

Learn Korean Ep. 14: "When" and "If"

There are two common ways to express "when" and "if" in Korean. Let's go over each of them.

verb stem + (으)면

Take the verb stem (the verb with the "다" removed), and add "으면" if it ends in a consonant, or "면" if it ends in a vowel.

"결혼하다" would become "결혼하면."

"먹다" would become "먹으면."

"비싸다" would become "비싸면."

"어렵다" would become "어려우면."

- Remember that certain Descriptive Verbs (such as ones that end in "ㅁ") have special conjugation rules (see Episode 2 for more information).

verb stem + (ㄹ/을) 때

Take the verb stem and add "을 때" if it ends in a consonant, or "ㄹ 때" if it ends in a vowel.

"결혼하다" would become "결혼할 때."

"먹다" would become "먹을 때"

"비싸다" would become "바쌀 때"

"어렵다" would become "어려울 때"

Differences

Let's go over the differences between these two forms.

verb stem + (으)면

In English, "when" and "if" can often be interchanged.

시간이 있으면 같이 밥 먹자.

"If you have time, let's eat together."

This sentence could also be translated as, "When you have time, let's eat together."

This form is used for talking about a **hypothetical situation**. Therefore, it can sometimes translate as "when" and other times as "if."

오늘 비가 오면 밖에 나가지 말자.

"If it rains today, let's not go outside."

"밖(에)" means "outside," and "나가다" means "to go out."

빨리 안 하면 죽어!

"If you don't do it right away, you're dead!"

부모님에게 친절하면 생일 선물을 많이 받을 거예요.

"If you are nice to your parents, you will get many birthday presents."

"친절하다" means "to be nice/kind."

verb stem + (ㄹ/을) 때

The word "때" literally means "time," such as "the time when." Two examples are the sentences, "The last time when I went to school," or "The time I got married." **This form is only used when you want to refer to the actual event in time.**

저는 학교에 있을 때 공부해요.

"When I am at school, I study." Or you could say, "The times when I'm at school, I study."

고양이가 밥 먹을 때 시끄러워요.

"The cat is noisy when it eats." Or you could say, "The times when the cat eats, it's noisy."

"시끄럽다" means "to be noisy/loud."

Comparison

See if you can guess which of these two sentences is more correct. *I'll give you a hint, they're both grammatically correct, but one of them sounds rather silly.*

A. 결혼하면 요리를 많이 할 거예요.

"When we get married, we're going to cook a lot!"

B. 결혼할 때 요리를 많이 할 거예요.

"When we get married, we're going to cook a lot!"

Take a moment to think about what each of these examples mean literally, using the notes we went over. When you've decided, read the next line.

Did you choose A? That's correct. But what if you guessed B? I said that both sentences are grammatically correct, so let's take a look at what each of them mean.

A. 결혼하면 요리를 많이 할 거예요.

"When we get married, we're going to cook a lot!"

This sentence uses the "verb stem + (으)면" form, so it means that this is a **hypothetical situation**. *"If we get married, or when we get married ("in the event that we get married"), we're going to cook a lot!"*

B. 결혼할 때 요리를 많이 할 거예요.

"When we get married, we're going to cook a lot!"

This sentence uses the "verb stem + (ㄹ/을) 때" form, so it means that this is **referring to the actual event in time**. *"At the time when we get married (in the chapel, at the very moment when we become husband and wife, while I'm in my tuxedo, and you're in your dress), we are going to cook a lot!"* Although **B** is grammatically correct, it sounds silly.

Example Sentences with "때"

Here are some examples of correct ways to use the "verb stem + (ㄹ/을) 때" form.

숙제를 할 때 집중해야 돼요.

"You need to focus when you do homework."

"집중하다" means "to concentrate/focus."

내가 어렸을 때 한국말을 못 했어.

"When I was young, I couldn't speak Korean."

"어리다" means "to be young (as a child)," and "어렸다" is the past tense of "어리다."

운전할 때 핸드폰을 쓰지 마세요.

"Don't use your cell phone when you're driving."

"운전하다" means "to drive (a vehicle)," and "핸드폰" means "cell phone" (literally "hand phone").

Conclusion

Once you understand the differences between these two forms, start using them as much as possible. Practicing what you learn is the best way to get better at Korean, so keep practicing and keep studying. Good luck in your studies!

