

LEVEL 1 LESSON 9

In this lesson, you are going to learn about the topic marking particles and the subject marking particles in Korean. Most languages don't have subject marking particles or topic marking particles in their sentences, so the concept might be very new, but once you get used to them, knowing how to use these particles will come very much in handy.

Topic marking particles

은 [eun] / 는 [neun]

The main role of topic marking particles is **letting the other people know what you are talking about or going to talk about**, and topic marking particles are attached after nouns.

Words ending with a last consonant + -은

Words ending with a vowel + -는

Examples:

가방 [ga-bang] + 은 [eun]

나 [na] + 는 [neun]

The topic of the sentence, marked by 은 [eun] or 는 [neun] is usually (but not always) the same as the subject of the sentence.

저 [jeo] = I

저 + 는 [neun] = 저는 [jeo-neun] = as for me / (I am talking) me

저는 학생이에요. [jeo-neun hak-saeng-i-e-yo] = As for me, I am a student. / I am a student.

Here, the word 저 (I) is both the topic of the sentence (talking about "I" here) and the subject of the sentence ("I" is the subject, and "am" is the verb.)

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But the uniqueness of the Korean language can be found in the following sample sentence.

내일은 저는 일해요. [nae-il-eun jeo-neun il-hae-yo]
= "As for tomorrow, I work."

Here, **내일** [nae-il], tomorrow, is followed by **은** [eun], is a topic, but not the subject of the verb 일하다 [il-ha-da], "to work" because it is not "tomorrow" that works but "I" that work.

Subject marking particles

이 [i] / **가** [ga]

The role of subject marking particles is relatively simple compared to that of role of topic marking particles.

Words ending with a last consonant + -이

Words ending with a vowel + -가

Examples:

가방 [ga-bang] + 이 [i]

학교 [hak-gyo] + 가 [ga]

So, basically,

topic marking particles (은/는) express what the **topic** of the sentence is, and **subject marking particles (이/가)** show what the **subject** of the sentence is, but that's not everything.

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What more is there about the particles **은/는/이/가**?

(1)

In addition to marking topics, 은 [eun] / 는 [neun] has the nuance of "about" something, "as for" something, or even "unlike other things" or "different from other things."

(2)

In addition to marking subjects, 이 [i] / 가 [ga] has the nuance of "none other than" "nothing but" and also, when used inside a complex sentence, the role of marking the subject without emphasizing it too much.

Let's look at some examples of **(1)**.

이거 [i-geo] = this / 사과 [sa-gwa] = apple / 예요 [ye-yo] = to be / is

이거 사과예요. [i-geo sa-gwa-ye-yo] = This is an apple.

You can add 은/는 to this, and in this case the subject, 이거, ends in a vowel, so add -는.

이거는 사과예요. [i-geo-NEUN sa-gwa-ye-yo]

= **(The other things are not apples, but) THIS is an apple.**

So you can imagine someone talking like this:

이거 커피예요. [i-geo keo-pi-ye-yo] (= This is coffee)

이거는 물이에요. [i-geo-NEUN mul-i-e-yo] (= That was coffee, but THIS ONE, it's water.)

이거는 오렌지주스예요. [i-geo-NEUN o-ren-ji-ju-seu-ye-yo]

(= And THIS ONE, it's different again, it's orange juice.)

이거는 뭐예요? [i-geo-NEUN mwo-ye-yo?]

(= And what about this one? What is it?)

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As you can see from this example, 은/는 has the role of emphasizing the topic of the sentence by giving it the nuance of "that one is ... and/but THIS ONE is..." So sometime it is unnatural to use 은/는 in every sentence you say.

So in Korean, although 은 and 는 are generally topic marking particles, people often save 은/는 for really emphasizing the topic in contrast to the other parts of the sentence.

For example, if you want to say "The weather's nice today." in Korean, you can say it in many ways. (Don't worry about the entire sentence here. Just focus on the use of 은/는.)

1) 오늘 날씨 좋네요. [o-neul nal-ssi jot-ne-yo]

The weather's good today.

2) 오늘 **은** 날씨 좋네요. [o-neul-**EUN** nal-ssi jot-ne-yo]

(The weather hasn't been so good lately, but TODAY, it's good.)

3) 오늘 날씨 **는** 좋네요. [o-neul nal-ssi-**NEUN** jot-ne-yo]

(Today, not necessarily everything else too, but at least the weather is good.)

So THAT's how powerful and useful the topic marking particles (은/는) can be in changing the nuance of your Korean sentences!

Let's look at some examples of **(2)**.

좋아요 [jo-a-yo] = it's good / 뭐 [mwo] = what / 이/가 [i/ga] = subject marking particles

Imagine that one says "좋아요. [jo-a-yo]" and that means "It's good." or "I like it."

But if you are not quite sure WHAT is good, you can ask "WHAT is good?" or "What are you talking about?"

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In order to express your curiosity as to "WHAT" is good, you can ask:

뭐가 좋아요? [mwo-GA jo-a-yo?]

Here the word 가 [ga] emphasize what the subject of the verb "to be / 좋아요" is.

If one says,

ABC 좋아요. [ABC jo-a-yo] = ABC is good.

And if you disagree and you think XYZ is good, not ABC. You can express your opinion that the subject of "being good" should be XYZ, not ABC, by saying:

ABC 좋아요? XYZ가 좋아요! [ABC jo-a-yo? XYZ-GA jo-a-yo]

So, with 이 and 가, you can add more flavor and more concrete meanings to your Korean sentences when you want to emphasize WHO did something, WHICH ONE is good, and etc.

Is that everything?

Almost.

As you can see from above, 은/는 and 이/가 both have different roles, but the roles of 은/는 as a 'contrast' factor is much stronger, because you can change the topic of a sentence with 은/는. So, when you form complex sentences (i.e. I think the book that you bought is more interesting than the book I bought.), in general, 은/는 is not so commonly used all over the sentences. Often times 은/는/이/가 can be dropped, but when you need particles to clarify the meaning, 이/가 will be more commonly used.