HISTORY OF KOREAN LANGUAGE

Korean is a major world language with an interesting phonology and unique writing system and is the official language of South Korea and North Korea, and approximately 80 million people speak Korean worldwide.

The Korean language has a long and rich history. Korean is one of the world’s oldest living languages, and its origins are as circuitous as the origin of the Korean people. Korean is descended from Proto-Korean, Old Korean, Middle Korean and Modern Korean. Since the Korean War, contemporary North-South differences have developed in standard Korean, including variance in pronunciation, verb inflection, and vocabulary.

The development history of Korean language is generally divided into three periods.

Old Korean: Old Korean would describe the language spoken in Korea prior to the 15th century. Little is known about it. This period of Korean history is known as the Three Kingdoms period, followed by the Unified Silla period – Silla being one of the Three Kingdoms that dominated the Korean peninsula, and the kingdom that wound up surviving and thriving. China had a huge influence on Korea during this time and our few examples of Old Korean are actually written in Chinese characters. This makes deciphering them difficult, as the Chinese characters appear to have been used to represent the sounds and meanings of the Korean language at the time, as opposed to an actual translation. This makes
understanding them very difficult.

**Middle Korean:** The evolution from Old Korean to Middle Korean is also argued – but generally, it is agreed that by the 15th century, with the advent of a Korean-specific writing system, the Korean Language had unified into what is known as Middle Korean. This writing system was called The Hunminjeongeum (which translates beautifully to “The Proper Sounds for the Instruction of the People”); known today as Hangul, was made official by royal proclamation on the part of King Sejong the Great.

This script included pronunciation rules and was intended to allow the largely illiterate peasant population in his kingdom to be able to read and write. It was believed to be promulgated on October 9, 1446, and that day remains Hangul Day in Korea.

**Modern Korean:** From there Korean follows a more standard and better-documented evolution model of language. Unification and standardization continued until Modern Korean was established as distinct from Middle Korean by the 17th century.

Since the division of Korea into North and South, the language as spoken by each country has begun to drift apart, although they are still firmly one language and mutually intelligible.

What’s really interesting about this is that much of the changes in North Korean are due to government intervention, as North Korea’s communist leaders have issued several proclamations concerning the language – a rare situation in language evolution, which is usually much more of a natural process.
For centuries, Koreans used Chinese characters to write their language out, but in the 15th century a new alphabet, known today as Hangeul, was developed.

In the modern world, Korean is spoken by almost 65 million people in the world, in North and South Korea as well as China, Japan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as notable communities in the United States and elsewhere. That is why English to Korean translation services are increasingly required around the world.

So, Korean has both a mysterious past and a scientific present, making it one of the most interesting languages in the world today!