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Linguistic and Social Features of Korean Slangs

OLOMOUC 2025 Cynthia Herchelová

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Vyhlasujem, že som túto bakalársku prácu vypracovala samostatne s použitím uvedených zdrojov a literatúry.

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Anotácia: Bakalárska práca sa zaoberá štúdiom súčasných kórejských slangov objavujúcich sa na sociálnych médiách. Skladá sa z dvoch častí. V prvej časti sa venuje morfológii a pojednáva o najčastejších typoch slovotvorby Kórejského slangu. V druhej časti analyzuje zozbierané slangové výrazy zo sociolingvistického hľadiska, pričom sa zameriava na ich spoločenskú relevanciu a na prvky kórejskej spoločnosti, ktoré sa odrážajú v potrebe ich tvorby a prijatia mladou generáciou.

Abstract

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Abstract: This bachelor's thesis focuses on the study of contemporary Korean slang found on social media. It contains two parts. In the first part, it examines the morphology and discusses the most common types of word formation processes of Korean slang. In the second part, the thesis analyses the collected slang expressions from a sociolinguistic perspective, with particular attention to their social relevance and to the aspects of Korean society that are reflected in the need for their creation and adaptation by the younger generation.

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In this thesis, I use the McCune-Reischauer Romanization in Korean for transcription of linguistic examples. Exception are proper nouns, for which the most widely accepted English transcription was chosen.

In this thesis, the adjective ‘Korean’ is used to address the language, culture and history of the Republic of Korea (ROK), unless stated otherwise. Likewise, the word ‘Korea’ means ROK (e.g, the Korean language: the language spoken in the Republic of Korea).

Introduction

This bachelor's thesis examines the characteristics of Korean slang expressions, from both a morphological and sociolinguistic perspective. It explores contemporary trends in slang formation in Korean slang and investigates the social dynamics surrounding these expressions within the current Korean context, and finally how their existence reflects their users and Korean society as a whole.

The slang expressions analysed in this study were primarily drawn from the Korean variety show 차린건 쥐뿔도 없지만 (translated as *Nothing Much Prepared*), hosted by Lee Youngji, a well-known Korean rapper and television personality in her early twenties. The show predominantly features informal, everyday conversations with prominent figures from the entertainment industry. The choice behind this decision was the show's natural reflection of the language trends favoured by its young, contemporary audience, with the host playing a role in shaping the linguistic landscape of Korean youth.

This thesis consists of two main sections. The first section will provide a theoretical framework, defining slang, exploring its role in modern society, and discussing its relevance within the field of linguistics. The second section is divided into two subsections: a linguistic analysis and a social analysis of the identified slang expressions. The linguistic analysis will focus on the word formation processes involved in creating these expressions, while the social analysis will examine the role these expressions play within the social contexts of their respective audiences.

1. Introduction to Slang

This section examines the complexities involved in defining slang, situating it within the broader context of colloquial language varieties while emphasizing its distinct linguistic and social characteristics. It explores the ways in which slang overlaps with, yet remains fundamentally different from, other informal language forms such as jargon, particularly in terms of function and audience.[1] The discussion also considers the critique of slang by linguists, who have often dismissed it as a degraded or non-serious form of language.[2] Nevertheless, this section argues for the linguistic and cultural importance of slang, highlighting its role as a dynamic and evolving reflection of social identity, group affiliation, and cultural trends. In particular, it stresses the necessity of studying slang within sociolinguistics, where its unique properties and its capacity to reflect societal changes offer crucial insights into language variation, innovation, and social interaction.

1.1. What is Slang?

From the moment language began to take shape in a more of a complete form around 150,000 years ago, it has undergone centuries of change and refinement to reach the complexity studied in the twenty-first century.[3] One of the most rapid examples of language change is slang.

Slang is a constantly evolving collection of informal words and phrases used by speakers to create or strengthen social identity and connection within a group, trend, or fashion. It's a long-standing element of language, its origins possibly dating back to the origins of language itself, as it appears to be a feature of any vocabulary used in informal interactions within a group that is large or diverse enough to be subdivided into subgroups.[4]

While there is no universally accepted definition of slang – as defining it is challenging due to its social and psychological complexities – the Oxford English Dictionary, which serves as one of the most highly respected authorities on the English language, defines it as a type of language consisting of ‘words and phrases which are very colloquial or informal, typically

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[1] Bikhtiyar Omar Fattah, On the Margins of Colloquialism: Analysis of Jargon, Slang, Idioms, Clichés and Acronyms within Register Theory in Selected English Texts (PhD diss., Koya University, 2023), 73-75.
[2] Marcel Danesi, “The Forms and Functions of Slang,” Semiotica 2010, no. 182 (November 4, 2010): 509, https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.2010.069.
[3] Steven R. Fischer, *A History of Language* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 51.
[4] Connie C. Eble, *Slang and Sociability: In-Group Language among College Students* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 11.

consisting of coinages, arbitrary modifications of existing words, playful or colourful figures of speech, coarse or offensive words, etc.'[5]

More broadly, Bethany Dumas and Jonathan Lighter proposed that slang can be identified using four criteria: first, slang diminishes the dignity of formal speech or writing; second, slang implies a speaker's special familiarity with a referent or a group of people with less social status; third, slang is avoided when speaking with people of higher social status; and fourth, slang replaces conventional synonyms, either to protect the user from discomfort or to avoid further elaboration. When something meets at least two of these criteria, it is considered to possess the ultimate identifying characteristics of true slang.[6]

While attempting to accurately define slang, a term very close in definition often comes into conversation, namely jargon. Jargon refers to a specialised variety of language characterised by the use of technical, professional, or context-specific terms, primarily employed and understood within a particular occupational, professional, or social group. It serves to facilitate precise and efficient communication among group members, but can create barriers to understanding for outsiders. Although traditionally confined to specific communities of practice, certain jargon terms may, over time, diffuse into general language use through media, technology, and social interaction.[7] A good example of jargon is 'acquit', which refers to an act when a court lets a person go without any penalty, and belongs to legal jargon. While this expression is connected to a particular group of people, it exists in the standard English dictionary and is associated with high level of proficiency in the language and high social status. What is apparent from this definition is that jargon, at first glance, heavily overlaps with the definition of slang. What differentiates slang from jargon is that it is not exclusive to a particular field of proficiency, but rather a colloquial language used to facilitate the process of communication and enhance intimacy among users, effectively contributing to the user's own identity and group belonging.[8]

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[5] Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. "slang," accessed January 1, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/slang_n4?tab=factsheet#22470345.
[6] Eble, Slang and Sociability: In-Group Language among College Students, 11–12.
[7] Fattah, On the Margins of Colloquialism, 64-66.
[8] Fattah, On the Margins of Colloquialism, 72-75.

1.2. Significance of Slang for the Study of Linguistics

From a more linguistic perspective, slang can be understood as a stylistic choice in which existing words have their meanings altered or expanded, or entirely new words are coined. It is a form of speech variety, which refers to any distinguishable linguistic system used by a speaker or, in this case, a group of speakers. Linguistic features of a speech variety can be observed at all levels of language – lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactical.[9] Slang is often a form of linguistic innovation that occurs without adhering to formal academic standards or conventional rules of language structure.[10]

1.2.1. Slang in the Study of Sociolinguistics

The study of slang is inherent to the study of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics refer to the study of the relationship between language and society. One of the fundamental areas of study within sociolinguistics is social variation, which refers to the differences in the ways people use language depending on social factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, social class, education, profession, or even the group to which they belong. There are two distinct approaches to describing social variation in language.

Firstly, the group-based approach, which begins by identifying various sections of the population, and then determines the linguistic behaviour — that is, the values of particular linguistic variables — characteristic of each group. Its focus is on what speech patterns are typical given a specific social group.

Secondly, the variable-based approach, where research focuses first on the distribution of linguistic variables across the speech community as a whole. After identifying specific patterns, they investigate the social characteristics of the speakers who use these forms. Essentially, it focuses on what can be inferred about the speaker's social background by their particular way of speaking and is centred on understanding the social meaning of speech as it is encountered in practice.[11]

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[9] Weidong Dai and Zhaoxiong He, *A New Concise Course in Linguistics for Students of English*, 2nd ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2010), 111.
[10] Frank Gaynor and Mario Pei, *Dictionary of Linguistics* (Michigan: Philosophical Library, 1954).
[11] William Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 130-131.

Thus, understanding social variation is particularly relevant in the study of slang, as different groups — whether defined by age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or subcultural affiliation — develop and adopt slang terms as markers of identity. Slang exemplifies how language change and variation are not arbitrary but socially motivated. Much like Labov's findings on pronunciation patterns correlated with social class[12], the use of slang is shaped by broader social structures and the desire of individuals to align (or misalign) themselves with particular social groups.

To conclude, though often dismissed as fleeting or substandard, slang is crucial to understanding everyday communication. Its informal, humorous, or taboo nature may cause scholars to view it as a deviation from standard language – even going as far as to call it a sort of linguistic 'carnage' –, but this overlooks its role in reflecting social and cultural dynamics.[13] Slang fosters social cohesion, identity formation, and boundary creation, making it vital to linguistic and social studies.

The rapid evolution of slang highlights language's fluidity and offers insights into shifting social attitudes and values. Korean slang, for example, illustrates how globalization and modernization have introduced English terms and unique new expressions, reflecting both global influences and South Korea's cultural shifts.[14] Slang is not just vocabulary, but a social practice rooted in human needs to belong and distinguish oneself. It strengthens group identity while excluding outsiders, further driving its evolution. Lastly, as Michael Adams concludes: 'We cannot study language unless we account for all its characters, slang included.'[15]

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[12] Labov, *The Social Stratification of English*, 40-57.
[13] Danesi, "Forms and Functions of Slang," 509.
[14] Connie Eble, *Slang and Sociability: In-Group Language among College Students* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 119–20.
[15] Michael Adams, *Slang: The People's Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

2. Korean Morphology

Morphology is a sub-discipline of linguistics concerned with the systematic patterns of word formation and the internal constituent structure of words. It deals with morphemes, the smallest meaningful units of language. Booij defines morphemes as 'minimal, irreducible linguistic units with a lexical or grammatical meaning.'[16]

It is important to note that words in most languages are rarely composed of only one morpheme; such words are referred to as simplex words. In contrast, complex words, or those with more intricate morphological structures, are created through the morphological rules of a language. [17]

2.1. Word Formation in Korean

To adequately understand the morphological characteristics of Korean slang expressions, it is imperative to first examine the principles of word formation in standard Korean. Establishing a baseline in standard morphology allows for a more nuanced identification of both the innovative and rule-governed nature of Korean slang. Given that slang often involves intentional deviation from linguistic norms, analysing its morphological foundation in relation to standard Korean enables a clearer conceptualization of its creative and systemic elements.

The most common word formation processes in Korean are inflection, derivation, and compounding. In addition, new words may also emerge through borrowing, the lexicalization of phrases, and coinage. A distinctive feature of the Korean lexicon is the prevalence of Sino-Korean vocabulary, which refers to Korean words of Chinese origin. These should not be classified as typical loanwords. Sino-Korean vocabulary is predominantly nominal, and new words are frequently formed by combining existing Sino-Korean morphemes.[18]

While these processes apply to standard Korean vocabulary, it is reasonable to expect that many will also apply to slang expressions in Korean. This expectation is based on the fact that while slang expressions often exhibit a certain non-conformity to the standard rules of

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[16] Geert Booij, *The Grammar of Words: An Introduction to Linguistic Morphology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8-9.
[17] EunHee Lee, Sean Madigan, and Mee-Jeong Park, *An Introduction to Korean Linguistics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 73.
[18] Lee, *Introduction to Korean Linguistics*, 91.

a language, they cannot completely deviate from the rules of morphology – particularly in a language as complex as Korean.

In the following section, I will briefly discuss the four most common formation processes seen in contemporary Korean. They consist of inflection, derivation, compounding and borrowing.

a) Inflection

Inflection refers to the process of forming different grammatical forms from already existing words. In Korean, this is primarily achieved by attaching inflectional suffixes. The categories formed through inflection are best described as morpho-syntactic, since distinguishing between morphology and syntax can be challenging, and all inflectional suffixes can also be analysed within syntactic contexts. A common example of an inflectional suffix is -들 [-tul], which marks the plural form.[19]

Ex. 사람 [*saram*] 'person' → 사람들 [*saram-tul*] 'people'

b) Derivation

The process of creating words out of other words by adding affixes. In Korean, the more common type of affixation is with the use of suffixes, which also have the quality of changing morphological category (i.e., part of speech) of the root to which they attach. Prefixes, in contrast, typically do not affect category change. Both derivational prefixes and suffixes may originate from either Sino-Korean or native Korean morphemes.[20] Below is an example containing a Sino-Korean suffix:

Ex. -자 [*cha*] 'person' in 기술자 [*ki-sul-cha*] 'skill' → 'technician'

c) Compounding

Compounding is a word formation process wherein new words are formed by combining two or more independent words, as opposed to using affixes, as in derivation. In Korean, compounds may be formed from native words belonging to lexical categories such as nouns,

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[19] Lee, *Introduction to Korean Linguistics*, 91.
[20] Lee, *Introduction to Korean Linguistics*, 81.

verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. Sino-Korean compounds, on the other hand, consist of bound roots of Chinese origin.[21]

Ex. 눈물 [*nun-mul*] 'eye-water' → 'tear'

d) Borrowing

Lexical borrowing refers to the process of adoption of individual words or sets of words from another language or dialect. Korean is characterised by having well over half of all of its modern vocabulary consisting of words either directly borrowed or derived from Chinese characters. Due to the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945, a lot of Japanese vocabulary is still commonly used.

Additionally, while English loanwords can be viewed as problematic amongst linguists due to the difficulties associated with their adaptation, there is very little practical resistance to their use from the general public, leading to most of modern Korean neologisms stemming from the English language.[22]

It is also noteworthy that while many English words borrowed into Korean retain their original meaning, particularly names of concrete objects, there are also many examples of loanwords that undergo a form of a semantic change (restriction, extension or shift). An example of a semantic restriction is 미팅 [*miting*], which in the Korean context specifically refers to a blind date, or a meeting between a man and a woman for the sole purpose of socialising.[23]

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[21] Lee, *Introduction to Korean Linguistics*, 86-87.
[22] Tyson, Rod. "English Loanwords in Korean: Patterns of Borrowing and Semantic Change." *The Journal of Second Language Acquisition and Teaching* 1 (1993): 29–30. https://journals.uair.arizona.edu/index.php/AZSLAT/article/view/21459

[23] Tyson, "English Loanwords in Korean," 32.

3. Analysis of Selected Terms from a Morphological Perspective

Previous studies on Korean slang expressions primarily focus on slang and neologisms used in text-based communication. According to these studies, the most common processes behind the formation of Korean slang include abbreviation, contraction, semantic shift (often imprecisely labelled as 'corruption'), and blending.[24] These do not heavily overlap (apart from semantic shift, which is relevant especially for borrowing in Korean) with the most common formation processes found in Korean language. This fact is due to their main research subject being text language, which significantly differs from the spoken form. The study 'The Language of the Web: Mechanisms of Korean Internet Slang' also examines spelling variation and orthographic innovation, which are prevalent in the language of Korean youth on the internet.

This thesis intends to draw on the previously conducted works and expand on the study of slang by also focusing on expressions used in spoken, conversational Korean. This will be done by the analysis of 97 Korean slang expressions, sourced primarily from two platforms. The first is the YouTube talk show 'Nothing Much Prepared', hosted by South Korean rapper Lee Youngji. This program was chosen due to its informal, interview-based format and strong appeal among Korean youth, making it an exemplary source for observing natural slang usage. Youngji herself has been dubbed 'The president of MZ', clearly defining the demographics of her audiences. Its casual setting and the popularity of both the host and her celebrity guests create a linguistic environment reflective of everyday speech among younger generations engaged with popular culture. Episodes 28, 29, 31, and 33 were specifically chosen for their representative value based on the guests' age and fan base demographics. The ages of quests present in these episodes range from 21 to 31 at the time of airing, with their fan bases following a similar age range.

However, relying solely on this source risks limiting the scope of slang to a single social context. To address this, additional expressions were collected from Naver, South Korea's dominant web search engine, and Ssadic (싸딕), an open, user-generated slang dictionary. The

[24] Alexandra Bîja, "The Language of the Web: Mechanisms of Korean Internet Slang," Annals of Philosophy, Social and Human Disciplines 1 (2024): 147–163, https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A3%3A16504355/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A181674105.

latter – short for 'Insider Dictionary' (인싸이더 딕셔너리) – is particularly valuable for its focus on emergent and trend-based vocabulary, offering a broader linguistic sample across digital and informal discourse communities. Examples taken from this secondary source will be marked by an exclamation point preceding the expression for transparency.

Following data collection, slang expressions were categorized based on their linguistic formation and the specific shifts that qualified them as slang. While most of the expressions were analysed and classified according to morphological processes – such as abbreviations and blending – a smaller subset was categorized based on semantic change or orthographic manipulation.

Based on the analysis of the aforementioned 97 expressions, I have identified ten major categories related to slang formation. In order of their frequency, the categories are as follows: abbreviation, compounding, derivation, language change, blending, contraction, script mixing, borrowing, showbiz words, and figurative speech. While some expressions could fall into multiple categories – particularly those involving English borrowings – I focused on the primary process behind each word's creation and its classification as slang. Although there is some overlap with previous studies, the emphasis on spoken language makes these findings broadly comparable to word formation patterns in standard Korean, with the notable exception of abbreviations.

Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the categorical structure derived from my analysis:

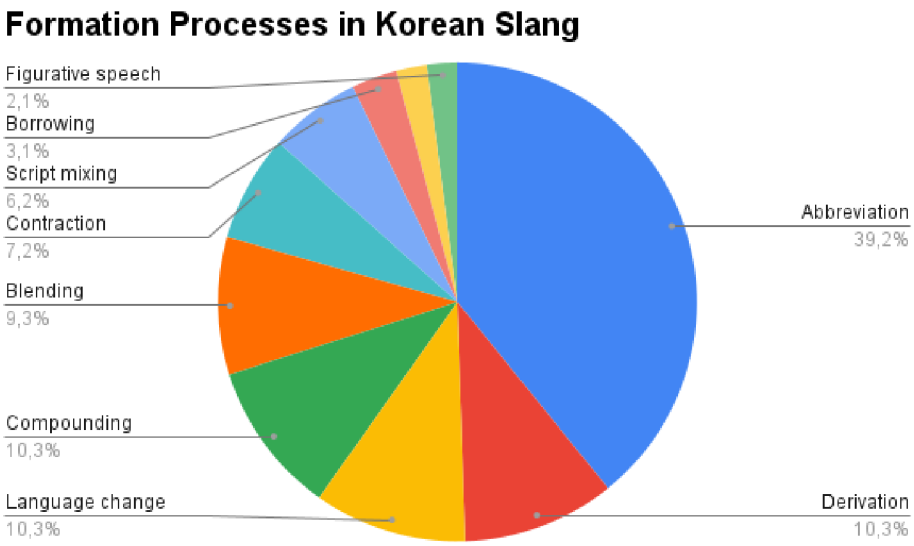

Figure 1: Formation Processes in Korean Slang

3.1. Abbreviation

The most common formation type was abbreviation, namely syllabic acronyms, which is in line with other studies conducted on Korean slang.[25] Within the category of abbreviations, three subtypes were identified: syllabic acronyms, mixed-code acronyms and romanised initialisms.

A noteworthy observation is that syllabic acronyms are much more common than consonantal acronyms, which can be seen more frequently in languages such as English. In fact, some Korean studies on the language adopt 두음절어 [*tu-ŭm-chŏl-ŏ*] (literally translated as a two-syllable word) to refer to acronyms, in order to emphasise the syllabic nature of these types of abbreviations.[26] This discrepancy can be attributed to Korean's unique writing system, in which characters are not written as isolated letters but rather grouped into syllabic blocks.

While forming syllabic acronyms, speakers usually reduce each phrase in the original expression to its first syllable, while maintaining the original pronunciation, which only further points to the importance of the syllabic unit.[27] Furthermore, Korean syllabic acronyms are often derived from entire phrases or full sentences, rather than isolated words, making them semantically rich and syntactically compact.

While consonantal acronyms do exist in Korean, they are nearly exclusively confined to text-based communication, as they are generally unsuited for spoken language.

a) Syllabic Acronyms

This subcategory is characterised by taking the first syllable of usually two or more words to create a single new expression, merging their meanings together. Unlike the mixed-code acronyms discussed in the next section, the source terms in this group are exclusively Korean, and their merger creates a compound meaning that is immediately recognizable to in-group speakers.

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[25] Sang-Cheol Ahn and Kyunney Egorova, "Morpho-Phonological Patterns of Recent Korean Neologisms," in *Proceedings of the Conference on Current Problems of Our Time: The Relationship of Man and Society (CPT 2020)* (Atlantis Press, 2021), 63, https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210225.012.

[26] Gyeongnyeo Kwon, *한국어 두음절어와 혼성어의 형성과 등재 연구* [A Study on the Formation and Registration of Korean Disyllabic and Blended Words] (Master's thesis, Ewha Womans University, 2022), V.

[27] Kwon, *한국어 두음절어와 혼성어*, 41.

(1) 음방 [*umpang*] 'music show' → 음악 [*umak*] 'music' + 방송 [*pangsong*] 'broadcast'

(2) 막방 [*makpang*] → 마지막 [*macimak*] 'last' + 방송 [*pangsong*] 'broadcast'

(This expression stands out amongst the others, because instead of using the first syllables of both words, it uses the last syllable of the word 마지막.)

(3) 사녹 [*sanok*] 'pre-recording' → 사전 [*sacen*] 'being prior, being beforehand'+ 녹화 [*nokhwa*] 'recording'

(4) 엽사 [*yŏp-sa*] 'funny picture' → 엽기 [*yŏp-ki*] 'bizzare' + 사진 [*sa-chin*] 'picture'

(A picture with a bizarre/funny expression either on purpose or accidentally, popular to share amongst friends.)

(5) 최애 [*ch'oe-ae*] 'bias, favourite' → 최고로[*ch'oe-ko-lo*] 'the most' + 애정하다 [*ae-chŏng-ha-ta*] 'to adore'

(Usually refers to the favourite member of a group, sometimes used more broadly to signify a favourite singer/character. It can be used as a standalone noun translating closely to 'bias'; or as a nominal adjective meaning 'favourite' singer etc.)

(6) 차애 [*cha-ae*] 'bias wrecker' → 차선으로 [*ch'a-sŏn-ŭ-lo*] 'as the second best option' + 애정하다 [*ae-chŏng-ha-ta*] 'to adore'

(Used very similarly to 최애, with the exception of referring to a 'second favourite', or a 'bias wrecker'.)

(7) !느좋 [*nŭ-chon*] 'good vibe, feel-good' → 느낌 [*nŭ-kkim*] 'feeling' + 좋다 [*choh-ta*] 'to be good'

(Although predominately acting as an adjective, same as its origins, it can also act as a noun within syntax.)

(8) !존버 [*chon-pŏ*] → 존나 [*chon-na*] 'f***ing' + 버티기 [*pŏ-t'i-ki*] 'enduring, holding out'

(Originating from the game ‘StarCraft’, where 버 stood for ‘burrow’, a special ability to conceal oneself underground and wait there. Over time, its use has expanded to refer to holding on in times of hardships/want until reaching the desired result. Comparisons can be drawn between its recent shift in meaning and the English word ‘manifesting’, as both are popular in online communities.)

(9) !혼영 [*hon-yŏng*] ‘watch a movie alone’ → 혼자 [*hon-cha*] ‘alone’ + 영화 [*yŏng-hwa*] ‘movie’

(10) 스불재 [*sŭ-pul-chae*] ‘a self-inflicted disaster’ → 스스로[*sŭ-sŭ-lo*] ‘by oneself’ + 불러온 [*pul-lŏ-on*] ‘caused’ + 재앙[*chae-ang*] ‘disaster’

(11) 엄친딸 [*ŏm-ch'in-ttal*] ‘mom’s friend’s daughter’ → 엄마 [*ŏm-ma*] ‘mom’ + 친구 [*ch'in-ku*] ‘friend’ + 딸 [*ttal*] ‘daughter’

(12) 남찍사 [*nam-tchik-sa*] ‘photo taken by someone else’ → 남이 [*nam-i*] ‘another person’ + 찍어준 [*tchik-ŏ-chun*] ‘taken’ + 사진 [*sa-jin*] ‘picture‘

(13) 남친짤 [*nam-ch'in-tchal*] ‘boyfriend photo’ → 남자 친구 [*nam-ja ch'in-ku*] ‘boyfriend’ + 짤 [*tchal*] ‘picture’

(A picture that looks like someone’s partner took it.)

(14) !갑분싸 [*kap-pun-ssa*] → 갑자기 [*kap-cha-ki*] ‘suddenly’ + 분위기 [*pun-wi-ki*] ‘atmosphere’ 싸해진다 [*sa-hae-chin-ta*] ‘become cold’

(Can be interpreted similarly to the English term ‘killjoy’, as it is usually used in situations when someone says something that ruins the atmosphere of the moment.)

(15) !나심비 [*na-sim-pi*] → 나의 [*na-ŭi*] ‘my’ + 심리적 만족의 [*sim-li-chŏk man-chok-ŭi*] ‘mental satisfaction’s’ + 비율 [*pi-yul*] ‘rate’

(The ‘rate of your mental satisfaction’ refers to the price of a purchase that brings you psychological satisfaction despite not being necessary.)

(16) 오노추 [*o-no-ch'u*] ‘song of the day’ → 오늘 [*o-nŭl*] ‘today’ + 노래 [*no-lae*] ‘song’ + 추천 [*ch'u-ch'ŏn*] ‘recommendation’

(17) !이왜진 [*i-wae-chin*] → 이게 [*i-ke*] ‘this’ + 왜 [*wae*] ‘why’ + 진짜이다 [*chin-tcha-i-ta*] ‘ to be true, real’ (‘Why is this real/true?’ used in cases when the speaker did not believe something to be true, but it turned out to be.)

(18) !꾸안꾸[*kku-an-kku*] ‘effortless chic’ → 꾸민 듯 [*kku-min tŭs*] ‘decorated’ + 안 꾸민 듯 [*an kku-min tŭs*] ‘as if not decorated’

(Meaning ‘looking as if you put effort into your appearance but actually looking natural’. It is used to describe a style that seems effortless yet stylish.)

(19) 많관부 [*manh-kwan-pu*] → 많은[*manh-ŭn*] ‘many, plentiful’ + 관심 [*kwan-sim*] ‘interest’ + 부탁드립니다 [*pu-t'ak-tŭ-lip-ni-ta*] ‘please’

(20) !안물안궁 [*an-mul-an-kung*] ‘didn’t ask, don’t care’ → 안 물어봤고 [*an mul-ŏ-pwass-ko*] ‘didn’t ask’ + 안 궁금하다 [*an kung-kŭm-ha-ta*] ‘not curious’

b) Mixed-code Acronyms

As the name of this subcategory suggests, these acronyms involve borrowing from another language in order to form the final expressions. Amongst those, the most prevalent were expressions containing words borrowed from English (with or without a semantic shift). Expressions containing Chinese and Japanese have also been identified.

- <u>Korean + English</u>

(21) 현타 [*hyŏn-t'a*] ‘reality check’ → 현실 [*hyŏn-sil*] ‘reality’ + (자격) 타임 [*cha-kyŏk t'a-im*] ‘realization time’

(Originally from 현자 타임 'sage time', this phrase used to be similar in meaning to the English 'post-coital tristesse'. Its modern usage has expanded to a moment of realization, where you can see things for how they truly are.)

(22) 직캠 [*chik-k'aem*] 'fan-cam' → 직접 [*chik-chŏp*] 'direct' + 캠 [*k'aem*] cam

(While literally translating to a 'direct camera', this expression refers to a videoclip of a performance and is very popular amongst K-Pop communities.)

(23) !억텐 [*ŏk-t'en*] → 억지 [*ŏk-chi*] 'forcedness' + 텐션 [*t'en-syŏn*] 'tension'

(This expression refers to a situation where someone is acting overly enthusiastic, energetic, or excited in a forced or exaggerated manner. Which being a noun, a verb forming suffix -하다 is often attached.)

(24) !반모 [*pan-mo*] 'informal mode' → 반말 [*pan-mal*] 'informal speech' + 모드 [*mo-tŭ*] 'mode'

(25) 짬바 [tcham-pa] → 짬밥 [*tcham-pap*] 'experience' + 바이브 [*pa-i-pŭ*] 'vibe'

(짬밥 is a slang in itself, and particularly describes period of military experience. 짬바 refers to 'the vibe that comes from experience' in a mocking tone, as it was popularized through a Korean show 'Show Me The Money', where the contestant coining this phrase was eliminated early on.)

(26) 얼박사 [*ŏl-pak-sa*] → 얼음 [*ŏl-ŭm*] 'ice' + 박카스 [*pak-k'a-sŭ*] 'Bacchus' + 사이다 [*sa-i-ta*] 'cider'

(Name of a mixed drink including ice, cider and a vitamin drink Bacchus.)

(27) !좋댓구알 [*choh-taes-ku-al*] → 좋아요 [*choh-a-yo*] 'like' + 댓글 [*taes-kŭl*] 'comment' + 구독 [*ku-tok*] 'subscribe' + 알람 [*al-lam*] 'alarm'

(A popular amongst YouTube audiences and creators 'like, comment, subscribe and turn the notifications on'.)

(28) 알잘딱깔센 [*al-chal-ttak-kkal-sen*] → 알아서 잘 딱 깔끔하고 센스있게 [*al-a-sŏ chal ttak kkal-kkŭm-ha-ko sen-sŭ-iss-ke*] 'Properly, well, exactly, neatly, and with sense'

(More naturally translates as 'do it properly, neatly, and sensibly on your own', this expression highlights the importance of handling tasks efficiently.)

- <u>English + Korean</u>

(29) 프사 [*p'ŭ-sa*] 'profile picture' → 프로필 [*p'ŭ-lo-p'il*] 'profile' + 사진 [*sa-chin*] 'picture'

- <u>Korean + English + Korean</u>

(30) !점메추 [*chŏm-me-ch'u*] 'lunch recommendation' → 점심 [*chŏm-sim*] 'lunch' + 메뉴 [*me-nyu*] 'menu' + 추천 [*ch'u-ch'ŏn*] 'recommendation'

(31) !사바사 [*sa-pa-sa*] 'from person to person' → 사람 [*sa-lam*] 'person' + 바이 [*pa-i*] + 사람 [*sa-lam*] 'person'

(While being an anglicized compound, the full phrase can be seen as an attempt at a partial loan translation of the English phrase 'from person to person'. In this expression, we can see a very common phenomenon in Korean borrowings from English, where phrases or words are adapted in an altered form or with an altered meaning.)

(32) !혼코노 [*hon-k'o-no*] 'going to the karaoke alone' → 혼자 [*hon-cha*] 'alone' + 코인 [*k'o-in*] 'coin' + 노래방 [*no-lae-pang*] 'karaoke'

- <u>Korean + Japanese</u>

(33) !성덕 [*sŏng-tŏk*] 'successful fan' → 성공한 [*sŏng-kong-han*] 'succeeded' + 덕후[*tŏk-hu*]

- <u>Korean + Chinese</u>

(34) !추구미 [*ch'u-ku-mi*] → 추구하다 [*ch'u-ku-ha-ta*] 'to seek' + 美 beautiful [*mi*] 'beauty'

(This expression is similar in meaning to 'role-model', and refers to a person that has the aesthetic we find attractive and seek to acquire.)

- <u>Pure English</u>

(35) !워라밸 [*wŏ-la-pael*] 'work-life balance' → A phrase originating from English, retaining its meaning.

c) Romanised Initialisms

This sub-category is particularly intriguing, since it diverges from the rules previously set by the other two sub-categories, and instead uses Latin alphabet to create initialisms, both from Korean expressions and from expressions borrowed from English.

(36) MZ → An abbreviation coming from the words 'Millennials' (born between 1980 and 1995) and 'Generation Z' (born between 1995 and early to mid-2000s), unique to the Korean discourse. Usually found in the form of MZ 세대 [*em-chi-se-tae*] 'Generation MZ'.

(37) JMT → An initialism for 존맛탱 [*chon-mas-t'aeng*], which translates to 'extremely delicious' or 'super tasty'.

(38) J 력 → A mixed type of an initialism – as J refers to the judging type in MBTI – and a derivation, as the suffix -력 [*lyeok*] 'power' attaches to it to form a term signifying one's ability to keep organized and plan ahead.

3.2. Compounding

Following abbreviation is compounding, which has totalled ten expressions out of the 97. Similarly to abbreviations, three subtypes of compounds have been identified based on the presence of borrowings.

a) Korean compounds

(39) 취향저격 [*ch'wi-hyang-chŏ-kyŏk*] 'hit the mark' → 취향 [*ch'wi-hyang*] 'taste' + 저격 [*chŏ-kyŏk*] 'shooting'

(This expression can also be understood as a loan translation, or calque, of the English expression 'hit the mark'. It is used to express when something is exactly to one's taste.)

(40) 번개모임 [*pŏn-kae-mo-im*] → 번개 [*pŏn-kae*] 'lighting' + 모임 [*mo-im*] 'gathering, meeting'

(Literally 'lightning meeting', this compound refers to spontaneous, last-minute social gatherings, especially those organized online with little prior planning inside game settings.)

(41) 빡세다 [*ppak-sey-ta*] → 빡 [*ppak*] + 세다 [*sey-ta*] 'strong, intense'

(Formed by compounding the intensifier 빡 (a mimetic expression indicating the sound of clapping two hands against each other with force) with the native Korean adjective 'strong, intense'. Together, it describes a very tough or difficult situation.)

b) Anglicized Compounds

The following compounds are fully comprised of English words, but don't exist in the English language as set phrases in the same forms.

(42) 원픽 [*wŏn-p'ik*] → 원 [*wŏn*] 'one'+ 픽 [*p'ik*] 'pick'

(In pop-culture, it refers to someone's favourite contestant in a survival show, mostly those whose concept is to create a new K-pop group.)

(43) 영라인 [*yŏng-la-in*] → 영 [*yŏng*] 'young' + 라인 [*la-in*] 'line'

(A compound of the words 'young' and 'line' with a semantic shift indicating group or network, referring to a cohort of young people within an organization or industry.)

(44) 큐티섹시 [*khyuthi seyksi*] → 큐티 [*khyuthi*] 'cutie' + 섹시 [*seyksi*] 'sexy'

(This term refers to a person that has both cute and sexy characteristics in a positive way.)

(45) 원샷 [*wŏn-syas*] 'bottoms up' → 원샷 [*wŏn*] 'one'+ 샷 [*syas*] 'shot'

(This word in Korean can mean either taking a single drink in one go (esp. alcohol) taking on a similar meaning to the phrase 'bottoms up'; or a solo camera shot in the context of media.)

c) Mixed-code Compounds

(46) 여유섹시 [*yeyuseyksi*] → 여유[*yeyu*] 'having more than enough of time, space, money, etc.' + 섹시 [*seyksi*] 'sexy'

(Similar to the term 큐티섹시 mentioned previously, it refers to a mix of easy-going, free-minded attractiveness that is very popular in South Korea as of now, where the person isn't focused on appearing attractive and doesn't 'try too hard'.)

(47) 야자타임 [*ya-ca-tha-im*] → This expression forms a very unique case. While the full agreed upon composition stems from the phrase 나이가 많든 적든 서로 **야** 라고 부르**자** [*na-i-ka manh-tŭn chŏk-tŭn sŏ-lo ya la-ko pu-lŭ-cha*] 'No matter the age, let's all call each other hey' + 타임 [*tha-im*] 'time'. In the case of linguistic analysis, it is important to point out that the informal vocative particle -야 [*ya*] and informal propositive particle -자 [*ca*] are joined together into 야자, a sort of colloquial compound substituting 반말 [*pan-mal*] 'informal speech'.

(48) 빅뱅세대 [*pik-payng-sey-tay*] 'BigBang generation' → 빅뱅 [*pik-payng*] 'BigBang' + 세대 [*sey-tay*] 'generation'

(Named after the Korean pop group BigBang, which was very popular in the late 2000s and early 2010s, and referring to the generation of K-pop fans that were fans during the group's prime and/or during their teenage years.)

3.3. Derivation

The third most common type is shared by derivation, language change and blending. Due to the abundance with which the formal Korean language uses derivation, its abundance was to be expected. This section includes interesting insights into the formation of not only Korean slang expressions, but also Korean morphology as a whole. Both class-changing and class-maintaining suffixes were identified.

a) Class-maintaining suffixation

- <u>Diminutive suffix</u>

(49) 귀염둥이 [*kwi-yŏm-tung-i*] 'cutie' → 귀염 *[kwi-yŏm]* 'affection' + suffix -둥이 [*tung-i*]

(50) 싸랑둥이 [*ssa-lang-tung-i*] 'lovely' → 사랑 [*sa-lang*] 'love' + suffix -둥이 [*tung-i*]

(The initial consonant is doubled to emphasize the cute feeling of the word.)

(51) 재간둥이 [*chae-kan-tung-i*] → 재간 *[chae-kan]* 'talent'

(Refers to a person with many talents.)

(52) 이겼지롱 [*i-kyŏss-chi-long*] → 이기다 [*i-ki-ta*] 'win' + past tense suffix -었 [*ŏss*] + discourse suffix -지 [*chi*] + dimunitive suffix -롱 [*long*] (indicating teasing)

- <u>Other</u>

(53) 자매력 [*cha-mae-lyŏk*] → 자매 [*cha-mae*] 'sister' + suffix -력 [*lyŏk*] 'power'

(Conveys the combined charm or dynamic of two people acting like sisters, possible to roughly translate to 'sister energy'.)

(54) 꼰대력 [*kkon-tae-lyŏk*] → 꼰대 [*kkon-tae*] 'old man' + suffix -력 [*lyŏk*] 'power'

(꼰대 [*kkon-tae*] more accurately refers to a person who pretends to be a know-it-all in a condescending manner. This phrase can be understood as the equivalent of 'boomer energy'.)

(55) 금쪽이 [*kŭm-tchok-i*] 'nointer' → 금쪽 [*kŭm-tchok*] 'a piece of gold' + nominalizing suffix -이 [*i*]

(Term originating from a popular TV show 'My Golden Child', used to refer to children who consistently disobeyed their parents or caused trouble.)

(56) !현질 [*hyŏn-chil*] → 현금 [*hyŏn-kŭm*] 'cash' + suffix -질 [*chil*] 'behaviour'

(A term popular in gaming contexts, as it refers to the act of spending real money in a typically mobile or online game through buying in-game items to gain advantage.)

b) Class-changing suffixation

- <u>Nominalization</u>

(57) 호소인 [*ho-so-in*] 'wannabe' → 호소하다 [*ho-so-ha-da*] 'to appeal' + suffix –인 [*in*] 'person'

- <u>Verbification</u>

(58) 빠방하다 [*ppa-pang-ha-ta*] → 빠방 [*ppa-pang*] an onomatopoeia expressing the sound of a car engine, mostly used by children + suffix -하다 [*ha-ta*]

(This expression is used to express an electronic device or any sort of engine going at full power.)

3.4. Language Change

Next is language change, more precisely semantic and phonetic shift (referring to the shift of either meaning or pronunciation from either Korean words or words borrowed from other languages, in this case, English). It is to be distinguished from simple borrowing, as a semantic shift is present, altering the original meaning. A form of semantic shift from borrowed

words is quite common in Korean, and this factor has proven relevant to the slang discourse as well.

a) Semantic Shift

(59) 펌핑 [*p'ŏm-p'ing*] 'pumping' → Similar to the English phrase 'pump up', meaning to fill oneself with excitement

(60) 화이팅 [*hwa-i-t'ing*] 'cheer up' → Originally from 'fighting', it is used as a catch-phrase to raise someone's spirit.

(61) 샵 [*syap*] → Loanword of the English word 'shop'. However, in Korean settings the word has undergone a semantic narrowing to a store which specializes in beauty-related services, such as a nail or hair salon.

(62) 서바이벌 [*sŏ-pa-i-pŏl*] 'survival show' → Borrowed from English survival show, this term refers specifically to elimination-based competition shows in Korean media, particularly to create a new musical group, representing a semantic narrowing distinct from the original meaning.

(63) 바라이어티하다 [*pŏ-la-i-ŏ-t'i-ha-ta*] → From English variety, with the Korean verb-making suffix -하다 [*ha-ta*] attached, it refers to acting in a way suited for variety shows – entertaining, exaggerated, or comically performative.

(64) 나락 [*na-lak*] → Literally translates to abyss or hell from Buddhist cosmology. In online communities, it refers to a celebrity or public figure facing 'ruin' or 'doom' – often after a scandal, or after getting cancelled.

(65) 사백안 [*sa-paek-an*] → Originally a medical or anatomical term meaning consisting of 사 [*sa*] 'four' + 백 [*paek*] 'white' + 눈 [*an*] 'eyes' or 'four-white-eyes'(eyes where the whites are visible on all sides), it has undergone a semantic shift to describe a cold or intimidating gaze, often used in visual media or idol aesthetics.

(66) 뱀눈 [*paem-nun*] → A compound of 뱀 [*paem*] 'snake' and 눈 [*nun*] 'eye', literally 'snake eyes', which semantically shifts to describe narrow, sharp, or sly-looking eyes, often with negative or stylized connotations. Also indicates a sly or un-trustworthy personality.

(67) 작두 타다 [*cak-twu tha-ta*] 'to be on a roll' → 작두 [*caktwu*] refer to a large traditional straw cutter, often associated with shamanistic rituals in which shamans 'ride' 타다 [*tha-ta*] or 'stand on the blade' during trance states or symbolize a supernatural possession or spiritual power. In modern usage, the meaning has transferred to refer to someone who is in a peak-performance state, or 'on a roll'.

b) Phonetic Shift

(68) 드루와 [*tŭ-lu-wa*] 'come on' → Formed by vowel simplification and substitution of the imperative term 들어와 [*tŭl-ŏ-wa*].

3.5. Blending

Blending is a type of word formation in which two or more words are blended together, with its constituents being either clipped or partially overlapped. A typical example of this type of formation in English is 'brunch', which consists of the words *breakfast* and *lunch*. Some sources in English regard blending as a subtype of compounding due to its similarities.[28] However, because of the syllabic-block nature of Korean orthography, Korean blends more closely resemble syllabic acronyms. While both processes involve the shortening of constituent words, a key distinction is that acronyms typically use the initial letters of each word, whereas blends combine any segments of the words, with at least one being truncated. Blends also tend to produce a more seamless integration, in which the boundary between the original words becomes blurred. This allows the word to appear to flow more freely.[29]

(69) 악플 [*ak-p'ŭl*] 'hate comment' → *악성* [*ak-sŏng*] 'malignant, bad'+ 리플 [*li- p'ŭl*] 'reply'

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[28] Natalia Beliaeva, "Blending in Morphology," *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Linguistics* (Oxford University Press, May 23, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.511

[29] Kwon, *한국어 두음절어와 혼성어*, 45-58.

(70) 갓생 [*kas-saeng*] → 갓 [*kas*] 'god' + 인생 [*in-saeng*] 'life'

(Used to describe life lived diligently while working hard or living a 'god-like' life.)

(71) 킹받다 [*khing-pat-ta*] → 킹 [*khing*] 'king'+ 열받다 [*yŏl-pat-ta*] 'to get angry, become enraged'

('King' is used as an intensifier, expressing a sort of 'king-like' anger.)

(72) 맛도리 [*mas-to-li*] → 맛 [*mas*] 'taste' + 처돌이 [*ch'ŏ-tol-i*] 'crazy fan'

(The origin of this term is a matter of dispute amongst its users. For the purpose of this thesis, the most commonly accepted and phonetically closest definition was adapted. The second part of this expression, 처돌이 is a slang expression in itself, referring to someone who likes something to an insane degree. While this word refers to the subject (the one who likes something), 맛도리 refers to the object (the thing that is liked, or is 'crazy tasty').)

(73) 팬싸템 [*p'aen-ssa-t'em*] → 팬사인회 [*p'aen-sa-in-hoe*] 'fan-signing event' + 아이템 [*i-a-t'em*] 'item'

(Fan-sign item refers to items fans bring for their artists to try on and take pictures with.)

(74) 메인카감 [*me-in-k'a-kam*] → 메인 [*me-in*] 'main' + 카메라 [*k'a-me-la*] 'camera' + 감독님 [*kam-tok-nim*] 'director'

(75) !일코노미 [*il-k'o-no-mi*] 'solo economy'→ 일 [*il*] 'one' + 이코노미 [*i- k'o-no-mi*] 'economy'

(76) !혼놀로그 [*hon-nol-lo-kŭ*] → 혼자 [*hon-cha*] 'alone' + 노는 [*no-nŭn*] 'playing' + 브이로그 [*pŭ-i-lo-kŭ*] 'vlog'

(A popular style of vlog where the creator does activities typically done with other people on their own, recording it for their audience.)

(77) 어쩔티비 [*eccelthipi*] → 어쩌라고, 가서 티비나 봐[*Eccelako, kase thipina pwa*] 'Whatever, go watch the tv (or something)'

(A catchy phrase similar in use to 'whatever' or 'so what?' while being criticized for something.)

3.6. Contraction

Contraction can be further divided into three smaller sub-categories, depending on which part of the words has been clipped: back clipping, middle clipping and front clipping.

a) Back Clipping

(78) 어맛 [*ŏ-mas*] → 어머나 [*ŏ-mŏ-na*] 'oh my godness'

(The consonant 's' at the end of the expression is pronounced as [*t*], an unreleased voiceless stop, giving it a sudden cut-off sound, and reflecting its nature as an exclamation. Similar cases can be found in other Korean exclamations, such as 헉 'gasp'.)

(79) 애니 [*ae-ni*] → 애니메이션 [*ae-ni-me-i-syŏn*] 'japanese animation'

(80) 인싸 [*in-ssa*] → 인싸이더 [*in-ssa-i-tŏ*] 'insider'

(Or 인사이더 with only one S sound - this word in itself not being in the standard dictionary and therefor without a fully agreed-upon spelling.)

(81) 썸 [*ssŏm*] → Comes from the English word 'something' and refers to a relationship between two people who aren't quite dating but have something going on between them.

(82) 방가방가 [*pang-ka-pang-ka*] → 반갑다 [*pan-kap-ta*] 'be glad'

(Primarily used as a greeting when meeting someone for the first time; the meaning of 방가방가 comes from the phrase 만나서 반갑다 [*man-na-sŏ pan-kap-ta*] 'Nice to meet you'.)

b) Middle Clipping

(83) 찐 [*ccin*] → 진짜[ccinca] 'really, seriously'

c) Front Clipping

(84) 팩트 [*p'aek-t'ŭ*] 'compact powder, compact cushion foundation' → In Korean beauty and online slang, 팩트 originally refers to compact cushion foundation, or compact powder from English, with 'compact' being used as a basis for the Korean expression.

3.7. Script Mixing

Code-mixing is a common occurrence in multilingual societies (very common in Korean context especially, in big part due to the size of Korean American population) and a well-studied linguistic phenomenon. While code-mixing refers to switching between languages, primarily in casual spoken conversations, script mixing is a linguistic phenomenon where multiple scripts are used within a single utterance (or conversation), and therefore present solely in written form. It is common on social media amongst users of languages which have different native scripts, such as Hangul in the case of Korean.[30]

a) Script mixing

(85) 마 za [*ma*-za] → 맞아 [*mach-a*] 'that's right'

(The last syllable 'cha' is read similarly to 'za' in Korean pronunciation.)

(86) GAE- → Vulgar prefix 개- [*kae*] 'very'

(Usually, this prefix appears in casual writing in its Romanised form followed by a word in Hangul, for which it acts as a vulgar intensifier.

ex. GAE 광대 [*GAE-kwang-tae*] 'f***ing clown')

(87) G 렸다 [*G-lyŏss-ta*] → 지렸다 [*chi-lyŏss-ta*]

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[30] Abhishek Srivastava, Kalika Bali, and Monojit Choudhury, "Understanding Script-Mixing: A Case Study of Hindi-English Bilingual Twitter Users," in *Proceedings of the 4th Workshop on Computational Approaches to Code Switching* (Marseille, France: European Language Resources Association, May 2020), 36.

(The syllable ‘chi’ is replaced by letter the G, following their similar pronunciation. This expression also more often appears in the conjugated form G 렸어 [G*lyŏss-ŏ*].)

(88) 美쳤다 [美 *ch'yŏss-ta*] → 미쳤다 [*mi-ch'yŏss-ta*] crazy

(In this care, the character 美 (hanja for beauty, pronounced as mi) replaces 미. Same as the above expression, it more often appears in the conjugated form 美쳤어 [美 *ch'yŏss-ŏ*].)

(89) 아이 C [*a-i-C*] → 아이씨[*a-i-ssi*] ‘damn it’

(Here, the letter ‘C’ mimics the Korean syllable 씨. This example illustrates orthographic play that allows users to censor or tone down offensive language while retaining its emotional intent.)

b) Alphanumerics

While script-mixing usually refers to the intermingling of writing systems amongst different languages, a sub-category of this phenomenon is alphanumerics, which involve numbers instead of letters. In Korean, alphanumerics can be used to replace component syllables of words that have the same or similar pronunciation. This is especially applicable for mono-syllabic numbers, as the syllables that form them are regularly found in the Korean language.

(90) !머선 129 [*mŏ-sŏn-1-2-9*] → 무슨일이고? [*mu-sŭn-il-i-ko*] ‘What is happening?’

(This expression in particular expresses the unique nature of Korean, as the last three syllables 일 [*il*], 이 [*i*], 구 [*ku*] (similar sounding as 고) represent the numbers one, two and nine respectively.)

3.8. Borrowing

Maybe surprisingly, one of the least common types found in the examples was ‘true’ borrowing or borrowing without any kind of semantic shift. Due to the high occurrence with which the Korean language takes words from English and other languages, and adapts them

into the lexicon, the line between a loanword, neologisms taken from English and slang is hard to clearly define. The two main rules I followed are that a borrowed word cannot be a part of the standard dictionary, as that makes it a part of a standard language, and therefore a neologism, not slang. Secondly, its use must be limited to a certain social group, clearly defining it as slang. Apart from single-word borrowings, a transliteration of a Japanese phrase was also identified.

(91) 플러팅 [*p'ŭl-lŏ-t'ing*] → From the English word 'flirting', it is considered slang because this term entered the vocabulary of Korean youth fairly recently, and its understanding remains limited within certain communities. In the Korean context, it especially refers to ambiguous romantic behaviour involving teasing.

(92) !덕후 [*tŏk-hu*] → Japanese term 'otaku' used to refer to a person who is highly obsessed or deeply interested in a particular hobby or subject, typically relating to anime, manga, video games, or other forms of pop culture.

(93) 꽃 따러 가다 [*kkoch tta-le ka-ta*] → From a Japanese euphemism *hana o tsumini iku* or 'to go pick flowers' for going to the restroom.

3.9. Showbiz Words

A remarkably interesting phenomenon in Korean popular media is the use of 'showbiz words'. These types of words utilize parts of names of celebrities or characters as a sort of morphemes representing the quality of their namesakes.

(94) 빈둥빈둥맨 [*pin-tung-pin-tung-maen*] → 빈둥빈둥 [*pin-tung-pin-tung*] 'lazily, laid back' + 맨 [*maen*] 'man'

(The second part of this expression, 'man', refers to the typical construction of superhero names such as Superman or Batman. Together, this expression can be roughly translated as 'Laid-backman', or someone who is good at or characteristic by having a very relaxed attitude. Rather than the word itself, this type of formation is popular amongst young people.)

(95) !월급루팡 [*wŏl-kŭp-lu-p'ang*] → 월급 [*wŏl-kŭp*] 'salary' + 루팡 [*lu-p'ang*] 'Lupin'

(‘Lupin’ references the fictional thief Arsène Lupin. It describes worker who get paid but secretly slack off or do minimal work—'stealing’ their salary like a thief.)

3.10. Figurative Speech

Lastly, two expressions representing the category of figurative speech were identified, one of them being an eponymy and the other an idiom, respectively.

(96) 탈룰라 ‘Tallulah’ → The origin of this word is from the movie ‘Cool Runnings’, where one character accidentally insults another’s mother’s name – Tallulah – and tries to talk his way out of it to smooth out the awkward atmosphere. It is used in construction such as ‘become a Tallulah’, where puts themselves in a similarly awkward situation on accident.

(97) 핑크 블러드 [*phing-khu pul-le-tu*] ‘pink blood’ → A term coined by SM Entertainment to represent fans of the groups under the company, inspired by the company’s pink branding.

3.11. Prevalence of Borrowings in Korean Slang

While simple borrowings did not make up the biggest category amongst the found expressions, an interesting observation is the frequent presence of borrowings within Korean slang expressions. In these cases, although borrowing was not the main process behind the formation of the expressions, it still played a role in part of their development. Figure 2 below illustrates how many of the 97 expressions involved borrowing, as well as specifies the source languages from which these elements originated.

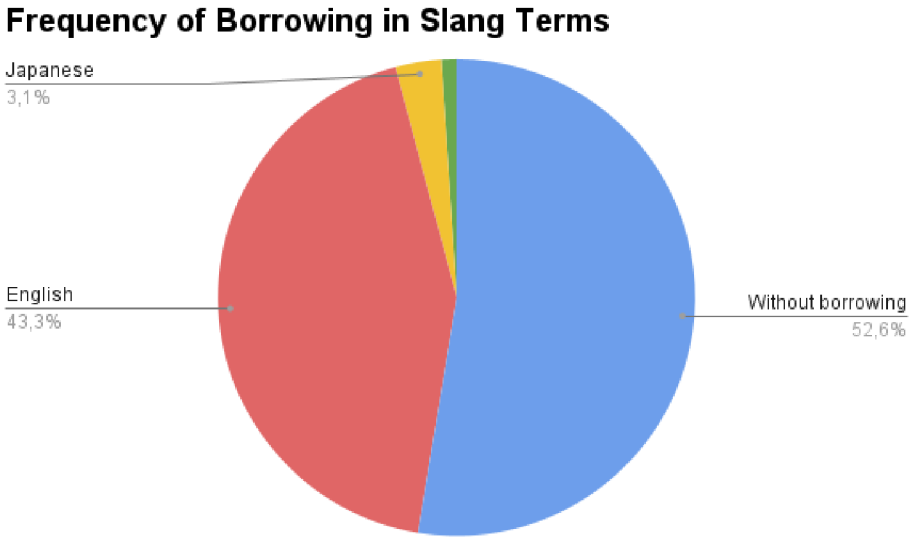

Figure 2: Frequency of Borrowing in Slang Terms

As shown, the largest category consisted of English borrowings, which aligns with the broader trend of standard Korean expressions increasingly drawing from English due to Korea's engagement with Western influences. Smaller categories included borrowings from Japanese and Chinese, comprising three and one term, respectively. These statistics suggest that Korean youth are gradually shifting away from Japanese and Chinese influences, despite the significant role these languages have historically played in shaping Korean vocabulary. Additionally, script-mixing and showbiz words were not categorised as including borrowings.

To conclude this chapter, the most frequently observed word formation process was abbreviation, which somewhat deviates from the typical morphological patterns of the Korean language. However, other prominent processes – such as derivation, language change (specifically semantic shift), compounding, and blending – are more consistent with established morphological trends in Korean. Notably, one of the most compelling findings was the prevalence of script mixing among Korean youth. This phenomenon remains an underexplored aspect of slang formation, particularly in the Korean context. The limited scholarly focus on this area may stem from its specificity to languages with native writing systems (such as Korean), whereas most slang research has traditionally centred on English, a language without an indigenous script.

4. Slang as a Reflection of Individuals and Society

For hundreds of thousands of years, human society has undergone numerous changes and continues to change with each passing day. Generation and extinction are an inevitable part of the process of change. In the realm of language, these elements are closely related to social phenomena, and continue to adapt to reflect changes in social, political, economic and cultural spheres.[31] The understanding of how societal changes reflect in language is crucial in understanding human perception of these changes.

As previously outlined, there are two approaches to social variation in sociolinguistics – the group-based and variable-based approach.[32] For the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to adopt the variable-based approach, as it is more relevant to my study. This approach first identifies lexical variables across the broader speech community before examining the social characteristics of the individuals who use them.

In line with this approach, I categorized the expressions identified during my analysis into broad semantic fields, subsequently focusing on what the presence of these specific fields, and more specifically, the individual expressions, reveals about the youth in Korea among whom they are prevalent. Finally, I contextualize my findings within the broader social landscape of South Korea, exploring how the observed patterns of language use correlate with other aspects of Korean society.

4.1. In-Group Language and Identity in K-Pop Culture

The most prevalent domain of slang expression observed in this study is that of fandom culture. This indicates a strong interest of Korean youth toward celebrities and popular media, where lexical items related to the entertainment industry enter colloquial usage with notable frequency and tend to exhibit greater longevity compared to slang in other semantic fields. In some cases, these terms even undergo lexical standardization, eventually integrating into the broader lexicon. The global phenomenon of K-pop – which has accelerated the growth and international visibility of the Korean entertainment industry – has further facilitated this process.

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[31] Jungwha Choi, "Interpreting Neologisms Used in Korea's Rapidly Changing Society: Delivering the Meaning of Neologisms in Simultaneous Interpretation," *Meta: Translators' Journal* 51, no. 2 (June 2006): 188–201, https://doi.org/10.7202/013250ar.

[32] Labov, *The Social Stratification of English*, 130-131.

Most notable expressions from this area are 음방 (music broadcast), 막방 (last broadcast), 사녹 (pre-recording), and 직캠 (fan-cam), which are all terms closely associated with K-pop, particularly with the live performance aspect characteristic of its promotion. The uniqueness of these terms lies not only in their frequent usage among Korean youth but also in their recognition and adaption by international fans, suggesting a transnational dimension of cultural belonging and shared linguistic identity.

Other terms include 덕후 (fan), 성덕 (successful fan), 핑크 블러드 and 빅뱅세대 (BigBang generation), all signifying a deep emotional investment, identity formation, and loyalty that characterise the relationship between fans and their favoured celebrities. Especially expressions like 'BigBang generation' and 'pink blood' suggest a strong association between fandom and personal identity amongst their users.

The occurrence of such expressions highlights the central cultural role fandom plays in contemporary Korean society, serving not only as a tool of linguistic innovation but also in constructing social identity and group solidarity, so very characteristic of slang itself. Their use functions as a marker of inclusion within a group, while simultaneously excluding outsiders who do not understand it.

4.2. Aesthetic Slang and Social Identity on Korean Social Media

Following fandom culture, another prominent semantic field in contemporary Korean slang is tied to social media and image portrayed through it. Terms such as 엽사 (funny picture), 남찍사 (picture taken by someone else) and 남친짤 (boyfriend photo) exemplify the curation that goes into social media profiles amongst the youth. These terms are not merely descriptive but also show indexicality, emphasizing attributes like approachability, humour, or emotional intimacy depending on the context of use. The increasing preference of such curated images illustrates how Korean youth linguistically and visually negotiate authenticity in a highly media-centred environment, projecting a self that is at once carefully crafted and intentionally reliable. The existence of these expressions in the lexicon signifies a drive towards the curation of a sense of parasocial closeness, blurring the boundaries between authenticity and the artificial.

Closely linked are aesthetic descriptors like 큐티섹시 (cutie-sexy) 여유섹시 (laid-back sexy) and 꾸안꾸 (effortless chic), which express aesthetics that are desirable amongst Korean youths, regardless of gender. They reveal how Korean speakers manage contradictory qualities – playfulness and allure, spontaneity and control – with a single expression, functioning as descriptors for complex social types. The last two expressions simultaneously reflect a broader cultural shift toward valuing effortlessness as a desirable aesthetic and social quality. This trend, while global in scope, is especially prominent in South Korea's visually driven social media culture. The effort to appear nonchalant and 'chic', despite putting in significant effort in doing so, serves as another tool in appearing both at arm's reach and far enough to be desirable.

4.3. Linguistic Generationalism: Slang, Belonging, and the Performance of Youth Identity

Building on the previously discussed function of slang in reinforcing in-group identity and setting forth social boundaries, Korean youth lexicon effectively both unites and stratifies its users. Terms such as MZ (Millennials and Generation Z) and 인싸 (insider) signify a broader sociolinguistic phenomenon in which language becomes a marker of generational belonging and cultural fluency. 'MZ' has evolved beyond a simple demographic label, functioning as a cultural category denoting specific aesthetic preferences, digital literacy and social behaviours, particularly in online and social media contexts. The use of this term fosters an intra-generational solidarity, while simultaneously constructing a generational 'other.' The resulting pressure to linguistically and behaviourally conform reflects broader societal dynamics in which identity is curated and affirmed through everyday language use.

Vice versa, 꼰대력 (boomer energy) highlights the social divide between different generations. Although used humorously at times, the term carries a critical edge, rejecting hierarchical or outdated behaviour, even when exhibited by peers rather than elders. Its application on younger individuals unfamiliar with the youth slang and digital culture of their peers separates them from the so-called 'insiders', and illustrates how linguistic competence functions as a gatekeeping mechanism even within a singular social group.

4.4. The Solo Economy and Shifting Social Norms in Korean Youth Culture

According to data released by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, as of March 2024, the number of single-person households in South Korea has exceeded 10 million for the first time in history. Concurrently, only 194,000 couples were reported to have married in 2023, a significant decline that is attributed to rising living costs, job insecurity, and shifting cultural values.[33] This demographic shift serves as a clear indicator of a societal shift towards a so-called 'solo economy', or 일코노미. This term emerged in the late 2010s to describe the rapid increase in the number of individuals who live and consume alone and continues to be a trending social phenomenon.

Simultaneously, new slang terms such as 혼놀로그 (vlog of playing by oneself), 혼영 (going to the movies alone) and 혼노코 (going to the karaoke alone) have gained popularity, particularly among younger generations. Notably, these terms are often associated with positive values, suggesting a strong societal shift towards independent lifestyles. Their widespread usage on social media platforms suggests a normalisation and even celebration of solitary lifestyles, which contrasts with the collectivist ideals traditionally upheld in South Korea's Confucian-influenced society.

The integration of these terms into everyday discourse signals a broader ideological shift, where being alone is no longer stigmatized, and instead points to strong autonomy, freedom, and emotional self-care. Social media plays a central role in this transformation, offering an opening for low-pressure social interactions that are particularly appealing to single-person households, giving rise to a new type of social belonging stemming from individuality rather than traditional familial structures.

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[33] Jang SeulGi, "Number of One-Person Households in South Korea Surpasses 10 Million," *Aju Business Daily*, April 9, 2024, https://www.ajupress.com/view/20240409111338768.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has examined the morphological and sociolinguistic dimensions of contemporary Korean slang, revealing how it reflects and drives social change. Key word formation processes such as abbreviation, compounding, borrowing, and semantic shift align with broader patterns in the Korean language, while the emergence of script mixing marks a distinct, underexplored feature of Korean slang, most likely influenced by the unique properties of the Korean writing system. Additionally, the presence of borrowings is an undeniable part of the vocabulary of Korean youths, underlining Korea's focus on globalization and the ease with which young people navigate this global landscape.

Beyond its linguistic structure, Korean slang plays a significant role in expressing youth identity and negotiating cultural values. Slang tied to fandom culture, aesthetic self-presentation, and the 'solo economy' illustrates how young Koreans engage with popular media, digital culture, and evolving attitudes toward individualism. These expressions reveal not only how language is shaped by generational and technological shifts but also how it actively participates in building social belonging and identity.

Ultimately, slang serves as both a mirror and a catalyst for transformation in Korean society. By analysing its forms and functions, this thesis underscores the value of slang as a lens through which to understand the dynamic interplay between language and social change. Undeniably, slang is not only an interesting, but also a crucial sector of linguistics which, despite its significance, remains hugely underexplored within the Korean context.

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