

Mini-Tutorial on Some Korean Letters

1. Korean alphabet

English is written using the English alphabet, or, essentially the same thing, the Latin alphabet.

Russian is written with different letters, but the letters correspond to sounds—very roughly speaking—just like in English, German, Italian, Spanish, French, Polish, Croatian... For example in the above-mentioned languages:

you = ты = du = tu = tú = toi = ty = ti

Chinese is very different: its numerous symbols correspond to words, very roughly speaking. For example: you = 你

To speakers of the above languages, except Chinese, Korean writing may look similar to Chinese (symbols as words), but in fact it is much more similar to their own writing systems (symbols as sounds: phonetic writing).

The main difference is that each letter-sound in Korean is not written linearly, one after the other as in English, Russian, German, Italian, etc., but instead they are grouped in blocks—even stacked vertically—to form syllables.

Your first Korean word:

you = 너

This word 너 consists of 2 letters for 2 sounds: ㄴ and ㅜ
They sound roughly like “n” and “o” in Italian, Spanish...

2. Writing Korean language in English letters

Korean language could be written in the Latin (English, Italian, Spanish...) alphabet and understood, though some nuance, clarity, and phonetic precision are lost.

The transformation from Korean to Latin alphabet is called romanization. Here you have a word with its romanization:

you = 너 (neo)

ㄴ is romanized n. It sounds similar to English “n”.

ㅛ is romanized eo in South Korea and ō in North Korea.

ㅛ Sounds, very very vaguely, as Italian and Spanish “o”.

Sounds are more precisely described in Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, and can be heard online in Google Translate.

From now on we will fix the attention on meanings of the words and the Revised Romanization (official in South Korean from year 2000 and used also by Google Translate) of letters and words, and much less on pronunciation.

Nevertheless the reader can approximate the pronunciation, at least vaguely (really vaguely), reading the romanizations with Italian or Spanish or Croatian pronunciation.


3. A kind of four-legged pet playing yoyo

This word

yoyo = ㅇㅇ (yoyo)

- means **yoyo**, or, differently written, yo-yo, the toy;
- is romanized **yoyo**;
- it appears somehow as two four-legged pets, laying on their backs and playing with yoyos.
 - is romanized with nothing, and has no sound, if it is the beginning of a syllable. It is romanized ng with the sound of ng in the English word “going” if it is at the end of a syllable: this case will be considered later in this Lesson.
 - ㅇ is romanized yo. You may remember this, thinking to a kind of four-legged pet, laying on its back (maybe to play yoyo).

This word is made with the same letters

dragon = ㅇㅇ (yong) 

And vaguely—really vaguely—it resembles a dragon, when seen from the front.

ㅇ (yo)

alone is a polite sentence ending. It doesn't mean anything by itself, but it changes the tone of the sentence to make it more respectful or friendly.

4. A circus show

In Korean, the English word "show" is borrowed and written phonetically:

show = 쇼 (syo) 🎪

- It means **show**;
- it is romanized **syo**;
- it appears somehow as a circus ready for a **show**.

쇼 is romanized yo, as already seen.

쇼 is romanized s.

5. The only Korean letter similar to English

The only Korean letter similar to an English letter, and romanized with the same letter, is

ㅣ (i)

Its pronunciation is similar to the letter i of Italian and Spanish.

I Sang-hwa is considered one of the greatest modernist Korean poets. His surname is ㅇㅣ, romanized I,

ㅇㅣ (I)

with the letter ㅇ of Lesson 3. It is silent — it has no sound — but it is orthographically required in syllables that begin with a vowel sound.

I is one of the most common Korean surnames, but for several reasons usually it is not reported with its exact romanization I, but as Lee (or Yi or even Rhee).

6. A new word with the already seen letters

At this point the reader knows 6 letters among which

ㅅ (s) Lesson 4

ㅣ (i) Lesson 6.

By the above listed letters you may romanize ㅅㅣ which is

poetry = ㅅㅣ (si)

It is pronounced roughly similarly to the English word “see” and its resembles the picture 🙏📄, representing a person **seeing** a **poetry** (📄) with admiration (🙏).

This poetry has the title in Korean, meaning “poetry”, the first verse in English, and the second verse in Italian, meaning “yes”, and the three words sounds similarly:

ㅅㅣ

See!

Sì!

It sounds roughly as the English sentence “See sea, see!”.

One may even add “Sí”, meaning “yes” in Spanish.

7. Other 3 words with the 6 seen letters


At this point the reader knows the letters

ㅅ (s) Lesson 4

ㅓ (eo) Lesson 2

ㅇ (nothing, but -ng in the end of syllable) Lesson 3.

By the above listed letters you may romanize ㅅㅓ which is

 castle = 성 (seong)

With the letters ㅅ and ㅇ and

ㅕ (yo) Lesson 3

you have the onomatopoeic word

woosh = 송 (syong)

which is used in comics, games and chats.

Here is another interjection, with the letter ㅇ and

ㅣ (i) Lesson 6

ew, huh, pfft, ph? = ㅇㅣ ~ (ing)



usually with the tilde ~, used in chat to express emotion.

8. The gnu with the birds on it

The letter ㅍ (yu) resembles vaguely a four-legged animal.

In Korean, the English word "new" is borrowed and written phonetically:

new = ㄴㅍ (nyu)

- It means **new**;
- it is romanized **nyu**;
- it appears somehow as a **gnu**  with its cleaner bird  over it.

One sees the letter ㅍ above explained and ㄴ (Lesson 2).

With the letter ㅇ we have the name for persons and pets

Yu = ㅇㅍ (Yu)

And with the letter ㅅ (s)

Syu = ㅅㅍ (Syu)

is a name commonly given to pets, and the writing of the word resembles vaguely a four-legged pet hugged by its owner. (Also ㅇㅇ and ㅅㅅ are names for pets).

The same word is imported for choux, the pastry:

choux = ㅅㅍ (syu)

and choux (the pastry) in English is pronounced as “shoo”.

Notice that in Korean there are not capital letters: the pastry choux and the pet named Syu are both written ㅅㅍ.

9. A letter resembling Russian and Greek

It is quite possible that the reader knows the Greek (uppercase) letter

Γ

which is used in Mathematics worldwide, and/or the corresponding Cyrillic letter

Г, г

(uppercase and lowercase, respectively), used in Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgar, and other Slavic languages.

It corresponds to the English letter g.

The Korean corresponding letter is similar but reversed:

ㄱ

ㄱ can sound like g at the start of a word, like k at the end.

We have the word

energy/spirit, Qi, Ki = ㄱㅣ (gi)

corresponding to classical Chinese word 氣 (气) (Qi/Qì/Chi), and, with the letter ㄴ too, the word

long = ㄱㅣ (gin)

10. Let us remember the 8 seen letters

ㄴ (n) Lesson 2 and

ㅅ (eo) Lesson 2 and then

you = 너 (neo)

ㅇ (nothing, but -ng in the end of syllable) Lesson 3

ㅇㅇ (yo) Lesson 3 and then

요 (yo) (to give a polite tone to sentences)

yoyo = 요요 (yoyo) dragon = 용 (yong)

ㅅ (s) Lesson 4 and then

show = 쇼 (syo) castle = 성 (seong) woosh = 송 (syong)

ㅣ (i) Lesson 6 and then

I (Lee) = ㅇㅣ (I) poetry = 시 (si) huh = ㅇㅣ (ing)

ㅠ (yu) Lesson 8 and then

new = 뉴 (nyu) Yu (name) = 유 (Yu)

Syu (name) = 슈 (Syu) choux = 슈 (syu)

ㄱ (g/k) Lesson 9 and then

energy/spirit, Qi, Ki = 기 (gi) long = 긴 (gin)

10. The letter A

Mirroring the letter

ㅓ (eo) of Lesson 2

one has the very common letter romanized a:

ㅏ (a)

It resembles the left part of the uppercase letter A:

```
o
oo
o o
o o
oooo
o o
o o
o o
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With this letter one has for example:

I, me = 나 (na)

which vaguely resembles a person talking about him/herself.

And the word

mountain = 산 (san)

and maybe some reader recognizes the Chinese word *shān* with the same meaning (but written 山).

And the word

river = 강 (gang)

11. The letter U

Removing one “leg” of the “four legged animal”

ㅍ (yu) of Lesson 8, one obtains the letter corresponding to the Latin letter u:

ㅍ (u)

With this letter we have for example:

eye, snow = 눈 (nun)

number = 수 (su)

12. The 2 children watching mother's bread

With the letter

ㅍㅍ (pp)

we have the word

bread = 빵 (ppang)

- It resembles 2 children watching mother's bread;
- is romanized ppang, similar to Spanish pan = bread.

Modern Korean contains many words borrowed from English.

However, aside from these loanwords, traditional Korean vocabulary is very different from English, as well as from the main roots of English: Latin and Germanic.

Classical Korean is also quite distant from all other European languages, especially Slavic languages and Greek. (*All the languages mentioned are Indo-European.*)

The word 빵 = bread is an exception: it was introduced to Korea by Portuguese missionaries. The Portuguese word for bread is *pão*, which comes from Latin *panis*; from which Spanish pan, Italian pane, French pain...

13. Another word from Latin

With the letter

ㅎ (wa)

here we have our first word which has more than one syllable:

wine = 와인 (wain)

It is a 20th-century phonetic loanword borrowed from English (probably via Japanese ワイン during the colonial period). So in fact it derives from Latin *vinum*, from which also the Italian and Spanish *vino* and the French *vin*.