

Learn Korean Ep. 11: This, That, and That

There's one way to say "this" in Korean ("이"), but two ways to say "that" ("그" and "저"). Let's go over each of them.

이 This

"이" is used when talking about something that's close to the speaker, just like in English.

이게 내 가방이고, 그게 네 가방이야.

"This is my bag, and that is your bag."

"게" is a casual way to write and say "것이."

"네" is "너의," and is pronounced "니" in casual speech.

"이" can be used for physical things that are close to the speaker, or for things mentally close to the speaker, such as ideas or concepts, also just like in English.

이 생각에 대해 어떻게 생각하세요?

"What do you think about this idea?"

그 That

"그" is used when talking about something that's close to the listener.

이게 내 가방이고 그게 네 가방이야.

"This is my bag, and that is your bag."

In this sentence, "그게" ("your bag") must be close to the listener.

그 방법이 좋은 것 같아요.

"I think that method is good."

Here, "method" is used with "그," meaning it must be close to the listener; in this case, it's something that is mentally close – a concept. It was probably recently presented by the listener to the speaker of this sentence.

저 That

“저” is used when talking about something that’s not close to either the speaker or the listener (far from both listener and speaker).

저 집이 아주 커요.

“That house is very big.”

“저” is used here because the house must be far from both the speaker and the listener. If the house were directly next to the listener, the speaker would have used “그.”

저게 무슨 좋은 아이디어라고?

“What kind of good idea is that?”

This sentence could be said while watching television with a friend and a program is playing that is talking about “an amazing idea.”

“저” would be used here because the thing, the idea presented in the program, is far from both the speaker and the listener. Neither the speaker nor the listener had the idea themselves.

Overview

Before we go any further, let’s summarize how to use “이,” “그” and “저.”

“이” = “This”

- Used for things or concepts close to the speaker.

“그” = “That”

- Used for things or concepts close to the listener.

“저” = “That”

- Used for things or concepts far from both the speaker and the listener.

Advanced “그” vs. “저”

“그” and “저” can, in certain cases, seem to overlap in usage. **This section is not for people who are learning about “이,” “그” and “저” for the first time**, as it could make things confusing – I’ve written this part in purple to distinguish it as difficult material. Read this section only after you’ve got a strong grasp of the basic concept first – these are **advanced concepts**.

그분은 정말 좋은 선생님이셨어요.

“That person was a really good teacher.”

This sentence means that the teacher must be close to the listener somehow, right?

Well, not here. Because “그” has one more usage.

“그” is also used for things (or people) that are **physically far** from both the listener and the speaker, but only **if the listener and speaker aren’t looking at it** when talking about it.

A: 저 집이 아주 커요.

“That house is very big.”

“저” is used because the house the speaker is talking about is far from both the speaker and the listener. A reply might look like this:

B: 네, 저 집이 아주 커요.

“Yes, that house is very big.”

The listener still replied with “저” because the house is still far away. However, **if the listener and speaker began to walk away from the house and stopped looking at it**, the next sentence could look like this:

A: 그 집에서 누가 살고 있을까?

“Do you think someone might be living in that house?”

Notice that the speaker switched to “그,” because even though the house is still far away from both of them, it’s no longer something they’re looking at. **If they were to stop and turn to face to house again, they would return to using “저.”**

“저” also has another usage; “저” can be used for **things far from both the speaker and the listener**, and **that the speaker knows but does not think the listener knows what he or she is referring to**.

A: 저 사람을 혹시 본 적이 있어요?

“Have you seen that person before by chance?”

“혹시” means “by (any) chance.”

Here, the speaker knows who “that person” is, but doesn’t think the listener does. Once the speaker thinks that the listener knows “that person,” the speaker will change to “그.”

B: 아니요. 저 사람을 본 적이 없어요.

“No. I have never seen that person before.”

The listener (B) probably looks at the person, realizes he or she does not know them, and replies. At this point, the speaker of the first sentence (A) now knows that the listener (B) knows who he or she is referring to (even though the listener does not know who the person is, the listener is aware of who the speaker was referring to).

A: 그 사람이 학생일까요?

"Could that person be a student?"

It changed to "그," because the speaker (A) now knows that the listener (B) at least knows who he or she is referring to.

Although this makes things more complicated, the original meanings of "그" and "저" have not changed at all. Talking about a house that is far away using "저" means **the concept of the house** is also far away from both the listener and the speaker – talking about that same house using "그" means the concept of that house is now close to the listener. The concept's location can change mentally depending on the situation (depending on whether the speaker is assuming the concept of the house is **far** or **close** to the listener).

Additional Uses of "그" and "저"

Here are a few additional uses of "이" and "저" that can be used by **any level**.

"이" can also be used for insulting someone, the same way we might start a sentence with "You~" in English – "You idiot!" In Korean, this would be "이 바보야!" Be careful when using "이" in this way, as it can sound rude, like in English, when used in the wrong situations.

"그" can also be used as an informal way to say "him" in Korean, and "그녀" as an informal way to say "her." You'll see this used in **textbooks** often, but it is not commonly used in speech because it can sound rude.

Don't worry if you skipped over the advanced parts in purple – they're for later on anyway, and by the time you want to learn them, you may already know them! The most important parts to take away from this lesson are in the Overview section. I hope this lesson has helped you to better understand how "이," "그" and "저" are used.

