# VERBAL SUFFIXES IN KOREAN LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

*This article is concerned about verbal suffixes as found in Korean language which is known as Hangeul. Commonly, verbal suffixes are added to verbal stems to express such socio-linguistic categories as "levels of speech" (which depend on relative social positions of the speaker and hearer). Korean system of the "levels of speech" is perhaps unique in that it utilizes both grammatical markers of several kinds (case markers, honorific markers, and special verbal particles) and special words and expressions. This article focuses on the suffixes attached to verbal stems to form three different levels of speech which are commonly used.*

**Keywords**: verbal suffix, honorification, honorific marker, level of speech

## INTRODUCTION

Major languages of the world have conclusive evidence for the genetic relationships. English, along with a host of languages spoken in Europe, Russia, and India, belong to the Indo-European family of languages. In contrast, there is no conclusive evidence relating Korean to a single family of languages. For a long time scholars have tried to associate the Korean language to one of the major language families but have not been successful in this venture. There have been many theories proposed on the origin of Korean. The most prominent hypothesis places Korean in the Altaic family, which includes Turkish, Tungusic, Mongolian, and Japanese, with the closest relationship to Japanese (Miller, 1980).

The Korean language also called Hangeul by the native speakers is extremely sensitive to the nuances of hierarchical human relationships. The proper use of polite language, or levels of polite speech, is an extremely complex and subtle matter. Thus, Korean possesses what is sometimes called "polite" or "honorific" language. The term honorific itself is used in the grammatical analysis of some languages (e.g. Japanese) to refer to syntactic or morphological distinctions used to express level of politeness

or respect, especially in relation to the compared social status of the participant (Crystal, 1991: 167). Honorification in Korean elevates the social status of a participant in a clause with respect to the subject and/or the hearer. There are various kinds of honorific markers; an honorific suffix for nouns, special honorific forms of nouns, honorific case particles, honorific suffixes on verbs, and special honorific forms of verbs.

Korean is an agglutinative language that is a language which uses agglutination extensively; most words are formed by joining morphemes together. The basic form of a Korean sentence is Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). Korean has a relatively free word order compared to English. It means that Korean is a completely free word order language. The Korean language obeys a strict grammatical constraint requiring that the sentence ends with a verb. Verbs seem to be the most important part of a sentence. In fact, it is the only part one needs for the sentence to be complete. Korean, unlike English, does not mention the subject of the sentence if it can be assumed from the context. For example, in English, one might ask "Are you hungry?" In Korean, if someone could just ask "Hungry?" and people knew who they were referring to, then it is perfectly fine to leave off the "you." This may be heard in English as well, but it is not considered grammatically correct but it is in Korean.

As verb is the most important part of the sentence, to transform a sentence from one speech level into another, one simply adds the proper verb endings which are called verbal suffixes to the verbal stem. For example, in Korean the infinitive form of the verb "go" is 가다 [kada]. It can be rendered 가 [ka] when speaking to an inferior or a child, 가요 [kayo] when speaking to an adult inferior 갑니다 [kamnida] when speaking to a person of still higher rank.

## LEVELS OF SPEECH IN KOREAN

The Korean language employs an extensive system of politeness and honorific markers. It is often the case that in order to utter any kind of expression, the speaker must keep in mind his/her social standing to the person addressed, and the person being talked about. Thus, there are various levels of speech used in Korean language.

The term level here is used to refer to a mode of expression felt to be appropriate to a type of social situation (Crystal, 1991: 199).

Brown and Levinson (1987) say there are three scales of politeness which determine the levels of speech, namely:

1. Social distance between speaker and hearer which is related to age difference, gender, and sociocultural background.
2. The speaker and hearer relative power, also called power rating which is related to asymmetric relation/position between the speaker and hearer.
3. The degree imposition associated with the required expenditure of goods and services (rank rating), which is related to relative position of a speaker to another.

In Korean, when talking about someone superior in status, a speaker or writer has to use special verb endings to indicate the subject's superiority. Generally someone is superior in status if he/she is an older relative, a stranger of roughly equal or greater age, or an employer, teacher, customer, or the like. Someone is equal or inferior in status if he/she is a younger stranger, student, employee or the like. The use of wrong speech levels or diction is likely to be considered insulting, depending on the degree of difference between the used form and the expected one.

There are no fewer than 7 levels of speech in Korean and each level has its own unique set of verb endings (with or without honorific markers) used to indicate the level of formality of a situation. The following is the complete chart of Korean seven levels of speech, the present indicative form of the verb 하다 [hada] :

| Speech Level | Non-Honorific Present Indicative of 하다 [hada] | Honorific Present Indicative of 하다 [hada] | Level of Formality | When Used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 하소서체 [Hasoseoche] | 하나이다 [Hanaida] | 아시나이다 [Asinaida] | Extremely formal and polite | Traditionally used when addressing a king, queen, or high official; now used only in historical dramas and the Bible |
| 힙쇼체 [Hapsyoche] | 합니다 [Hamnida] | 하십니다 [Hashimnida] | Formal and polite | Used commonly between strangers, among male coworkers, by TV announcers, and to customers |

| 해요체<br>[Haoche] | 하오<br>[Hao] | 하쇼[Hasyo],<br>하시오<br>[Hasio] | Formal, of<br>neutral<br>politeness | Spoken form only used<br>nowadays among some<br>older people. Young<br>people sometimes use it<br>as an Internet dialect<br>after it was popularized<br>by historical dramas |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 히게체<br>[Hageche] | 하네<br>[Hane] | 하시네<br>[Hasine] | Formal, of<br>neutral<br>politeness | Generally only used by<br>some older people<br>when addressing<br>younger people,<br>friends, or relatives |

| 해라체<br>[Haerache] | 한다<br>[Handa] | 하신다<br>[Hashinda] | Formal, of<br>neutral<br>politeness<br>or<br>impolite | Used to close friends,<br>relatives of similar age,<br>or younger people; also<br>used almost universally<br>in books, newspapers,<br>and magazines; also<br>used in reported speech |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 해요체<br>[Haeyoche] | 해요<br>[Haeyo] | 하세요[Haseyo<br>],<br>하서요[Hasyeo<br>yo] | Informal<br>and polite | Used mainly between<br>strangers, especially<br>those older or of equal<br>age. Traditionally used<br>more by women than<br>men. |
| 해체<br>[Haeche] | 해[Hae] (in<br>speech),<br>히여[Hayeo]<br>(in writing) | 하서<br>[Hasyeo] | Informal,<br>of neutral<br>politeness<br>or<br>impolite | Used most often<br>between close friends<br>and relatives, and when<br>addressing younger<br>people. It is never used<br>between strangers<br>unless the speaker<br>wants to pick a fight or<br>the listener is a child. |

These days, some of the speech levels have disappeared and people do not use them much in everyday lives. Only three speech levels are still actively used by the speakers of the language. Kim [1984] says that the three main levels of speech are distinguished with respect to politeness: formal, polite, and casual. The main speech levels of declarative sentences have the following suffix forms: formal: ㅂ니다[mnida] / 습니다[seumnida]; polite: 아요[ayo] / 어요[eoyo]; casual: 아[a] / 어[eo]. Thus, when the speaker expresses his politeness toward the hearer, either the polite or the

formal speech level is used. In contrast to this, when the speaker does not express any particular politeness toward the hearer, the casual speech level is used.

Formal Korean is commonly used to someone who is clearly of superior status, and only when talking about one who is of superior status, between strangers, among male co-workers, and by TV announcers. Polite Korean is used mainly between strangers especially those older or of equal age, traditionally used more by women than men. Casual Korean is used to close friends, relatives of similar age, or younger people; and also almost universally in books, newspapers, and magazines.

## VERBAL SUFFIXES IN KOREAN LANGUAGE

As in most Altaic languages in general, modifying words/phrases in Korean precede the modified: modifying adjectives are supposed to precede the modified nouns, adverbs precede verbs, etc. Korean, as typical for Altaic languages, has verb-final, left-branching sentence structure, exemplified by general SOV (subject-object-verb) formula. Verb is always the last constituent of a sentence, but other components can often be either omitted or inverted. Korean system of the levels of speech is perhaps unique in that it utilizes particular verbal suffixes. There are at least three kinds of ending attached to the verbal stems to identify the levels of speech; formal, polite, and casual as seen below.

| Level of Speech | Verbal Suffix |
|---|---|
| Formal | ㅂ니다 [mnida]/ 습니다 [seumnida] |
| Polite | 어요 / 아요 [eoyo/ayo] |
| Casual | 어 / 아 [eo/a] |

To make sentences in different levels of speech, one simply adds a particular suffix to the verb. For example the infinitive form of the verb "to eat" is 먹다 [meokda]. The infinitive form in this example consists of the verb root, 먹 [meok] and the 다 [da] ending. If the 다 [da] ending is removed, the verb root 먹 [meok] is left. The verb root by itself has no meaning. The removed 다[da] ending must be replaced by a different ending depending on what level of speech one wants to create. So the formal form will be 먹습니다 [meokseumnida ], the polite form 먹어요 [meogeoyo], and the casual form 먹어 [moegeo].

Kim (1984: 890) states that there are two suffix variations to form a formal speech; the formal form 습니다 [seumnita] occurs only with verb stems ending in a consonant, but the alternant form of the formal form ㅂ니다 [mnita] occurs only with verb stems ending in a vowel and [r]. Based on these classes of suffixes, verb stems can be divided into two groups: consonant stems (i.e. stems ending in a consonant) and vowel stems (i.e. stems ending in a vowel). There are also two different suffixes for both polite and casual speech, how to decide which suffix to choose is based on the verb root. If the last vowel in the verb root is 오 [o] or 아 [a] then the suffix 아요 [ayo] for polite speech or 아 [a] for casual speech is used. If the last vowel in the verb root is anything other than 오 [o] or 아 [a], then the suffix 어요 [eoyo] for polite speech or 어 [eo] for casual speech is used. The following are more examples of the use of verbal suffixes in Korean.

| English | Verb Stem | Infinitive Form | Formal | Polite | Casual |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| To Buy | 사 [sa] | 사다 [sada] | 삽니다 [samnida] | 사요 [sayo] | 사 [sa] |
| To Cry | 울 [ul] | 울다 [ulda] | 웁니다 [umnida] | 울어요 [ureoyo] | 울어 [ureo] |
| To Go | 가 [ka] | 가다 [kada] | 갑니다 [kamnida] | 가요 [kayo] | 가 [ka] |
| To Know | 알 [al] | 알다 [alda] | 압니다 [amnida] | 알아요 [arayo] | 알아 [ara] |
| To Search | 찾 [chat] | 찾다 [chatta] | 찾습니다 [chatseumnida] | 찾아요 [chajayo] | 찾아 [chaja] |
| To Be Good | 좋 [joh] | 좋다 [jota] | 좋습니다 [johseumnida] | 좋아요 [johayo] | 좋아 [joha] |
| To Have | 있 [it] | 있다 [idda] | 있습니다 [itseumnida] | 있어요 [ideoyo] | 있어 [ideo] |
| To Not Have | 없 [eops] | 없다 [epsda] | 없습니다 [eopseumnida] | 없어요 [eopseoyo] | 없어 [eopseo] |
| To Listen | 듣 [deut] | 듣다 [deudda] | 듣습니다 [deutseumnita] | 들어요 [deureoyo] | 들어 [deureo] |
| To Speak | 말 [mal] | 말하다 [marhada] | 말합니다 [marhamnida] | 말해요 [maraeyo] | 말해 [marae] |

**Irregular Patterns of Verbal Suffixes**

To make sentences in a particular level of speech, one simply follows the general pattern of how to add the formal, polite, and casual suffixes to the verb stems. However, there are some situations that do not follow this pattern exactly, especially if one wants to form the polite and casual forms.

## 1. Verbs ending in 아 [a] or 어 [eo]

In the chart on the previous page, it can be seen that 사다 [sada] meaning "to buy" uses a different pattern of verbal suffix. If the 다 [da] ending is removed, the verbal stem 사 [sa] is left. Following this pattern, the suffix 아요/아 [ayo/a] is added to the verb stem, and it will form something like 사아요. The real way is just 사요. It has been shortened because otherwise there would be two of the same vowel in a row. Since that is redundant, it is simply written 사요 [sayo] for its polite speech and 사 [sa] for its casual speech.. Other verb examples that take this pattern are:

| English | Verb Stem | Infinitive Form | Formal | Polite | Casual |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| To Stand | 서다 [seo] | 서다 [seoda] | 섭니다 [seomnida] | 서요. [seoyo] | 서 [seo] |
| To Meet | 만나 [manna] | 만나다 [mannada] | 만납니다 [mannamnida] | 만나요 [mannayo] | 만나 [manna] |
| To Go | 가 [ka] | 가다 [kada] | 갑니다 [kamnida] | 가요 [kayo] | 가 [ka] |

## 2. Verbs ending in 오 [o]

A verb ending in 오 [o] also takes a different pattern of suffix. The verb stem of the verb 오다 [oda] meaning "to come" is 오 [o]. This would naturally take the 아요 [ayo] suffix. Instead of making 오아요 [oayo], it becomes 와요 [wayo] as it would be much easier to combine the 오 [o] and the 아 [a] into 와 [wa]. The following are other verb examples taking this pattern:

| English | Verb Stem | Infinitive Form | Formal | Polite | Casual |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| To Twist | 꼬 [ggo] | 꼬다 [ggoda] | 꼽니다 [ggomnida] | 꽈요 [ggwayo] | 꽈 [ggwa] |
| To See | 보 [bo] | 보다 [boda] | 봅니다 [bomnida] | 봐요 [bwayo] | 봐 [bwa] |
| To Leave | 나오다 [nao] | 나오다 [naoda] | 나옵니다 [naomnida] | 나와요 [nawayo] | 나와 [nawa] |

### 3. Verbs ending in 이[i]

Any verb root that ends in 이 [i] will naturally take the 어요/어 [eoyo/eo] suffixes, but to make it easier and sound better, 이[i] + 어[eo] is shortened to 여 [yeo]. For example: the verb 마시다 [masida] meaning "to drink" in English has 마시 [masi] as its verb stem. Following normal patterns for the polite form, it should be formed into 마시어요 [masieoyo], but the real polite form is 마셔요 [masyeoyo] and the casual form is 마셔 [masyeo]. The following are other verb examples taking this pattern.

| English | Verb Stem | Infinitive Form | Formal | Polite | Casual |
|---------|-----------|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
| To Hide | 가리 [kari] | 가리다 [karida] | 가립니다 [karimnida] | 가려요 [karyeoyo] | 가려 [karyeo] |
| To Cut | 치 [chi] | 치다 [chida] | 칩니다 [chimnida] | 쳐요 [chyeoyo] | 쳐 [chyeo] |
| To Wait | 기다리다 [kidari] | 기다리다 [kidarida] | 기다립니다 [kidarimnida] | 기다려요 [kidaryeoyo] | 기다려 [kidaryeo] |

### 4. Verbs ending in 으 [eu]

When a verb stem ends in 으 [eu], the 으 [eu] is dropped, the last vowel in the stem that is left (not including the 으) is used to decide what suffix is attached to the verb. For example, the stem of the verb 바쁘다 [bappeuda] meaning "to be busy" is 바쁘 [bappeu]. For this example, the last vowel would be 아[a]. So, when the 으 [eu] is dropped and the 아요 [ayo] suffix is added, the polite form would be 바빠요[bappayo] and the casual form is 바빠 [bappa]. Other verb examples that follow this pattern are:

| English | Verb Stem | Infinitive Form | Formal | Polite | Casual |
|---------|-----------|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
| To Write | 쓰 [sseu] | 쓰다 [sseuda] | 씁니다 [sseumnida] | 써요 [sseoyo] | 써 [sseo] |
| To Be Ugly | 나쁘 [nappeu] | 나쁘다 [nappeuda] | 나쁩니다 [nappeumnida] | 나빠요 [nappayo] | 나빠 [nappa] |
| To Crack | 트 [teu] | 트다 [teuda] | 틉니다 [teumnida] | 터요 [teoyo] | 터 [teo] |

## 5. Verbs ending in 르 [reu]

The verb 모르다[moreuda] which means "to not know" has the verb stem 모르[moreu]. Following the irregular verb pattern 4, it seems that the verb stem ends in 으[eu] and it means to form the polite speech, one simply adds the 아요 [ayo] suffix. But it is not correct. Koreans have decided if a verb root ends in 르 [reu] (not just 으 [eu] ), then the ㄹ [l] will be doubled up by adding a second ㄹ [l] to the end of the syllable before the 르 [reu]. And then 으 [eu] is dropped. Then the verb will be 몰라요 [mollayo]. Other verb examples using this pattern are:

| English | Verb Stem | Infinitive Form | Formal Ending | Polite Ending | Casual Ending |
|---------|-----------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| To Split | 가르 [kareu] | 가르다 [kareuda] | 가릅니다 [kareumnida] | 갈라요 [kallayo] | 갈라 [kalla] |
| To Stay | 머무르 [meomureu] | 머무르다 [meomureuda] | 머무릅니다 [meomureumnida] | 머물러요 [meomulleoyo] | 머물러 [meomulleo] |
| To Call | 부르 [bureu] | 부르다 [bureuda] | 부릅니다 [bureumnida] | 불러요 [bulleoyo] | 불러 [bulleo] |

## 6. Verbs ending in ㅂ [p]

The final irregular pattern of verbal suffixes is attached to a verb ending in ㅂ[p]. If a verb ends in ㅂ [p], the ㅂ [p] should be dropped and 우 [u] is added. After that, since now the verb ends in 우[u], 어요 [eoyo] suffix is used to make the polite form. This is another pattern where the combination of two characters to make it smoother is used. 우 [u] and 어[eo] combine into 워 [wo]. For example, the verb 덥다 [deopda] meaning to help becomes 더워요[deowoyo] as its polite form and [deowo] as its casual form. Other verb examples that follow this pattern are:

| English | Verb Stem | Infinitive Form | Formal Ending | Polite Ending | Casual Ending |
|---------|-----------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| To Lock | 잠그 [jamgeu] | 잠그다 [jamgeuda] | 잠급니다 [jamgeumnida] | 잠궈요 [jamgwoyo] | 잠궈 [jamgwo] |
| To Thank | 고맙 [komap] | 고맙다 [komapta] | 고맙습니다 [komapseumnida] | 고마워요 [komawoyo] | 고마워 [komawo] |
| To Be Happy | 즐겁 [jeulgeop] | 즐겁다 [jeulgeop ta] | 즐겁습니다 [jeulgeopseumni da] | 즐거워요 [jeulgeowo yo] | 즐거워 [jeulgowo] |

## CONCLUSION

In Korean today's language, there are three levels of speech which are still commonly used. The three levels of speech, distinguished with respect to politeness: formal, polite, and casual have the following suffix forms: formal: ㅂ니다 [mnida]/ 습니다 [seumnida]; polite: 어요 [eoyo]/ 아요[ayo]; casual: 어 [eo]/ 아 [a]. The formal form 습니다 [seumnida] occurs only with verb stems ending in a consonant, but the altemant form of the formal form ㅂ니다 [mnida] occurs only with verb stems ending in a vowel and [r]. The polite suffix 아요 [ya] and the casual suffix 아 [a] are used with verb stems ending in vowels 오 [o] and 아 [a] while the polite suffix 어요 [yeo] and the casual suffix 어[eo] are used with verb stems ending in vowels anything other than 오[o] and 아[a]. Besides the regular pattern, there are also some irregular patterns of verbal suffixes attached to verb stems, especially those to form the polite and the casual forms, they are:

1. Verb stems ending in 아[a] or 어 [eo] take the verbal suffixes 아요[ayo] or 어요[eoyo] for its polite form and 아[a] or 어[eo] for its casual instead of 아아요[aayo] or 어어요[eoeoyo] and [아아 aa] or 어어[eoeo].

2. Verb stems ending in 우 [o] take the verbal suffixes 와요 [wayo] for its polite form and 와[wa] for its casual instead of 우아요[oaya] and 우아[oa].

3. Verb stems ending in 이 [i] take the verbal suffix 여요 es [yeoyo] for its polite form and 여[yeo] for its casual instead of 이어요[ieoyo] and 이어[ieo].

4. Verb stems ending in 으 [eu] take the verbal suffixes 아요[ayo] or 어요[eoyo] for its polite form an 아 [a] or 어 [eo] for its casual instead of 으어요[eueoyo] and 으어[eueo].

5. Verb stems ending in 르[reu] take the verbal suffixes 라요 [layo] or 러요[leoyo] for its polite form and 라 [la] or 러[leo] for its casual instead of 르어요[reueoyo] and 르어[reueo].

6. The last one, Verb stems ending in [p] take the verbal suffixes 워요 [woyo] for its polite form and 워 [wo] for its casual instead of 바요[bayo] or 버요[beoyo] and 바[ba] or 버[beo].

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