Learn Korean Ep. 94: Korean Honorifics (Part 2 of 2)

Last episode we learned about honorific speech, honorific verbs, making commands with the $\sim(2)$ 세요 form, and honorific nouns. This lesson will continue from where we left off.

Humble speech is similar to honorific speech, in that it can be combined with other forms, and is used to show a certain level of respect to the person you are speaking *about*.

However, while honorific speech is used to show extra respect to a person we're talking about, humble speech is a bit different. Humble speech is used to show *humility*. This is figuratively as if the speaker is lowering himself or herself down to the person he or she is speaking about.

드리다 "to give"

Let's first take a look at an example sentence:

내일 선물을 줄 거예요. "I will give you a present tomorrow."

This sentence is grammatically fine. However, what if the person we're giving the present to (the person we're talking about – here, "you" in the sentence) is someone who we'd want to show extra respect to?

We can't use the honorific verb 주시다 ("to give"), because that would be adding extra respect to *ourselves* (the person who is speaking, and giving the present). But we still want to show extra respect. We can use a humble verb to figuratively lower ourselves down when giving the gift – almost as if we're bowing down and holding up the present to them. Here is what the sentence could look like using a humble verb:

내일 선물을 드릴 거예요. "I will give you a present tomorrow." This sentence has the same meaning as the first one, but we've switched the verb 주다 ("to give") with 드리다 ("to give"), which is a humble verb.

Using 드리다 shows humility from the speaker toward the person who he or she is giving something to.

뵈다 (or 뵙다) "to see"

뵈다 (or sometimes 뵙다) is another common humble verb. Here's an example of a regular sentence:

내일 봐요.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

What if we are saying this sentence to our boss? Although we can of course change the $\sim \Omega$ form to the $\sim \Box \Box$ form, this would not show enough extra respect. Instead, we can add humility to our sentence and increase how much respect is shown to the boss.

We can exchange 보다 ("to see") for the verb 뵈다 ("to see"), or 뵙다 ("to see" – a tiny bit more humble). Here's what the sentence would look like:

내일 봬요.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

Both 뵈다 and 뵙다 conjugate as 봬요 in the ~요 form, or 뵙니다 and 뵙습니다 in the ~니다 form.

And both sentences (봐요 and 봬요) have the same literal meaning. The second sentence shows extra humility toward the boss.

Mid-Lesson Review

So around here you might be expecting a list of verbs that can become humble verbs. Fortunately, there aren't many humble verbs we have to learn – there are only 2 common humble verbs that we need to learn, and we've already covered them (드리다 and 뵈다/뵙다).

Let's do a quick recap. Using honorific verbs shows extra respect toward the person who we're talking *about*. Using a humble verb is kind of like the speaker is also bowing down toward the person who they're talking about – lowering themselves.

Because of this, you'll never use humble speech (such as 드리다) when someone else is giving something to you, because that would be figuratively making them bow down to you.

Honorific and Humble Particles

There are a few particles that are also preferred when using honorific speech or humble speech. These particles show extra respect to the person that they come after (they're only used with people). Here are those particles:

(Subject Marker) 이/가 → 께서 (Topic Marker) 은/는 → 께서는 (To/From [a person]) 에게(서) → 께

Let's look at an example of each one:

아버지**께서** 집에 안 계세요. "Dad is not at home."

Using 아버지가 would still be grammatically correct, but would not show the proper amount of respect to the dad. Since we're already using 계시다 instead of 있다, it's best to complete the sentence by also using one of these particles.

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이제 할머니**께서는** 주무실 거예요. "Grandma will sleep now."

This sentence uses not only the particle 께서는, but also the honorific verb 주무시다 ("to sleep"). It shows a proper amount of extra respect to the grandmother.

선생님께 선물을 드렸어요.

"I gave the teacher a present."

This sentence has the same grammatical meaning as 선생님**에게** 선물을 줬어요, but shows not only extra respect by using 께, but humility by using the verb 드리다 instead of the normal verb 주다.

Advanced Notes

~해 드리다

드리다 can also be used in place of 주다 when doing and asking for favors. For a review of this, see Episode 36. Here's an example.

제가 해 줄게요. 제가 해 드릴게요. "I'll do it for you."

Conclusion

Honorific speech and humble verbs can be confusing at first, because English doesn't have a similar concept. But these are essential to speaking Korean like a native.

Not being a native Korean means that you won't be held to the same standard as a Korean would, and mistakes are often forgiven. However, the more Korean you are able to use, the more you will be expected to properly use politeness levels, honorific speech, and humble verbs.

It will take practice to feel comfortable with these concepts. Take your time, because these are not beginner concepts. They can only be mastered through frequent review and practice.

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

