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THE NEW GOVERNMENT ROMANISATION SYSTEM: WHY WAS IT NECESSARY ?

Prof. James Huntley Grayson*

At the start of the new millennium, the Government of the Republic of Korea implemented a new system for transcribing Korean words, terms and phrases into the Latin alphabet to replace a variant of the so-called McCune-Reischauer system which was the then accepted standard system of romanisation both in Korea and in the scholarly world outside of Korea.¹ In this article, I discuss the vexed issue of a proper system for romanising Korean, and why I believe that the new government romanisation system (hereinafter called NGR) is not only unsatisfactory, but inferior to the system which it has supplanted. I wish to indicate some serious social and political issues which have been raised about the way in which NGR was implemented, and to suggest a way out of the current unsatisfactory situation. I am writing as scholar in the field of Korean Studies with two principal concerns - a concern for consistency in transcribing terms in my subject field, and a concern that such terms be transcribed in such a way that the non-native student or scholar can pronounce the term so that it is comprehensible to a native speaker of the Korean language.

What is the Purpose of a System of Romanisation?

Any system of romanisation is a linguistic transcription system which exists in order to transcribe the words, terms, and phrases of a language which is not written in the Latin alphabet into that system of writing.² Such systems, thus, have one principal purpose and one purpose only, to enable non-native speakers of a given language to pronounce these words, terms, and phrases in such a way that the native speaker of the language understands them. A romanised form of vocabulary items from a language not written in the Latin alphabet is intended solely for the use of the non-native speaker. It is not meant to supplement or to supplant the use of the native script. Obviously, this general principle applies to the romanisation of the Korean language as to any other language not using the Latin alphabet. They are not intended to be the principal system of language transcription for Koreans who have an excellent alphabet of their own which was scientifically designed by their own linguists in the fifteenth century. Romanised terms, however, can be useful to the native speaker as a tool for the introduction of words, terms, phrases, cultural and historic ideas and events to non-Korean speaking foreigners. Thus, any system of romanisation, including a system for romanising the Korean language, is for the use and benefit of people who do not speak that particular language and probably will not have to time to learn to do so.³

A secondary principal of any system of romanisation is to provide consistency in the representation of the words, terms and phrases of one language into another. Anyone can, and people do, devise their own ways of representing the vocabulary of one language in the script of another language when they write letters and other personal materials. Although this is acceptable on a personal level, it is inappropriate on a general level when these words, terms and phrases will appear in books, papers and other public means of communication. Because of the wide spread nature of these forms of public communication, it is essential that in such materials there be consistency in the representation of terms being romanised.

Principles of Romanisation

Consistency is a key principle, as well, in the *process of the romanisation* of the terms of any language into another. That is, the values assigned to letters of the Latin alphabet must generally carry the same pronunciation in one system of romanisation as in another. If unorthodox and non-standard pronunciations of letters are introduced in a system, the system fails to do what it was intended to do, provide a simple means for the non-native speaker to say the terms in a way comprehensible to a native speaker. It is for this reason that most systems of romanisation have adopted the dual principles

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of representing vowel sounds according to their pronunciation in Italian, and consonantal sounds according to their pronunciation in English. This is because the vowel sounds of Italian and the consonantal sounds of English are recognised as being both unchanging and readily understood by native speakers of any of the other European languages.⁴

The principle of using Italian vowel sounds and English consonantal sounds for transcription, however, has a subsidiary principle for the variation of the sound of the letter. The Latin alphabet evolved to provide a system for transcribing the Latin language, the language of Rome. Subsequent to the collapse of the Roman Empire the peoples of western Europe and parts of eastern Europe used the alphabet of Rome to transcribe the sounds of their own languages. It was found inadequate to the task because many of these languages had sounds which do not exist in Latin. Consequently, every major European language which uses the Latin alphabet, except for the English language, has varied the appearance of the letters representing both the vowels and consonants to reflect the richness of their own phonology. This means, in effect, every European language but English uses diacritical marks over either the vowels, or the consonants, and some cases over both. Likewise, romanisation systems for non-European languages with complex phonologies have to use diacritical markings to represent the sounds of their languages. This is particularly the case with the classical and contemporary languages of the Indian sub-continent. Even in languages which have fairly simple phonologies, such as Japanese, diacritical marks are used. Japanese, for example, uses a diacritical mark called a macron to distinguish long vowels from standard vowels, as in Tōkyō. This use is standard practice on all formal signage including railway stations in Japan.

English does not use diacritical marks, because the English language does not have agreed canons for spelling its vocabulary in any consistent, phonetic way as is the case with every other European language. Foreign words imported into English, for example, remain in the form in which they were imported, and are not altered as in other European languages according to the pronunciation canons and orthographic conventions of the receiving language. This convention for the writing of the English language means that learning to spell and write in English is a difficult task, because in effect the written form of every item of vocabulary has to be learned individually. This process is not very different from the way in which Chinese characters have to be mastered, and does not recommend the English system of writing as a model for any system of transcription.

Issues in the Romanisation of the Korean Language

The correct transcription of the Korean language into the Latin alphabet is a more complex problem than is the case for the vast majority of the languages of the world. This is because the Korean language has the following features - an extremely rich and extensive phonology, extensive sound changes between syllables and between words in a sentence, and finally a complex system of agglutination. In any system for transcribing the Korean language account has to be taken both of the great variety of sounds and of the complex set of sound changes. The feature of agglutination creates particularly difficult problems in transcribing the Korean language. Decisions have to be made about the correct or appropriate transcription of grammatical morphemes, grammatical structures that indicate, for example, whether the preceding word is a subject, an object, or whether it possesses the word which follows. How do such morphemes actually fit into the total sentence structure? Are they to be transcribed as attached to the previous word, or are they to be separated out from it? Decisions made about such grammatical issues will influence the way in which the word (the grammatical morpheme) is transcribed. Few of the world's language have as many transcription problems as does the Korean language.⁵

A second and related issue to the question of morphemic change is whether the system of transcription chosen is to be a transliteration system (that is, a letter-for-letter transcription from the Korean alphabet into the Latin alphabet), or whether it will be a transcription of whole words from Korean into the Roman alphabet. On an *ad hoc* basis, most Koreans choose the first system because it is easy to do a simple letter-for-letter substitution, and because it is confidently believed that the Korean alphabet faithfully represents the sounds of the Korean language. As a general point, the latter belief is true BUT the actual orthographic rules for writing the Korean language ignore the fact of sound changes between syllables. Any one who has had to learn Korean knows that these changes have to be learned laboriously because the orthographic conventions for writing Korean do not take into account these changes.⁶

It is useful at this point to compare issues surrounding the transcription of the languages of Korea's two closest neighbours, China and Japan. Chinese is a relatively easy language to transcribe, in spite of its unusual and complex system of tones, because there are no significant sound changes between syllables. Consequently, words, terms and phrases in Chinese can be transcribed character by character without worrying about any of the complex issues of sound change which occur in Korean. Likewise, transcribing Japanese is not as difficult as transcribing Korean even though they are grammatically similar languages and Japanese has the feature of sound change between syllables. This is the case both because there are vastly fewer phonemes in Japanese than in Korean, and because Japanese is written in a syllabery and not in an alphabet. It is worth pointing out that one of the probable reasons that the fifteenth century linguists who devised the Korean alphabet chose an alphabetic system of writing over a syllabery (and previous Korean scripts were syllaberies) is that while Japanese has some 50 or so phonemes, Korean has around 1300.⁷ More importantly, although the Japanese language does possess the feature of sound change between syllables as in Korean, because Japanese is written in a syllabery, the sound changes are already built into the indigenous system for transcribing the language. Thus, when Japanese is transcribed into the Latin alphabet, transcription can be done on the basis of simple substitution. Of the three major East Asian languages, there are many more complex issues in the process of the transcription of the Korean language than with any of the languages of its neighbours.

A Brief History of the Romanisation of the Korean Language

From the time that Western missionaries, merchants and foreign diplomats arrived in Korea, it was plain that there had to be a system for writing terms and phrases in the Korean language in the Latin alphabet in order to introduce the names of places, people, things and events to people in their respective home countries. By the late 1890s, a system began to emerge which bears some resemblance to the so-called McCune-Reischauer system (hereinafter MR) which was formalised in the late 1930s. An examination of the map of Korea in Mrs. Isabella Bird Bishop's book *Korea and Her Neighbours* shows that this system had two distinctive features, the transcription of aspirated sounds by the addition of the letter 'h' after a consonant and the use of the *umlaut* over 'o' and 'u' to represent the shorter vowels ㅓ and ㅜ.⁸ There was also a French transcription system used by the French Roman Catholic missionaries. By the time of the creation of the MR system, George M. McCune and Edwin O. Reischauer who introduced (but did not create) the system calculated that there were at least seven different systems then in use. Given the variety and contradictions between these several systems, and given the fact that the *Chosŏn-ŏ hakhoe* (Korean Language Research Society) was endeavouring to introduce a standardised system for the use of the Korean alphabet, it seemed an appropriate time to propose and introduce a standardised system for transcribing the Korean language into the Latin alphabet.⁹

The system of romanisation which McCune and Reischauer introduced was the creation essentially of three well-known Korean phoneticians and scholars, Ch'oe Hyŏnbae, Chŏng Insŏp and Kim Sŏn'gi who worked in collaboration with McCune and Reischauer. The principles underlying this new system were checked and discussed with Korean scholars and scholars in Europe and North America for its appropriateness and ease of use before it was formally announced. The new system, introduced through the *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1939, immediately became the standard system used throughout the world because of its consistency and appropriateness.¹⁰ Aside from the linguist aspects of the MR system, it is important to note that

- 1) the new system of Romanisation was devised by *Koreans* in collaboration with non-Korean scholars,
- 2) the new system was *voluntarily* adopted as the standard system because of its obvious usefulness to the scholarly and non-scholarly community alike,
- 3) neither McCune nor Reischauer ever claimed to have created the system, nor did they refer to the system by the name by which it has become known. They did, however, refer to it as the system which they used.

By the 1950s, the so-called MR system had established itself as *the* international standard for the transcription of the Korean language into the Latin alphabet. It was universally used by cartographers and international bodies and organisations for representing Korean place names, terms and phrases. It was also used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea in all external documentation including maps which were distributed to the non-Korean speaking world.

By the 1960s, domestically there were moves to replace the MR system with another system. In the 1970s, this system was formally adopted by the Korean Government and was used on all internal documentation including signs for roads, streets and railway stations. Identified with the Ministry of Education, which promoted its wide-spread domestic use, this system became known as the MOE system. However, throughout the whole period in which the MOE system was used internally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to use the internationally recognised MR system.

The MOE system has the following features:

- 1) it is a transliteration system substituting one letter in the Korean alphabet with one letter in the Roman alphabet,
- 2) it ignores sound changes between syllables,
- 3) it uses unusual combinations of vowels to avoid the use of diacritical marks, and
- 4) it uses hard consonants to represent the standards consonants of the Korean language.

The advantage of the MOE system was that it was easy for *Koreans* to use, substituting one letter for another. A complaint made about MR by Koreans was that in reading an MR-transcribed term, it was hard to read back into the original *Han'gŭl* lettering. The disadvantage of the MOE system was that it was difficult for *non-Korean speaking foreigners* to pronounce the Korean words, terms and phrases represented by the system. The MOE system failed to do what a good system of romanisation must do, provide a means by which non-native speakers can produce a sound similar to the sounds of the original words. In fact, the MOE system produced many embarrassing romanisations, most notable of which was the transcription of the 독립문 as the 'Dog-rib mun', consequently referred to jokingly as the 'Kae k'albi Gate'. Clearly, the MR's representation of 독립문 as 'Tongnim-mun' was far more accurate and did not produce laughable transcriptions.

In the run-up to the 1988 Olympics, the Government of the Republic of Korea decided that for the sake of internal and external consistency, a decision had to be made about the appropriateness of the MOE and MR systems. Both systems had their domestic proponents. After research, it was found that the MR system most faithfully represented the Korean language and was formally adopted as the official governmental transcription system used on all internal and external documentation including maps, and railway, street and road signs. Thus, for the first time there was a system for transcribing the Korean language into the Roman alphabet which was accepted both nationally in Korea and internationally, a system which was accepted by the Government and by the scholarly community in Korea and abroad. This situation of unanimity remained the case until the dramatic introduction of a new system by the ROK Government in 2001, a system which will be referred to hereinafter as NGR (New Government Romanisation).

Features of the MR system

Before we can discuss the introduction and characteristics of NGR, we must first discuss the characteristics of the MR system which in Korea it has replaced. There are five characteristics of MR.

- 1) it is a system for transcribing whole words and phrases, and is not a simple letter-for-letter substitution transliteration system,
- 2) its use of the Latin alphabet is based on the widely accepted principle of vowels as in Italian, and consonants as in English.
- 3) MR recognises the paucity of the Latin alphabet to transcribe fully the phonetic system of the Korean language by augmenting the sounds of the vowels and consonants with the use of diacritical marks.
- 4) the MR system recognises that there are a wide range of sound changes between syllables.
- 5) MR is a system for transcribing whole words or vocabulary items and not for transcribing comprehensively whole sentences or phrases.¹¹

To take each of these characteristics in turn, the first point means that whole words or phrases will be transcribed as they sound as individual units. Thus, the ancient Korean kingdom of 고구려 is transcribed as Koguryŏ, recognising the alteration in the pronunciation of the letter ㄱ from its position as a consonant in the initial position in the word and in the medial position. MR thus recognises a feature of the *Korean language* which is NOT represented orthographically by the *Korean alphabet*, that is the alteration between soft and hard consonants, depending on whether the consonant is in either the initial or final position on the one hand, or in the medial position on the other hand. The second principle takes account of major sound changes where the pronunciation of the letter changes into a

very different sound. Examples of this type of phonemic change may be illustrated by the auxiliary verb *합니다* which is written in MR as 'hamnida', recognising that in the succeeding sound environment of the letter ㄴ, the letter ㅁ is read as an 'm'. Another frequently encountered example would be the case of the ancient kingdom of 신라 which MR transcribes as Silla. This transcription accounts for the fact that the sounds of the letter ㄴ and ㄹ in that order of sequence are pronounced as if they are a double 'l'.

The phonology of the Korean language is one of the richest and most extensive of any of the world's languages, and probably the most extensive of any of the major languages. In terms of its consonants there are three types, standard consonants with variations, forced voiced plosive consonants, and aspirated consonants.¹² Likewise, the vowel phonemes are complex including standard vowels, monophthongs and diphthongs.¹³ To take account of this extensive phonology, the MR system uses a system of diacritical markings such as the breve to represent the shorter 'o' and 'u' vowels, and the apostrophe to represent aspiration. Forced voiced plosive consonants are represented by a doubling of the standard consonants. Thus to distinguish between the two different 'o' sounds in 이촌 and 인천, MR transcribes these place names as 'Ich'on ' and 'Inch'ön'. Likewise the difference between the two 'u' sounds in 군산 and 금강산 is represented in MR as Kunsan and Kŭmgang-san. It is important to notice that no symbols are used in these transcriptions which introduce extraneous sounds. The breve, the diacritical mark used to indicate a short 'o' and 'u', is a symbol widely used in the pronunciation element of English dictionary entries, and is universally understood by speakers of any European language as representing a short sound to whatever vowel it is attached. The *umlaut* which had been used in several of MR's predecessors is unsatisfactory because it introduces a sound which is not in Korean.

Diphthongs are very common in Korean, perhaps the commonest being the combination of ㅏ with ㅓ to make ㅑ, and ㅓ with ㅗ to make ㅜ. MR uses 'ae' to represent ㅑ and 'e' to represent ㅜ. The combination 'ae' is widely understood because it is used in Greek, and 'e' because it is the pronunciation of the vowel in Italian. To represent diphthongs or other sounds, MR does not use combinations of vowels such as 'eo' and 'eu' because these do not exist in any European language and the use of them would introduce extraneous sounds.

Because of the range of different consonantal sounds, MR uses the apostrophe to represent aspiration. Thus, 대견 and 대천 are represented as Taejŏn and Taech'ŏn. The distinction made by the apostrophe between aspirated and non-aspirated sounds is a readily understood convention. Thus the MR system in order to supplement the meagre range of vowel and consonantal sounds in the Latin alphabet employs widely used and readily understood diacritical markings *which do not introduce any extraneous sounds into the reading of the transcribed word or term.*

The fourth feature of the MR system - that it takes account of sound changes - has been discussed above. Sound change between syllables is a major feature of the Korean language and any system for transcribing Korean must take account of it if such a system is to enable non-native speakers to pronounce words with any likelihood of being understood. This MR does consistently, with one notable exception, which brings us to the fifth characteristic of the MR system. MR is for the transcribing of whole linguistic terms (names, place names, whole words, whole vocabulary items) but not for the transcription of whole sentences, phrases or book and article titles as a unit. That is, each item in a book title, for example, will be transcribed as a separate unit, ignoring any sound changes which might occur in natural speech between words. To preserve the linguistic integrity of the individual items of vocabulary, sound changes between words are ignored and only sound changes between syllables within individual items are transcribed. This convention applies to personal names as well. Taking the name of the scholar 백낙준 as a whole, it would be transcribed as Paeng Nakchun, accounting for the sound change of a ㅓ followed by a ㄴ. However, to preserve the integrity of the surname, the name is transcribed as Paek Nakchun, with a vocabulary break created between the surname and the personal name.¹⁴

Reasons for the Introduction of NGR

Following cabinet-level discussions at the beginning of the new century and with virtually no consultation with the scholarly and foreign communities - the principal audience for a system of

romanising Korean, the Government of the Republic of Korea announced and implemented a new system of romanisation to replace MR which it said was unsatisfactory.

Pamphlets were distributed widely within and outside of Korea explaining why the new system was being implemented, and domestic institutions including newspapers and scholarly bodies and publications were ordered to use the new system, NGR, exclusively. Like every scholar in the area of Korean Studies, I received a copy of this booklet, which gives three basic reasons for scuttling MR and implementing NGR. These reasons are that:

- 1) the apostrophe was often left out, with the result people would mispronounce words,
- 2) the breve over the vowels was often omitted with the same results in pronunciation, and
- 3) the MR system is unsuited to the information age.

Essentially, these arguments are one argument, a dislike of using diacritical markings.

Before critiquing NGR, we need to consider what kind of system it actually is, what features characterise it. These features are:

- 1) NGR is a cross between a letter-for-letter transliteration system and a true transcription system which transcribes whole words and vocabulary items,
- 2) NGR recognises certain sound changes between syllables within vocabulary items,
- 3) NGR recognises a difference between soft and hard consonants *but not in the medial position within a vocabulary item*,
- 4) NGR rejects the use of diacritical marks in transcribing vowels, and
- 5) NGR provides no markings for indicating the difference between aspirated and non-aspirated consonants.

Essentially NGR is a version of MOE taking cognisance of certain features of the MR system, but rejecting the latter's use of diacritical marks and the distinction between soft and hard consonants in the medial position of a word or term.¹⁵

Let us look at each of these features in turn. While from the non-Korean point of view, a system which is not a simple letter-for-letter substitution system is a major advance, it is strange that this point has been accepted, because popularly it was the principal criticism of the MR system. With regard to the second point, this may also be considered to be an advance over the original MOE system as we can see in the following example. The term 독립문 in NGR becomes 'Dongnimmun' which is similar to MR 'Tongnim-mun', taking into account the fact that the letter ㄱ followed by the letter ㄴ together becomes the cluster 'ngn', and that the letter ㅁ in ㅁ when followed by ㅁ itself becomes an 'm'.

The problem with the Romanisation of 독립문 as 'Dongnimmun', however, is in the choice of the initial consonant, an issue which relates to the second point, the way in which standard soft and hard consonants are represented. In MOE this distinction was never recognised. Thus the letters ㄱ, ㄷ, ㅂ, and ㅈ were always and in every instance represented by the Latin letters 'g', 'd', 'b', and 'j'. These are hard consonants, which not only do not represent the sound of the Korean letters ㄱ, ㄷ, ㅂ, and ㅈ in the initial position in a word, but create word constructions which produce peculiar sounds in English and other European languages. Thus the surname 박 became 'Bag'. To avoid this type of problem, the creators of the NGR system decided that soft consonants could be used in the final position in a word or vocabulary item. However, if the word or term being transcribed is treated as an independent vocabulary item, then the same consonant in the initial and final positions in a vocabulary item will have the *same*, not a different, sound. Thus NGR in its transcription introduces sounds which are not actually there, whereas MR more nearly reflects the actual pronunciation.

Moreover, NGR *does not* recognise the alteration in sound from a soft to a hard consonant which *does* take place in spoken Korean. The representation of this shift in sound is a major feature, however, of MR as mentioned above. To take the name of the ancient kingdom of 고구려 again, in NGR it becomes Goguryeo. This transcription for 고구려 leads anyone unfamiliar with the Korean language to assume that the first and second consonants are the same sound. They are *the same letter* in the Korean alphabet, but they are *not pronounced the same* in the sound environment where the consonant falls between two vowels. MR's representation of the kingdom's name as Koguryŏ is much closer to Korean pronunciation and is completely consistent in its principles of romanisation. NGR on the other hand is entirely inconsistent at this point, both introducing distinctions in sound which are not there (i.e.,

between initial and final consonants), and ignoring distinctions which are there (i.e., between initial/final consonants and medial consonants).

To come to the fourth and fifth points, NGR rejects the use of any diacritical markings to indicate variations in the pronunciation of vowels and consonants. In order to represent the differences between ㅓ and ㅕ, and ㅡ and ㅜ, NGR reverts back to the MOE system's use of 'eo' and 'eu' to represent ㅓ and ㅕ. The problem with this choice is that it combines two vowels which do not exist as a combination in any European language. As a result, a foreigner unfamiliar with the Korean language will pronounce each vowel in each combination as *two* separate letters. Confusion on this point may have resulted from the popular spelling of the name of the capital of the Republic of Korea as 'Seoul'. Anyone unfamiliar with the origins of this transcription might assume that the 'eo' represents the Korean letter ㅓ. The transcription, however, derives from French where it is properly spelled as 'Séoul'. This is composed of two syllables 'Sé' and 'oul'. Also note that in French you have to use diacritical marks because the Latin alphabet lacks enough letters to represent the richness of the French language. How much more so for Korean. The French motor manufacturer 'Peugeot' is another case in point, where the 'e' in both instances relates to the sound of the consonant preceding it and is not attached to the 'u' or 'o' which follows it.

Further examples could be multiplied from other European languages, but the point is clear. 'Eo' and 'eu' are not combinations in any European language and their use in systems of transcription for the Korean language not only leads to confusion but more importantly to mispronunciation through the addition of sounds which are not there in the Korean word. There is *no* practical alternative to the use of diacritical marks. As stated before, the example of the lack of diacritical marks in the writing of English does not contradict this point because in English the spelling of each item of vocabulary has to be laboriously memorised. One cannot with assurance sound out the pronunciation of an English word without previously knowing its pronunciation.

If NGR possesses these defects, what were the reasons which lead the Government to consider replacing the MR system which we have seen when it is compared with NGR is both closer to the pronunciation of Korean words and terms, and is also more consistent in the application of the principles underlying its system. As mentioned above, the pamphlet introducing the new system stated three reasons which are essentially one reason, the dislike of the use of diacritical marks. However, we have seen how

- 1) that it is standard procedure for writing any European language other than English to use diacritical marks, and
- 2) that there is no practical alternative to using diacritical marks in Korean if the purpose of a romanisation system is to enable a foreigner unfamiliar with the language to pronounce Korean sounds in an approximate manner.

The first two reasons given for the rejection of MR was that leaving off the diacritics on the vowels and the apostrophes on the consonants led to mispronunciation. Leaving off these marks might have led to some mispronunciation, but certainly not as much as great as the mispronunciations found in the use of the NGR system. The addition of an 'e' to 'o' and 'u' *adds* sounds which are not present in the pronunciation of Korean words. The resulting situation then is far worse than failing to make the distinction between a long and a short vowel.

In addition, the NGR system does not provide for a proper distinction between aspirated and non-aspirated consonants. In Korean, aspirates are strong consonants and need to be indicated as such. The use of 'k', 't', 'p' and 'ch' for the letters ㅋ, ㅌ, ㅍ and ㅊ is inappropriate because there is no indication that these sounds are different from their normal soft standard equivalents. Foreigners with no knowledge of the Korean language will pronounce these consonants in a soft manner and without sufficient aspiration. Consequently, the NGR system itself fails at the precise point where it criticises the MR system. In other words, the very criticism of mispronunciation which critics of MR level at its *application* can be levelled at the NGR system as a *structural* problem. More importantly, these first two criticisms of MR are not about the principles underlying the system only about the inappropriate way the system may have been used popularly. The problem with the NGR system is an inherent problem.

The third criticism of the MR system is that it is inappropriate for the information age. This again is a criticism of the use of diacritics, and is a completely fallacious argument. This argument in effect says that diacritics cannot be used in email messages and only with difficulty in word processing. Both of these sub-arguments are wrong. I regularly receive email communications from colleagues in France, Germany and the Scandinavian countries with diacritical marks displaying prominently. I am currently writing this article on a computer which has a programme packed with a wide range of fonts and diacritical marks. Unfortunately, they are awkward to get at, using a laborious process with the mouse. However, this usage is a result of poor design and not an inherent problem in itself. In fact, the widely used Korean HWP or *are a Han'gŭl* programme in its earlier versions had a means by which you could switch from a standard English keyboard to a keyboard with easy access to both standard English letters and letters with diacritical marks appropriate for transcribing Korean. By changing the settings you could easily and rapidly touch type all vowels and consonants using diacritical marks. In other words, the technology existed, but has gone in reverse. This is a failure in the design of computer programmes not to add these necessary features, and is not an inherent problem with the MR system itself.

On examining both the principles underlying the NGR system and the reasons given for its introduction, we have seen that NGR is not as good a system as the one which it replaced, and that the reasons given for its introduction are insufficient to explain the change which the Government made.

Examples of Problems in the Use of NGR

The problems in the use of the NGR system may be illustrated by three vignettes. Wales High School in the Sheffield region has an exchange agreement with Panp'o High School in southern Sŏul whereby every year students from the two high schools visit the other school for a two-week period. Before the students from Panp'o arrive in Sheffield, Wales High School asks us to give their students some basic instruction in the Korean language. In order to make most efficient use of the time, we do not teach the alphabet or the written language, but only concentrate on spoken skills such as greetings and polite phrases. As an aid to the students, we provide a romanised list of the phrases and sentences which we will be teaching them. We have always used MR to transcribe these phrases. We never had to correct a student's pronunciation on the basis of terms represented using MR. Shortly after the introduction of NGR, we distributed a sheet using NGR romanisations. Not one of the students in that particular year could get the correct pronunciation, even after we had tried drilling them many times. NGR misled such students for whom it was presumably designed, persons with no knowledge of the Korean language.

A second example concerns my youngest son. When he was fifteen, he started to study the Korean language with our Korean language instructor at Sheffield. One day, I gave him a list of words written in *Han'gŭl* and the same list romanised in NGR. In each case, he could correctly read the words in the Korean alphabet, but mispronounced them when reading them in NGR.

When I have flown into Korea in the last few years, as we approach 인천공항, the pilot announces that we are about to land in 'In chee on' Airport. It is clear that this change in pronunciation has occurred because the current romanisation system adds an additional letter which will be pronounced by anyone not familiar with the Korean language. These three anecdotes point up the same problem. Because NGR uses hard consonants when there should be soft consonants, and because NGR adds an extra vowel to a short 'o' and 'u', mispronunciation of Korean words by non-native speakers has become endemic. This problem of mispronunciation is not the result of a *misapplication* of the NGR system of romanisation, it is an *inherent problem* with the system itself.

Problems in the Implementation of NGR

Until the implementation of the NGR system, in previous decades there had been freedom of choice about what system should be used to represent the Korean language. During the days when MOE was the official domestic romanisation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, English newspapers and Korean academic journals published in English (such as the *Korea Journal*) used MR. The two systems were allowed to co-exist together. This is no longer the case. The Government now requires all domestic institutions and publications to use NGR and has exercised strong pressure on bodies overseas to do the same.

To contrast the MR and NGR systems, the MR system was created by *Korean phoneticians in close collaboration with non-Korean scholars*. Because it was recognised by non-Koreans as being the best system for representing Korean words, terms and phrases, MR *voluntarily* became accepted as the

international standard. Every subsequent system has under test conditions been shown to be inferior in regard to the main purpose of a system for the romanisation of Korea - which is to enable non-Koreans unfamiliar with the language to pronounce Korean terms with a fair degree of accuracy. In contrast to this, the NGR system although created by Korean scholars was conceived with virtually no consultation with foreign scholars and ignored such advice which was given. It was then *imposed* as the single acceptable system.

It is this last point which most disturbs me. However the Korean Government wishes to represent domestically a Romanised form of the Korean language is one thing, but to impose by fiat on the world of scholarship a system of romanisation is an infringement on scholarly endeavour which is out of touch with the democratic age in which we live. In fact, even during the days of the military rulers, this kind of intrusion into the world of scholarship was never ever countenanced. Some times comparisons are made with the substitution of the Wade-Giles system for romanising Chinese with the Chinese Government's system called *pin-yin*. The latter system has now become the standard system for Chinese. I have discussed the issue of the romanisation of Chinese with a number of colleagues in the area of Chinese Studies. Every one of these many colleagues indicated that the *pin-yin* system is a better system than the one which it replaced. I have never heard any scholar in Korean Studies argue that NGR is a better system than MR.

A Solution to the Problem: Co-existence

I would like to request the Government of the Republic of Korea to consider returning to a state of affairs which is more appropriate to our democratic times. That is, I would like to ask the Government to allow academic and journalistic freedom in the choice of the system for representing the Korean language in the Latin alphabet. I would strongly recommend that MR be allowed to co-exist alongside NGR, that academic journals, academic institutions and museums in Korea be permitted to use the MR system. This is important because most European and North American scholars teach students who do not know Korean and will probably never learn it. For these students and the general public it is important that the current literature continue to use the same terms as in the past. The unanimity which existed with the domestic and international use of MR until the introduction of NGR meant that there was a decade and a half in which there was a consistent use of a single romanisation system. Academic works which will be read for decades to come must continue to use these terms or confusion will ensue.

Therefore, I make the following concrete proposals to the Government of the Republic of Korea for consideration:

- 1) that as a principle a situation of co-existence between the MR and NGR systems be legally permitted and encouraged,
- 2) that it is understood that the Government will continue to use NGR on its own domestic documentation, and on road and railway signs,
- 3) that Korean academic journals, newspapers and public institutions such as museums be permitted to choose their preferred system of romanisation with the *proviso* that in textual material and on signs when a term is introduced the other romanisation of the term is included in parentheses *at the point of its first occurrence only*. Curiously, under current Government regulations *Japanese* romanisations in parentheses are permitted, but not ones in MR.
- 4) that a list of several hundred commonly used terms, place name, and names of historic figures be created and widely distributed to schools, and public institutions for ease of use and reference.
- 5) that manufacturers of computer programmes be encouraged to return to the use of keyboards which provide easy access to diacritical marks. This is currently done for switching between Latin letters without diacritics to *Han'gŭl* by the use of a single key. It would not be difficult to do the same for access to Latin letters with commonly used diacritical marks.

I have one further suggestion for the scholarly world, that we should commemorate the phoneticians whose work resulted in the creation of the so-called McCune-Reischauer system. As George S. McCune and Edwin O. Reischauer both have disclaimed credit for the system, I believe that we should refer to this system of scholarly transcription as the Ch'oe-Chŏng-Kim system in honour of Ch'oe Hyŏnbae, Chŏng Insŏp, and Kim Sŏn'gi. It could be called the CCK system for short.

Finally, I challenge the Government to test the two systems by presenting a series of the same words transcribed in both the CCK and NGR systems to a large sample of foreign visitors to this country with

no knowledge of the Korean language. It would be useful to see how successful these two systems are in assisting non-native speakers to approximate the sounds of a language with which they have no familiarity.

Endnotes

1. This system for transcribing the Korean language was introduced to the world in the classic article by George M. McCune and Edwin O. Reischauer entitled 'Romanization of the Korean Language Based upon its Phonetic Structure', *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, v. 29 (1939), pp. 1-55. This is the most exhaustive public statement and description of any system for rendering Korean words, terms and phrases into the Latin alphabet. After discussing the necessity for a new system of romanising Korean, they discuss at great length the vowels and consonants of the language taking into consideration among other subjects simple vowels, labialized vowels, palatized vowels, long and short vowels, irregularities in vowel pronunciation, plosive consonants, unvoiced, voiced, 'forced' and aspirated plosives, plus non-plosive consonants including nasal consonants and fricatives. Rules for the application of the system are considered exhaustively as well as special issues in transliteration. This discussion, covering 55 pages, is enriched by seven charts. In short, McCune and Reischauer demonstrate at length why the system which they are introducing most appropriately covers every normal aspect of transcribing a highly complex language, and therefore makes it the most appropriate general system of romanisation. They concede, however, that it is not appropriate for purposes of scholastic linguistic transcription (see page 7).

2) McCune and Reischauer, op. cit., pp. 1-3, 7.

3) Ibid, pp. 7-8. Although they discuss the issue of romanisation in terms of the Korean language, the issues discussed are themselves of general implication.

4) Ibid, p.9.

5) Ibid, pp. 6-7. For a thorough description of the Korean language, its grammatical structure and phonology see James H. Grayson 'Korean Language' in Robert Asher and J.M.Y. Sijmpson, eds., *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1994), v. 4, pp. 1864-1872.

6) For a more detailed discussion of the current and previous Korean writings systems see James H. Grayson, 'Korean Writing System' in Robert Asher and J.M.Y. Sijmpson, eds., *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1994), v. 4, pp. 1872-1874.

7) Marshall Pihl has discussed the development of the systems for writing Korean, including syllabic and alphabetic scripts. He believes that the vast number of phonemes made the use of a syllabic script untenable. Pihl estimates that there are around 1300 phonemes in the language, which could be reduced to about 500 syllabic symbols with the use of diacritical markings. See Marshall R. Pihl, Jr., 'The Alphabet of East Asia' in Korean National Commission for UNESCO, *The Korean Language* (Söul, Si-sa-yong-o-sa, 1983), p.117.

8) Evidence such as this indicates that very early on, from the mid-1890s, a system of romanisation was emerging amongst the foreign community in Korea which had many of the features of the so-called MR system, that is soft initial and final consonants, diacritical marks over vowels such as 'o' and 'u', and a mark to indicate that a consonant was aspirated to distinguish it from the softer, standard form. See Isabella Bird Bishop, *Korea and Her Neighbours: A Narrative of Travel, with an Account of the Recent Vicissitudes and Present Position of the Country* (1898, repr. Söul, Yonsei University Press, 1970). The map is located between pages 10 and 11 of the text.

9) McCune and Reischauer, op. cit., p. 6.

10). Ibid, see note 1.

11) Ibid, pp. 7-9.

12) Ibid, pp. 10-23.

13) *Ibid*, pp. 24-48.

14) *Ibid*, pp. 49-53.

15) *Ibid*, pp. 53-55. Although some complain that the MR system is hard to use, McCune and Reischauer provide a few simple clues in those pages on how to apply the system, generally by thinking how the words, terms and phrases are actually pronounced. Proponents of another system have to show why on phonetic and linguistic grounds the system proposed to replace the one introduced by McCune and Reischauer is superior to it, and to do it in the exhaustive detail which these scholars did to promote their preferred system. To aid in the romanisation of Korean vocabulary, terms and names The Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch has produced a simplified chart based upon McCune and Reischauer's article which may be obtained by application to them.