

## THE NEED FOR A KOREAN SIGN LANGUAGE BIBLE TRANSLATION<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

This paper explores the need and potential for a Korean Sign Language Bible, and some considerations necessary for translating the Bible into Korean Sign Language (KSL). The following factors will be reviewed: demographic data concerning the Deaf in Korea as well as the population of Christians among the Deaf; social background regarding the enforcement of the “Law for the Disabled”; and the current standing of KSL and churches serving the Deaf in Korea. Several attempts at translation of the Lord’s Prayer in KSL will be compared and lessons drawn about the sign language most suitable for Bible translation.

### Demographics of the Deaf in Korea

According to the city/provincial statistics of registered disabled persons by type of disability during the years 2001–2006, the number of people in Korea who are speech/hearing disabled has increased as follows:

2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
105,711	128,823	139,325	155,382	174,302	205,155

**Table 1. Number of speech/hearing disabled in South Korea**

[Source: Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, Policy for People with Disabilities Team.]

A fair explanation of such increase would be that the number of people who have *registered themselves* as disabled has increased every year rather than that the actual number of the disabled has increased. The above source estimates the number of the hearing/speech disabled among the “expected total number of the disabled” to be about 302,000 in 2005. This is because of the large number of deaf people who are not registered and therefore are not included in the figures given in the table.

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## **Social background regarding the enforcement of the “Law for the Disabled”**

The year 2008 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In Korea, the “Law for the Disabled,” which aims to prohibit discrimination against disabled people, and to protect their rights, went into effect as of April 11, 2008.

When a public agency holds a public ceremony, Article Fourteen of the “Law for the Disabled” states that if requests to provide support for the disabled are made seven days prior to the event, appropriate means of communication such as sign language interpreters, written language interpreters, voice interpreters, or hearing aids must be provided. In addition, TV broadcasts must offer sign language or subtitles, although Korean broadcasting companies do not yet appear to be ready to provide full sign-language interpretation services. The law has not expanded the national language list in Korea to include KSL, but these regulations help secure rights of sign language users.

## **The development of Korean Sign Language**

According to the historical record of the Seoul National School for the Deaf (<http://www.seoulnong.sc.kr>), it was the missionary Rosetta Sherwood Hall who became interested in educating the Deaf after visiting Deaf schools in China, and thus founded the Deaf class belonging to the Pyungyang School for the Blind, the first educational institution for the Deaf in 1909. (Note, however, that Chil-gwan Kim [2005] asserts that there is no supporting evidence for this.) On April 1, 1913, the government established Jesengwon (National School for the Blind, Deaf part) in Chonyondong, Seoul, and provided education for the Blind and Deaf. Because Korea was under Japanese rule at that time, education for the Deaf was focused on teaching Japanese Sign Language (JSL) and Japanese like any other school in Korea, and most of the Japanese teachers were users of JSL. It is assumed that there was mixed use of informal “home signs” (which grew spontaneously as they were needed in homes or villages) and JSL during this period (C. Kim 2005, 21-22). In 1920, the “Japan Association of the Deaf, Kyung-sung (Seoul) office” was founded, and early KSL grew and developed through the process of localization under the influence of JSL.

On September 1, 1946, Baek-won Yoon, the first principal of the National School for the Blind invented and made public the “Korean fingerspellings.” Because education for Deaf students was delivered with JSL at that time, students were using JSL, and among the elderly Deaf who were educated before 1945, there are people who can still use JSL. Yoon made a significant contribution to the development of KSL by creating Korean fingerspellings for the Deaf and promoting them to the students. In 1979, the staff of the Seoul National School for the Deaf started collating KSL, and published the *Standard Dictionary of Korean Sign Language* with about 5,700 words in sign language in July 1982.

The “Standard Sign Language for Signed Korean,” standardized through the efforts of twenty-two researchers comprising experts recommended by NGOs and schools serving the Deaf nationwide, was introduced to the public in 1991 (Ministry of Education 1991). This standardization of signs was done by

combining signs and fingerspellings to conform with Korean grammar. It was implemented as a government-commissioned project in line with the initiative by the Ministry of Education to develop and promote the *Guidebook of Standard Korean Sign Language* so that there would be a standard sign language commonly used by the Korean Deaf.

The National Institute of the Korean Language carried out sign language standardization in conjunction with the Korean Association of the Deaf. During the first phase of this project (2000-2006), they published the *Dictionary of Korean Sign Language* and the *Sentence Dictionary of Korean Sign Language*. Then in April 2008, they produced five publications: *Sign Language for Daily Life 1* (1,264 standardized words), *Sign Language for Legal Situations* (570 words), *Sign Language for Everyday Transportation* (504 words for driver's license exams), *National Anthem and Pledge*, and *Songs in Sign Language* (including DVD), *Korean Sign Language 1* (including about 1,210 words and 1,000 sentences in standardized sign language).

The National Institute of the Korean Language took the initiative to standardize and harmonize naturally-developed sign languages which often differ so greatly that they are not mutually intelligible. The institute's work is referred to as Sign Language for Schools or Signed Korean. Se-eun Jhang (2000, 5-8) differentiates natural sign language and standardized sign language, and defines natural sign languages as sign languages that were naturally created, while defining standardized sign language as Signed Korean that intentionally modifies or adds components to natural sign language in order to conform to the grammatical structure of the Korean language.

Se-eun Jhang views sign language as a kind of natural language like vocal languages, and comments that early studies in sign language from the linguistic perspective can be found in Kim 1983, Suk 1989, and others. Suk 1989 was a full-scale study of sign language from a linguistic perspective, and many other studies were done around the time of his research. Se-eun Jhang's paper, "A Study of the Phonological Structure of Korean Sign Language" (1999) is another full-scale analysis from a linguistic perspective. In this paper, Se-eun Jhang explains syllable structure and phonological phenomena in KSL based on hand shape, movement, location, and orientation.

Many scholarly articles and master's or doctoral theses on KSL have been published since these studies. More recently, there have also been articles studying the linguistic features of non-manual signals in KSL (Youn 2003; D. Kim 2005). The Korean Society for Sign Language Linguistics held their ninth seminar on the theme, "Exploring the Identity of Korean Sign Language" on November 5, 2007, with the aim of "looking into the current identity of Korean Sign Language from the viewpoint of Deaf researchers and assessing the current standing of research on Korean Sign Language so as to seek the way forward for sign language research in the future."

### **Deaf churches and Deaf Christians in Korea**

When we look at the number of religious entities serving the Deaf community, the ones that undertake the most outstanding work are Christian (Protestant)

groups. As a matter of fact, among the many religious groups in Korea it was the Protestant churches that first started serving the Deaf. The first service that was attended by seven members of the “Department for Evangelizing the Deaf” of the Youngnak Church in October 1946 marked the foundation of the Youngnak Deaf Church ([www.yndeaf.com](http://www.yndeaf.com)), which celebrated its sixtieth anniversary on January 1, 2008. Many dedicated workers came out of this group, and many Deaf attended the commemorative service. There are many Deaf churches like the Youngnak Deaf Church nationwide. Across denominations, it is assumed that there are over seventy Deaf who undertake pastoral duties as ordained pastors, and over eighty church evangelists who either graduated from or are currently studying in theology programs in undergraduate and graduate schools. Protestant church denominations that have mission work among the Deaf include three Presbyterian denominations, Habshin Gaehyuk, Tonghab, and Habdong, Korean Methodist Church, Assemblies of God, Korean National District Church of the Nazarene, and international mission organizations like World Opportunity International based in the United States, and so on (Lee 2004).

On March 15 of 1999, Deaf churches and church groups serving the Deaf which belong to the above denominations united and formed an interconfessional organization called *Hankook Kidoggyo Chohgyeonhaphye* “Korean Christian Council for the Deaf.” Their efforts gave birth to a large-scale, united mission organization that serves over 100 Deaf churches and 5,000 Deaf Christians nationwide (Kang 2000). Its website ([www.kcdeaffa.or.kr](http://www.kcdeaffa.or.kr)) offers links to Deaf church organizations in Korea. There are also churches that have a department dedicated to serving the Deaf. During the service, pastors who know KSL translate and deliver Bible passages as needed. On the internet, we sometimes find video clips with portions of Bible passages that have been translated into sign language (e.g., Luke 24.45-49 can be found at [www.jangham.com](http://www.jangham.com)). There are Deaf Christians who attend churches serving the hearing because they prefer to hear sermons by a hearing pastor through sign language interpretation, but the majority prefer to listen to pastors who are Deaf themselves and conduct the service using sign language. It seems that the Deaf feel closer to a Deaf pastor because that pastor would have also gone through similar struggles growing up and lives with the same handicap. Such pastors are thus able to understand the suffering and pain of the Deaf, and set an efficient and appropriate pastoral goal for their ministry.

Yeong-dae Yu (2007) reports, “It is estimated that there are about 350 thousand Deaf in Korea. Because there are only 7,000 Christians among 350,000 (2%), the majority of the Deaf community are out of the reach of evangelical churches. There are about 150 Deaf churches around the country, and they are served by about 180 Deaf clergy.”

The majority of Deaf church pastors can understand written language to a certain extent. They are capable of reading and understanding the Bible translated into Korean, translating the Bible passage, and delivering it to the congregation during church services. It is easy to search the internet and find video clips of sermons given by Deaf church pastors. One such broadcast is HMBC (Human Mission Broadcasting, <http://www.hmbc.kr>).

HMBC offers an “online Christian sign language dictionary” to Christians with hearing disabilities and to those interested in learning sign language. This website offers not only the sign for the term “Lord’s Prayer” but also the signing of the prayer itself, and several thousands of items of sign language vocabulary for general occasions like extending greetings and words about family and nature. In addition, it offers “Standard Korean Christian Sign Language” signs, such as those for pastor, pastoral services, church, worship, prayer, singing hymns, giving praises, deacon, and so on. It also introduces people who contributed their efforts to creating the website, and states that the purpose of standardizing Christian Sign Language is to bring into conformity the different Christian Sign Language expressions used in the Deaf churches of each denomination. A “Committee of the Denominations’ Representatives for Standard Korean Christian Sign Language” was organized, and its members carried out these projects. It can thus be said that all the preparations for Bible translation into sign language have been made. It was touching to see video clips with translations of the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments. The website also has a bulletin board system where people can “request a word entry” so that the contributors can continue to update the database with the requested words. The people spearheading this project are professionals in the field of sign language. Lectures on sign language are given by sign language interpreter Young-ah Lee (Hallelujah Church). Professor Joon-woo Lee, who oversees Deaf education at the Namseoul Grace Church, and the Rev Chon-shik Sohn, pastor of the Youngnak Deaf Church, give direct supervision so as to ensure the accuracy of the sign language dictionary.

### Review of existing sign language translations of the Lord’s Prayer

The following is a comparative analysis showing a glossed transliteration of the Korean Revised Version (1) followed by glossed back-translations into written form of the first line of the Lord’s Prayer in three existing sign language translations, which are: (2) Young-hoe Ahn’s sign language translation (free translation using Natural Sign Language of the Deaf); (3) Human Mission Broadcasting’s video translation in Standard Sign Language; and (4) translation in Signed Korean.

A.

1) <i>hanŭl</i> heaven	<i>-e</i> in	<i>kyieosin</i> is	<i>uri</i> our	<i>Abeoji</i> Father	<i>-yeo</i> vocative suff.: looking at the heaven
2) <i>hanŭl</i> heaven	<i>kot</i> place	<i>keohada</i> live, is	<i>uri</i> our	<i>Abeoji</i> Father	
3) <i>hanŭl</i> heaven		<i>keohada</i> live, is	<i>uri</i> our	<i>Abeoji</i> Father	<i>-yeo</i> vocative suff. (fingerspelling of /-yeo/)
4) <i>hanŭl</i> heaven	<i>kot</i> place	<i>keohada</i> live, is	<i>uri</i> our	<i>Abeoji</i> Father	<i>-yeo</i> vocative suff. (fingerspelling of /-yeo/)

## B.

1) <i>irūm</i> name	<i>-i</i> (nom. suff.)	<i>keorookhi</i> holy	<i>yeokim</i> be thought	<i>-ūl</i> (obj. suff.)	<i>padūsio</i> receive	<i>-mio</i> and (connective suff.)
2) <i>irūm</i> name		<i>keorookhi</i> holy	<i>sengkak</i> thought		<i>kajida</i> have	
3) <i>irūm</i> name		<i>keorookhi</i> holy	<i>sengkak</i> thought		<i>kajida</i> have	<i>jusi-mio</i> give me, and
4) <i>irūm</i> name		<i>keorookhi</i> holy	<i>sengkak</i> thought		<i>kajida</i> have	<i>jusi-mio</i> give me, and

## C.

1) <i>nara</i> kingdom	<i>-i</i> (nom. suff.)	<i>imhaopsi</i> come			<i>-mio</i> (connective suff.)
2) <i>nara</i> kingdom		<i>osida</i> come	<i>juseyio</i> please give me		
3) <i>nara</i> kingdom		<i>osida</i> come	<i>juseyio</i> please give me		
4) <i>nara</i> kingdom		<i>osida</i> come	<i>juseyio</i> please give me		

## D.

1) <i>ttūt</i> will	<i>-i</i> (nom. suff.)	<i>hanūl</i> heaven	<i>-eseo</i> in	<i>irun</i> be done	<i>keot</i> it	<i>-gatchi</i> as
2) <i>ttūt</i> thought reason		<i>hanūl</i> heaven	<i>kot</i> place	<i>iruda</i> establish	<i>-keot</i> it	<i>cheoreom</i> as
3) <i>ttūt</i> thought reason		<i>hanūl</i> heaven	<i>kot</i> place	<i>iruda</i> establish	<i>-keot</i> it	<i>cheoreom</i> as
4) <i>ttūt</i> thought reason		<i>hanūl</i> heaven	<i>kot</i> place	<i>iruda</i> establish	<i>-keot</i> it	<i>cheoreom</i> as

## E.

1) <i>ttang</i> earth	<i>-eseodo</i> in			<i>irueojida</i> be done	
2) <i>ttang</i> earth	<i>kot</i> place			<i>iruda</i> establish	
3) <i>ttang</i> earth	<i>kot</i> place	<i>-do</i> also (described fingerspellings of /-do/)		<i>iruda</i> establish	<i>juseyio</i> please give me
4) <i>ttang</i> earth	<i>kot</i> place	<i>-do</i> also (described fingerspellings of /-do/)		<i>iruda</i> establish	

The video translation in Standard Sign Language available at Human Mission Broadcasting's home page seems awkward because it occasionally introduces fingerspelled Korean grammatical elements into the translation. For instance, the Deaf do not use vocative suffixes like /-yeo/ after *abeoji* "father" or semantic suffixes like /-do/ "also, too" when they converse in sign language. At schools, the hearing teachers often fingerspell /-do/ during classes. While fingerspellings were created to express the Korean language with signs, the Deaf who do not know the Korean language itself neither use nor understand them. If sign language is regarded as a means to express Korean, such expressions would be needed, but they cannot be considered as a mode of communication created from the perspective of the Deaf who do not know the language in the first place. The Signed Korean translation is a more faithful translation of the source text. However, for the Deaf who do not know Korean, it is difficult for them to understand sign language expressions that plainly transfer the Korean language into signs. This would be the same as delivering a message by using English prepositions with Korean vocabulary and expecting a non-English speaking listener to understand. The method of adding Korean suffixes to sign language vocabulary will clearly communicate the meaning to those who know Korean, but for the Deaf person who barely understands Korean or for those that do not know Korean at all, such a method would only interfere with their understanding and the delivery of the message.

For these reasons, the focus should be placed on the Deaf who do not know Korean rather than on using signs or fingerspellings invented to faithfully express the Korean language, and also on using expressions commonly used by the Deaf when translating the Bible into sign language.

In Korean, suffixes function to define more precisely the meaning boundaries of the words preceding them, but the KSL used by the Deaf does not have such suffixes. Their sign language, like Chinese, expresses meaning with words themselves and the way they are ordered. Various suffixes like /-ida/ and /-ipnida/ used in Korean can be expressed with sign language vocabulary, but the Deaf who do not know Korean do not use such suffixes in their communication.

Grammatically speaking, conjunctive suffixes like /-myeo/ and /-ko/ carry the meaning of "also" and "again," but when they are imported into sign language, as in B (3) and (4) and E (3) and (4), the result is awkward and unnatural. In KSL, the order of the words implies the connection of meaning, so the idea of "and, also" is already expressed without any need for the intrusive Korean suffix. That is why Young-hoe Ahn's translation does not include a signed expression for suffixes. For the Deaf who know no sound, consonant or vowel, using Signed Korean is not the right method. Rather, the translator must understand sign language as a unique language. KSL is not a supplementary means to express Korean, but a language completely different from Korean with its own unique modes of communication.

A problem more fundamental than the issue of expressions is vocabulary. The situation would probably be similar across countries, but there is a limited vocabulary in KSL in that it does not have corresponding words for special terms or for words that are not in general use. Because of this, it raises the same kind

of problems we experience when translating the Bible into other languages that have a limited vocabulary. To take the example of translating the Psalms, the translators attempted to translate the phrase *Yeohowa-nŭn na-eui mokja-sini* (The LORD is my shepherd) as

<i>Yeohowa-nŭn</i>	<i>na-eui</i>	<i>yang</i>	<i>kiu-nŭn</i>	<i>saram-igie</i>
LORD is	my	sheep	raises	person because

that is, “Because the LORD is a person who raises my sheep.” The translator has attempted to explain what a shepherd is because there is no word for *mokja* (shepherd) in KSL (Ahn 2007, 107), but in doing so has seriously distorted the meaning. In addition to furthering agreement on important Christian terminology in the standard sign language, Bible translation into KSL will also give rise to many instances that will require development of new sign language expressions for many generally-used Korean terms that are thus far nonexistent in sign language, possibly by defining them from the available pool of sign language vocabulary. In such cases, the constant, important challenge would be to come up with an appropriate translation that does not deviate from the original texts and is yet fully comprehensible to the Deaf. In the face of such a challenge, it would be necessary to seek to achieve dynamic equivalence in the translation as far as possible.

### Conclusion

There are very few among the Korean Deaf who are capable of reading the Bible in the written language. The reality is that the majority of the Korean Deaf are still outside the realm of written language, and thus lie outside the realm of the gospel. The need for a sign language Bible for the Deaf has hardly been brought to the attention of the hearing Christian communities, for the following reasons:

1) Sign language has been understood as a supplementary means to communicate the Korean language. In other words, KSL has not been regarded as a unique, minority language used by a certain group of people. Expressing the Korean Bible with KSL was merely considered as an issue of delivery, and not of translation.

2) When we talk of Bible translation, our primary perception connects it to a printed Bible, and sign language, by nature, is a language that is difficult to record in book form. We now have an infrastructure that provides high-speed internet connections, and particularly in Korea, the percentage of people with an internet connection is very high. So if the Bible can be translated visually into KSL, and distributed through the internet or on CDs, many will gain easy access to the Bible.

3) Living standards of the Christian Deaf are generally low and there is almost no church serving the Deaf that is financially self-supporting. Because of this, churches serving the Deaf lack resources to plan to translate the Bible on their own. But with the necessary support, we can say that the ground for Bible translation is fully fertile.



If the Bible is translated into sign language, it will greatly contribute to establishing a standard KSL and to its continuing development. Above anything else, spreading the gospel would be greatly accelerated. Everybody should be able to think of sign language as one of the minority languages rather than a language for the hearing disabled, or a language to shy away from. The Bible should be translated into KSL as quickly as possible not only for the 350,000 Deaf in the country but also for the renewal of all of us living in the same society with them. Sign language is not supplementary to the Korean language. Rather, it is a unique language, used by a minority group in our society, which is of equal importance to the Korean language. When the Bible is translated into sign language, it will free the Deaf from the insult, humiliation, prejudice, discrimination, anger, and despair they have had to bear because of their inability to hear, and also from the invisible barriers blocking their access to the gospel.

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