



Korean Ladder Study Note

두음법칙

Why 女 Is 여자 but 男 Stays 남자

Level	Topic	Focus
B2 · Upper-Intermediate TOPIK 4	Pronunciation Consonants	두음법칙 Why 女 Is 여자 but 男 Stays 남자

Study Links

Open this lesson on Korean Ladder

<https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-B2-PRON-CNS-003>

Watch the full video on YouTube

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFuWNGH_hao

Visit koreanladder.com for all free lessons

<https://www.koreanladder.com>

Core Idea

Here is my question. Why is the word for woman 여자, but in older or northern spellings I sometimes see 녀자? Did the first sound disappear?

좋은 질문이에요. The answer is 두음법칙, the initial-sound rule. 두음 means the first sound of a word, and 법칙 means rule.

이 규칙은 주로 한자어에서 보여요. In many Sino-Korean words, 리을 or 니은 at the very start of a word is avoided in standard South Korean spelling.

첫 번째 움직임이에요. 리을, the letter ㄹ, before 이 or a y-vowel drops to 이응, the letter ㅇ. 그래서 리가 이가 돼요.

Conversation Snapshot

Speaker	Korean	Meaning
Hana	이 노동 조건, 이해했어요? —	Did you understand these labor conditions?



Speaker	Korean	Meaning
Junho	네, 관리 팀이 잘 설명했어요. —	Yes, the management team explained it well.
Hana	좋아요. 남녀 휴게실 위치도 확인해 주세요. —	Good. Please also check the location of the men's and women's lounge.
Junho	네, 여자 휴게실은 오른쪽에 있어요. —	Sure. The women's lounge is on the right.
Hana	노동 · 이해 · 여자 —	front position: changed
Junho	관리 · 남녀 —	middle position: stayed

Vocabulary & Useful Expressions

Word	Meaning	Example
두음법칙 dueum-beopchik	initial-sound rule	좋은 질문이에요. The answer is 두음법칙, the initial-sound rule. 두음 means the first sound of a word, and 법칙 means rule.
단어 첫소리 ㄹ · ㄴ daneo cheotsori rieul · nieun	word-initial ㄹ and ㄴ	이 규칙은 주로 한자어에서 보여요. In many Sino-Korean words, 리을 or 니은 at the very start of a word is avoided in standard South Korean spelling.
리 → 이 ri → i	ㄹ before 이/y drops at the front	첫 번째 움직임이에요. 리을, the letter ㄹ, before 이 or a y-vowel drops to 이응, the letter ㅇ. 그래서 리가 이가 돼요.
녀 → 여 nyeo → yeo	ㄴ before 이/y drops at the front	두 번째 움직임이에요. 니은, the letter ㄴ, before 이 or a y-vowel also drops to 이응. 그래서 녀가 여가 돼요.
녀자 → 여자 nyeoja → yeoja	woman	예를 들어 볼게요. The older or source form 녀자 becomes the South Korean standard 여자.
여자 yeoja	Why 女 Is 여자 but 男 Stays 남자	So I should say 여자, not 녀자, when I'm using standard South Korean.
리해 → 이해 rihae → ihae	understanding	맞아요. Another one is 리해 becoming 이해. In South Korea, the word begins open, with 이, not 리.
로 → 노 ro → no	ㄹ before other vowels becomes ㄴ at the front	세 번째 움직임도 있어요. Word-initial 리을 before other vowels does not disappear completely. It softens to 니은. So 로 becomes 노.



Grammar / Structure Notes

두음법칙

두음법칙 — initial-sound rule

두음 = first sound · 법칙 = rule

단어 첫소리 ㄹ · ㄴ

단어 첫소리 ㄹ · ㄴ — word-initial ㄹ and ㄴ

mostly Sino-Korean words

ㄹ → 이

ㄹ → 이 — ㄹ before 이/y drops at the front

리해 → 이해

ㄴ → 여

ㄴ → 여 — ㄴ before 이/y drops at the front

녀자 → 여자

녀자 → 여자

녀자 + → + 여자 — woman

예를 들어 볼게요. The older or source form 녀자 becomes the South Korean standard 여자.

Pronunciation Loop

Phrase	How to practice
여자	yeoja
이해	ihae
이해가 돼요	ihaega dwaeyo
노동	nodong

Self-Check

- 1 Say 두음법칙 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
경음화 Why 학교 Sounds Like 학교	B2 Pronunciation: compare 경음화 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-B2-PRON-CNS-002
구개음화 When 같이 Becomes 가치	B2 Pronunciation: compare 구개음화 with this lesson so the boundary becomes clearer.	Open lesson https://www.koreanladder.com/lesson.html?id=KOR-B2-PRON-CNS-001
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

My Notes

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