

LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF CONSONANT SOUNDS IN THE KOREAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract. This article examines the linguistic and phonetic characteristics of consonant sounds in the Korean language from an articulatory and phonological perspective. The study analyzes the classification of Korean consonants according to voicing, aspiration, place of articulation, and manner of articulation. Special attention is given to the distinctive features of bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar, and glottal consonants, as well as to the articulatory properties of plosive, fricative, affricate, lateral, and nasal sounds. The article also discusses the functional role of phonetics as a theoretical basis for phonological studies. Through a systematic analysis of Korean consonant sounds, the research highlights the structural organization and phonetic specificity of the Korean sound system.

Keywords: phonetics, phonology, consonant sounds, articulation, voiced sounds, voiceless sounds, aspirated consonants, nasal sounds.

Just as sound constitutes the primary medium of linguistic expression, the phonetic structure of the Korean language is likewise realized through sound. Sound functions as a communicative instrument that conveys meaning and facilitates verbal interaction. The scientific study of speech sounds as elements of language is referred to as phonetics, an independent linguistic discipline with its own specific object of inquiry. Furthermore, the findings obtained through the analysis of individual speech sounds within phonetics provide an essential theoretical foundation for phonology, which examines the functional aspects of sound systems. For this reason, phonetics is often regarded as a complementary field that supports and enriches phonological studies.

According to the criteria used for classifying speech sounds, the sounds employed in the Korean language can be divided into several categories. Among them, the most significant types may be briefly described as follows:

1. Voiced Sounds (유성음) and Voiceless Sounds (무성음)

Voiced sounds are produced when the vocal folds vibrate during the articulation process. In other words, these sounds involve vocal cord vibration. In Korean, all vowels as well as the sonorant consonants ㄴ, ㄹ, ㄻ, and ㅇ belong to this category.

Voiceless sounds, by contrast, are articulated without vibration of the vocal folds. As the airflow passes through the vocal tract, no vocal cord vibration occurs. In the Korean language, all consonants except ㄴ, ㄹ, ㄻ, and ㅇ are generally classified as voiceless sounds.

2. Consonants (자음) and Vowels (모음)

Consonants are obstructed speech sounds produced when the airflow is partially or completely blocked within the oral cavity during articulation.

(1) Classification According to the Involvement of the Nasal Cavity (공강/공명 기준)

- Nasal sounds (비음): sounds in which the airflow passes through the nasal cavity during articulation (ㄴ, ㄻ, ㅇ).

- Oral sounds (구강음): sounds produced with airflow passing through the oral cavity; this category includes all consonants except the nasal sounds.

(2) Classification According to Aspiration (기식음)

- Unaspirated sounds (무기음): sounds articulated without a strong release of breath.

- Aspirated sounds (유기음): sounds produced with an accompanying burst of air or strong aspiration during pronunciation.

(3) Classification According to Place of Articulation (조음위치)

- **Bilabial consonants (양순음):** consonants produced through the contact and subsequent release of both lips. In Korean, this group includes the sounds ㅂ, ㅃ, ㅄ, and ㅅ. However, the consonant ㅅ differs from the others in that, although it is articulated through the closure of the lips, the airflow is released through the nasal cavity rather than the oral cavity.

- **Alveolar consonants (치조음):** consonants articulated when the tip of the tongue approaches or touches the upper alveolar ridge. This category includes ㄷ, ㄸ, ㄹ, and ㄴ. The sounds ㄷ, ㄸ, and ㄹ are produced when the tongue tip makes contact with the alveolar ridge and is then quickly released. In contrast, ㄴ is a nasal sound formed by the contact of the tongue tip with the alveolar ridge while the airflow passes through the nasal cavity. In addition, the sounds ㄱ and ㅋ are produced when the tongue tip comes very close to the alveolar ridge without complete closure. Due to the active involvement of the tongue tip, these consonants are also referred to as apical consonants (설단음).

- **Palatal consonants (경구개음):** consonants produced when the front part of the tongue approaches the hard palate during articulation. This group includes the Korean sounds ㅈ, ㅊ, and ㅉ. These sounds are articulated through the close contact between the tongue and the hard palate. Due to the involvement of the tongue surface, they are also referred to as laminal consonants (설면음).

- **Velar consonants (연구개음):** consonants articulated when the back part of the tongue approaches or touches the soft palate (velum). In Korean, this category includes ㄱ, ㅋ, and ㆁ. These sounds are produced through the contact and subsequent release of the back of the tongue against the soft palate.

The sound ㅇ is also classified within this group; however, it differs from other velar consonants in that it is produced with the back of the tongue touching the soft palate while the airflow passes through the nasal cavity. For this reason, it is also regarded as a nasal sound and is sometimes referred to as a velar nasal consonant (설근음).

- **Glottal consonants (성문음):** consonants produced through the activity of the vocal folds in the glottal region. These sounds are also known as laryngeal sounds (후음). In Korean, this category includes the consonant ㅎ, which is articulated through the narrowing or friction of the airflow in the glottal area.

(4) Classification According to Manner of Articulation (조음방법)

- **Plosive consonants (파열음):** consonants produced when the airflow coming from the lungs is completely blocked at a particular point within the oral or nasal cavity and then suddenly released. Because the articulatory organs fully obstruct the airstream during their production, these sounds are also referred to as “stop sounds” or “occlusive sounds” (폐쇄음). Furthermore, since the airflow is momentarily halted and then released abruptly, they are likewise termed “stops” (정지음) in phonetic terminology.

- **Fricative consonants (마찰음):** consonants produced when the passage between the articulatory organ and the point of articulation is considerably narrowed, allowing the airflow to pass through only with difficulty. As the air moves through this constricted channel, frictional noise is generated, which gives these sounds their name. Unlike plosive consonants, fricatives are not formed through complete closure within the oral cavity; instead, the airflow passes continuously through a narrow opening.

- **Affricate consonants (파찰음):** consonants that combine characteristics of both plosive and fricative sounds. In their articulation, the airflow is initially completely blocked, as in plosive consonants; however, instead of being released abruptly, it passes gradually through a highly constricted opening, thereby producing friction. In Korean, the consonant ㅈ belongs to

the affricate category and, like plosive consonants, it exhibits a three-way distinction consisting of lenis, fortis, and aspirated forms.

- **Liquid/Lateral consonants (유음):** consonants articulated with minimal obstruction to the airflow in comparison with other consonant types. Their principal characteristic is that the tip of the tongue touches the upper palate, blocking the central airflow, while the air is allowed to pass freely along one or both sides of the tongue. For this reason, these sounds are often described as “flowing sounds,” resembling the smooth movement of water.

- **Nasal consonants (비음):** consonants produced when the oral passage is blocked and the airflow is consequently released through the nasal cavity. In Korean, the nasal consonants include ㄴ, ㄹ, and ㅇ.

In conclusion, the phonetic system of the Korean language demonstrates a highly systematic and well-structured articulatory and phonological organization, in which speech sounds are consistently classified according to both their place and manner of articulation. Korean consonants are divided into articulatory categories such as bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar, and glottal consonants, each distinguished by its own phonatory and articulatory characteristics.

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