

Identity construction through gendered terms of addresses in Korean

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Abstract. How should a speaker call a hearer? In this paper, we present an experimental study which probes the social and interactional meaning of Korean gendered terms of addresses (GTAs: *unnie*, *oppa*, *noona*, *hyung*). GTAs prescriptively index genders of both interlocutors, but are beginning to be used in ‘gender-mismatch’ patterns. Based on the experimental results, we argue that both the prescription conforming and the ‘mismatching’ uses of GTAs are each associated with unique, complex webs of meanings which track the shifting gender ideologies in Korea. In particular, mismatching uses of GTAs are shown to often function as speakers’ strategy to break away from established gender norms, including traditional gender roles and the sexualization of female-male relations.

Keywords. terms of addresses; language and gender; Korean; social meaning; language ideologies

1. Introduction. How do we call each other, and what does the answer reveal about our identities and the relationships we form in a society? Other than names, we also often use ‘terms of addresses’ to call or refer to someone else. These include terms such as *dude*, *sis*, *honey*, *your honor*, *madame X*, *Mr Y*, etc. Terms of addresses are particularly interesting from a sociolinguistic perspective, because they reveal not just speaker-hearer relationships, but also the evolution of the broader social structures that prescribe the roles we take on and relationships we enter into in a given community.

The specific terms of address that we are interested in are familial, gendered terms of addresses in Korean, henceforth GTAs. Here, we focus on 4 such GTAs, *unnie*, *oppa*, *noona*, and *hyung*. GTAs are ubiquitous in everyday interaction, as well as in mainstream Korean media. They are also one of the first expressions that international fans of K-dramas and K-pop familiarize themselves with, and actively take on as a part of their own language practice. The full dimensions of social meanings associated with these GTAs however, have not yet been thoroughly investigated. The aim of this paper is to clarify the evolving meanings associated with the 4 GTAs and situate them within the changing fabric of the Korean society.

1.1. ORIGIN AND USE. Etymologically, the 4 GTAs in question functioned as kinship terms and were only used to address one’s older siblings (i.e., older brothers and sisters). This basic function is maintained to the present day, but now, GTAs also have a much wider usage pattern. A first pass empirical generalization is that GTAs can be used to address or refer to basically any (slightly) older person that one feels close to, like an older friend or an older romantic partner. The age gap needs to be below a certain threshold however, as other more differential terms should be used for hearers who are much older than the speaker. Native speaker intuitions suggest that the critical threshold is around 10 years of age gap (with more leeway granted if the speaker and the hearer are very close).

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gender ideologies appear to constrain or at least influence the envelope of the emerging indexical fields associated with the GTAs. Seen under this light, mismatching uses of GTAs can be construed as speakers' strategy to break away from these gender norms underlying the matching uses of GTAs, such as the sexualization of female-male relations and cute femininity (in the case of *oppa*), or their strategy to actively embody non-traditional gender roles connoted by mismatching uses of GTAs, such as feminine solidarity (in the case of *unnie* used by males).

At the same time, we also think that there exists some room for introducing and negotiating new meaning potentials of the GTAs, the key battleground being specific utterances grounded in interactions (Kiesling 2004, 2009; Podesva 2011; i.a.). To give just one example, we notice a recent trend in which female speakers use the term *unnie* to signal positive, empowered traits, and relationships predicated on solidarity (in the past, we believe these intentions would have likely triggered the use of the mismatching GTA *hyung* by the female speakers). We think that this not only reflects shifting ideas about female roles and female to female relationships, but also indicates that the accumulation of *unnie* uses in specific, positive contexts may have actively helped the term acquire new dimensions of meaning, and in turn maybe even helped shift ideas about female roles and female to female relationships.

This work was limited in the number and the diversity of participants recruited for the experiment. In the future, we aim to run follow-up studies focusing more on LGBTQIA communities, because the comments elicited from the present study suggest that they are at the forefront of initiating innovative, mismatching uses of the GTAs documented here. Of particular interest may be people who self-identify as non-binary; we are curious to find how they would navigate a language system which prescriptively enforces binary gender.

7. Supplementary materials. Links to experiments, data, and model summaries can be found in the following repository: <https://github.com/sunwooj/genderedTAs>.

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