

Learn Korean Ep. 99: Korean Counters

The last two episodes covered Sino-Korean and Pure Korean numbers. Make sure you're familiar with both of those systems before starting this episode.

As I mentioned when talking about Sino-Korean numbers, we can't simply count things by randomly putting a number in front of the thing we want to count. For example, we can't count 5 people by saying "오 사람." In order to count things, we'll need to use things called *counters* in Korean. Depending what we're counting (people, animals, cups, or pizza) we'll need to use a different *counter*.

Won

Sino-Korean + 원

We already covered how to count Won using Sino-Korean numbers (for example, 50 Won is just 오십원).

Counting different things will require using either Sino-Korean or Pure Korean numbers.

But before we jump in, let me clarify something. Every single noun in Korean won't have its own unique counter. If you know the counter for counting *animals*, you can use that for counting sheep or cows or monkeys. There is no separate *monkey counter* (not yet, at least). Also, there aren't *that* many counters you'll need to memorize for most conversation – just a few dozen or so.

Let's cover a few of the most common counters.

People

Pure Korean + 명

To count people, use the Pure Korean number system and attach 명. Note that 명 isn't used by itself to mean "person," it's only used together with Pure Korean numbers when counting. Also, using Sino-Korean numbers with 명 might be understandable in some cases (everyone

makes mistakes), but would sound strange and incorrect. Make sure to learn which number system is used with each counter as you memorize them, to make sure you'll always be understood.

So to say 1 person we'd use the Pure Korean number for 1 (하나) and combine it with this counter 명 and get 한 명 – *record scratch* – But we learned that 1 is 하나, so let's talk about what's happening here.

When the Pure Korean number 1 (하나) is combined with a counter it changes to 한. So 1 person is 한 명 and *not* "하나 명." In fact, the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 20 also change when they're used directly before a counter. Take a look.

1	하나	→ 한
2	둘	→ 두
3	셋	→ 세
4	넷	→ 네
20	스물	→ 스무

These changes aren't too severe (even if you forget these and pronounce them wrong, it won't sound *terribly* wrong), but they're still important to know. This change is for both pronunciation *and* when writing the numbers.

Also, note that this is *only* when these numbers come directly before a counter. For example, 20 people is 스무 명, but 21 people is 스물 한 명 (not 스무 한, because 스물 isn't directly in front of the counter 명).

Practice

Before we go further, practice translating these examples. The answers are at the bottom.

1 person

3 people

6 people

10 people

Answers: 한 명, 세 명, 여섯 명, 열 명

Counting Above 40 or 50

As we learned in the previous lesson, Koreans will *usually* switch to Sino-Korean numbers (if they weren't already using Sino-Korean numbers) once the number reaches 40 or 50. Also, Koreans will *always* switch to Sino-Korean numbers for anything above 99.

So to say 50 people, you could either say 오십명, or 쉰 명 if you'd like. And to say 100 people, it's just 백 명.

Let's learn some more common counters.

Animals

Pure Korean + 마리

Counting animals also uses the Pure Korean number system. This includes all types of animals.

To say 3 cows, it would be 소 세 마리. Note that the animal you're counting comes first, if it's not already clear that's what you're counting. For example, if someone asks "How many cows are there?" then the appropriate reply would simply be 세 마리 (3 cows). If someone instead asks "What are

those animals and how many are there?" then the appropriate reply would include 소 세 마리 to clarify.

And the same applies when counting people. It's not necessary to specify that you're counting people when using 명, since 명 is always only used for counting people. Saying 사람 다섯 명 would be unnecessarily repetitive, unless it wasn't clear that you were talking about a *specific* type of person – for example, 한국 사람 다섯 명 (5 *Korean* people). Most of the time you won't need to specify.

Whenever it's already clear what you're counting, there's no need to specify – whether you're counting people, animals, or general things.

General Things

Pure Korean + 개

You can use this counter when counting general things that either don't have their own separate counter, or when counting things that you don't know their counter.

To say 5 chairs, you can say (의자) 다섯 개. Remember that saying 의자 is necessary whenever it's not clear what you're counting. If someone asks "What's in that room?" then the appropriate reply might include 의자 다섯 개 (5 chairs), but if someone asks "How many chairs are there?" then the appropriate reply would just use 다섯 개.

Here are a few examples of this counter.

- 3 hats → 모자 세 개
- 2 pencils → 연필 두 개
- 5 computers → 컴퓨터 다섯 개
- 1 window → 창문 한 개

*Age***Pure Korean + 살**

You can count someone's age (such as saying your own age) with the counter 살.

For example, if you're 31 years old you can say 저는 **서른 한 살**이에요 ("I'm 31 years old.")

Here are some examples.

5 years old	→ 다섯 살
3 years old	→ 세 살
15 years old	→ 열 다섯 살
21 years old	→ 스물 한 살

*Measurements***Sino-Korean**

Many counters used for *measuring* things will use Sino-Korean numbers (but not all). A few common examples are meters (**미터**), liters (**리터**), and degrees (**도**). Here are a few examples.

5 meters	→ 오 미터
8 liters	→ 팔 리터
20 degrees	→ 이십 도

Note that Korea uses *Celsius* (not Fahrenheit). In Celsius, water freezes at 0 degrees and boils at 100 degrees. Temperatures during the winter in Korea will often fall below 0, and during the summer reach the high 30s (which feels like a sauna when combined with the humidity). If you can, I recommend visiting Korea during the spring or fall because you'll more easily be able to enjoy traveling outside.

*Flat Items***Pure-Korean + 장**

“Flat items” includes sheets of paper, as well as (interestingly) T-shirts. Here are a few examples.

1 sheet of paper	→ 종이 한 장
5 sheets of paper	→ 종이 다섯 장
20 sheets of paper	→ 종이 스무 장
1,000 shirts	→ 셔츠 천 장

*Books***Pure-Korean + 권**

Books are counted with 권. Here are some examples.

1 book	→ 책 한 권
5 books	→ 책 다섯 권
24 books	→ 책 스물 네 권

Advanced NotesCounting one:

When counting 1 of any *item*, 하나 will also often be used instead 한 개. Both 하나 and 한 개 are acceptable.

Age above 40:

Usually when counting age (살) above 40 or 50, it's more common to switch to a different counter – 세. The counter 세 is a bit more formal, and is used with Sino-Korean numbers. For example, to say a person is 50 years old, you can say 오십 세. In addition, asking an older person their age is done with a completely different phrase. Instead of asking 나이가 어떻게 돼요? you can ask 연세가 어떻게 되세요? The meanings are the same, but 연세 is a more polite way to say 나이 (a person's age in years).

How many:

몇 (normally meaning “how many”) can also be used as a number before *any counter*. When used this way, it means “a few.” For example, 몇 명이 왔어요 (“A few people came.”). When used in a question, it simply retains its original use as “how many.” For example, 몇 명이 왔어요? (“How many people came?”).

Here are a few more common and useful counters.

Clothing: Pure Korean + 벌

Counting *sets* of clothing, such as suits, can be done with 벌.

(양복) 한 벌 → 1 suit

Words: Pure Korean + 마디

Individual words can be counted with 마디.

(말) 한 마디 → 1 word

Bottles: Pure Korean + 병

(맥주) 열 두 병 → 12 bottles of beer

(물) 세 병 → 3 bottles of water

Long, thin items: Pure Korean + 자루

(연필) 세 자루 → 3 pencils

(칼) 한 자루 → 1 knife

Pairs of socks or shoes: Pure Korean + 켤레

(양말) 두 켤레 → 2 pairs of socks

(신발) 한 켤레 → 1 pair of shoes

Pizza: Pure Korean + 판

(피자) 스물 세 판 → 23 pizzas

Plates: Pure Korean + 접시

(볶음밥) 여덟 접시 → 8 plates of fried rice

Cups: Pure Korean + 컵

(물) 한 컵 → 1 cup of water

Trees: Pure Korean + 그루

(나무) 한 그루 → 1 tree

Appliances and Cars: Pure Korean + 대

(자동차) 두 대 → 2 cars

(컴퓨터) 열 네 대 → 14 computers

Pieces: Pure Korean + 조각

(빵) 한 조각 → 1 piece of bread

(피자) 네 조각 → 4 pieces of pizza

Times: Pure Korean + 번

한 번 → once, one time

두 번 → twice, two times

열 번 → ten times

백 번 → 100 times

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!

