

Learn Korean Ep. 113: (으)나 마나 and 봤자 “No Matter”

Both (으)나 마나 and 봤자 are intermediate level grammar forms, and are not recommended for beginners. They have similar translations, but work differently and have different rules.

Action Verb Stem + (으)나 마나

This grammar form is used to show that the result of something (an action verb) does not matter – no matter what you do.

Some possible ways to translate it are “It would be a waste of time (to do verb),” or “You shouldn’t bother (doing verb),” or “It’s no use (to do verb).”

To use this form, take an action verb stem and attach 으나 마나 if it ends in a consonant, or attach 나 마나 if it ends in a vowel.

For example, 하다 would become 하나 마나, and 읽다 would become 읽으나 마나.

Note that this form is only used with positive action verbs – not with negative verbs (such as ones using 안 or 지 않다). This is because the meaning would sound awkward; therefore, 안 하나 마나 would be like saying “It would be a waste of time to not do...” or “It’s no use to not do...” and would be incorrect.

Here are some examples.

어차피 제가 그 파티에 가나 마나 아무도 모를 거예요.

Either way, even if I go to the party nobody will know.

This example means that even if I go, nobody will know whether I went or not. Therefore, I shouldn’t bother going, or it’s no use going, or it would just be a waste of time for me to go to the party.

그 책은 읽으나 마나 도움이 안 될 거예요.

Even if you read that book it won’t be helpful.

The most common way to use this form is when followed by 이다 ("to be") – here as 예요. It does not need to be followed by a complete sentence. When used in this way, it has the meaning of "Don't bother doing (verb)," or "It's no use to do (verb)," or "There's no point to do (verb)." The next grammar form 봤자 can also be used in this way, although it is less common than with (으)나 마나.

그렇게 하면 하나 마나예요.

It doesn't make a difference if you do that.

이런 날씨에는 우산을 쓰나 마나예요.

It's no use using an umbrella in this weather.

You might say this sentence if it's raining so much that using an umbrella wouldn't make any difference – "it's useless" to use an umbrella.

Verb Stem + (아/어/etc.) 봤자

This grammar form is also used to show that something does not matter. And it's used to say that something is a waste of time, no matter what you do or no matter what something is (when used with descriptive verbs).

To use this form, take a verb (action verb or descriptive verb) and conjugate it to the 요 form as usual – then attach 봤자.

For example, 하다 would become 해 봤자, and 읽다 would become 읽어 봤자.

This form originally comes from the regular 보다 grammar form (meaning "to try," or "to do [and see how it goes]"). Therefore, 해 봤자 literally means "Even if you do...," and 읽어 봤자 literally means "Even if you read...."

For another example, let's use the descriptive verb 맛있다 ("to be delicious") – 맛있어 봤자 literally means "Even if it's delicious...."

Here are some examples.

지금 가 봤자 늦었을 거예요.

Even if you go now, you'll be late.

Note that 늦다 ("to be late") is often conjugated in the past tense to mean that you're late for something – here it's 늦었을 거예요 (literally, "You will/would have been late.") and not 늦을 거예요.

In addition, the 봤자 form is commonly used together with the 것이다 future tense form. This usage is for assuming that something would have happened, and means "Even if I had done (verb), something will happen."

제 방은 정리를 해 봤자 금방 더러워질 거예요.

Even if I organize my room, it'll get dirty right away.

비싼 옷을 입어봤자 티도 안 나요.

It doesn't make a difference if I wear expensive clothes, because nobody can tell.

티(가) 나다 means that something is apparent or obvious, or that something is easy to notice, or easy to tell.

감자가 맛있어 봤자 얼마나 맛있겠어요?

Even if the potatoes taste good, I mean, how good could they be?

Conclusion

If you have any questions, feel free to send me a message through my web site or on YouTube. Good luck in your studies!

