

Learn Korean Ep. 13: “Whether (or not)” and “If”

Let’s go over how to say “Whether” and “If.” An example in English would be “I don’t know whether he’ll be there,” or “I don’t know if he’ll be there.” In this way, it’s used for talking about things that are unknown.

The rules will change a little bit, depending on whether we’re working with **Action Verbs** or **Descriptive Verbs**.

What is an Action Verb? Action Verbs are verbs that **do** things. “먹다,” “to eat,” and “자다,” “to sleep,” are two examples. “있다,” “to exist,” and “없다,” “to not exist,” are also Action Verbs.

What is a Descriptive Verb? Descriptive Verbs are verbs that **describe** things. “친절하다,” “to be friendly,” and “좋다,” “to be good,” are two examples. “이다,” “to be,” and “아니다,” “to not be,” are also Descriptive Verbs.

Using Action Verbs

Here are the rules for conjugating “Whether (or not)” and “If” when using an Action Verb.

Present Tense:

- ❖ verb stem + 는지

Past Tense:

- ❖ verb stem + 어/아/etc + 는지
 - The middle part (어/아/etc) is conjugated the same as when making the “요” form (see Episode 2).

Future Tense:

- ❖ verb stem + (ㄹ/을)지
 - “을지” is used following a consonant, and “ㄹ지” is used following a vowel.

Using Descriptive Verbs

Here are the rules for conjugating "Whether (or not)" and "If" when using a Descriptive Verb. The only difference here from Action Verbs is when using the present tense.

Present Tense:

- ❖ verb stem + (ㄴ/은)지
 - "은지" follows a consonant, and "ㄴ지" follows a vowel.

Past Tense:

- ❖ verb stem + 어/아/etc + 쓰는지
 - *This is the same as for Action Verbs.*

Future Tense:

- ❖ verb stem + (ㄹ/을)지
 - *This is the same as for Action Verbs.*

When using Descriptive Verbs, many of the rules that apply when conjugating the "요" form also apply here. For example, take the verb "춡다," "to be cold." As usual, remove the "ㅂ" and add "우," just like when making the "요" form. Let's take a look in detail:

Using the Descriptive Verb "춡다:"

- Remove the "다" ⇨ "춡"
- Conjugate as you would for "요" form:
 - The verb ends with "ㅂ," so remove the "ㅂ" and add "우" ⇨ "춡우"
- Now add any tense you'd like....
 - Present: "춡운지"
 - Past: "춡웠는지"
 - Future: "춡울지"

Descriptive Verbs require this additional step only in verbs with exceptions (such as verbs ending in "ㅂ"); Action Verbs do not. I highly recommend going over Episode 2 to make sure that you have a good grasp on standard "요" form conjugation.

Example Sentences

저는 그가 거기에 **있을지** 몰라요.

"I don't know whether he will be there." or "I don't know if he will be there."

This sentence uses an Action Verb in the future tense.

저는 그가 거기에 **있는지** 몰라요.

"I don't know whether/if he is there."

This sentence uses an Action Verb in the present tense.

저는 그가 거기에 **있었는지** 몰라요.

"I don't know whether/if he was there."

This sentence uses an Action Verb in the past tense.

내일도 오늘처럼 **더울지** 궁금해요.

"I'm wondering whether/if tomorrow will be hot too like today."

This sentence uses a Descriptive Verb in the future tense.

지금 철수가 **바쁜지** 알려주세요.

"Please tell me whether/if Cheolsoo is busy now."

This sentence uses a Descriptive Verb in the present tense.

어제 그 시험이 **어려웠는지** 알고 싶어요.

"I want to know whether/if that test yesterday was difficult."

This sentence uses a Descriptive Verb in the past tense.

Whether or not

By adding one more form, you can also say "whether **or not**." This form is an intermediate concept, so I've highlighted it in purple. Please skip this section if this is your first time learning about the concepts above. Here's an example:

저는 그가 거기에 있을지 **없을지** 몰라요.

"I don't know whether or not he will be there."

This sentence literally means "*I don't know whether he will be there or whether he will not be there.*"

Here's how to conjugate it:

For Action Verbs, take the negative form of the verb (see Episode 7) and conjugate it the same way as shown above. The negative form of the verb can just be the verbs own opposite (e.g. "좋아하다" ⇨ "싫어하다," or "있다" ⇨ "없다"), or it can be the verb conjugated into a negative form (e.g. "좋아하다" ⇨ "좋아하지 않다") – you are free to choose either one. You can also add "아니면" (before the negative form of the verb) to separate the sentence into two parts, and make it clearer and easier to understand.

동생이 올지 **안 올지** 궁금하지 않아요?

"Aren't you curious whether or not your younger sibling will come?"

그가 K 팝을 좋아하는지 **안 좋아하는지** 몰라요.

"I don't know whether or not he likes K-pop."

This sentence literally means, "I don't know whether he likes K-pop or doesn't like it."

그가 K 팝을 좋아하는지 **싫어하는지** 몰라요.

"I don't know whether he likes K-pop or hates it."

For Descriptive Verbs, take the negative form of the verb and conjugate it the same way as shown above. You can also add "아니면" to separate the sentence into two parts, and make it clearer and easier to understand. But you have one more option – you can use the verb "아니다," "to not be," instead of the entire conjugation.

"아니다:"

- Present: 아닌지
- Future: 아닐지
- Past: 아니었는지

You can only use "아니다" in this way ("whether *or not*") with Descriptive Verbs.

내일도 오늘처럼 더울지 **아니면 안 더울지** 궁금해요.

"I'm wondering if tomorrow will be hot too like today or not."

지금 철수가 바쁜지 **아닌지** 알려주세요.

"Please tell me whether or not Cheolsoo is busy now."

어제 그 시험이 어려웠는지 **아니었는지** 알고 싶어요.

"I want to know if that test yesterday was difficult or not."

Additional Usage

This section is also in purple, as it is an intermediate concept. Please skip this section as well if you skipped the previous purple section.

서울이 이렇게 추울지 알고 있었어요?

"Did you know that Seoul would be this cold?"

Notice that the above section has no "whether" or "if." This is because this form has a deeper meaning than just "whether" and "if" – **it's used for talking about things that are unknown**. It's not a new concept though; using "whether" and "if" already signifies in English that we're talking about something that is unknown. "I don't know whether he likes K-pop" expresses that the speaker does not know something – "whether he likes K-pop" is unknown. This form is therefore also used with words such as *what, who, how, why, where, when, and how much*.

나는 뭐가 가장 쉬운지 알고 싶어요.

"I want to know what is the easiest."

누가 제일 똑똑했는지 맞춰 보세요.

"Try to guess who is the smartest."

나는 네가 어떻게 했는지 궁금해.

"I'm curious how you did it."

그가 왜 그렇게 했는지 이해할 수 없어요.

"I can't understand why he did that."

어디서부터 시작해야 할지 고민이다.

"I'm worried where I'll have to start from."

세일 기간이 언제까지인지 아세요?

"Do you know when the sale period is until?"

당신이 한국말을 어디서 배우고 있는지 가르쳐 주세요.

"Please teach me where you are learning Korean."

This form has a 3rd usage as well, for saying "How to~." I won't cover it here, because there are a few more ways to say "How to~," but here's an example using this form.

나는 김치를 어떻게 만드는지 알고 있다.

"I know how to make kimchi."

Conclusion

Don't stress about the parts in purple – in fact, skip them if you're not yet confident with the basics. And remember that practicing what you learn is the best way to get better at Korean, so keep practicing and keep studying. Good luck in your studies!

