon, Keum sil. 2001. A Sociolinguistic Assessment of Changes in the New Romanization of Korean. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 9(1), 1-14.** The paper deals with the changes in the New Romanization Proposal. The main issue of the paper is centered around three strands (i.e. behaviors, people, and ends) of an 'accounting scheme' that Cooper (1989) suggested for language planning. The paper involves three steps. First, it examines current societal trends in the use of romanization and justifies the needs for changes. Second, it looks into some of the changes and reflects on two principles that the changes are based on. The changes are evaluated in two dimensions, namely, "purity" and "efficiency." Finally, the paper discusses the sociolinguistic purpose for the changes and raises a concern for non-native speakers of Korean. (William Paterson University)

## 1. Introduction

Language changes as society changes. Language planning, defined as "deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes" (Cooper, 1989, p. 45) is a very complex endeavor. Its complexity has been extensively discussed by Ager (1996) by means of the 'accounting scheme' that Cooper suggested for language planning.<sup>1)</sup> Below is an illustration of some aspects of

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1) There are eight different strands of the accounting scheme that Cooper suggested for language planning. However, they are all closely interrelated as indicated in one sentence: What *actors* attempt to influence what *behaviors* of which *people* for what *ends* under what *conditions* by what *means* through what decision-making *process* with what *effect*? Cooper (1989, p. 98). Although this paper takes Cooper's view of language planning, it is worthwhile to note that his view is quite different from other researcher's

Cooper's scheme that language planners would use in context of changes in Romanization of Korean.

*Behaviors.* What language behaviors are to be influenced - corpus planning of the deliberate cultivation of new uses, acquisition planning in teaching/learning of the changes, status planning in the functional allocation of the changes, and/or other behaviors?

*People.* Who are the members of the speech communities that accept and hence define the revised Romanization as the standard? Are they native speakers of Korean including article/textbook writers, non-native speakers of Korean including tourists, librarians, researchers, computer users, and/or others?

*Ends.* What is the sociolinguistic purpose for the attempts to influence language behaviors? Is it to prevent the dominant position of a particular social group, to protect the identity of the nation, to project the desired external image, and/or other purposes?

In addition to these three strands, five other strands (i.e. *Actors, Conditions, Means, Process, and Effects*) deserve to be studied in-depth for a comprehensive understanding of the Romanization of Korean. However, the main issue of this paper is centered around the above three strands. The paper looks into some of the changes made in the New Romanization Proposal and reflects on two principles that the changes are based on.<sup>2)</sup> The changes are evaluated in two dimensions, namely *purity* and *efficiency*, and are discussed with regard to the sociolinguistic purpose for the revised Romanization.

## 2. Changes

Among many types of changes in a language, changes in orthography (and

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view in that language planning consists of a process of systematic, government-authorized, long-term sustained and conscious efforts (Weinstein, 1980; Bourne, 1997).

2) The Romanization of Korean was revised by the National Academy of the Korean Language in 1999. Two basic principles of Romanization are: (i) Romanization is based on standard Korean pronunciation, and (ii) Symbols other than Roman letters are avoided to the greatest extent possible.

the lexicon) are the most accessible to awareness and explicit discussion, and have been the focus of deliberate efforts to influence other's language behavior in many nations. The term 'changes' in the sphere of romanization may appear to be a type of change that easily lends itself to discussion due to its controversial nature. However, changes in romanization are more complicated than general changes in orthography as a whole since it affects language behaviors of both native speakers of the respected language and its non-native speakers as well as speakers of different regional dialects. Romanization of Chinese characters is a good example of the complication of the issue. Since the romanization system was put forward by sinologists (the best known is the Wade notation), numerous attempts at alphabets have emerged: for example, *Zhuyin Zimu*, an alphabet based on the 55 semi-Chinese and semi-Western characters proposed by Lu Kan-Chang, *Guoyu romazi*, National language romanization, *Befangu latinhua xinwenzi*, Latinized New Writing of the Northern Dialect, and *Pinyin* (De Francis, 1977). Among these alphabets, *Pinyin* has been the most widely used. The main purpose of the *Pinyin* system was to facilitate the spread of *Putonghua* (i.e. the embodiment of pronunciation in Beijing, the grammar of the Mandarin dialects, and the vocabulary of colloquial Chinese literature). However, problems of intelligibility have arisen due to the varieties of regional pronunciation (Crystal, 1987, p. 313). Recently, there has been a rapid increase in the number of fields which require or need romanization of non-Roman scripts. This increase is due to a number of societal factors such as globalization of the world, international visibility of developing countries, and advanced technology. In the past, the use of romanization was mostly reserved for personal names, company names of international business, and signs/maps for tourists. Lately, its use has been extended to other areas such as library, language textbooks, journals, and magazines. For example, Barry (1997) revised ALA-LC Romanization Tables which contain 54 romanization schemes, one of which is for Korean. These Romanization Tables have been developed in the event that translation into English is not desirable or possible, which is often the case with proper names, titles, and terms for which no appropriate Roman script equivalent exists.

Another example of extensive use of the romanization is in publication of language textbooks using a good amount of Roman alphabet. In the past decade, there has been a substantial increase in course enrollment in languages that previously had not been taught. MLA's Fall 1998 survey shows an 61.1% increase in biblical Hebrew, 34% in Korean, and 23.9% in Arabic between 1995-1998.<sup>3)</sup> Along with this increase, many textbooks have been romanized at least for beginners to facilitate learning of the target language.

Academic trends also point to another aspect of the extension of the use of romanization. Internationalization, interdisciplinary studies, and multiculturalism have encouraged researchers and writers to broaden their scope of research and writing to include other ethnic groups, races, nations; as a result, we have encountered many romanized words of the respected group/nation in books, magazines, journals, and newspapers. It goes without saying that this rapid expansion is reinforced by internet use.

As the population in need of romanization increases in number and domain, evaluation and revisitation of its current version is inevitable. Some forms of the current version would be viewed as better, more correct or more appropriate than others. The basis of its evaluation and the rationales for the revised version could be explicit, implicit, social, political, and/or emotional.

A most common approach to evaluation lies in the realms of the purity and efficiency of its current forms/use (Ferguson, 1977, p. 15). These two realms can be associated with Weber's theory of social actions, especially two of the four ways of social actions postulated therein, namely value-rational action and instrumental-rational action. (Weber, 1964, pp. 115-118). Purity-based evaluation can be associated with value-rational action, which is determined by a conscious belief in the intrinsic value of acting in certain way, and efficiency-based evaluation with instrumental-rational action, which is determined by consciously devised attempts to achieve desired ends with the choice of appropriate means.<sup>4)</sup>

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3) The report of the MLAs enrollment survey is available at the Web sites of the MLA ([www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org)) and ADFL ([www.adfl.org](http://www.adfl.org)).

4) The other two social actions are affectual action and traditional and conventional. The affectual action which is determined by specific affects and states of feeling, could be associated with beauty-based evaluation that Ferguson mentioned. However, as

## 2.1. Purity

Purity evaluation involves the issues of native vs. foreign, old vs. new, or one classical source vs. another. The basis of assumption of purity varies from case to case. For example, while the language reform in Turkey is to get rid of the Perso-Arabic vocabulary in favor of Turkish formation, there has been little objection to new French loanwords.

Considering that the issue of foreign loanwords is a typical concern of those who want to preserve purity of the language, interested observers would raise a question as to the nature of the purity of Romanization. What would be the basis of purity in the Romanization of Korean? After all, are all Roman symbols not foreign to Korean language? Could the deletion of the apostrophe and the breve accent mark of the old system, a major change in the new Romanization, be viewed as an attempt to enhance the degree of purity? Could it be said that languages (e.g. French, German, and Spanish) that use the Roman alphabet with diacritic marks are less pure than English that does not use accented letters?

One of the basic principles of the revised Romanization of Korean states that it shall follow the standard pronunciation of Korean. It may seem that this principle implies an attempt to preserve or encourage native-like Korean sounds. However, does it reflect the psycholinguistic reality of those who pronounce the romanized words? Let's consider how native speakers of Korean and non-native speakers would pronounce a romanized Korean word.

In most cases, native speakers of Korean do not pronounce a romanized word according to the way it is written. Instead, they try to figure out what it means by deciphering the Roman symbols mentally or by approximating the symbols verbally on the basis of their knowledge of the phonetic system of a

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Ferguson pointed out, there seems to be little systematic investigation of the beauty dimension. Very often, the aesthetic judgment of a form(s) reflect not direct natural response to linguistic features but feelings of appropriateness due to customary use of the forms for their respective purposes. Hence, beauty evaluation is less argued than purity or efficiency. In regard with traditional conventional action, which is determined by the habituation of long practice could be associated with a position of conservationists who want to maintain the old system.

given language. Even if they read it out as it is written, their pronunciation of the word would be very diverse due to a number of factors: (i) they are not native speakers of a given language with a roman alphabet, (ii) their level of proficiency in the target language varies, (iii) they may know more than one romance language which may interfere with each other. However, once they guess what the romanized word means, mostly from the context in which it is written, they pronounce it as a native-speaker of Korean whether it is written in one way or another. Whether a name of city is written, Daegu or Taegu, they will pronounce it in the same way once they have figured out what city the symbols represent. The indifference of the distinction between D, voiced sound and T, non-voiced-sound to the native speakers of Korean is implied in a remark by Kim (2000). He wrote, "I, (...) made a little experiment with some of my Western (native English-speaking) friends to determine how these Korean consonants are perceived and pronounced by them. (...) In my speech, the difference between voiced and non-voiced sounds was almost indiscernible despite my conscientious efforts to find any."

As for pronunciation by non-native speakers of Korean, especially for those whose native language uses the Roman alphabet (e.g. English, French, German, Italian, Spanish), a wide range of variation in pronunciation of the word is observed, whether it is written Taegu or Daegu. They pronounce the romanized words in their own way (i.e. American way, French way, German way, etc.), unless they have mastered the Korean language. The variation is due to the difference in phonemic representation and/or place of articulation of the particular letter. For example, letter U in Taegu represents four phonemes in English: /U/ (lax, high, back, rounded sound) as in *clue*, /u/ (tense, high, back, rounded) as in *cue*, /ʌ/ (lax, mid, central, unrounded) as in *cut*, /ə/ (schwa) as in *suppose*. In French, the letter U represents /y/, a closed, rounded, front vowel, which does not exist in English. Letter T represents phoneme /t/ in both English and French. However, its place of articulation is different; it is an alveolar stop in English, but a dental stop in French. If we consider allophones of the same phoneme which are in complementary distribution, the variation in pronunciation of the same letter which we expect to hear is even greater.<sup>5)</sup>

Considering the indifference of distinction between Roman letters to native-speakers and the variation in pronunciation by non-native speakers, it is hard to advocate the changes in Romanization in the realm of purity. In other words, the principle stated, "Romanization is based on standard Korean pronunciation" becomes questionable as to how constructive it would be in the mind of those who pronounce the romanized word. It does not reflect the 'psycholinguistic reality' of the speakers.

## **2.2. Efficiency**

The efficiency dimension may touch upon large issues in language planning. Its measurement is tied to particular goals. For example, if the goal is to facilitate linguistic understanding with a neighboring nation, one kind of orthography may be highly efficient. If the goal is to have a nationally distinctive language or to inhibit communication with the other nations, then a different kind of orthography would be more efficient.

Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2000) provides two reasons why the revision of the old system was necessary: (i) the old system did not maintain important phonetic differences and (ii) it was wrong for the information age. To put these reasons in term of efficiency, the old system was not efficient enough to facilitate the understanding of Korean phonology, and it was inconvenient to use in technology-oriented society.

### **2.2.1. Linguistic understanding**

In the old system, the phonemic distinctions of four consonants are made by means of the apostrophe, and two vowels are distinguished by using the breve

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5) It is worth mentioning that I have given up hearing my name correctly pronounced by non native-speakers of Korean. For instance, I have been addressed Joon not Yoon by some Hispanic students who are not familiar with Korean names. In Spanish, letter Y is pronounced as J. The variation in pronunciation of my first name by non-native speakers is even worse.

("half moon"). However, it has been widely observed that the apostrophe and the breve have been often omitted when it comes to daily usage. As a result, the intended meaning of a particular word can be easily misunderstood. In other words, the old system has a tendency to trigger ignorance of 'minimal pair,' a pair of words that are identical except for one phoneme (e.g. k'aeda-*dig* vs. kaeda*fold*; t'al-*mask* vs. tal-*moon*; p'al-*arm* vs. pal*foot*); and a miscommunication could easily occur even in a contextualized sentence. For instance, a patient describes pain in his arm, but writes pal instead of 'p'al.'

The new system aims to avoid miscommunication caused by the omission of the diacritic marks by preserving an individual entity of each letter of Korean alphabet. In the new system, different Roman letter(s) is (are) allocated to each one. Four consonants have been changed from K, T, P, and CH to G, D, B, and J. The other matching four consonants have been changed from K', T' P' and CH' to K, T, P, and Ch without an apostrophe. Two vowels have been changed from "O + a breve" and "U + a breve" to "EO" and "EU."

The preservation of an individual entity of each Korean letter prevents not only miscommunication but also helps language users understand Korean phonology. The Korean spelling system demonstrates a direct one-to-one correspondence between grapheme and phoneme. All vowels and consonants are spelled, in principle, correctly using non-lexical phoneme-to-grapheme conversion rules alone; this is in contrast to English which has a complex relationship between phoneme and grapheme. For example, Korean letter "ㅏ" romanized as "A" represents always the same Korean vowel /ㅏ/. However, English letter A represents four phonemes: /æ/ as in *apple*, /ə/ as in *appeal*, /e/ as in *age*, /a/ as in *army*. Similarly, Korean letter "ㅓ" romanized as "S" represents always the same Korean consonant /ㅓ/ although its sound value changes depending on its position and environment. In contrast, English letter S represents four phonemes: /s/ as in *see*, /z/ as in *raise*, /ʒ/ as in *vision*, /ʃ/ as in *tension*.

### 2.2.2 Computer-based inconvenience

The principle regarding avoidance of symbols other than Roman letters



reflects the way people write in the today's computer-oriented society. Although computer-based communication requires writing, the speed at which a message is transmitted had made computer language more conversational than paper-based communication in many situations. Sherwood (1999) notes that spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and the convention of grammar have been ignored in many computer-based writings. Similarly, diacritics have been omitted for the sake of speed since writing words with diacritics requires a special keyboard and/or code numbers to write accented letters. For instance, for é, one has to press four keys (i.e. alt, 1, 3, and 0), which delays writing. This kind of delay is not compatible with the basic beneficial characteristic of the computer, that is, speed.

To recapitulate, the changes in Romanization are justified in terms of efficiency in that they help language users understand Korean phonology and reduce computer-based inconvenience. Weber (1964) would view the changes as instrumental-rational action, determined by expectations as to the respect for Korean phonemic characteristics even in advanced technology-based society, making use of these expectations as means for the successful attainment of the language planner's rationally chosen ends (i.e. sociolinguistic purpose).

### **3. Sociolinguistic Purpose: a concern for non-native speakers**

Native speakers of Korean would recognize the efficiency aspect of the revised Romanization without difficulties. However, interested researchers would raise a question as to the sociolinguistic purpose for the revision and its implication for non-native speakers. They would regard the revision as an action to protect the national linguistic identity which may generate a social and psychological discomfort for non-native speakers.

It has been argued that the adoption of the Roman alphabet would diminish one of the most important symbols of national identity regardless of the need for it. For instance, in India, while a group, known as Roman Lipi Parishad (RLP) has advocated for the adoption of the Roman alphabet for the main languages for the country, opponents have expressed strongly concerns about the status of indigenous scripts.<sup>6)</sup>

One way of reducing the status-concern is to develop the romanized system in such a way that the system reflects some characteristics of the indigenous language. The development of such a system would promote the national identity and lead the language planners to claim the ownership of the system. In this respect, Korean language planners may argue that standardization of the revised system would provide an internationally recognized badge of identity. A critical question arises here as to what type of attitude toward national language identity (or what type of approach to implementation/standardization) is desirable in order to minimize social and psychological discomfort of non-native speakers.

Two types of attitudes toward national identity in relation with the language ownership have been observed. One is in language planning in France that could be labeled as defense-oriented attitude, and the other in Britain, possibly labeled as benefit-oriented attitude. France has been known for its pride in the ownership of language that its political community has manifested over centuries. This effort of maintaining language as a national symbol is associated with political attitudes such as an aversion for the Anglo-Saxon countries and/or social attitudes such as a fear of social disturbance from the young, from immigrants, or from the poor. For the French, as Ager notes (1996, p. 192), [L]anguage is essentially a maker of inclusion or exclusion." This defense-oriented attitude has led to macro-level policies that have tended towards reinforcing social cohesion. In contrast to France, Britain has taken another type of attitude toward standard English. Ager (1996, p. 193) writes, "Standard English is such an obvious benefit in social life that people do not have to be forced. It's their own right to remain disadvantaged by remaining within their own language variety." This benefit-oriented attitude has led to micro-level policies that have had mainly economic and efficiency objectives.

Both types of attitude (i.e. defense-oriented and benefit-oriented) toward the

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6) Generally speaking, adoption of alphabet of other countries is a by-product of political events as in the cases of the replacement of the Arabic alphabet by a Roman alphabet for Turkish, the Arabic alphabet for Urdu and Devanagari for Hindi are good examples of the by-product of socio-political events (Calvet, 1998).

new Romanization of Korean could engender difficulties in implementation of the system. The defense-based attitude would delay the legitimization of a policy-making sequence for non-native speakers of Korean since learning the new system is not any easier than the old system. Harvey (1999) expresses his frustration regarding the new system. He wrote, "It may be obvious to Korean speakers that WO must be W+EO, since there is no W +O in the language, but this is hardly the case for foreigners. In my own dialect, the former is rather like the diphthong in 'work' while the latter would be rather like that in 'walk,' both equally possible. (...) Similarly, there is no way for a less than fluent foreigner to know when UI in the proposed system stands for EU+I and when it stands for U+I as in UIDONG, unless the latter is hyphenated, U-IDONG. (...)"

The benefit-oriented attitude would generate social psychological anxiety for non-native speakers, especially those who are accustomed to the old system. For those who are already familiarized with the old system, the cost of learning the new system would be significantly high. From a perspective of behaviorism, breaking old habits in order to form new habits requires a great deal of repetition with reinforcement. From a perspective of cognitive psychology, it also requires diligence, persistence and devotional adherence to the ideal in order not to be interfered by previously-acquired knowledge. A reconciliation of the old and new systems would call for 'psychological energy' (Hakuta and Snow 1987, p. 5) needed to escape from the ontological dilemma of being "simpliciter."

The social psychological cost for non-native speakers adjusting to a new system has been illustrated in many writings by those who have lived in two languages (Rodriguez, 1983; Hoffman, 1989). For example, it was a heart-breaking experience when Rodriguez whose first name is 'Ricardo' heard someone sound out: *Rich-heard Road-ree-guess*. He writes "'Richard,' the nun repeated more slowly, writing my name down in her black leather book. Quickly I turned to see my mother's face dissolve in a watery blur behind the pebbled glass door" (Rodriguez 1983, p. 12). This incident, although it is not directly related to the issue of Romanization, lends itself to a sense of the social psychological price that non-native speakers of Korean may have to pay

for the new system.

The issue of language ownership in the context of Romanization is delicate, and therefore should be treated tactfully since romanized Korean is primarily for interaction with non-Korean language communities (i.e. non-native speakers of Korean). Barbas (1999) writes, "What the heck do Koreans need a romanization system for, considering that han'gul is such a damn good and scientific writing system? After all, a romanization system, whatever it is, is for foreigners who can't read the language... The final users are foreigners, no?"

These questions are legitimate in the sense that Romanization of a non-Romance language is primarily for international speech communities (e.g. publishers, tourists, language learners, librarians, internet users, and so forth), thus their voices should be heard.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

The revision of Romanization and standardization is timely in terms of 'speed-based' convenience required in our computer age. Yet given the fact that the revised system is not easier than the old system for non-native speakers, the diversity in romanization is likely to prevail more widely in speech communities for a long period of time. That is, the process of implementation of the revised system should be inclusive rather than exclusive. Considering that the enrichment of human life lies in diversity and not in confinement, language planners should anticipate (and respect) variation in use of the revised Romanization. From a sociolinguistic perspective, a detailed plan for post-hoc analysis of eventual behavioral impact of the changes would be critical for the success of this complex endeavor.

Having myself been both a native speaker of Korean and a multilingual speaker living in the United States, I can attest that the aforementioned types of attitude toward language-related national identity have an impact on the technical aspects of language planning and policy. However, the issue on the vicissitudes of the analytic process from the sociolinguistic perspective is beyond the scope of this paper, and will be treated elsewhere.

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14 Keumsil Kim Yoon

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