

Phonological Changes in Korean

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the phonological changes that have occurred in Korean. According to my research, Korean has undergone three major phonological changes since the 1980s: 1) vowel shortening in near-homophones, 2) the merger of different final consonants into one consonant at word-final position and 3) consonant cluster reduction. Among these changes, the most noticeable change is the vowel shortening, which is observed in the mid-vowels of near-homophones. This phenomenon has been so prevalent that nearly all the near-homophones that were distinguished by the different vowel length came to be pronounced as homophones.

The second phenomenon, the merger of different final consonants into one consonant at word-final position is spreading its effects to more words in Korean, resulting in the gradual disappearance of the phonological value of word-final consonants before a vowel-initial suffix.

The third phenomenon, consonant cluster reduction is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, this phenomenon has evidently started in Korean phonology. In this paper, I address these three phonological phenomena with some empirical data.

Keywords: Korean; phonology; leveling; near-homophone; vowel length; mid-vowel; contextual information; usefulness; suffix; consonant cluster

1 Introduction

Korean seems to have undergone phonological changes over the past 30 years. In this paper, I attempt to explore phonological and phonetic changes that have occurred in Korean. I also address some evidence of these changes in Korean and what socio-linguistic factors have caused these changes. Phonological changes occur most frequently while syntactic changes occur most rarely and, because of this rarity, are the hardest to notice. As I have investigated changes that have occurred in Korean for this paper, I have found out that this is quite true of Korean, too. One interesting finding of my research is that the changes in Korean have continued regardless of the vigorous efforts of Korean linguists to purify Korean. One thing that I was also able to notice is that phonological leveling phenomena have happened quite frequently in Korean and there has been a lot of evidence that prove this point over the past two or three decades.

2 Phonological changes in Korean

2.1 Loss of vowel length distinction in near-homophones – a type of phonological leveling

One of the most noticeable and important changes that has occurred in Korean phonology is the disappearance of differences of vowel length in near-homophones. Until about less than three decades ago (as far as I can remember, by early 1980s), there was a clear difference in vowel length between near-homophones in Korean. As is observed from Table 1, all the near-homophones in Korean, in principle, used to have either a long vowel

Table 1

Homophone	Authentic pronunciation	Actual pronunciation
말(horse)	/mal/	/mal/
말(speech, tongue)	/ma:l/	/mal/
눈(eye)	/nun/	/nun/
눈(snow)	/nu:n/	/nun/
밤(night)	/bam/	/bam/
밤(chestnut)	/ba:m/	/bam/

or a short vowel as a clue to distinguish them from each other. I still remember that my elementary school teacher of my first grade used to stress the importance of pronouncing the vowel lengths of near-homophones correctly. This difference in vowel length for near-homophones was regarded as a very important part of Korean phonology. But this distinction disappeared somehow by the mid eighties and completely disappeared by the end of the late eighties. No doubt, there are still some Koreans who distinguish near-homophones by pronouncing the length of the vowels of them either long or short but they do it unconsciously and habitually when they do so. As a native speaker of Korean, it is my firm belief that nowadays there are very few Koreans who, upon hearing the mid-vowel of *nun* /nu:n/ meaning *snow* being pronounced as short vowel /u/, will correct him to pronounce the vowel of this word longer to make the word /nu:n/ distinguishable from its near-homophone *nun* /nun/ meaning ‘eye’.

This is also true of *bam* which means either *chestnut* or *night*. No Korean will ever mistakenly understand /ba:m/ ‘chestnut’, whose vowel used to be long, as /bam/ ‘night’, when somebody pronounces the vowel of the word short in the following sentence

- (1) Ku bam eun massitta
 Det Noun Nom suffix Adj
 “The chestnut is delicious.”

Then, what has caused this distinction in vowel length in near-homophones to disappear in Korean? There are no clear explanations for this vowel shortening. But still, it seems that there is some plausible reason for this phenomenon. The simplest and most persuasive reason seems to be that the difference in the vowel length was not crucial in distinguishing the meanings of a pair of this type of near-homophones for Korean speakers. Unquestionably, the most important role of vowel length difference in the near-homophones was that of distinguishing the different meanings of near-homophones. But, indeed, contextual information has also enabled native Korean speakers to distinguish the meanings of near-homophones correctly regardless of whether the vowel length distinction is present or not in

the near-homophones. In other words, Korean speakers still can rely upon the contextual information of a sentence to guess the meanings of homophones and near-homophones correctly. And more importantly, they have no difficulty in doing this task. In fact, nowadays, it is entirely the contexts that Korean speakers refer to in order to distinguish the meanings of homophones and near-homophones correctly.

In this sense, I assume that the presence of the distinction of vowel length in near-homophones must have been trivial and useless for most Korean speakers and finally disappeared. In short, the vowel length difference lost its usefulness or markedness as a criterion for distinguishing near-homophones semantically. I would call this disappearance of vowel length difference a ‘leveling phenomenon’ in the phonology of Korean. Two lexically identical words that used to be distinguished solely by the length of their mid-vowels lost the difference in the vowel length and came to be distinguished by the contexts in which they appear.

2.2 *The merger of different final consonants into one consonant, another leveling in Korean phonology*

Another important phonological phenomenon which has occurred in Korean is the merger of fricative and affricate consonants into a single fricative in word-final position. This change may sound vague but it will become clear as I explain about this phenomenon. Like many other languages, Korean has many one-syllable words which have CVC syllable structure and many words of this type only differ either in the initial or in the final single consonant. The case in question is words that have CVC structure and differ in the final consonant. Column A in Table 2 provides some words of this type in Korean. Phonologically, the three words in column A are distinguished from one another by the different final consonants. One interesting phenomenon that occurs in these words is that the final consonants of these words are pronounced identically as [t] when the words are pronounced in isolation. This phenomenon is called “coda neutralization”. But when the words are combined with a suffix that has a vowel in its initial position, the phonological values of the different final consonants are recognized and the final consonants begin to be pronounced as they are

Table 2

A. Phonetic Representation	B. Phonetic Representation in isolation	C. Pronunciations when combined with suffixes ‘i’ ‘ul’ ‘un’	D. Pronunciation Leveled
/bich/ (light)	/bit/	/bichi/, /bichun/, /bichul/	/bisi/, /bisun/, /bisul/
/biz/ (debt)	/bit/	/bizi/, /bizun/, /bizul/	/bisi/, /bisun/, /bisul/
/bis/ (comb)	/bit/	/bisi/, /bisun/, /bisul/	/bisi/, /bisun/, /bisul/

supposed to be pronounced phonologically. But this does not happen when the words are combined with a consonant-initial suffix. So the first word ‘bich’ in Column A at Table 2, when combined with ‘ul’ the accusative suffix, is pronounced as [bichul] and the second word [biz] as [bizul]. This phenomenon is an important phonological rule in Korean phonology. But this rule seems to be more and more neglected. The different final consonants of the words: [bich], [biz], [bis] at Table 2 are becoming more and more frequently

pronounced by Koreans identically as [s] when they have a following suffix that has a vowel at its initial position. Before I planned to write this paper, I interviewed several Korean native speakers to see how they pronounce these words with vowel-initial suffixes. The results show that among the Koreans interviewed most of the subjects who are over thirties pronounced these words with vowel-initial suffixes correctly. But, younger Koreans, most of whom were in their early twenties did not pronounce these words with vowel-initial suffixes correctly and showed tendency to pronounce the final consonant as [s] in all three words.

This result needs further investigation and needs more experiments with more subjects to generalize the finding. But one thing is somewhat clear from this result. This phenomenon seems to have happened because [s] is the easiest sound to pronounce. I assume that this phenomenon is ongoing among many young Korean people, especially Korean people under the age of thirty.

Actually, this merger of final consonants into [s] seems to be a fairly recent phenomenon because many Korean people of my age were still aware of these differences during high school days. Nevertheless, nowadays it seems to be increasingly becoming the case that Korean people distinguish what is meant by [bich], [biz] or [bis] solely from the context of the sentences in which these words appear. Obviously, this is another case of phonological leveling.

2.3. Consonant cluster reduction

The third phenomenon that is occurring in the phonology of Korean is consonant cluster reduction. I have to say that this phenomenon is in its initial stage but still in progress. Looking at the table closely will help to understand what I mean by this terminology.

Table 3

Phonetic Description	Phonetic Description in isolation	Pronunciation when combined with vowel -initial suffix <i>ul</i>	Leveled Pronunciation
/hulg/ (soil)	/hug/	/hulgul/	/hugul/
/tagl/(chicken)	/tag/	/tagul/	/tagul/

Look at the word *hulg* 'soil' in the table for this case. This word consists of one syllable structures and the final consonant cluster has two consonants. In principle, the first consonant of this final consonant cluster is omitted in pronunciation and only the second consonant is pronounced when the word *hulg* is pronounced alone. But when the word is followed by a vowel-initial suffix, the value of the first consonant of the consonant cluster is recognized and the first consonant is pronounced. About two decade ago, this principle was regarded as the standard way of pronouncing this type of words that have a CVCC type syllable in Korean. But this principle has begun to change, too. Some of this type of words began to be pronounced differently.

As shown in the table, *hulg* and the suffix *ul* have to be pronounced as [hulgul]. But almost all Korean people pronounce this word and the suffix as [hugul]. The same phenomenon has also happened to *tagul*. Indeed, the pronunciation of *tagul* as [tagul] was so old and has been persistent that most Korean people do not know that the first consonant [l] is deleted.

This phenomenon has not advanced far yet and is in its initial stage. But unarguably this phenomenon has started in Korean. Simply a consonant in word internal position which has a following consonant and which used to be pronounced in certain environments is becoming

less and less pronounced these days. The most adequate explanation for this phenomenon seems to be the tendency towards the ease of articulation. Surely, this seems to have been triggered by Korean people's tendency towards the ease of articulation. Actually, this is not a phenomenon limited to Korean. There are many other languages that show the same phenomenon. Crosslinguistically, it is quite common that a consonant is deleted from consonant clusters.

2 Conclusion

As I have illustrated so far, the possible reason behind the three phonological changes is the tendency towards ease of articulation. This is shown in the three changes. In near-homophones in Korean, the mid-vowels tend to be shortened rather than lengthened. Needless to say, short vowel requires less airflow than long vowels, which means that short vowels are easier to articulate than long vowels. The merger of different final consonants into one consonant can also be explained in this sense. The final consonants which should not undergo coda neutralization before a vowel tend to be pronounced as one single consonant [s].

Lastly, consonant cluster reduction which has been claimed to exist in Korean in this paper also supports the claim that Korean is experiencing the tendency towards ease of articulation.

Appendix A. Loss of vowel length distinction in minimal pairs

(Data from the New Korean Dictionary published by Yang Ju dong in 1968)

Minimal pairs (meaning)	Authentic pronunciation	Actual pronunciation
말(horse)	[mal]	[mal]
말(speech)	[ma:l]	[mal]
눈(eye)	[nun]	[nun]
눈(snow)	[nu:n]	[nun]
밤(night)	[bam]	[bam]
밤(chestnut)	[ba:m]	[bam]
벌(punishment)	[bʌl]	[bʌl]
벌(bee)	[bʌ:l]	[bʌl]
창(spear)	[čaŋ]	[čaŋ]
창(Korean style singing)	[ča:ŋ]	[čaŋ]
발(foot)	[bal]	[bal]
발(blind curtain)	[ba:l]	[bal]
천(thousand)	[čʌn]	[čʌn]
천(cloth)	[čʌ:n]	[čʌn]
일(one)	[il]	[il]
일(work)	[i:l]	[il]
병(bottle)	[byuŋ]	[byuŋ]
병(disease)	[byu:ŋ]	[byuŋ]
배(ship)	[bæ]	[bæ]
배(double)	[bæ:]	[bæ]

Appendix B. Merger of fricative or affricate consonants into one single consonant

A. Phonological Representation	B. Pronunciation in isolation	C. Pronunciations with suffixes <i>i, un, ul</i>	D. Recent Pronunciations with the suffixes
빛/bič/ (light)	[bit]	[biči], [bičun], [bičul]	[bisi], [bisun], [bisul]
빚/biz/ (debt)	[bit]	[bizi], [bizun], [bizul]	[bisi], [bisun], [bisul]
빗/bis/ (comb)	[bit]	[bisi], [bisun], [bisul]	[bisi], [bisun], [bisul]
낫/nač/ (face)	[nat]	[nači], [načun], [načul]	[nasi], [nasun], [nasul]
낮/naz/ (daytime)	[nat]	[nazi], [nazun], [nazul]	[nasi], [nasun], [nasul]
낫/nas/ (sickle)	[nat]	[nasi], [nasun], [nasul]	[nasi], [nasun], [nasul]

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