

-(으)ㄴ/는/(으)ㄹ + 명사

noun-modifying forms — the verb that describes a noun

English puts a whole clause after the noun: the book I read. Korean puts it before, and marks its tense on the verb itself. This system underlies dozens of later grammar points.

How it attaches

Word type	Form	Example
Verb, past	-(으)ㄴ	읽다 → 읽은 책
Verb, present	-는	읽다 → 읽는 책
Verb, future	-(으)ㄹ	읽다 → 읽을 책
Adjective, present	-(으)ㄴ	좋다 → 좋은 사람
있다 / 없다 group	-는	재미있는 영화
ㄹ stems	ㄹ drops	만들다 → 만든 / 만드는
이다	-인	학생인 친구
Recollection	-던	자주 가던 카페

Notes

The modifier always comes before the noun, and the tense sits on it rather than on the main verb. 어제 읽은 책 (the book I read yesterday), 지금 읽는 책 (the book I'm reading), 내일 읽을 책 (the book I'll read).

Verbs and adjectives behave differently, and this is where most errors come from. Verbs: past -(으)ㄴ, present -는, future -(으)ㄹ. Adjectives: present -(으)ㄴ — 좋은 사람, 예쁜 꽃. So 읽은 is a past verb but 좋은 is a present adjective, even though they look alike.

One group sits between the two. Adjectives built on 있다 or 없다 take -는, not -(으)ㄴ: 재미있는 영화, 맛있는 음식, 재미없는 수업. And stems ending in ㄹ drop it before -(으)ㄴ and -는: 만들다 gives 만든 and 만드는.

Examples

- 1 지금 읽는 책이 재미있어요.
The book I'm reading now is good.
- 2 어제 만난 사람이에요.
This is the person I met yesterday.
- 3 내일 갈 곳을 정했어요.
I've decided where to go tomorrow.
- 4 맛있는 음식을 먹었어요.
I had some delicious food.
- 5 예쁜 옷을 샀어요.
I bought some lovely clothes.
- 6 제가 사는 곳은 서울이에요.
The place I live is Seoul.

Compared with

English relative clauses

Word order is the reverse. Everything that would follow the noun in English goes in front of it in Korean, and no relative pronoun is used.

the book I read yesterday → 어제 읽은 책

Verbs vs adjectives

The same ending means different things depending on the word class. -(으)ㄴ on a verb is past; on an adjective it is present. Nothing in the form tells you which — you have to know the word.

읽은 책 (the book I read) / 좋은 책 (a good book)

-던

Describes something habitual or unfinished in the past, with a note of recollection. It contrasts with -(으)ㄴ, which reports a completed action plainly.

자주 가던 카페 (the cafe I used to go to) / 어제 간 카페 (the cafe I went to yesterday)

Watch out

✗ 정말 재미있는 영화예요.

○ 정말 재미있는 영화예요.

Adjectives ending in 있다 or 없다 take -는, not -(으)ㄴ. 맛있는, 맛있는, 재미없는 all follow.

✗ 좋은 사람을 만났어요.

○ 좋은 사람을 만났어요.

Ordinary adjectives take -(으)ㄴ for the present. -는 belongs to verbs, and to the 있다 group.

✗ 제가 만든 음식이에요.

○ 제가 만든 음식이에요.

A stem ending in ㄹ drops it before -(으)ㄴ and -는: 만든, 만드는. Compare 사는 사람 and 산 사람 from 살다.