

Learn Korean Ep. 93: Korean Honorifics (Part 1 of 2)

"Honorifics" is only one part of Korean *politeness levels*. In order to understand honorifics, we'll first need to understand how and when to use the regular ~요 form, the ~니다 form, as well as know about 반말 (casual Korean). These forms are all covered in other episodes in this series, so I won't re-teach them here. Make sure to know all of those forms well before beginning this lesson.

The ~요 form and ~니다 form are used to show respect to the person who you're speaking to. However, the person you're speaking to isn't always the same person who you're talking about. For example, you could be speaking with your best friend (using 반말), and talking about his or her father. In this case, it would be good to show extra respect toward the father, but not toward your best friend.

Honorific speech is used to show respect to someone who you are speaking *about*, but not specifically to show respect to the person you're talking to. Here's an example sentence.

아버지가 어디에 있어요?

"Where's dad?"

This sentence uses the ~요 form, so the speaker is likely talking with someone who they want to show respect to. But the ~요 form by itself doesn't show any respect to the person who you're talking *about*. While this sentence is grammatically correct, it does not show any extra respect to the father. 있다 ("to exist") is a regular verb, that here is referring to the father, and does not show any extra respect.

Instead of 있다 ("to exist"), we can use a different verb that will show more respect toward the subject of that verb. In this case, we can use the honorific verb 계시다 ("to exist") instead to add extra respect toward the father. We'll show this example in a moment.

To repeat, honorific speech does not change the amount of respect to the person we are speaking with, but only to the person who we are talking about (unless the person we are talking about is the same person we are speaking to).

Here's how we can change the previous sentence to use honorific speech, to show extra respect to the father.

아버지가 어디에 계세요?

"Where's dad?"

Using 계세요 (from 계시다) shows extra respect toward the dad, but not toward the person we're speaking to. In fact, we can change the sentence to 반말 and still use the verb 계시다.

아버지가 어디에 계셔?

"Where's dad?"

This sentence could be said to a close friend or sibling, and still shows extra respect to the father.

This is the basics of how honorific speech works. It shows respect to the person who you are speaking *about*. For example, this might be a *teacher*, an *adult*, a *stranger*, and anyone who you have a *business* relationship with. The usage situations are similar to when you would normally use the ~니다 form.

You will not use honorific when talking about close friends, boyfriends or girlfriends, small children, or animals.

Asking Questions with Honorifics

Often, the person who you are talking about is also the same person who you are talking to. This happens whenever you're asking a question to someone about themselves. For example, you might ask a stranger how to get to the bank.

은행에 어떻게 가는지 아세요?

"Do you know how to go to the bank?"

아세요 comes from the honorific verb 아시다 (“to know”), which comes from the regular verb 알다 (“to know”). We’ll talk about how to make honorific verbs soon.

Of course, we could have also conjugated the sentence this way, and it would be grammatically correct:

은행에 어떻게 가는지 알아요?
“Do you know how to go to the bank?”

But using 알다 instead of 아시다 doesn’t show any extra respect to the person we’re talking about (here, the listener). Since this question would likely be asked to a stranger, it would be better to use honorifics.

Let’s talk about how to change a regular verb into an honorific verb.

Verb Stem + (으)시다

Take a verb stem and attach 으시다 if it ends in a *consonant*, or attach 시다 if it ends in a *vowel*. Verb stems ending in ㄹ will drop the ㄹ.

This will become ~(으)세요 in the 요 form, ~십니다 in the ~니다 form, or ~셔 in casual speech, among many other ways. Here are a few various examples:

하다 → 하세요, 하십니다, 하셔, 하시면
 믿다 → 믿으세요, 믿으십니다, 믿으시고, 믿으셨어요
 이다 → 이세요, 이십니다, 이시죠, 이셨는데

Before we go on, let’s talk about using this form as ~(으)세요.

Verb Stem + (으)세요

The ~요 form has many uses. One of its uses is for making *polite commands* – we can do the same with ~(으)세요.

You can use the ~(으)세요 form to make regular statements, questions, and to give commands that sound polite. This is similar to using the word "please" in English when asking for something. Here are some examples:

주세요.

"Please give (it to) me."

하세요.

"Please do (it)."

가세요.

"Please go."

Remember that the ~요 form, and by extension the ~(으)세요 form, can also be used in statements and questions. Here's an example of a sentence with various politeness levels:

선생님이 뭐해?

선생님이 뭐해요?

선생님이 뭐하셔?

선생님이 뭐하세요?

선생님이 뭐하십니까?

"What is the teacher doing?"

Unique Honorific Verbs

Not all verbs use the ~(으)시다 form to become honorific (such as 계시다). Here are the most common ones:

있다 → 계시다 "to exist"

없다 → 안 계시다 "to not exist"

먹다 → 드시다 "to eat"

자다 → 주무시다 "to sleep"

죽다 → 돌아가시다 "to die" (literally, "to go back")

Here are some examples:

어머니는 지금 집에 안 계세요.
"Mom is not at home now."

선생님은 이미 점심을 드셨어요.
"The teacher ate lunch already."

Note that if a verb has its own honorific verb form, you have to use it. So using 먹으시다 would be incorrect.

잘 주무셨어요?
"Did you sleep well?"

할아버지가 돌아가셨습니다.
"My grandfather passed away."

Honorific Nouns

Not only do we need to use honorific verbs when we're using honorific speech, we also need to use honorific nouns. Here's an example:

사람 → 분 "person"

Both 사람 and 분 mean "person," but 분 is used to show extra respect to that "person" who you're talking about.

So if you want to say that a teacher is a good person, you could say this:

선생님이 좋은 분이세요.
"The teacher is a good person."

This sentence uses an honorific verb, 이다, here as 이세요, and the honorific noun 분. We could also say this sentence:

선생님이 좋은 사람이에요.
"The teacher is a good person."

This sentence is grammatically correct, but it doesn't show any extra respect to the teacher.

Here are the most commonly used honorific nouns:

사람 → 분 "person"
집 → 댁 "house"
나이 → 연세 "age"
이름 → 성함

Examples

Let's look at a few examples using everything that we've covered.

선생님의 댁이 어디세요?
"Where is the teacher's house?"

Since 이세요 here comes after a vowel, it shortens to 세요.

아빠가 많이 드셨어.
"My dad ate a lot."

연세가 어떻게 되세요?
"How old are you?"

저 분이 누구세요?
"Who is that person?"

Advanced Notes

있으시다 and 없으시다

You might see either of these verbs used instead of 계시다 and 안 계시다. Using these verbs to show extra respect to a person would be *incorrect*. However, it is acceptable to use these verbs when referring to a *thing* (and not a person). For example:

숙제가 있으세요?

"Is there any homework?"

Using the verbs this way shows extra respect to the person you're talking about – in this case, the person you're speaking with (the teacher, most likely). These verbs can only be used in this way when speaking directly to the person who you're talking about. In these cases, using 계시다 would be *incorrect* – for example, 숙제가 계세요 is grammatically wrong.

The same applies to the verb 이다 ("to be"). It can be used in the same way, as 이시다. For example:

5 백원이세요.

"That's 500 Won."

Honorific Progressive Tense

When using honorifics with the progressive tense (~고 있다), change both the verb before to an honorific, and also change 있다 to 계시다. For example:

할머니가 주무시고 계세요.

"Grandmother is sleeping."

However, if the first verb does not have its own unique honorific verb (such as 가다 which becomes 가시다), then it's not necessary to change it. For example:

아버지는 어디에 가고 계세요?

"Where is dad going?"

It's not necessary to use 가시고 (from 가시다) because 가다 does not have a unique honorific verb form, and 가고 is preferable.

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!

