The purpose of this book is both to provide a systematic overview of the mechanics of the Korean verbal system and to provide paradigmatic reference charts for the conjugation of both regular verbs and of all classes of irregular verbs.

The conjugation of Korean verbs is a particularly complicated affair. Complete verbal paradigms (showing all conjugations and other verbal forms such as participles that can be derived from a verbal infinitive) for most other languages can be compiled with relative ease, and the number of entries on such charts can be determined with a fair amount of exactitude.

Sanskrit is perhaps the most highly inflected Indo-European language, and complete charts of its verbs showing all historical forms would probably contain in the area of 200 different entries. Typical Latin verbs have 133 possible forms, and the modern Romance languages are only marginally less complicated: Catalan verbs have 109 different forms; Spanish and Portuguese 105; Italian 92; French 90. The above numbers include the same endings when used for different persons or tenses, and in the Teutonic languages indication of the agent by means of a pronoun rather than by verb endings is even more common, so that while a traditional chart of German verbs shows 85 “entries,” the number of different conjugated forms is barely half that figure. Dutch, English, and the continental Scandinavian tongues have carried this process even further, so that while it is still traditional to show six entries for each tense (1st, 2nd, and 3rd persons, singular and plural), the number of actual conjugations plus participles and other verbal derivations for these languages is only in the range of 30 different forms. The Slavic languages have similar figures (Russian 27, Polish 34). The number of verbal conjugations and similar derived forms in languages from other families is in the same basic range. For instance, Arabic, a Semitic language generally regarded as complex for foreign learners, has some 114 variant conjugated forms on the average verbal infinitive.

In contrast, a comprehensive paradigmatic chart of a Korean verb would have to show well over 1000 different forms, though in point of fact the agglutinating structure of the Korean language means that the number of different derived forms that can be obtained from any given verb is practically if not literally and truly infinite, and so it is impossible to determine the exact number of endings and thus construct a truly complete chart of verbal forms for this language. The charts in this book are therefore limited to showing enough of the forms that are likely to be encountered, either in speech or in print, that a careful study of the mechanics of their formation will allow one to deduce the meaning of other possible permutations. There are two basic kinds of “verbs” in Korean; our charts for one show 615 endings, for the other, 495. These are those that have been judged “most common,” though in reading any Korean literary text, one is likely to come across a myriad of other endings that could not be included in these paradigms.

The Korean verbal system is so complicated because of a number of different factors. First of all, the phenomenon of “speech levels” requires the use of different conjugations (and sometimes different verbs entirely) depending on the context, the age, and the social relations of the speech partners or subject matter. Secondly there is what may be called the “grammaticalization of nuances” that is characteristic of the Korean language. Many emotional nuances, such as surprise or irritation, which are expressed through tone of voice or through use of interjections
and other words in Western languages, are expressed directly through a plethora of alternate verb endings in Korean. Thirdly, as mentioned above, the agglutinating nature of the language allows grammatical morphemes to be combined almost ad infinitum. Fourthly, contractions and elisions that result in an apparently different verbal form are very common in both colloquial and formal written Korean. Fifthly, the current political division of the country has resulted in two different standardized forms, and the language is everywhere in a rapid state of development and flux. Sixthly and finally, many dialectical variations can still be heard in various regions of the country and found reflected in works of literature.