Korean is an extremely phono-symbolic language, whereby the sounds themselves carry meaning. One of the biggest challenges when learning Korean is to understand and fully utilize this subtle characteristic of the language, yet most non-native speakers will acknowledge the absolute importance of mastering this skill. For example, becoming proficient in the use of ideophones is vital for effective communication since a breadth of meanings and emotions are condensed into one word or phrase.

Ideophones, although found in most languages, are particularly abundant in Korean; and unlike in most languages, in Korean, ideophones are even commonly used in more formal contexts, such as Newspaper headlines.

In contrast, ideophones can be easily found in South Korean newspapers, in both the headlines and throughout the article itself. This is not a matter of journalistic quality. Korea’s main newspapers – Kukmin Ilbo, Segye Ilbo, Maedal Gyeongje, JoongAng Ilbo or Chosun Ilbo, among others – publish daily articles in which ideophones play a relevant role, especially when they are used in the headline. The examples provided here are only a few of the wide uses of these sound-symbolic terms in Korean journalism, more specifically, in newspaper headlines.

Kukmin Ilbo recently published the article “Bukjeok dondeok buksugun… ‘Jiyeokgamnyeom jaehwaksan uryeo’…” (Fig.1) This headline literally means: “Even if you stab it a hundred times or heat it up to 90 degrees, it’s still ‘this’…” Not only is the ideophone ‘meoljjeong’ (말썽) used, it is also emphasized with quotation marks. This polysemic word refers to something that remains intact, unscathed, sane or sober. Furthermore, it evokes in the reader a particular feeling of strength, lucidity, power or robustness, which seems unstoppable or invincible. Thus, this ideophone conveys the sense that the Coronavirus remains unscathed and seems invincible. Ideophones have an extraordinary descriptive power that allows receivers to develop a deep emotional understanding of the message the headline is conveying.

The main objective of newspaper headlines is to attract and have an impact on the readers. They must be short and simple, yet attractive and impressive. Ideophones are equipped with all these features: they are short yet splendidly descriptive, and impressive in their ability to evoke emotional reactions and impressions. JoongAng Ilbo published an article on the recent US elections with the headline, “Bundanwi eopchirakdwichirak Bukjeokdo, nambu seonbelteu daebubun dwijeotda” (بوندانية بايدنات بوكجوك، نامبو سونبلت الأولى دويبدو) (Fig.2) literally translated as: “Up and down minute by minute … Trump flips most of the Southern Sun Belt”. The ideophone eopchirakdwichirak (업처라كد최하락) has two contrasting, yet parallel meanings. It describes a person who tosses and turns in bed, unable to sleep, and it also depicts a dingdong, a race, a close game or a fight at close quarters. It expresses a continuous change of positions: up and down. At the beginning of counting the votes for US presidential elections, it was difficult to predict the winner, since the results changed every single minute. The one word, eopchirakdwichirak (업처라كد최하락), perfectly defines both the flip-flapping and the struggle.

Chosun Ilbo issued the article “Baidoeyeon dojagosumatesa? Han-bing han-bing” (Fig.3) which translates as: “What if you are surprised? Hand-shake hand-shake”. For example, when energetically removing a face mask. This is not a matter of journalistic quality. There are some cases where two ideophone are used in one headline. For example, Segye Ilbo issued the article “Hwik ‘hwik’… jiyeokgamnyeom jaehwaksan uryeo” (희wik ‘희wik’… 지예오감네요자이희막선유리요) (Fig.4) translated as: “The tourist spots crowded, the masks are ‘off’… Regional infection proliferation is being worried about”. Again, the ideophone is enclosed by quotation marks to attract the reader’s attention and motivate them to keep reading.

Despite the marginal use of ideophones in formal contexts in European languages, particularly in comparison with Asian or African languages, these illustrative words are widely used in all registers of the language in Korea, including in the official arena of newspapers. Ideophones are commonly used in Korean journalism to draw attention to headlines and connect with the reader emotionally. This highlights the significant role of these words in Korean, and the necessity to properly introduce ideophones when teaching Korean as a foreign language.