Learn Korean Ep. 9: Topic and Subject Markers

Topic Markers (은/는) and Subject Markers (이/가) have been a large source of confusion among Korean learners; even most native Koreans can't explain how to use them, although they are able to use them perfectly. The Topic Marker and Subject Marker are actually quite simple, and their usages and meanings are well defined; much of the confusion revolving around these comes from Korean lessons that are lacking in explanation, or that gloss over important details. Let's clear some things up.

Topic Marker

The Topic Marker is either "은" if it comes after a consonant, or "는" if it comes after a vowel, and is **placed directly after a new topic**. If I'm talking about my best friend ("my best friend" will be the topic of my sentence for this example), and I want to say "My best friend went to the store," I'd place the Topic Marker directly after "my best friend."

"내 가장 친한 친구**는** 가게에 갔다."
"My best friend went to the store."
Remember that "나의" often shortens to "내."

Since the topic of the sentence has now been established as being "my best friend," anything else I say afterward will also be in reference to the topic ("my best friend"). If I wanted to then say in the next sentence, "Yesterday my best friend bought an apple," I wouldn't have to restate the topic – I wouldn't have to add "my best friend" in this next sentence – since we already know what the topic is. This is the function of the Topic Marker.

"어제 사과를 샀다."
"Yesterday (my best friend) bought an apple."
We don't need to restate "my best friend," since it was already established as the topic in the previous sentence.

I should note that saying "My best friend went to the store," and "Yesterday he bought an apple," isn't how anyone would naturally speak in a regular situation in Korean (or in

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English), but this example does show how the topic marker basically works. **The Topic Marker sets the topic of what you're talking about**.

You can think of the Topic Marker as meaning something like **"As for~,"** as in the example "As for me (*I don't know about you guys, but*), I like kimchi." It sets up a whole new topic for the sentence, changing whatever may have been there before.

"내 가장 친한 친구**는** 가게에 갔다."
"<u>As for</u> my best friend, he went to the store."

저**는** 김치를 좋아해요.
"I like kimchi." or "<u>As for</u> me, I like kimchi."

Subject Marker

The Subject Marker is either "이" if it comes after a consonant, or "가" if it comes after a vowel, and is also **placed directly after a subject**. By "subject," I mean the same "subject" that we learn in English class.

"I kicked the ball."
Can you find the subject in this sentence? Can you remember that kid in elementary school who could twirl a pencil around his thumb? (The subject here is "I," by the way.)

In English, the subject is simply whatever, or whoever is performing an action, or being described in the sentence; the Subject Marker in Korean works the same way. When you use the Subject Marker you are specifying the actual subject of a sentence. This is different from the Topic Marker because **while the Topic Marker sets aside a new topic for the sentence (remember "As for~"), the Subject Marker simply marks the subject, and does not change any previous topic that the speaker may have been talking about**.

철수**가** 점심을 먹었어요?
"Did Cheolsoo eat lunch?"
"점심(을) 먹다" means "to eat lunch."

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For this sentence, the topic remains the same – whatever the topic originally may have been. Before this sentence, the speakers may have been discussing their favorite movie, and could return to talking about movies even after this sentence is asked and answered.

If you were to ask this question using the Topic Marker, the overall meaning would change.

철수**는** 점심을 먹었어요?
"How about Cheolsoo – did he eat lunch?" or "As for Cheolsoo, did he eat lunch?"
You can see how the Topic Marker changes the topic of the sentence. Even if the topic before were 'favorite movies', the speaker has now changed the topic to be about Cheolsoo.

The Subject Marker only points out the subject of a sentence, and doesn't change the topic to a new one. Because of this, **the Subject Marker is also used when answering questions**.

뭐**가** 가장 좋을 것 같아요?
"What do you think would be best?"

이**게** 가장 좋을 것 같아요.
"I think this would be best."
"게" is a casual, shorter way to say "것이."
This sentence would not be answered using the Topic Marker, because it would sound awkward; using the Topic Marker would sound like you were changing the question.

Here's an example of what it would be like to use the Topic Marker in a place where the Subject Marker should be used instead:

이**건** 가장 좋을 것 같아요.
"As for this, I think it would be best."
"건" is a casual, shorter way to say "것은."
This sentence would only be said if you were comparing "this" to something else, since using the Topic Marker here would be introducing a different topic. You *could* say "As for this, it would be best," if you are planning on talking about "this" afterward, and you felt the listener would not mind if you changed the topic.

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뭐**가** 그렇게 웃겨요?

"What's so funny?"

"웃기다" means "to be ridiculous," or "to be (laughably) funny."

To answer the above sentence, you can fill in the blank below.

"_____(**이/가**) 웃겨요."

If you wanted to put a person here as the subject, just know that calling a person "웃기다" is rude. A better way to call someone "funny" in a positive way is with the verb "재미(가) 있다," which means "to be humorous" or "to be entertaining."

"철수**가** 재미 있어요."

"Cheolsoo is humorous (funny)."

Topic and Subject Marker... together

Let's go over some examples using the Topic Marker and the Subject Marker in the same sentence; hopefully this will help you see a bit more clearly the different roles they play.

나**는** 내 가장 친한 친구**가** 가게에 갔다고 말했다.

"I said that my best friend went to the store."

Whenever someone is saying a quote, the person saying the quote (here it is "나") will be followed by the Topic Marker, and the subject of the quote (here it is "내 가장 친한 친구") will be followed by the Subject Marker.

This does not only apply to quotes; any time you have one statement inside of another in the same sentence, you will use the Topic and Subject Markers in this same way.

나**는** 엄마**가** 가장 좋다.

"I like mom the best."

This literally means, "<u>As for</u> me, mom is the best."

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We can switch the topic of the sentence ("나") with the subject of the sentence ("엄마") and show you how it would look.

엄마**는** 내**가** 가장 좋다.
"Mom likes me the best."
This literally means, "<u>As for</u> mom, I am the best."
"나" + the Subject Marker becomes "내가."

생선**은** 도미**가** 최고지.
"<u>As for</u> fish, snapper is the best."
This can also be translated (more naturally) as, "When it comes to fish, snapper is the best."
"생선" means "(dead) fish," and "도미" means "snapper (fish)." If you wanted to talk about a live fish, you'd use "물고기."

I hope you can see that the Topic Marker and Subject Marker aren't so vague after all. However, they do take practice to get right. Practice speaking Korean as much as possible and you'll be using both of these naturally in no time.

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