



Korean Ladder Study Note

시 / 사 / 수

Why ㅅ Sounds Like 'Sh' Before ㅣ

Level	Topic	Focus
A1 · Beginner TOPIK 1	Pronunciation Consonants	시 / 사 / 수 Why ㅅ Sounds Like 'Sh' Before ㅣ

Study Links

Open this lesson on Korean Ladder

<https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-PRON-CNS-009>

Watch the full video on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEYpI3mKqsg>

Visit [koreanladder.com](https://www.koreanladder.com) for all free lessons

<https://www.koreanladder.com>

Core Idea

Okay, here's my real problem. I learned ㅅ is 's', so why does my Korean friend say 시 like 'shi'? Am I hearing things?

You're not hearing things. 아주 좋은 질문이에요. It really does shift, and there's a simple rule behind it.

The whole secret is the vowel that comes right after ㅅ. One vowel pulls the sound toward 'sh'.

여기 규칙이에요. Before the vowel ㅣ, ㅅ softens toward 'sh'. Before ㅏ, ㅑ, ㅓ, it stays a clean 's'.

Conversation Snapshot

Speaker	Korean	Meaning
Hana	이 시 좋아요. —	I like this poem.
Junho	네, 저도 시를 좋아해요. —	Yes, I like poems too.



Speaker	Korean	Meaning
Hana	커피 네 잔, 사 줄까요? —	Four coffees — shall I buy them?
Junho	좋아요, 잠깐 쉬어요. —	Sounds good, let's rest a moment.

Vocabulary & Useful Expressions

Word	Meaning	Example
ㅅ + ㅣ s + i	Before ㅣ, ㅅ leans toward 'sh'	The whole secret is the vowel that comes right after ㅅ. One vowel pulls the sound toward 'sh'.
시 = sh · 사 · 소 · 수 = s si = sh · sa · so · su = s	ㅣ triggers the soft 'sh'; other vowels keep plain 's'	여기 규칙이에요. Before the vowel ㅣ, ㅅ softens toward 'sh'. Before ㅓ, ㅕ, ㅗ, it stays a clean 's'.
사 · 소 · 수 sa · so · su	plain 's' — like 'sock'	먼저 평범한 소리를 들어요. Let's hear the plain 's' first, so you know the baseline.
사 sa	four — plain 's'	사. It means 'four'. The ㅅ here is a simple 's', just like the start of 'saw'.
소 so	cow — plain 's'	소. It means 'cow'. Again a plain 's' — 소, nothing fancy.
수 su	number — plain 's'	수. It means 'number'. 수 — still that steady, plain 's'.
시 si	poem — soft 'sh'	시. It means 'poem'. Listen — 시. The ㅅ slides toward a soft 'sh', not a sharp hiss.
사 → 시 sa → si	plain 's' → soft 'sh', because of ㅣ	들리죠. Same letter ㅅ, but the ㅣ pulls it gently toward 'sh'. 사 versus 시 — feel the difference.



Grammar / Structure Notes

ㅏ + ㅣ

ㅏ + ㅣ — Before ㅣ, ㅏ leans toward 'sh'

Everywhere else, ㅏ stays a plain 's'

ㅑ = sh · ㅓ · ㅕ · ㅗ = s

ㅑ = sh · ㅓ · ㅕ · ㅗ = s — ㅣ triggers the soft 'sh'; other vowels keep plain 's'

It's about the vowel, not the letter changing

ㅓ · ㅕ · ㅗ

ㅓ · ㅕ · ㅗ — plain 's' — like 'sock'

tongue relaxed, a soft steady hiss

ㅓ

ㅓ + ㅓ — four — plain 's'

ㅓ. It means 'four'. The ㅓ here is a simple 's', just like the start of 'saw'.

ㅕ

ㅓ + ㅕ — cow — plain 's'

ㅕ. It means 'cow'. Again a plain 's' — ㅕ, nothing fancy.

Pronunciation Loop

Phrase	How to practice
ㅓ	sa
ㅑ	si
ㅓㅑ	sa · si

Self-Check

- 1 Say ㅑ / ㅓ / ㅕ three times: slow, natural, then inside a short sentence.
- 2 Write one original sentence that was not in the video.
- 3 Rewatch the YouTube lesson and pause when the same pattern appears.

Related / Subsequent Studies



Lesson	Why study it next	Link
ㄷ / ㅌ / ㅌ The Three Korean D/T Sounds	A1 Pronunciation: compare ㄷ / ㅌ / ㅌ with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-PRON-CNS-006
ㄹ 발음 The Korean R/L Sound at the Start and Middle of Words	A1 Pronunciation: compare ㄹ 발음 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-PRON-CNS-002
ㄴ / ㄷ / ㅎ The Soft Korean Consonants Beginners Overlook	A1 Pronunciation: compare ㄴ / ㄷ / ㅎ with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-PRON-CNS-008
ㅇ의 두 얼굴 첫소리 묵음과 받침 받침 'ㅇ'	A1 Pronunciation: compare ㅇ의 두 얼굴 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-A1-PRON-CNS-004

My Notes

Your ladder to fluent Korean. This PDF, the website, and the video lessons are free for personal study.