

# The McCune-Reischauer Korean Romanization System

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(Update: Since this article was written, the Korean government implemented the “Revised Romanization of Korean.” This article provides a short history of romanization systems of hangul, explanation of differences between the systems, and some of the advantages and disadvantages of these systems.)

The headline in the 14 January 1984 issue of the *Korea Times* came as good news to the thousands of people who were looking for relief from the endless debate over which system would be used for romanizing Korean: “Gov’t to adopt M-R system.” The article explained that “The Education Ministry announced its policy to romanize Korean words almost in strict observance of the McCune-Reischauer system yesterday, putting an end to the decades-old controversy over the matter.” At long last, after all these years of confusion, we could finally stop battling over which romanization system to use—until, in May of 1999, the message from Seoul National University Professor Lee Sang Oak appeared on the Korean Studies Forum list: “...the NAKL [National Academy of the Korean Language] decided to re-open inquiry into the issue.”<sup>1</sup> So the controversy continues. And it will probably continue as long as humans seek a better way, because neither the Korean nor the English writing system is equipped to represent all the rules of Korean pronunciation in a way that is entirely accurate, convenient and aesthetically pleasing.

It is fitting that these notes have been provided in time to celebrate the venerable system’s *hwan’gap* in the year 1999.

## What is the M-R system used for?

The McCune-Reischauer romanization system was originally devised, in 1939, to satisfy the need for one standard romanization of Korean. The designers of the system did not attempt an exact notation that would include all the details of the language’s phonetic system, be-

cause that would have required using arcane symbols. “We have not intended that it be used in phonetic or in technical philological research. Rather, we have made it for general scholarly and non-scholarly use where phonetic symbols would be cumbersome and annoying and where strict phonetic exactness is not demanded. We have therefore attempted to effect a compromise between scientific accuracy and practical simplicity” (McCune, 1939). Neither did they attempt to represent to an exact degree the way Korean is written; they designed their system with the intention of providing a relatively simple method of representing what the language sounds like when it is spoken.

## The historical background on romanization systems for Korean

Though not the first romanization system for Korean, the Ross system, designed in 1882<sup>2</sup>, seems to be the first system used by a significant number of people, mainly missionaries. At the time of the creation of the M-R system, according to McCune, there were more than 27 systems. In 1997 the number was estimated at “more than 40” (Kim, 1997). That is not surprising in light of the fact that a standardized Korean orthography did not appear until 1933, prior to which Korean was written according to pronunciation (which varied according to dialect) instead of language structure. The first system promulgated officially by the Korean government was the Ministry of Education system of 1948 (based on the M-R system, with a few variations); subsequently, in 1959, the Ministry of Education adopted a system based on different principles, thereby causing much confusion and

dissatisfaction among those who used the M-R system. All this discontent brought about two more proposals, in 1978 and 1979, and then, around 1982, after it was announced that Korea would host the 1988 Olympics, a wide and vociferous discussion erupted, again between the anti- and pro-M.R. forces, culminating in the government announcement in 1984 that it would use a slightly modified M-R system. Over the next decade, however, discontent continued to simmer, and came to a boil again in 1997 with another debate. That debate subsided with no conclusion reached, simmered for another two years, and was brought back to full boil in 1999. (You can observe this discussion, continuing into 2000, if you subscribe to the Korea Studies forum at [www.mailbase.com](http://www.mailbase.com).) Meanwhile, since 1986, while controversy has continued inside Korea, outside Korea the International Standards Organization (ISO) has been consulting with the two Koreas over adoption of an ISO standard for romanization of Han'gŭl.

### Development of the M-R system

Donald Clark (1997) tells us how the M-R system was conceived and developed. George McCune was born in Korea to a Presbyterian missionary family who came to Korea in 1905. After graduating from a university in the United States he returned to Korea to continue his studies in East Asian history and pursue formal understanding of the Korean language at Chosen Christian College (the present Yonsei University) under the distinguished Korean linguists Ch'oe Hyŏnbae and Chŏng Insŏp. Many linguists of the time were dissatisfied with the existing romanization systems, in particular the system that the Japanese government had forced on Korea. (This system, designed more for romanization of Japanese, produced such anomalies as *Tyosen* for the more recognizable *Chosen*.) In the summer of 1937 Edwin O. Reischauer, on his way to China to collect information for a paper he was writing in Japan, stopped in

Korea and was then forced by political events in China to stay in Korea for a couple of months. During this period McCune and Reischauer began development of their romanization system with Ch'oe Hyŏnbae and other linguists; development continued after Reischauer left, until the McCune-Reischauer system was published in 1939, in that year's *Transactions* of the Royal Asiatic Society.

### Chronology of significant date in the romanization of Korean

- 1835: Missionary W. H. Medhurst uses his unnamed and unpublished system in his translation of a book on Chinese, Korean and Japanese languages.<sup>3</sup>
- 1882: J. Ross's system appears.<sup>4</sup>
- 1874: The Dallet (French) system introduces the commonly seen digraphs *eo* and *eu*.<sup>5</sup>
- 1897: J. S. Gale's system is introduced in his *A Korean-English Dictionary*.
- 1933: The Korean Language Research Society publishes "Rules for the Unification of Spelling to Conform to the Unified System," and names its writing system Han'gŭl.
- 1935: Jung Insub publishes his system, "The International Phonetic Transcription of Korean Speech Sounds".<sup>6</sup>
- 1939: The McCune-Reischauer system is presented in *Transactions*.
- 1940: The Korean Language Society publicizes its "The Romanization of Korean Sounds," the first system devised entirely by Koreans.
- 1948: The Korean government adopts the McCune-Reischauer system.
- 1954: Samuel Martin presents his Yale-Martin system<sup>7</sup> for linguistic analysis.
- 1956: The North Korean system (modified slightly in 1986)<sup>8</sup> is promulgated.
- 1959: The Ministry of Education announces its change to a transliteration (spelling-based) system; from this point till 1984 different

- government agencies use different systems.
- 1979: The National Academy of Sciences proposes a revision of the 1959 MOE system.
- 1981: The Workshop Conference on Korean Romanization is sponsored by the Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii.<sup>9</sup>
- 1982: Spirited public criticism of the 1959 MOE system breaks out.
- 1984: The Korean government adopts what is popularly known as the “Ministry of Education (MOE) system”<sup>10</sup> (the McCune-Reischauer system with minor alterations); this remains the official government system.<sup>11</sup>
- 1986: Discussions begin between the two Koreas for agreement on a proposal by the ISO (International Standards Organization) system.
- 1996: A meeting is hosted by the National Commission for Romanization to get opinions from Koreans and non-Koreans in the public involved in romanization.<sup>12</sup>
- 1997: The National Commission for Romanization, appointed by the Ministry of Culture and Sports,<sup>13</sup> proposes government adoption of a spelling-based system (similar to the 1959 MOE system); a heated debate erupts in the press and on the Internet.
- 1998: The Ministry of Culture and Sports proscribes all further debate on which system to use.<sup>14</sup>
- 1999: ISO subcommittee decides to review proposed romanization system 3 years later, in order to provide time for full agreement between the two Koreas, with possible adoption as an ISO standard at that time.<sup>15</sup>
- 1999: The National Academy of the Korean Language renews the debate on which system to use (Lee Sang Oak, 1999). Circulates a questionnaire in early October, and in November holds its first in a series of open hearings extending into 2000.<sup>16</sup>

### The most popular romanization systems in the year 2000

At present, four systems are widely used in Korea, exclusively or in combination.

The Yale-Martin system is used by most linguists in their structural and phonological study of the Korean language. Most will agree with Fouser’s (1998b) statement that “The Yale-Martin system’s wide-spread use in scholarship makes it a *de facto* second system along with the current McCune-Reischauer system” (if we regard the 1984 MOE system as one with the McCune-Reischauer).

The M-R system is used by “foreign organizations, institutions and persons (diplomats, military officials<sup>17</sup>, map-makers, librarians [including the United States’ Library of Congress, which made some revisions (Choi 1999)], authors, bibliographers, publishers and others), both inside and outside Korea” (Kaliher, 1982, p. 44). The 1984 MOE system is also used by many Koreans and non-Koreans in an individual capacity and, of course, by Korean government departments and agencies in official government publications and correspondence, textbooks, road signs, and other English language functions under the jurisdiction of the government.

Many Koreans and non-Koreans who use the M-R or 1984 MOE system actually borrow, consciously or unconsciously, consistently or inconsistently, the 1959 MOE system’s digraphs *eo* and *eu* (for the unrounded /o/ and /u/) to avoid the technical difficulties encountered in rendering the M-R system’s breve ( ̃ ); and they sometimes use *b*, *d*, *g* and *j* at the beginning of a word rather than the *p*, *t*, *k* and *ch* required by M-R and 1984 MOE when they think actual pronunciation warrants it.

One system that is not in use now but may gain popularity one day is the proposed ISO transliteration system. It consists of two “methods” for representing consonants (two because the two Koreas have not yet agreed upon one)

and one method for vowels. The system is an interesting combination of the major systems discussed in this section. Method 1, preferred by the DPRK, uses the M-R system's method (*p, t, k* and *ch*), and Method 2, preferred by the ROK, uses the 1959 MOE (*b, d, g* and *j*) method for the corresponding characters; Method 1, however, uses the Yale-Martin system's method (*kh, th, ph, ch; c*) for representing aspirants and the affricate, respectively. The slightly rounded and unrounded vowels are represented by the 1959 MOE system's method (*eo* and *eu*).

### Two ways of romanizing Korean

Han'gŭl (the Korean orthographic system) is a highly sophisticated orthographic system which some romanization systems transliterate and some transcribe. Written Korean, like written English, does not represent exactly how the spoken language sounds. In English orthography, for example, we use the same *o* in the second syllable of both *photograph* and *photography*, even though pronunciation of the *o* is not the same; Korean orthography follows the same principle.

The main difference in the romanization systems is whether they are either mainly transliteration or mainly transcription. Transliteration (1959 MOE, Yale-Martin) puts emphasis more on how a language is written than on how it is pronounced (though the Yale-Martin system is also very informative about pronunciation<sup>18</sup>); transcription (Mc-Cune Reischauer, 1984 MOE) emphasizes how the language is pronounced more than how it is written (though information on spelling can also be retrieved). Therefore, a translit-

eration system represents Korean orthography exactly; Korean orthography does not use a different letter to show a slight variation (an allophone) in the pronunciation of a basic sound (a phoneme), and neither does this type of romanization system. A transcription system does show the change in pronunciation, by using a different letter; consequently, this kind of romanization system frequently differs from corresponding spelling in Korean orthography. Even the M-R system, though, does not represent every sound variation.<sup>19</sup>

To illustrate the difference between the two romanization systems, take the Korean spelling for *속리산*, the mountain: in spoken language the final consonant (ㄷ) of the first syllable *속* is /ng/, and the first consonant (ㄴ) of the second syllable is /n/. The 1959 MOE system romanizes *속리산* as *Sogri-san* and the Yale-Martin system romanizes it *Sok.li-san*. The M-R and 1984 MOE transcription systems, on the other hand, get a lot closer to actual pronunciation with *Songnisan*.

Another example of the different ways these systems work is found in *독립문*, the name of an historic gate in Seoul. Transliteration, which focuses on language structure and attempts letter-for-letter accuracy, represents the word as *Doglibmun* (1959 MOE) or *Tok.lip.mun* (Yale-Martin). The transcribed romanization, though, is *Tongnimmun*, which, for those who do not know the less apparent rules of the transliteration systems, more accurately represents the word's pronunciation.

### How the systems compare

The chart below shows examples of how the different systems deal with problems in rendering Korean in English.

		Transcription		Transliteration	
	han'gŭl feature	M-R	1984 MOE	1959 MOE	Yale-Martin

독립문	consonant change	Tong <u>n</u> immun	Tong <u>n</u> immun	Doglib <u>m</u> un	tok.li <u>p</u> .m <u>u</u> n
속리산	consonant change	Song <u>n</u> isan	Song <u>n</u> isan	Sogri-san	Sok.li-san
강릉	consonant change (also note the unrounded vowel in the second syllable)	Kang <u>n</u> ŭng	Kang <u>n</u> ŭng	Gangreung	Kang.l <u>u</u> ng
부부	lenis (light) stops	<u>p</u> u <u>b</u> u	<u>p</u> u <u>b</u> u	<u>b</u> u <u>b</u> u	<u>p</u> u <u>p</u> u
풀	aspirate stops	<u>p</u> 'ul	<u>p</u> 'ul or pul	<u>p</u> ul	<u>p</u> hul
빵	forced stops	<u>pp</u> ang	<u>pp</u> ang	<u>bb</u> ang	<u>pp</u> ang
제주도	affricates	<u>C</u> heju-do	<u>C</u> heju-do	<u>J</u> ejudo	<u>C</u> ĕy <u>c</u> wu-to
전라북도	slightly rounded vowel (also note the consonant change between first and second syllables)	Ch <u>o</u> llapuk-do	Ch <u>o</u> llapuk-do or Ch <u>o</u> llapuk-do	<u>J</u> eonlabugdo or <u>J</u> eonla Bugdo	<u>C</u> en.la pukto
금잔디	unrounded vowel	<u>k</u> ŭm <u>j</u> andi	<u>k</u> ŭm <u>j</u> andi	<u>g</u> eum <u>j</u> andi	<u>k</u> u <u>m</u> -canti
김정호	Name syllabification	Kim Ch <u>o</u> ng <u>h</u> o	Kim Ch <u>o</u> ng- <u>h</u> o or Chong- <u>h</u> o	Gim Jeong- <u>h</u> o	Kim Chen- <u>g</u> ho

## Problems in the systems currently in use

### 1) Problems common to all the romanization systems

No single romanization system, transliteration or transcription, satisfactorily represents both the pronunciation and grammar of Korean because of three features of the language: the existence of sounds that cannot easily be represented by Latin letters, differences in the way Koreans and non-Koreans perceive the same sounds, and the nature of Korean orthography. Thus, because English does not have single letters that satisfactorily represent the Korean sounds for 어 and 으, we must either use a diacritic that is difficult or impossible to produce on the ordinary typewriter or computer (M-R uses the breve), or digraphs (*eo* or *au*) that are either misleading, except to initiates, or differ in pronunciation according to circumstance. Because of difference in perception of

sounds, a Korean perceives the initial ㅈ in 독립문 differently from the way an American hears it, and therefore wants to transcribe it differently from the way a native English speaker does.<sup>20</sup> (Rector, 1999, describes this and other lenis stops as “whispered and breathy,” different from an initial English /p/ or /b/.) In addition, because Korean orthography focuses on the language’s structure, we have two basic types of romanization systems (transliteration and transcription), each with limitations, and a continuing debate over which is the best type.

In a message regarding the NAKL's 1999 proposal to change the official government Romanization system yet again, John Harvey<sup>21</sup> points out that “The real question is not so much whether the current systems [*sic*] has drawbacks, or even whether some other system might be better, but whether adopting any other system would be worth 1) the huge amount of money required for making the

changes on road signs, in guidebooks, and so forth, 2) the long period of confusion between two systems while those changes are being made (which would undoubtedly last through the 2002 World Cup), and 3) the probably division that would be created between the system coming into use in Korea and the system (M-R) being used by foreign scholars, governments, reference works, etc.” Gary Rector remarks that no system for representing han'gŭl can be perfect and that every system will have elements that seem arbitrary or non-representational or are difficult to learn, and that the only way that any system can be made useful is by getting everyone to use it, which can be accomplished only by providing thorough and consistent training in its rules in school, government and the press.

## 2) Problems with the individual systems

Before getting into this section, two points must be made. First, all systems of orthography and romanization have problems when we expect from them what they were not intended to provide. Some systems cause more difficulty for native speakers, others cause more for non-native speakers. Second, the inclusion of a complaint in this section or of a proposal in the following section (regarding suggestions for improvement) does not signify this writer's acknowledgment of its validity.

### Yale-Martin

The main limitation of the Yale-Martin system is inherent in any transliteration system. Refer above to the “consonant change” rows in the table “How the systems compare” for examples of problems with inaccurate pronunciation; a transcription system represents pronunciation more accurately more easily for the person who does not know the system's rules, which are not as immediately evident as those of a transcription system. Choe (1997b) provided a good example of what would happen if a Korean

used the transliteration system of strict letter-to-letter correspondence to write an English word in Korean. The name Al Gore would look something like and would be pronounced (with Italian vowels) something like /al go-re/.

One other complaint made by those unfamiliar with the Yale-Martin system is that two of the letters that it uses, *c* for ㅈ and *e* for ㅊ, do not *apparently* represent the sound of the Korean letters that they are intended to transcribe. A related complaint is that, while no Korean basic vowel is a diphthong, some vowels (ones which were historically diphthongs) seem to be presented as diphthongs in Yale-Martin (e.g., *ay* for ㅝ). Uninitiates also have difficulty with the system's many digraphs and trigraphs to represent Korean letters (e.g., *th* for ㅊ and *yay* for ㅝ); in a word comprised of single letters, digraphs and trigraphs, it is sometimes difficult to determine where one Korean letter begins and ends.

### 2.a) The 1959 MOE System

Because it is a transliteration system with inflexible letter-to-letter correspondence, like the Yale-Martin system, the 1959 MOE system does not provide a surface representation of the pronunciation.

The main criticism of the 1959 MOE system, however, is the use of English voiced stop letters *b*, *d*, and *g* to represent Korean's unvoiced stops ㅂ, ㅈ, and ㅊ at the beginning of words: the result is often quite unpleasant to the English ear. Lee Sang Oak (1982 p. 8) explains that in English there is “a paralinguistic tendency that English uses voiced consonants for many coarse and inelegant words,” such as *gag*, *dung*, and *bang*. One famous instance of this problem is the 1959 MOE system's transliteration of the name of Independence Gate 독립문 as *Doglibmun*. (The agency responsible for making the sign compounded the problem by mistakenly using *r* instead

of the required *l*, and then highlighted the problem by writing it in three separate syllables, ending up with a sign showing “Dog Rib Mun.”) Gary Ledyard noted a few more examples of transliterations that upset or amuse the English eye and ear: “...Jong Gag, Bug A Hyeon, Bug Gang, Rag Won, Young Hag, any of which could not only get you lost but cause a serious accident as well.”

The problem with the /dog/ pronunciation is not inherent in a transcription system; it is caused by the developers’ decision to use *d* instead of *t* for ㄷ. The problems with *g* in *dog*, and the *l* and the *b* in *lib*, though, are inherent in a transcription system, which does not attempt to account for the sound changes that result, in the case of Korean, when a ㄷ is followed by a ㄹ, and a ㅃ is followed by a ㅍ.

The problem with /dog/ brings to mind another problem with this system: The *d*, *g* and *b* are somewhat misleading representations of the Korean pronunciation; they strike the Korean ear strangely when pronounced by an English speaker unfamiliar with the conventions of this system. (In another way, the same can be said of the M-R system’s representation of these same consonants as *t*, *k* and *p*; this is discussed below.) Koreans do not voice *b*, *d* and *g*, but native English speakers who are unfamiliar with Korean tend to voice these letters because they are voiced in English.

Many do not like the 1959 MOE choice of *eo* for ㅊ and *eu* for ㅉ, saying that it is another example of pronunciation misrepresentation and a cause of confusion. (Gary Rector wonders whether this digraph, originally used in Dallet’s system (1874), might have originated in the French spelling of Seoul. The *eo* in Seoul might come from the French pronunciation of *e*, similar to a Korean’s slightly rounded /o/. The French pronunciation *ou* is similar to the Korean rounded /u/.<sup>22</sup>)

## 2.b) The McCune-Reischauer System

Orthography: If one does not know the complex rules for transcription in the M-R system it is not possible to retrieve the Han’gŭl spelling from the M-R spelling.

Technical difficulties: The breve ( ̃ ), a diacritic mark placed above *o* and *u* to represent the slightly rounded /o/ ( ㅝ ) and the unrounded /u/ ( ㅜ ), is one of the major causes for complaint. In fact, it is one of the main reasons that the Korean government has been looking for an alternative to the M-R system over the last couple of years. The breve cannot be typed on an ordinary typewriter; many do not know how to produce it on a computer, and even when it does get produced it cannot be read in a program that does not use or is not set up for a compatible character-encoding system.

The apostrophe has also received a lot of attention. This is used to mark both aspirate consonants and three potentially confusing syllable breaks. (The apostrophe is *not* used to clarify all syllable breaks that might possibly cause confusion. It marks only *a’e*, *o’e* and *n’g*.) The problem is said to be one of clutter, which can occur when an apostrophe that marks an aspirate appears in close proximity to an apostrophe that marks a syllable break.

Inaccuracy: While phonetic accuracy was the authors’ main goal, both Koreans and non-Koreans have been wrestling with a few related problems since the birth of the system. Representing initial unaspirated and unvoiced consonants (such as ㄱ in Kim) with letters that represent unvoiced consonants in English (such as *k*) causes non-native speakers of Korean to add unnecessary aspiration (Kim 1996). The reader may have seen the cartoon in the Korean Herald a few months ago that showed the non-Korean asking (in Han’gŭl) “Mr. K’im k’yeshimnigga?” 미스터 김 케십니까, in which the ㄱ was aspirated ( ㅋ ). This

cartoon exaggerated the pronunciation problem, but one gets the point.

Confusion: Lee Hyōn-bok, a linguist at Seoul National University, offered the widely-quoted complaint that the M-R system makes *prostitute* ( 창녀 ) and *eldest daughter* ( 장녀 ) sound the same when spoken by an English speaker who is unfamiliar with Korean and the M-R system, because non-native English speakers tend to pronounce *ch* and *ch'* the same (Kim-Renaud 1997).<sup>23</sup>

Klein (p. 19) reported that “Another criticism often leveled at the M-R system is that distinction in words may be lost. M-R *kungmin*, for example, could represent either 국민 (“national”) or 궁민 (“poor people”).

Difficulty of transcription for Koreans:

It is easier for Koreans to use a transliteration system like the 1959 MOE system because when they write “they think in hangul” (Fouser, 1998a), just as English speakers think in English orthography when they write. In this respect the M-R system is sometimes difficult for Koreans because they do not make the same phonemic distinctions as speakers of English do.

McCune (p. 26, footnote 1) points out that “The average Korean does not distinguish between the voiced and unvoiced sounds of these plosives, as will be seen by the fact that both are written by the same *ōnmun* [or Han’gūl] letter. On the other hand the average American or Englishman does not distinguish between Korean [lenis and aspirated] plosives. Three Korean words illustrate this, *p’al* (arm), *pal* (foot) and *sabal* (bowl). To an American or an Englishman the difference between the first two is very difficult to note, and many foreigners pronounce them alike. The Korean, on the other hand, often insists that he pronounces the        in *pal* and *sabal* the same, although the difference is striking to the western ear.”<sup>24</sup>

Origin: Some are against the M-R system for reasons other than linguistic.

“The current system is dubious because it comes from a system developed by foreigners during the Japanese colonial occupation” (Kim 1996).<sup>25</sup> Others dislike the M-R system because this system with two foreign names in its title is the basis for the widely-used system promulgated by the Korean government (the 1984 MOE system), and if Koreans had the genius to create the great Han’gūl system, the government should be able to find Koreans with the ability to establish a satisfactory romanization system (Fouser, 1998b p. 17).

### **Ideas for resolving the romanization problem**

In 1997 the Lingua Koreana Society conducted a survey of Koreans and non-Koreans residing in Korea to find out which of several romanization systems the surveyed thought most accurately reflect Korean pronunciation. The Society presented a long list of single words and names written in Han’gūl, along with their romanizations by the different systems. Almost 57% favored the transcriptions of the M-R system; the next most popular were the transliterations of the “Hanse” system (Fouser 1998a p. 28). The opinion of most non-Koreans and many Koreans involved in the discussion over the last few years has been, “If it ain’t broke. . .”: continue to use both major existing systems, the morphophonemic Yale-Martin for linguistic analysis, and the phonetic McCune-Reischauer (not to exclude the 1984 MOE, which is almost identical) for other purposes. (Very few know of the Hanse system.) There are also many, though, who would like to see the government adopt one system for all purposes, and there is no lack of notable candidates: the Revised Hanse system, Lee Hyun Bok’s, You Mahn-gun’s, Kim Bokmoon’s, an ISO (International Standards Organization) proposal on which North and South Korea are trying to come to agreement, and a Unified Korean Romanization System, and yet others



(Fouser 1998b). As mentioned previously, the NAKL has added its system to this list.

Some have tried to provide a helpful perspective to the debate, to simplify it, by asking two questions: Who, after all, is romanization for? And *what* is it for? Instead of simplifying the problem, however, these questions complicate it by adding one more unanswerable element to it. Proponents of each system naturally answer these questions in a way that bolsters the argument for their system. Some say that romanization is for foreigners, others that it is for Koreans; some insist that romanization is used mainly for foreigners to be able to read and pronounce Korean with relative accuracy, others that it is used mainly for Koreans to represent Han'gŭl in writing. The fact that romanization is for all of these people and uses does not make simplify anything.

However, since non-Koreans throughout the world almost exclusively support the M-R system for the purposes for which it was intended (even if they disagree with several of its individual features), as do a majority of Koreans, this system will most likely continue to be widely used, within Korea and without. The M-R system remained pre-eminent no matter which system the government adopted, and the ISO system currently under review, even when it becomes a standard, is a transliteration system used in situations which do not require a transcription system like the M-R. The question here, then, is not so much which system to use as how to resolve the problems in the M-R system.

### **Various proposals for fixing problems in the M-R system**

This is a representative collection of the many ideas that have been proposed, over the last few years, in the interest of improving the system's ease of use and its phonetic accuracy. A complete listing would go on for

pages; as for the value of these opinions, we do not have enough space here to present all the interesting pros and cons that have been voiced over the years.

### Lenis stops (k/g, t/d, p/b)

- Extend use of the voiced consonant letters (*b, d, g*) to initial positions when the final sound in the preceding word necessitates this. For example, the word for moon ( 달 ) is represented as *tal* no matter where it is located in a phrase because *t* is used for lenis stops at the beginning of a word, but this proposal would change the *t* to *d* when the word is in a medial position in a phrase and follows an *n* in the preceding word (big moon: *k'ŭn dal*) (Sohn, p. 55, Rector 1997b). The M-R system requires this change only "in the middle of a word," not a phrase (McCune p. 28-29).

### Aspirate marking

- Substitute the letter *h* for the apostrophe to mark the aspirate consonants: *ph, th, kh, chh*, instead of *p', t', k', ch'*.
- A mark is needed, because it is often essential to know whether the consonant is an aspirate or not, and context does not help when the reader is dealing with names. Continue using the apostrophe; the *h* is deficient aesthetically and can be confusing to one who does not have familiarity with the language or the M-R system.
- Simply eliminate the apostrophe, and use voiced consonant letters for initial lenis stops.

### Syllable boundary marking

- Eliminate the apostrophe that is used to show syllable boundaries (*a'e, o'e, and n'g*).
- Replace the apostrophe with a slash. The slash would indicate a syllable break more clearly than the apostrophe, is not as conspicuous as the apostrophe (it makes less white space), and

would reduce confusion and clutter by allowing the apostrophe to be used exclusively for marking aspirates.

- Replace the apostrophe with a hyphen.

#### Marking the unrounded vowels

- Use *eo* and *eu*.
- Use upper case. For example, ChOllapuk-do and Han'gUl.
- Omit any mark when meaning is clear without it.
- Replace the breve with another diacritic mark (circumflex, umlaut, acute, or grave accent mark) that is available in all software and works on the Internet. "Almost *any* accent mark can be used. Preferably, of course, it will not be one which suggests a phonetic value to many readers, like the *umlaut*—ö and ü... I would suggest the circumflex—ô and û—which has the virtue of being available as a separate character on probably all keyboards, so that, in a pinch, we can use o^ and u^" (Harvey 1996). (Some put the circumflex *before* the letter.) See the key combinations table in the endnotes for creating the circumflex right above the letter,<sup>26</sup> but be warned that the reader of your e-mail will probably see garble<sup>27</sup>. "The circumflex is a good replacement for the breve because it is visually similar and because many computer users now use it informally as a replacement for the breve" (Fouser 1998 p. 30). "...No matter what diacritic you use, many editors and any publisher can run a universal 'search and replace' and produce the standard McCune-Reischauer diacritic throughout your text so long as you have adopted a given diacritic and used it consistently and unambiguously" (Ledyard 1997).

- Leave it be. The computer industry will provide a standard code for creation and reading of the breve soon enough. A breve is provided in Unicode, a recent alternative to ASCII code. Unicode is quickly gaining support from the software industry (operating systems, applications and Internet). Soon it will simply be a matter of whether the software of the intended reader is set to show the breve.<sup>28</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

From its publication in 1939 to its *hwan'gap* in 1999 the McCune-Reischauer system has remained the preeminent transcription romanization system for han'gŭl. It is logical to assume that it has retained its popularity because its developers had enough knowledge and foresight to deal with the intractable problems of representing han'gŭl in an orthography so impossibly different from it in the best ways available to us.

The nature of language prevents any romanization system—for any language on this earth—from ever fully representing the pronunciation of that language. People get used to a well-wrought system, though, and the problematic features that might have seemed so difficult to live with at the relative beginning of the system become second nature with consistent use and the passage of years, much like English speakers have got used to the different sounds for the same letters and different letters for the same sounds in their language. And we are probably not being unduly optimistic to believe that one day, in Korea too, no one will give a second thought to using a *p* for a sound that is neither /p/ nor /b/.

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<sup>1</sup> As of June 28, the matter was still being discussed in a lower committee of the NAKL (Lee Sang Oak, personal communication).

<sup>2</sup> Conflicting information: Lee (1982, p. 6) says 1882. Fouser (1998b) says 1877: "Romanization of Korean dates back to 1832, when a German doctor, Philipp Franz J. B. van Siebold...developed a romanization system for Korea.... Several other systems were devised in the mid-19th century, but three, the Siebold system (1832), the Dallet system (1874) and the Ross system (1877) exerted the strongest influence on later systems."

<sup>3</sup> "As early as in 1835, a polyglot with such a long title as *Translation of a comparative Vocabulary of the Chinese, Corean and Japanese, to Which is Added the thousand Character Classic, in Chinese and Corean, the Whole Accompanied by Copious Indexes of All the Chinese and English Words Occurring in the Work* was published in Batavia in Indonesia by the English missionary, W.H. Medhurst. As a matter of fact, this polyglot was a reproduction of

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the Chinese (Written)-Japanese-Korean Glossary of the 18th century published by the Bureau of Interpreters in the government of the Chosun dynasty of Korea.” This information is included in an article entitled “The Official System of Romanization for Korean Currently in Use and Its Problems,” presented at a meeting on romanization in December of 1996, chaired by Song Ki-jung.

<sup>4</sup> Entries from 1882 to 1979 from Lee Sang Oak (1982; p.6).

<sup>5</sup> “The Dallet family of systems uses the same consonants [as the M-R system], but indicates aspiration with an *h* added to each consonant (*kh*, *th*, and *ph*). The use of the *h* continues to this day in the official North Korean romanization system and the Yale-Martin system used mainly by linguists. The Dallet system set another precedent with the use of the *e* with another vowel to indicate the two vowels...which become *eo* and *eu*’... “The use of *eo* for and *eu* for is still popular because the breve used over *o* and *u*, respectively, for these letters is so inconvenient for many people” (Fouser, 1998b). “The first European priest to cross the border was Pierre Maubant ... That was in 1836, and presumably...began the first of three-dozen Romanization systems that have been made and unmade for the last hundred years... The French mission made their system public in 1881, but the substance of the system can be gleaned from Dallet’s *History of the Korean Church* published in the 1870s... The biggest nuisance to [Dallet] was the first sound of the two-syllable name of...Seoul. He was not at all sure about the value of that very common sound, so he offered for that single sound three optional notations: *o*, *eu*, and *e*. He adopted the last of his three options to produce the historic ‘*Seoul*’ which may be as thoroughly French as *Londres*, though no Frenchman could read it and come up with anything remotely approximate to how the natives say it” (Kim, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Lee Sang Oak (1982, p. 6): “Ross’s system (1882)...is worth noting as a sort of predecessor to Jung’s system (1935).” Fouser (1998b): 1936.

<sup>7</sup> Lee Sang Oak (1982, p. 7 footnote).

<sup>8</sup> Fouser (1998b). “North Korea was the first to come up with a new romanization system. The current system of Romanization in North Korea dates from 1956 and was modified

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slightly in 1986. It combines features from the Dallet (1874) system and the 1933 Unified Orthography system [for Korean spelling].”

<sup>9</sup> Sohn (1982) p. 53. Also presented here in this article are recommendations made at the Workshop.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Education Proclamation 84-1, January 13, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Schiffman (1985).

Kang 1983: “The Ministry of Education, which is in charge of formulating a unified spelling system to romanize Korean words, is using the traditional system it developed in 1959. The Ministry of Education (MOE) system is used in school textbooks. Unlike the Education Ministry, the Ministry of Construction and the Seoul City government recently decided to use the McCune-Reischauer system in romanizing the names of streets and places. In the meantime, to prevent further confusion in the romanization of Korean words, the Education Ministry last year asked a special committee at the National Academy of Sciences to draft a unified spelling system for romanizing Korean words... The special committee...drafted a new romanization method for Korean words by combining the MOE system and the M-R method. The ministry, however, has not decided whether to adopt the new method as a final solution.”

Fouser (1998b): “Complaints about the 1959 MOE system and wide popular use of the McCune-Reischauer system...caused the Ministry of Education [to] reexamine the issue in the early 1980s... The system put in place in 1984 is, except for a few minor changes, the same as the 1939 McCune-Reischauer system. This system takes the opposite approach from the 1959 system in that it attempts to approximate the Korean pronunciation by representing surface-level phonological changes. Each Han’gŭl graph is therefore represented by one or two Roman letters. The system uses the breve diacritic mark above the *o* and *u* to create additional vowels. It also uses an apostrophe to represent the aspirated Korean consonants.”

Also see the discussion “Government-adopted Romanization System” (*Korea Times*, 14 January 1984) and “Changes in Romanization” table in “New romanization system adopted for Korean words” (*Korea Herald*, 14 January 1984).

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<sup>12</sup> This Commission was established by the National Academy of the Korean Language, a government agency under the Ministry of Culture and Sports.

<sup>13</sup> Kim-Renaud (1997): “There is not a single nonnative speaker present at the meeting[s of the Commission]... Language and writing affairs have been under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Sports for some time now, not the MOE [Ministry of Education]... They have finally arrived at a consensus that they would work for a ‘one-to-one’ transliteration, not very different from the Yale-Martin system, except that they would change the <p>, <l>, <k> to <b>, <d>, <g> and doubling these letters for the tense [doubled letter] series.”

Lee (1999): This tentative proposal was presented by the National Academy of the Korean Language, but was aborted after intense and widespread discussion “because of a lack of public consensus and [also because of] uneasiness about the economic crisis in the middle of 1997.”

Kaliher (1997): “...the government ruled that the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) 1959 system be implemented on road signs nationwide, thus propagating such spellings as ‘Dogribmun’ for Independence Gate, and fueling a wealth of associated jokes. (A couple of examples: The MOE spelling for Cholla Pukto, or North Cholla Province, inspired the riddle, ‘What does a Jeonra Bugdo that no other bug does?’ And a blackboard graffito used the MOE spelling of Park Chung Hee’s name to announce, ‘The new Romanization system has been approved by President Bag.’)...Foreign travelers could be forgiven for wondering why many of the signs on the road to Kangnung read ‘Gangreung.’ (Gangrene jokes abounded.)”

Lee (1983): “Dogribmun, a typical example of awkward Romanization that many “Koreigners”...have enjoyed poking fun at, is in fact an illegitimate version of “Doglibmun” produced by a silly transcriber among the sign-painting authorities. According to my scrutiny of the Ministry of Education’s 1959 system, its first ‘note’ says that after any consonant should be written *l* rather than *r*: e.g., Sinla.”

Kim-Renaud (1997): There was a public hearing on May 6, with no foreigners in attendance, “although the meeting was announced in every newspaper, radio, and TV.” However, the 1997 meeting sponsored by the Korean Language Research Center, attended by several Americans, was an attempt to get the input of foreigners.

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<sup>14</sup> *Hanguk Ilbo* (1998): “The Ministry of Culture and Sports, which oversees the National Academy of the Korean Language, announced at the end of June 1998 that all further debate on changing the official romanization system be stopped because of a lack of funds and national consensus for the change.”

<sup>15</sup> At its July 1999 meeting the ISO Subcommittee for Conversion of Written Languages (ISO/TC 46/SC2) decided to postpone adoption of the Technical Report “ISO/TR 11941 (Transliteration of Korean script into Latin characters)” as an ISO standard (Clews, personal communication 14 July 1999). For more information, see <http://www.elot.gov/tc46sc2> and <http://asadal.cs.pusan.ac.kr/han-tl-ts>.

<sup>16</sup> The NAKL was accused by many Koreans and non-Koreans of having ultranationalistic reasons for attempting to get the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to adopt its proposal, and the NAKL director’s admonition, “When in Rome do as the Romans do,” along with the Academy’s dissemination of a questionnaire only to Koreans and its announcement of an open hearing for the proposal only a couple days previous to the hearing did not help defend it against these charges.

The three principles that the NAKL claims to have followed in drafting the system are:

1. “to be written as pronounced in Korea,
2. not to use any symbol other than the Roman alphabet,
3. to write one sound with one letter” [Harvey, personal communication, 18 Nov. 99; Harvey goes on to point out ways in which the system does not consistently follow all of these principles; search the archives of [www.mailbase.com](http://www.mailbase.com), Korean Studies, for the full text and many more communications about this matter. Also search the November and December 1999 archives of *The Korea Herald* and *The Korea Times*.]

Major proposed changes: Replace the M-R breve with eo and eu for the unrounded vowels, use g, d, b, and j for initial lenis stops (instead of M-R’s k, t, p and ch), represent aspirated consonants with k, t, p and ch (instead of with the apostrophe used in M-R), ignore liaison (to better represent spelling).

<sup>17</sup> In an article opposing the NAKL’s 1999 initiative to replace the M-R system, Han Dong-soo, Political Editor for *The Korea Times*, points out that “The United States Forces Korea,



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which uses the McCune-Reischauer romanization system, will have to make a decision on whether to follow the new linguistic guidelines. However, it is a near certainty that the USFK will not accept it. . . Will the Pentagon order the wholesale revision of military maps and the names of its military targets in North Korea--Yongbyon into Yeongbyeon...for instance? What will happen to the coordination of ROK-U.S. combined forces when they use different maps and pronounce their target locations differently? Can these hypotheses be dismissed as groundless fears?" (Quoted in Bryan R. Ross's message to the Korean Studies list, 1 Dec 1999.)

<sup>18</sup> Gary Rector provides an example of the *q*'s function: In the word *Sinselq.tong*, the *q* shows that the *t* is glottalized because of the preceding *l*. This information does not appear in either Han'gŭl or the M-R system.

<sup>19</sup> "M-R violates its phonetic principle... by writing the silent *y* in *kye*, *rye*, and *hye* and the silent *ū* in *hūl*" (Harvey, 1999), and by maintaining one spelling for the possessive marker *ūi*.

<sup>20</sup> "Users of the Roman alphabet have their own phonemic interdistinctions quite different from those of Koreans, thus perceiving certain different Korean phonemes as the same sounds and the same phonemes as different. Thus, for example, Americans perceive /bul/ ( 불 ) 'fire' and /p'ul/ ( 풀 ) 'grass' as the same *pul*, while perceiving the same phoneme in *kakeuk* ( 케옥 ) 'opera' as two different significant sounds, as in *kagŭk*" (Sohn 51).

<sup>21</sup> Korean Studies list, 11 Dec 99.

<sup>22</sup> See Footnote 4.

<sup>23</sup> Critics of this complaint question its validity. One reason is that the aspirate mark in the M-R system makes the difference perfectly clear: "In the first case, the M-R romanizations of <changnyO> and <ch'angnyO> are different, and the presence of the unexpected 'apostrophe' in the latter word will serve to indicate to even the least initiated non-speaker of Korean that some sort of 'extra phonological knowledge' is required. And that extra knowledge is present WITHIN the romanization system itself. That is, the sign <ch'> has a consistent pronunciation within the system" (Kosofsky, 1997). Another reason critics question the validity of this complaint is that a person who would not know enough to distinguish between

these two words would not likely be having a Korean-language conversation in which these more sophisticated words would appear.

<sup>24</sup> "...the M-R system is very difficult for Koreans to use unless they get some training, because it requires using different Roman letters for one and the same Korean phoneme or Hang'ul letter. This is particularly the case with the initial lax consonants which are spelled *p, t, k, ch* and the medial counterparts which are spelled *b, d, g, j*" (Sohn, p. 55).

<sup>25</sup> Actually, McCune and Reischauer developed their system in close consultation with Ch'oe Hyônbae and Chông Insôp, highly respected linguistics scholars of the time. Besides, the 1959 MOE system that many linguistic nationalists champion is based on the system that another foreigner, Ross, developed in 1882.

<sup>26</sup> This table presents some of the methods for creating a circumflex.

	Mac/U.S.	IBM/U.S. – International <sup>a</sup>	Word (Windows95x) <sup>b</sup>
ô	Alt+i, then o	Alt+0244	Ctrl+Shift+^, o
û	Alt+i, then u	Alt+0242	Ctrl+Shift+^, u
Ô	Shift+Alt+j	Alt+0212	Ctrl+Shift+^, O
Û	Alt+i, then Shift+u	Alt+0219	Ctrl+Shift+^, U

Table notes:

With all of these methods, keep in mind that the reader must have software that can read these symbols. Also, the correct "character encoding" settings in the reader's software must be made. (Some e-mail programs do not provide this function.)

<sup>a</sup>Enable the number pad..

<sup>b</sup>Or in Insert-Font-Symbols, select the "normal text" circumflex o, u, O, or U, then assign a shortcut key before closing the box.

The information in the "Mac/U.S." and "IBM/U.S. –International" columns was provided by Frank Hoffman (1999). The information in the "Word (Windows95x)" column comes from John Harvey.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Rector, in personal communication, presented three variables to consider when using computer diacritics in e-mail: "1) Is the [reader's] browser capable of reading the Unicode Latin Extended-A characters? (The main modern browsers can handle Unicode.), 2) Does the reader have at least one font that contains those characters and are they encoded in that font to the same codes as they are in Unicode Latin Extended-A?, 3) Does the reader

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have the browser set up to use that encoding and that font? (Most people just use the default settings.)”

<sup>28</sup> For more information, see [www.unicode.org](http://www.unicode.org).