KR

KOREAN LESSON

Korean Grammar 2 · Chapter 1 · Speech Levels

🚦 Speech Levels in Depth — 말씨의 단계

*Korean Grammar 1 (chapter 10, Putting It Together) gave you three levels: formal polite, everyday polite and casual. This chapter shows the whole system. Grammarians describe **seven speech levels**, each with its own sentence-final endings for statements, questions, commands and suggestions. Only four of them are common in modern speech, but you will meet the other three in dramas, signs, novels and the speech of older people, so it pays to recognise them.*

THE RULE IN ONE BOX

The **speech level** is chosen by the **listener and the situation**, and it is shown in the **last ending of the sentence**. It is separate from the **honorific** -(으)시-, which shows respect to *someone mentioned in the sentence* (Chapter 2). The four common levels are: **합쇼체 (formal polite) · 해요체 (everyday polite) · 해체 (casual) · 해라체 (plain)**

The seven levels

The names are built from the imperative of **하다** ("do") plus **체** ("style"): each name shows how that level makes a request. For example, **하십시오체** is the style whose command is **하십시오**.

LEVEL	NAME	POLITENESS	FORMALITY	WHERE YOU MEET IT
1	**하소서체**	very high	very high	historical dramas, scripture and prayer, speech to royalty (uncommon)
2	**하십시오체** (also **합쇼체**)	high	high	strangers at the start, customer service, news announcers, speeches; **common**
3	**해요체**	high	low	everyday speech with strangers, colleagues, older people; **very common**
4	**하오체**	neutral	high	some older speakers, signs and notices, historical dramas; **rare today**

LEVEL	NAME	POLITENESS	FORMALITY	WHERE YOU MEET IT
5	**하게체**	neutral	neutral	some older men to juniors, professors to students, novels; **rare**
6	**해라체**	low	high	close friends and relatives of the same age, adults to children, impersonal writing, indirect quotation; **common**
7	**해체**	low	low	close friends and family, talking to children; **very common** (casual speech, **반말**)

The ratings follow Wikipedia's description of the levels. Sources disagree on details, and the page itself is marked as needing more citations, so treat the table as a guide to how the levels feel, not a precise measure. Sources also count the levels differently: one notes that traditionally there were eight levels, of which four to six are still in use today. Two points are generally agreed: **하오체 and 하게체 are being replaced by 해요체** in modern speech, and **learners need to produce only 합쇼체, 해요체 and 해체** (plus 해라체 in writing).

Endings of the six everyday-to-rare levels

The table shows one verb, **가다** ("to go"), in each mood. (The seventh level, 하소서체, is left out: its forms such as **가나이다** belong to prayer and drama.)

LEVEL	STATEMENT: "(I) GO"	QUESTION: "DO (YOU) GO?"	COMMAND: "GO!"	SUGGESTION: "LET'S GO"
합쇼체	**갑니다**	**갑니까?**	**가십시오**	**갑시다**
해요체	**가요**	**가요?**	**가세요**	**가요 / 갈까요?**
하오체	**가오**	— (not given by the source used)	**가오 / 가시오**	—
하게체	**가네**	**가나? / 가는가?**	**가게**	**가세**

LEVEL	STATEMENT: "(I) GO"	QUESTION: "DO (YOU) GO?"	COMMAND: "GO!"	SUGGESTION: "LET'S GO"
해라체	간다	가니? / 가냐?	가라	가자
해체	가	가?	가 / 가지	가 / 가자

> **Watch out: one form, four jobs**
>
> In 해요체 and 해체 the **statement, question and suggestion** are written the same way (**가요**, **가**); only **intonation** (and the context) tells them apart. 해요체 has a separate command form, **-(으)세요**, which is also the polite request you already know. In writing the question mark is the only clue.

> **Watch out: the suggestion forms vary by source**
>
> The suggestion ending of 합쇼체 is usually given as **-(으)ㅂ시다** (**갑시다**, **먹읍시다**). The Wikipedia page used for this chapter lists **-(으)십시다** and **-(으)시지요** for the same job, so check a grammar reference before relying on one form in a formal setting, and prefer a request such as **같이 가시겠습니까?** ("would you like to go together?").

Forming the four common levels

합쇼체 — formal polite

After a **vowel** stem add **-ㅂ니다**; after a **consonant** stem add **-습니다**; ㄹ stems drop the ㄹ (**살다 → 삽니다**). Questions end in **-ㅂ니까 / -습니까?**. After a noun use **입니다 / 입니까?**. Past: **-았/었습니다**. Command: **-(으)십시오**, which includes the honorific -(으)시-.

해요체 — everyday polite

Stem + **-아요 / -어요**, with contractions (**가요**, **마셔요**, **해요**). After a noun, **이에요 / 예요**. Past: **-았/었어요**. Command: **-(으)세요**.

해체 — casual (반말)

Take the 해요체 form and drop **요**: **먹어**, **가**, **해**. After a noun, **(이)야**. Past: **-았/었어**. The same ending can be a statement, question, suggestion or command, and a suggestion can also be made with **-자** or **-(으)ㄹ까?**.

해라체 — plain

This is the most system-like level: it is the form used in **writing** (articles, essays, grammar books), in **indirect quotation** (Chapter 8) and when speaking to children or close friends. Its present tense depends on the word type:

- **Verbs:** after a vowel **-ㄴ다**, after a consonant **-는다**: **간다**, **먹는다**, **한다**. (ㄹ stems drop the ㄹ: **산다**.)
- **Adjectives, 있다, 없다 and 이다:** the plain **-다**: **좋다**, **있다**, **학생이다**.
- **Past: -았/었다**: **갔다**, **좋았다**.
- **Question: -니? / -냐?**: **가니?**, **먹냐?**. **Command: -아/어라** (**먹어라**). **Suggestion: -자** (**가자**).

WORD	합쇼체	해요체	해체	해라체
가다 go	**갑니다**	**가요**	**가**	**간다**
먹다 eat	**먹습니다**	**먹어요**	**먹어**	**먹는다**
하다 do	**합니다**	**해요**	**해**	**한다**
좋다 be good	**좋습니다**	**좋아요**	**좋아**	**좋다**
학생이다 be a student	**학생입니다**	**학생이에요**	**학생이야**	**학생이다**
갔다 (past of 가다)	**갔습니다**	**갔어요**	**갔어**	**갔다**

> **Watch out: 합쇼체 is not "more polite" than 해요체**
> Both are highly polite. The difference is **formality**: 합쇼체 sounds official and distant (news, presentations, first meetings), while 해요체 sounds friendlier and is the default for ordinary contact. Using 합쇼체 with a friendly neighbour can sound stiff; using 해요체 in a formal presentation is usually fine but sounds softer.

> **Watch out: 해라체 and 해체 are not rude in themselves**
>
> Both are low in politeness, so using them to a stranger, a boss or an older person is rude. But 해라체 is also the neutral form of **writing**, and 해체 is the warm form for friends and family. The same word is rude or friendly depending on the listener.

Choosing a level

LISTENER OR SITUATION	SAFE LEVEL	EXAMPLE
customer, announcement, speech, interview	**합쇼체**	**도와드리겠습니다.** I'll help you.
stranger, colleague, older person, shop	**해요체**	**어디 가요?** Where are you going?
close friend of your age, family, a younger person you know well	**해체**	**어디 가?** Where are you off to?
child, or writing in an essay or news article	**해라체**	**밥 먹어라.** Eat your meal. / **그는 서울에 산다.** He lives in Seoul.
unsure of status or age	**해요체**	the "never wrong" choice

Switching levels

Korean speakers often start with **해요체** and move to **해체** when they become close, and it is polite to wait for the more senior person to suggest the change. Phrases such as **말 편하게 하세요** ("feel free to speak casually") or the question **말 놓아도 될까요?** ("may I speak casually?") are used for this; these phrases, and the habit of mixing a few casual endings into otherwise polite speech between people who are close, come from general knowledge and were not in the sources consulted, so listen to how native speakers do it.

🗣️ In Use — 실제 예문

One question, four levels, and a rare one.

① A reception desk (합쇼체)

A:

어서 오십시오. 무엇을 도와드릴까요?

Welcome. How may I help you?

B:

김 과장님을 만나러 왔습니다.

I've come to see Manager Kim.

② Two colleagues (해요체)

A:

점심 먹었어요?

Have you had lunch?

B:

아니요, 아직이요. 같이 먹어요.

No, not yet. Let's eat together.

③ Two friends (해체)

A:

점심 먹었어?

Have you eaten lunch?

B:

아니, 아직. 같이 먹자.

No, not yet. Let's eat together.

④ A parent to a child (해라체)

A:

손 씻었니? 밥 먹자.

Did you wash your hands? Let's eat.

B:

네, 씻었어요.

Yes, I washed them.

⑤ A professor to a student (하게체, rare)

A:

자네, 이리 오게. 이 책을 읽어 보게.

You, come here. Try reading this book.

B:

네, 교수님. 감사합니다.

Yes, professor. Thank you.

Notes on the rare levels

하오체 (**가오**) is described as almost completely out of everyday use in South Korea, though it still appears on signs and notices (with the command form, as in **들어오지 마시오**, "do not enter"), in historical dramas and in North Korean standard speech. **하게체** (**가게**, **가네**) is limited to some older male speakers, such as a professor or boss speaking to a younger person, and to novels; it is not

> used to children or blood relatives. A learner does not need to *produce* either, only to understand them.

📋 Quick Reference — 요약표

LEVEL	STATEMENT ENDING	QUESTION ENDING	USE IT WITH
합쇼체	-ㅂ니다 / -습니다	-ㅂ니까 / -습니까?	customers, official speech
해요체	-아요 / -어요	-아요? / -어요?	almost anyone, the default
해체	-아 / -어	-아? / -어?	close friends and family
해라체	-ㄴ다 / -는다 / -다	-니? / -냐?	children, writing, quotation
하게체	-네	-나? / -는가?	rare: older men to juniors
하오체	-오	—	rare: signs, drama

✏️ Try It Yourself — 연습

Work out the answer first, then click to check.

1. Ask "Are you going?" in 합쇼체, 해요체 and 해체.

▼ Show answer

갑니까? · 가요? · 가?

2. Put **학생이에요** into 합쇼체, 해체 and 해라체.

▼ Show answer

학생입니다 · 학생이야 · 학생이다

3. Give the 해라체 present of **먹다**, **하다** and **좋다**.

▼ Show answer

먹는다 · **한다** · **좋다** (adjectives take plain -다, not 좋는다).

4. Say "Let's eat" in 해체, and say "Please sit" in 합쇼체 and 해요체.

▼ Show answer

먹자 · **앉으십시오** · **앉으세요**

5. Which level would you use to a shop assistant you have never met?

▼ Show answer

해요체, the safe default; 합쇼체 if the setting is formal.

6. Name the level of each: **먹는다**, **먹네**, **먹어요**, **먹습니다**.

▼ Show answer

해라체 · 하게체 · 해요체 · 합쇼체

7. Make the 해체 sentence "I went to school" and the 해라체 sentence "I went to school".

▼ Show answer

학교에 갔어. · **학교에 갔다.**

8. Why is it wrong to say **어디 가?** to your friend's grandmother?

▼ Show answer

It is 해체, a casual level with low politeness, which is rude to an older person. Use 해요체 with the honorific: **어디 가세요?** (the honorific is explained in Chapter 2).

Coming up in Chapter 2: Honorifics and Humble Forms. You will learn the honorific -(으)시- in full, the special honorific verbs (드시다, 주무시다, 계시다), the humble verbs (드리다, 뵙다, 말씀드리다) and how titles with 님 work.