

The Word Stress Rules in Korean

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I. Introduction

The importance of stress and intonation cannot be overstated. It is the stress and intonation that a child first acquires in the course of learning a language. The first reason for this: stress that is the amplitude of sound waves and intonation that is the frequency of sound waves are the stimuli that are perceived more easily by the body oscillator that every person is born with than individual phonemes. The second reason: the number of the kinds of stress and intonation is limited; two: strong and weak, in the stress, and three: low, mid, and high, in the intonation in any language, whereas the number of English consonant phonemes, for example, is 23, and that of Korean consonant phonemes is 20. It is naturally easier for us to learn a small number of things than a large number of ones. In this connection, I'd like to quote Peter Guberina who says, "We hear not only by ears but by the tactile sensation we obtain by the air waves created by the speech." And stress, intonation and rhythm are closely related with the air waves.

III. The Word Stress in Korean

"The main stress in a Czechoslovak word always falls on the initial syllable, that in a Polish word always on the penultimate, that is, the second syllable from the last, and that in a Turkish word always on the final syllable,"¹ which means that the position of the stress in those languages is fixed, therefore, the stress is non-phonemic. The stress in English is phonemic since the presence or absence of the stress on the same position of the otherwise homophonous words brings a meaning difference as seen in 'accent(n) vs. ac'cent(v), 'permit(n) vs. per'mit(v), and 'contact(n) vs. con'tact(v). The stress positions, however, are different depending on individual words. The stress in Korean is non-phonemic as well except in the only case where the meaning difference is created because of the stress difference caused by the difference of vowel length. The long one is stressed strongly, whereas the short one weakly, as seen in 마력 /ma'ɾjaŋ/ (魔力: magic power) vs. 마력 /'ma:ɾjaŋ/ (馬力: horse power) and 가시 /ga'si/ (thorn) vs. 가시 /'ga:si/ (visible).²

On the position of the word stress in English, Prator says, "Unfortunately, there are no infallible rules for determining which syllable of a word should be stressed. Many times you will need to turn to the dictionary unless you hear the word spoken by someone familiar with it."³ The same may be said with Korean.

Be that as it may, should we leave the position of the word stress in Korean arbitrary? No, there should be an attempt to find the rules if any for determining it.

Below, I present you with the tentative rules for it. The rules are based on a study by Dr. Hyun Bok Lee, president of the Phonetic Society of Korea as well as chairman of the Dept. of Linguistics, Seoul National University,⁴ and on my own intuition confirming the findings. My own supplementary views will be added in several places. Inasmuch as the Japanese and Korean languages are the same in both using phonetic alphabetical letters, in both having the S-O-V syntactic word order and the case markers coming after word stems, and in that the number of syllables counts more than that of stresses in speech, the rules may be applied to the Japanese stress positions as well. In fact, many similarities have been found, which will be mentioned as the occasion arises.

III. The Word Stress Rules

(Rule 1) The one-syllable word invariably has stress on it, regardless of whether it ends in a vowel or a consonant, and whether the vowel that constitutes the syllable is long or short.

Rule 1 Formula

'(C)V(:)(C)

Ex's. 애 /'e:/ (child), 감 /'ga:m/ (persimmon), 달 /'dal/ (moon)

(Exc. 1) The Exception to the Rule 1. When the one-syllable word is a demonstrative determiner, it is stressless.

Ex's. 이 /i/ (this), 저 /dʒa/ (that)

(Rule 2) The stress position for the two-

syllable word goes by the following rules.
(Rule 2:1) When the first syllable ends in a vowel, the second syllable receives stress.

Rule 2:1 Formula

1st syllable	2nd syllable
(C)V	'(C)V(C)

Ex's. 사이 /sa'i/ (in-between), 다리 /da'ri/ (leg or bridge), 그늘 /'aunwul/ (shade), 마당 /ma'daŋ/ (yard), 우편 /u'pjən/ (郵便: mail), 자리 /dʒa'ri/ (place)

It is interesting to find that this rule roughly corresponds to that of the Japanese language. On a page of a Japanese word accent dictionary, 58 among 62 words are found to follow this rule, though not all the 62 words are two-syllable words. One word going counter to this rule that especially attracts my attention is /'haʃi/ (chopsticks) in contrast with /ha'ʃi/ (bridge),⁵ no phenomena of which are found in standard Korean except in the dialogue of the southern Kyōngsang region.

(Exc. 2) The Exception to the Rule 2:1. When the vowel that constitutes the first syllable is long, the first syllable itself receives stress.

Ex's. 오정 /'o:dʒaŋ/ (午正: noon), 이자 /'i:dʒa/ (利子: bank interest), 마부 /'ma:bu/ (馬夫: horse driver), 가능 /'ga:nwŋ/ (可能: possible)

Most of the words that apply to this exception are those which were written in Chinese characters before being adopted for speech use in Korea. Some of this kind are found in the Japanese language.

Ex's. 道路 /'do:ro/ (road), 氷 /'ko:ri/ (ice).⁶ In English as well, the same vowel is longer when stressed than when not stressed.⁷

(Rule 2:2) When the first syllable ends in a consonant, the first syllable receives stress.

Rule 2:2 Formula

1st syllable	2nd syllable
'(C)VC	(C)V(C)

Ex's. 상자 /'saŋdʒa/ (box), 발동 /'baldoŋ/ (starting), 친선 /'tʃinsən/ (friendship), 천당 /'tʃandaŋ/ (heaven)

Some of this kind are found in the Japanese

language.

Ex's. *맛* /'qammi/ (sweet taste), *산* /'dansan/ (carbonic acid).⁸

One more example may be /'patto/ (in a flash). (Exc. 2) The Exception to the Rule 2:2. When the second syllable is of a lexical unit on its own when used independently, it also receives stress mainly for the purpose of contrast. There is a slight pause between the two syllables in the case, evidently to avoid a stress clash.

Ex's. *강북* /'qan-'buk/ (江北: north of the river), that is, not *강동* /'qan-'dod/ (江東: east of the river) or *강서* /'qan-'sa/ (江西: west of the river)

Note: The in-between hyphen indicates the presence of a pause.

The pause arising here may be interpreted according to the view of Lieberman who suggests that the metrical grid of an utterance may also contain silent grid positions—positions not aligned with syllable, whose presence is determined in some way on the basis of the syntactic structure of the utterance. Abercrombie calls this silent stress.⁹

(Rule 3) The stress position for the three-syllable word goes by the following rules.

(Rule 3:1) When the first syllable ends in a vowel, the second syllable receives stress. The third syllable has weak stress as well as the first syllable.

Rule 3:1 Formula

1st syllable (C)V	2nd syllable '(C)V(C)	3rd syllable (C)V(C)
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Ex's. *가재미* /'qadʒemi/ (crawfish), *너구리* /nə'guri/ (raccoon dog), *지구촌* /ji'gʊtʃon/ (global village)

Some of this kind are found in the Japanese language.

Ex's. *私* /wa'dasi/ (I), *心* /qo'kori/ (mind)¹⁰ (Exc. 3) The Exc. 2 holds true with this case also. However, there are two possible alternatives in this case. That is, [(one lexical unit consisting of two syllables) + (one lexical unit consisting of one syllable)] as in *파랑새* /paraŋ + se/ (blue bird), or *이듬해* /idum + he/ (next year), and [(one lexical unit consisting of one syllable) + (one lexical unit

consisting of two syllables)] as in *대나무* /de + namu/ (bamboo tree) or *노처녀* /no + tʃʌnʌ/ (老處女: old maid).

Then, the stress for each of the four example words will go as follows.

/pa'raŋ-'se/, /i'dum-'he/, /'de-na'mu/, /'no:tʃʌnʌ/

You will find that all the four example words above are compound words. In English, "the compound rule assigns greatest prominence to the left-hand constituent,"¹¹ as seen in *sports complex*, *apartment house* and *business affairs*. Here we find a difference between the stress systems of Korean and English.

The Exception 3 shows that one of the important factors that determine the stress position in the case of a compound word in Korean is the word-member lexical unit which may consist of one syllable or two syllables.

(Rule 3:2) When the first syllable ends in a consonant, the first syllable receives stress: The remaining two syllables have weak stress.

Rule 3:2 Formula

1st syllable '(C)VC	2nd syllable (C)V(C)	3rd syllable (C)V(C)
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Ex's. *연구소* /'yanquso/ (research institute), *갈매기* /'qalmegi/ (gull), *압록강* /'apnokkaŋ/ (The Yalu River)

(Exc. 3) The Exc. 3 holds true with this case also. The same phenomenon regarding stress as that of the Exc. 3 happens in this case.

Ex's. *산국화* /'san-'gukhwa/ (山菊花: mountain chrysanthemum), *분기선* /'bunqi'san/ (分岐線: branch line)

(Rule 4) The stress position for the more-than-four-syllable word is determined by the combination of Rules 1, 2 and 3.

Ex's. *날카롭게* /'nalkha'ropke/ (sharply), *동물숭배* /'donmul'suŋbe/ (animal worship), *시기상조* /ʃi'qi'saŋdʒo/ (time immature)

Many of the four-syllable words are adjectives with intensive implication or manner adverbs consisting of a pair of some words or two words having rhymed sounds.

Ex's. *알쏭달쏭* /'alsong'dalsong/ (obscure),

시림시림 / si'rum si'rum/ (lingerlingly)

Words of this kind are seen in the Japanese language also, like /ka'raka'ra/ (a manner adverb expressing someone laughing loudly) and /de'kobo'ko/ (uneven).

IV. Conclusion

This study has found that the Korean stress is characterized by the following points.

- (1) A heavy syllable, by which is meant a syllable ending in one or more consonants, tends to receive stress.
- (2) A long vowel tends to receive stress.

Language universals may be found here, seeing the fact that the three languages, that is, Korean, Japanese and English are common in this respect.

- (3) In the case of a compound word, the lexical unit that is a member of the word independently follows the stress rules.
- (4) The rhythmic alternation caused by the regular stress alternation exists in Korean. This is evidently seen in the phenomenon that a stress clash is avoided by giving a pause between two consecutive strong stresses.
- (5) Many similarities are found between the stress systems of Korean and Japanese.

NOTES

1. Shibada Takeshi, "On the Japanese Accent" in *Collection of Studies on the Japanese Accent* (Tokyo, Yusei-do, 1980), p. 7.
2. Kwang-woo Nahm, et al., *The Dictionary of the Korean Standard Pronunciation* (The Institute of Korean Historical and Cultural Studies, 1984).
3. Clifford H. Prator, Jr., *Manual of American English Pronunciation* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1957), p. 19.
4. Hyun Bok Lee, "The Phonetic Study of the Korean Speech Rhythms" in *Malsori* (Journal of the Phonetic Society of Korea, No. 4, June, 1982), pp. 31-47.
5. From *Collection of Studies on the Japanese Accent* (CSJA hereafter), *op. cit.*, p. 292.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 256 & p. 258.
7. Arthur J. Bronstein, *The Pronunciation of American English* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960), p. 143.
8. CSJA, *op. cit.*, p. 258 & p. 288.
9. Elisabeth O. Selkirk, *Phonology and Syntax* (MIT, 1984), p. 20.
10. CSJA, p. 272 & p. 290.
11. Elisabeth O. Selkirk, *op. cit.*, p. 149.