Authenticating the fake:
Linguistic resources of *aegyo* and its media assessments

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Abstract

Cuteness has emerged among young women in East Asia as a way of performing youthfulness and freedom from the constraints of the traditional wise-mother ideal. However, it simultaneously limits women’s social independence in virtue of their docility and subordination. This paper focuses on a kind of cute, feminine act/attitude in South Korea known as *aegyo*, in which a manipulated cute act is performed to please others. Media create instantiations of *aegyo*, establishing the performance of “childish *aegyo*” as a gendered practice, and magnifying its exaggeratedly cute aspects. This childish style, with resources from immature language, has been enregistered as a new, authentic style of young women, and is featured in media events that police its form as they reproduce its role in the normative gender order.

Introduction

In the “Woman News” skit of the July 7, 2012 episode of *SNL Korea*, a Korean version of the U.S. late night sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, the featured actress introduces a “woman’s speech translator machine,” which translates women’s words to “normal, comprehensible” words for men. The actress says to the machine, “Wow, this bag is really pretty,” which is immediately translated to “Buy me (this bag)” in an unnatural sounding automatic voice by the machine. She then says, “Honey, I am hungry,” and the machine again translates it as, “Buy me (food)” in the same automatic voice. Then, the actress says, “*Oppa*” (a term of address for an older male) with an extremely elongated last syllable and wiggling tone, and in return the machine produces a high-pitched, girly, exaggerated voice saying, “Buy me (food),” also using the same elongation and the tonal contour as in the actress’s voice. The actress looks very satisfied and proud as the machine successfully translates her words.

This scene aims to mock an exaggeratedly cute behavior in Korea that is called *aegyo*. While the dictionary definition of *aegyo* is “an attitude that looks cute and pleasing,” and is generally regarded as a positive descriptor of women, the media like to present a whiny and exaggerated kind of *aegyo* like the one in the *SNL Korea* skit. In fact, the media are obsessed with showing a cute but whiny version of *aegyo*. If you watch Korean television shows, it is hard to spend a single evening without catching a female guest/actress/singer performing one, requested by eager male participants. So this kind of “childish *aegyo*” is performative—Korean young women on television do it to show their charm and attractiveness, and just like any other performance, it is evaluated by the audience present. Because the childish *aegyo* that is shown in the media is shamelessly manipulative and exaggerated, it is seen as phony and silly, and often becomes a source of laughter and ridicule in the shows and dramas.

At the same time, the media present an overall positive evaluation of *aegyo* in a broader sense, which helps constrain femininity under the normative gender order. Thus, *aegyo* is like plastic surgery, in that people accept its fakeness, as long as it looks real enough and is
pleasing to the eyes, because people like cute, childlike women as much as they like beautiful, mature women. In order to look real and genuine, however, aegyo must be carefully policed: the media show a myriad of successful and failed aegyo performances, commenting on details of their language to keep aegyo in control. Also, by allowing women to be fake, aegyo, like plastic surgery, reflects and instantiates the part of the gender order that says, “women are by nature fake.” This article, therefore, takes interest in this complex surgical process – the process of authenticating and policing the fake performances by media – and examines how language plays a central role in the process.

Aegyo is an interesting case because the media exert explicit management and control of finer linguistic details. In the above SNL episode, the woman’s utterance of oppa with the wiggling tone marks a very obvious aegyo act. Although the woman’s exaggerated performance of aegyo – her shameless use of her charm in demanding goods and fulfilling her needs – is ridiculed in the skit, this episode shows how women’s maneuvered aegyo is sexualized and commodified in the mainstream media. It also shows how aegyo is standardized in terms of its linguistic resources, as the machine is able to translate her desire successfully and accurately based on her voice alone. The standardization of the voice, which involves a particular way of using phonetic and lexical resources, is achieved through direct or indirect comments and evaluations by the participants and producers of the media.

The importance of aegyo lies first and foremost in its salient cultural value, for it is the epitome of gender ideology discursively constructed in the realm of patriarchal Korea. Aegyo is deeply rooted in the nation’s cultural and moral standards, functioning as the idealized norm of modernity and trendiness in Korean mainstream culture. Korean women “consider their self-perceived ['lack of doll-like cuteness'] to be the main source of their static lives and missed opportunities, social and physical immobility, and their feeling of being ['left behind']” (Puzar 2011). Korean women frequently engage in aegyo, and it is a highly socially significant type of behavior shaped by the dominant gender ideology of Korea. Aegyo is an example of how cultural signification processes construct and circulate a particular image of women through a male gaze.

The main data for this study come from two Korean television shows: uri gyoelhonhasseoyo (‘we got married’), a pseudo-reality television show, and Gajokorakkwan (‘Family Entertainment Room’), an evening entertainment show. Using excerpts from these shows, I show the linguistic resources of aegyo, as well how such performances are evaluated. I also discuss other kinds of media data, including newspaper articles and web-based domestic and foreign forum discussions of Korean pop culture. The spread of aegyo is becoming a worldwide phenomenon with the spread of Korean pop culture called hallyu (‘Korean Wave’). For hallyu observers and followers aegyo has become a symbol of cultural uniqueness and femininity in Korea. In addition, I show the results of interviews that I conducted with young Koreans about aegyo and its linguistic and non-linguistic resources. These interviews highlight people’s perceptions of and judgments about aegyo.

Cuteness, childlike-ness, and aegyo

Cuteness is one of the most pronounced and popular cultural traits in East Asia. Although cuteness as a woman’s practice is found in other cultures and traditions, its cultural salience and pervasiveness are far more distinct in East Asian contexts. As exemplified by the universally popular Japanese cartoon character Hello Kitty, and by Podori, the mascot of the
National Police in Korea (Figure 1), the use of cute images and icons is widespread. The prominence of cuteness as a crucial cultural element in East Asia has been discussed in many studies (Kinsella 1995, Allison 2003, Abelmann 2003, Puzar 2011), relating cuteness to not only a mode of aesthetics but also a cultural ideology. The cultural power of cuteness comes from its wide appeal to the public, for cuteness is “one thing that registers for all people” (Allison 2003: 383). ‘Cute’ essentially means childlike, and is associated with positive qualities of children such as “sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and [having] inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances” (Kinsella 1995: 220).

Despite the universal liking of cuteness, however, appearing or acting cute can be controversial, as people often find it socially or contextually inappropriate, and criticize it within the realm of women’s language. Since aegyo, in its most basic sense, is a superficial manifestation of cuteness, understanding the ideology behind cuteness in Korea, in terms of its development and its gendered and controversial nature, is a crucial step in understanding the aegyo phenomenon and its significance.

[Figure 1] Podori (Korea) and Hello Kitty (Japan)

While cuteness is undoubtedly a trait linked to childlike-ness and innocence, it is also one of the most prominent gendered aspects of East Asian culture, and the media play a significant role in this prominence. In a content analysis of Korean fashion magazines targeting adolescent girls, Nam et al. (2010) found that among Korean and western women and men, Korean women are the most stereotypically portrayed as cute – smiling, pouting, and using childlike expressions. This result, coupled with similar results from Maynard and Taylor’s (1999) study of Japanese women, shows how heavily the image of women is associated with cuteness and childishness, in both Korean and Japanese media and cultures. “While seriousness and classical beauty could still be largely desirable in corporate environments, and are seldom unimportant, in some places, such as the media, dollified cuteness is already mainstreamed” (Puzar 2011). Because of the widespread appeal of cuteness, through its lovability, light-weightedness, and child-likeness, cute prevails in images of women in East Asia.

This gendered cuteness, however, has not always been a powerful cultural model of femininity in East Asian culture. Rather, it emerged among young women as a way to draw contrast, or opposition, to ideal, traditional femininity. Cuteness has been discussed as a new type of dominant image for young females in contemporary Japan (Matsumoto 1996, Treat 1996, Otsuka 1991), partially substituting the stereotypical image of a modest, conservative, and polite Japanese woman who is dedicated to family values, called ryousei kembo ‘good wife and wise mother’ (Matsumoto 1996, Kinsella 1995, Inoue 2006). In Korea also, the equivalent hyeomnyoungcheo ‘wise mother good wife’ stereotype of a traditional woman no longer dominates the ideal woman’s image. Instead, a cute, ‘melodramatic and infantilistic’ (Abelmann
2003: 22–25), or ‘dollified’ (Puzar 2011) mode of femininity pervades the society. The “cute and childish” persona is an alternative way of being feminine for younger speakers in many parts in East Asia. The centralization of cuteness, especially for young women, has been noticeably rapid and widespread, especially in East Asian media. Starr (N.d.) states, “In a marketplace in which the greatest cultural capital is held by the modern and the young, JWL [(Japanese Women’s Language)], as an index of traditional femininity, becomes the way that ‘other people’ talk.”

Young East Asian women like to act cute in part because cuteness has been mainstreamed and centralized in these cultures, and it is a fashionable way to show one’s youthfulness, likability and attractiveness. Young Korean women’s performance of aegyo is not a statement of conformity or obedience. Rather, for some it is even about being assertive as a woman, in the same way a child is being “assertive” when they plead with their parents. Cuteness emerged as a reaction against traditional, conservative norms for women, but this new type of femininity is yet another form of confinement for women because it still idealizes women’s submissive and dependent role in the normative gender order. Aegyo places women on a par with children, who are dependent. While cuteness has universal currency due to its linkage to childlike characteristics such as lovability and purity, it is also valued in society because of its other accompanying characteristics or “cultural values” such as dependence and docility, reinforcing the gender order by placing women again under control.

Inauthentic but good aegyo

What separates aegyo from an act of mere cuteness is its manufactured-ness—aegyo is cuteness as the result of some art or manipulation. The simple definition of aegyo, “an attitude that looks cute to others” in the Korean Standard Dictionary (1999) indeed captures this crucial artificialness of aegyo: that aegyo is not merely an attitude of being cute, but an attitude of appearing cute to others. Instead of being viewed for one’s purely natural quality, an act of aegyo is generally regarded as a manufactured and skillfully manipulated attitude or act that can be faked with intention at the performers’ will. While aegyo shares all the characteristics of cuteness such as docility, childlike-ness, and subordination, it is also, crucially, designed to do so.

While the artificial nature of aegyo is embedded in any part of its performance, people have no problem enjoying it, despite its obvious inauthenticity. When asked what he thinks of aegyo in an interview, Jongshin, a 30-year-old male Korean graduate student, recounted his own experience with aegyo. He was drinking with a group of other Korean people in a bar. Although he did not feel like drinking soju, a Korean hard liquor, his friends urged him to drink just one shot, and it soon became an obsession for the whole group. Jongshin kept refusing to drink until a younger, female friend “melted him down” with her aegyo. He says it was just one word, oppa (a term of address for an older brother, but commonly used by young women to address older male friends), that did it. He claims that there was something remarkable about the voice – when asked, he says he cannot remember anything about her physical gestures, and insists that it was solely the voice that made him automatically reach for the glass and tip it off. He confesses that from that day on, he became cautious of aegyo because the experience made him realize the power of women’s aegyo on men.

This typical aegyo episode, one that any Korean man could have, shows how an aegyo act can be successful without being genuine. Although Jongshin was well aware of his friend’s
intentionality and noticed the changed quality of her voice in uttering “oppa,” it did not stop him from acquiescing to her. What this episode illustrates is a gender game between men and women, which, because the context and stakes are harmless and trivial, gives women the appearance and sense that they can “dominate men.” Ultimately though, this *aegyo* game reinforces the gender order, because in it, the woman pleads, and the man decides to comply or not.

Validation of *aegyo* is also achieved by the media’s attempt to connect *aegyo* to women’s innate desire, as having *aegyo* or being *aegyo*-ful is framed as a natural quality of women. The example (1) is from an article in a tabloid newspaper, in which the author attempts to teach the female readers how to do *aegyo* as a way of “not being lonely”:

(1) Are you frustrated about yourself, because you don’t have *aegyo*? But, look into it. In the deep part of you, the instinctive femininity, that you yourself didn’t even realize, is wriggling. Now what you only need to do is to show (surface) it.

(“The art of *aegyo*: A guide for lonely people” by Sports Korea, November 21, 2005)  
[http://sports.hankooki.com/lpage/errotalk/200511/sp2005112111464065940.htm](http://sports.hankooki.com/lpage/errotalk/200511/sp2005112111464065940.htm)

In (1), *aegyo* is described as what is “wriggling” inside of any woman’s body. *Kkwumtuldayda* (“to wriggle”), a verb that is used to describe *aegyo*, includes a sense of eagerness, as if something is about to burst out in excitement. *Aegyo* is described as an embodied element of woman-ness; it resides in a woman’s body, waiting to be surfaced.

While it is claimed that desire to do *aegyo* is part of the “instinctive femininity” that you must have as a woman, it is not equal to the femininity itself, because it still needs to “surface”. In the rest of the article from which (1) is taken, *aegyo* skills are explained for women who are not eloquent in performing this behavior. While the media and people’s discourses on *aegyo* successfully necessitate *aegyo*, relating it to women’s desire, women still need to learn its skills in order to accomplish their goal. In other words, they need to learn how to perform *aegyo* well, in a way that looks authentic and genuine despite its understood fakeness.

The quality of *aegyo*, therefore, depends on how well one can convince people to believe in one’s feigned purity and innocence. An obviously fake-looking *aegyo* is a failed one, and is as despised as a bad *aegyo*, just as an overtly artificial plastic surgery is despised. This aspect of *aegyo* often seems to confuse the observers of Korean pop culture, as they seek to understand the practice of *aegyo* as a cultural phenomenon in Korea. Indeed, the fakeness of *aegyo* is one of the most frequently discussed topics in outsiders’ discussions on Korean pop culture. In 6theory.com, one of the biggest online forums on Korean pop-culture, topics such as “Is Sunny’s *aegyo* fake?” and “Fake vs. natural *aegyo*” are among the most frequently discussed ones, eliciting controversies over what is a good and attractive *aegyo*, and how it is played out in practice. The general consensus of the discussions is that when *aegyo* looks obviously fake and not genuine, it is never attractive and desirable.

This paradoxical characteristic of *aegyo*, that it has to look genuine and authentic when it is not, makes performing good *aegyo* a challenging task that requires continuous learning and modulation. *Aegyo* is hard to achieve without looking exaggerated, fake, or too imposing, but it is a necessary social skill and a crucial part of cultural knowledge for young women. Some women are successful in acquiring this mandatory social skill while others are not. Yuna, a 27-year-old Korean woman who works for a management company, is proud of her *aegyo* and her ability to make men do what she wants. She says that her *aegyo* has always worked out in her
past relationships and that men have always loved it. However, Soun and Youngmi, a 29-year-old graduate student and a 32-year-old lawyer respectively, say that they hate aegyo because they are just not able to do it. Youngmi, who has been married for three years, tells me that the discussion of aegyo makes her feel guilty because she never does aegyo to her husband. Soun, who is single, is sick of people telling her that she must be more aegyo-ful to find a boyfriend or a husband. While these female interviewees report having varying degrees of aegyo capability, they generally view aegyo as one of the deciding factors in their romantic relationships, and a difficult skill to acquire.

Acquiring good and appropriate aegyo is part of achieving “proper womanhood” for young women. Aegyo is a highly valued skill in part because it involves disguising what is fake as authentic, and requires an understanding of cultural norms and values, as well as careful modulation of the linguistic and non-linguistic details of one’s performance.

Enregisterment of “childish aegyo” and its controversy

While aegyo comprises a range of attitudes and acts that look cute and pleasing, and thus includes a gentle and sweet manner, the Korean media selectively promote the exaggeratedly cute and childish behavior to represent aegyo. When aegyo is used to mean a woman’s sweet attitude that looks pleasing, it is taken as a compliment toward a pleasant attitude of a woman. One of the early appearances of the word aegyo in the modern novel is shown in (2). Aegyo is used to describe a woman’s “thin and beautiful eyes,” to explain how her eyes are charming, and are full of lovability:

(2) 가늘고도 이릿따운 두눈추리에 애교가 가득하다
Kanulkodo ilisttawun twunwunchwuliey aegyoka katkhay
‘Thin and beautiful eyes are full of aegyo’ <금국화 Kumkwukhwa, 1923>
(From Sejong Modern Literature Corpus (1988) by National Institute of Korean language)

While this meaning of aegyo, which refers to a women’s positive and pleasing trait, continues to be a part of aegyo, it is not the mainstream or predominant image of aegyo that the Korean media like to present.

The media are the dominant forces in the process of erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000), as they eliminate the gentleness from the meaning of aegyo and show cute and childish performances that seem exaggerated and often comical. Deprived of its gentleness, aegyo in the media has begun to mean the performance of childish cuteness. In Figure 2, a typical aegyo pose is shown with extremely popular female celebrities who are in their late teens to early twenties. The shrinking of their bodies, and their inwardly clenched fists attached to their cheeks (a popular aegyo pose also known as a bbooing-bbooing pose) index smallness, and the blank and girlish looks on their faces index innocence and purity. Their looks and gestures are surprisingly uniform, showing how standardized the public image of aegyo is. It is this kind of childish, and often whiney aegyo that is constantly circulated through the media. The style of “childish aegyo” has been enregistered as a popular style for young women in media – it combines and exaggerates the linguistic resources from immature and childish language, and creates a new register. This style is often overtly performative and exaggerated, not only
because it is more fun to watch, but also because it provides a useful site where women’s behavior can be vigorously watched, criticized, and corrected, without shame and solemnity.

[Figure 2] An aegyo pose by a K-pop band Sonyeosidae ‘Girl’s Generation,’ South Korea’s #1 Power Celebrity (Forbes Korea 2011 and 2012).

Childish aegyo, in fact, has been elevated to a representative cultural practice of Korean women, from an outsiders’ point of view. In web-based magazines and forums on Korean pop culture, aegyo is often described as something uniquely and authentically Korean. An author writes, “Aegyo (a notion often associate with the cute concept) is a cultural practice, so obviously native Koreans get it… (http://seoulbeats.com/2012/10/the-k-pop-formula-cute-or-sexy-pick-your-poison/).” At the same time, it is connected to the broader Asian culture, as another author argues: “Although aegyo is a definition that is specific to the cultural context of Korea, its cultural implications run deep into the moral and cultural backbone of Asia (http://seoulbeats.com/2012/10/unpopular-opinion-enough-with-the-aegyo-bashing/).” In the same article, the author also writes, “…aegyo has shouldered the way for K-pop’s success and K-pop has ridden the aegyo wave all the way to becoming the global industry it is today. Many of us would not know K-pop if not for aegyo…,” emphasizing aegyo’s core role in Korean pop culture.

The childish image of aegyo that the media promote, however, makes aegyo a controversial practice, despite its general likability. This controversial aspect of aegyo echoes the media’s reaction to cuteness, in how the media continue to warn of the potential danger or disturbance to the gender order if cuteness is excessive and rebellious. The rise of cuteness is often seen as a sign of women’s cultural domination in contemporary East Asia because of the consumption and production of cute-related products and services (Allison 2004, Treat 1996, Kinsella 1995, Hjorth 2009). Cute images and performances can contain counter-cultural ideas
and elements, often associated with the innovative and rebellious use of language (e.g., Miller 2004b, Matsumoto 1996, Kinsella 1995). As a result, cuteness is placed at the center of criticism by the public and the media, and oftentimes the main target of criticism is cute language, or cute style. The mainstream media and intellectuals often view cute style as a rejection of traditional and dominant female values, because it shows one’s decision to “not grow up.” For example, Japanese intellectuals consider that the addiction to cuteness among the young generation shows disengagement from their social duties and obligations as adults (Kinsella 1995: 246–7). Because of the direct link between childlike characteristics and cuteness, a young adult woman’s use of cute linguistic style is interpreted as her having a childlike personality, not being mature enough to perform an adult’s duty. Thus, women’s linguistic performance of excessive cuteness is often despised, labeled as immature and anti-social.

Despite the possible “threat” that aegyo poses – nonconformity to traditional gender norms – aegyo remains largely positively valued, different from most labels used for young women’s distinctive or “aberrant” linguistic behavior (e.g., burikko in Miller [2004a]). Thus, the discussions of aegyo, including those surrounding its portrayal in the media, are never about its social value or overall negative value, but about whether and how it is properly performed with the appropriate stylistic and linguistic resources. The aegyo style has been placed at the center of youth culture due to its power to create intense attention and public scrutiny, as its users strive to achieve authenticity through its manipulated performance.

Aegyo style: Linguistic resources

Aegyo style cannot be attributed to a single feature, and is constituted by a combination of multiple linguistic and non-linguistic features. However, there is a set of salient features that index aegyo, and are used frequently by the media in performing and mocking it. Among them, I discuss the four most prominent: 1) rising-falling intonation (LHL%), 2) the lexical item oppa, 3) nasality, and 4) infantile consonants (hyeo jjalbun sori ‘short tongue sound’).

LHL% is representative of aegyo practice, not only because it iconically represents a ‘wiggling’ body movement that frequently occurs with aegyo, but also because it covers a wide range of aegyo types, from a gentle attitude to childish aegyo, depending on its phonetic manifestations. Different from other features such as nasality and infantile consonants that are more directly associated with childish aegyo, LHL%, a tone that indexes casualness and gentleness, only indexes childishness when used with intensified phonetic manifestations (Moon 2010). Oppa, a term of address that a younger female uses toward an older male in an intimate relationship, shows how aegyo is romanticized and sexualized in the male-female relationship. Nasality is the feature most frequently associated with aegyo. A nasal delivery, which is often linked to negative personality traits in an adult’s speech production (Miller 2004a), indexes cuteness and becomes an endearing trait of women in aegyo contexts. Lastly, infantile consonants are another salient resource used in aegyo practice. The use of these consonants is the most extreme feature of childish aegyo, shown by its stigmatization even in the realm of the media where exaggerated and intensified aegyo can be commonly found.
LHL%, a rising-falling tone at the end of an Intonation Phrase (IP), is a prominent aegyo resource mentioned most frequently by interviewees only second to nasality. LHL% sits only on the last syllable of an IP, where the syllable is typically elongated to accommodate a complex – rising and then falling – contour. A typical shape for LHL% is shown below:

As shown in Figure 3, the LHL% tonal contour is characterized by having a low (L), high (H), and low (L) point within the IP-final syllable. The acoustic pattern of LHL% starts with a declination, reaching its lowest point after the beginning of the syllable ma. Then the contour draws a hill-like shape, marking the highest point, and starts declining until it reaches the lowest point at the very end of the phrase.

The phonetic properties of LHL% are iconically related to the practice of aegyo, as the range of its properties reflect the range of emotions that it carries. When an LHL% is phonetically subtle, meaning that it is used with narrow pitch excursion and shorter duration, it is generally used as a gentle and caring intonation pattern in casual conversations, functioning as a “softener” (Moon 2010). This use is contrasted with a phonetically salient – with wider pitch excursion and longer duration – LHL% that indexes childish aegyo in romantic situations (Moon 2010). Thus, when LHL% is phonetically salient, the original meaning of softness and gentleness is lost, and the tone indexes animated emotions such as childlikeness, playfulness, or annoyance.

Also, the use of this intensified LHL% is iconic in that it resembles a childish wiggling gesture that frequently occurs with the intonation (a girly pose of shaking the left and right shoulder forward and backward in a repetitive motion with clenched fists that are typically placed in front of the chest). This iconic intonation, or the corresponding body gesture, is orthographically represented with tilde (~), in casual writing or subtitles of TV shows.

Because the IP final syllable in LHL% is typically elongated to contain the fluctuation of the intonation contour, LHL% is closely associated with final lengthening, another feature that is frequently discussed as a child language feature (Snow 1994), or as a part of babble talk speech style (Geenberg 2010). The phrase final lengthening is one of the prosodic features that children acquire at a very early stage of language acquisition: even two-year-old English speaking children can control the lengthening (Snow 1994, Yuen et al. 2011). Geenberg (2010) identifies the use of phrase final lengthening in adults’ babble talk in English. While the tonal shape of LHL%
is a language-specific characteristic that iconically represents a physical *aegyo* gesture, it is coupled with final lengthening, which is a cross-linguistic child language feature, to construct a childish, cute, and intimate meaning of the intonation.

In a Korean pseudo-reality television show called *uri gyoelhonhasseoyo* (‘we got married’; henceforth UG) where celebrities act as married couples, *aegyo* is frequently performed and evaluated. Featuring three to four female-male couples (varied by the season) who pretend to be newlyweds, UG shows the couples’ interactions while they perform their assigned activities such as moving in, making *kimchi* (pickled cabbage), or going on a picnic. These pre-recorded scenes are then watched in a studio by the other pairs, commentators, and audience, where people comment on and laugh at each other’s acting. Inyoung, a bossy and hysterical character who always yells at her fake husband Crown J, likes to use *aegyo* to resolve awkward situations. In these sweet talks, she performs *aegyo* with LHL% to show her affection toward her husband. In the Shower Gown episode (Figure 4), knowing that Crown J is upset from their fight in the previous scene, she comes into their bedroom with a shower gown that she claims to have prepared exclusively for him. In this episode Inyoung’s speech is full of nasality, and she uses extremely polite terms such as *sebang* (‘husband’ – an old fashioned, polite way of addressing one’s husband). While the entire conversation illustrates her sweet talk, the most obvious *aegyo* performance starts right after she hands over the gown to him, with the repetitive use of LHL%:

1. **Inyoung**: *ewullinda, oppa.*
   ‘looks good, oppa.’
2. **Crown J.:** *Ung.*
   ‘yeah.’
3. **Inyoung**: *Yeksi oppaka oskelika cohunikka~.*
   ‘since you have a nice body~’
4. **Crown J.:** *Ung.*
   ‘yeah.’
5. **Inyoung**: *wuri sepangun~.*
   ‘my husband does~’

[Figure 4] A screen capture and excerpts of the Shower Gown Scene from *uri gyoelhonhasseoyo* (UG): Episode 1. (LHL% denoted by ~)
In Figure 4, Inyoung starts using LHL% contours, with flattering compliments such as “you have a nice body.” Her nonverbal acts – shrinking her body to look smaller and cuter, and smiling constantly – also signal the beginning of a full-fledged aegyo act. The suprasegmental features such as a nasal voice quality, along with nonverbal resources, function as contextual cues to the change in the discourse, from gentle sweet talk to playful aegyo talk.

This aegyo scene shows a carefully modulated aegyo that looks almost genuine and natural. Comments about this scene can be found in an individual interview with Crown J that immediately follows this scene. In this interview where he faces a camera and is asked questions about his “real feelings” about Inyoung and this particular Shower Gown incident, Crown J comments, “There is something about Inyoung, which makes me not able to dislike her. She is... cute. Her voice has aegyo in it, like a puppy.” What is remarkable about this confession of his “real” feelings is that he talks as if Inyoung’s aegyo was a genuine quality, even though he is fully aware of her bossy and fickle persona in the show. This successful ‘deception’ makes her aegyo a good one, contributing not only to her partner’s positive impression of her but also to the interesting development of the story in this pseudo-reality show.

2) Oppa and imagined romantic/sexual relationship

There are not many words in Korean that can compete with oppa for rich cultural meaning. Although oppa is originally a kinship term that translates directly to ‘older brother,’ it is used widely among young females as a cover term for older male friends, since the use of a kinship term as a second person reference is a common form of address in Korean society (Park 1990, Choi 1997). Because the term functions as an acknowledgement that the speaker is younger than the addressee, it is typically used as a verbal strategy to contextualize social hierarchy in conversations (Kang 2003). As well as revealing the hierarchical relationship, oppa also invokes a close bond between the interlocutors. However, oppa is different from other equivalent kinship terms that share the same usage – hyung (a younger male to an older male), unnie (a younger female to an older female), or nuna (a younger male to an older female) – in that oppa often invokes a fantasy of a male-to-female relationship that extends beyond basic friendship. Although nuna also involves male-to-female relationship, it does not invoke the same kind of sexualized meaning because nuna automatically puts a male in a lower position than a female in terms of the age hierarchy. The word oppa, on the other hand, shows the most “ideal” and conventional relationship between men and women, where women are younger, and hence more innocent and dependent.

Oppa functions as a frequent symbol of aegyo because aegyo is often about creating a gendered fantasy. As described earlier, Jongshin could not refuse a younger female friend’s request to drink soju when she did aegyo with her nasal utterance of oppa. Her aegyo, although seemingly innocent and cute, is sexualized in this context because of the cultural connotation of oppa and the social context of their relationship. For Jongshin, falling for her voice is yielding to her femininity, which validates that he is a perfectly normative man who is attracted to women’s acts of cuteness. Thus, this single word often functions as a powerful tool to support gender normativity and expected behavioral patterns between men and women.

The male fascination with the word oppa comes from the reassured social order that the word delivers, and the romantic or sexual connotation that it invokes. The male view of oppa and its association with other cultural components can be found in a Korean mega-hit song “Gangnam Style,” which is the most viewed video in YouTube history as of December, 2012.
The song’s refrain is “oppan Gangnam style,” meaning ‘oppa is Gangnam style’ (n being a shortened form of the topic marker un/nun). The lyrics and the music video show a character – the singer Psy – claiming to be cool, trendy, middle class, and women’s favorite. *Oppa* in this song is used to mock the way women would refer to him, symbolizing the above-mentioned qualities that Psy is trying too hard to represent (and mock at the same time) in this song. It creates a funny irony because Psy, a fat, funny-looking guy who is doing a horse dance, obviously is not any of them.

Psy’s use of *oppa* is comical, because it indexes a fake intimacy between him and the female audience. In the song he is referring to himself as *oppa*, a term that the audience – young women – is supposed (or hoped) to use to address him. The use of Non-Pronominal Self Reference (NPSR) has been discussed as an index of hyper-femininity (Miller 2004a) and childishness (Kajino 2010) in women’s speech. Also, Choi (1997) calls this usage “viewpoint shifting” – the speakers take the view of the listeners in addressing themselves – and discusses that it takes place when the speaker wants to express empathy toward the listener. So by calling himself *oppa*, Psy is not only adding a comical effect to the song – because it is an extremely cheesy behavior for a grown-up man to use NPSR – but also creating a close space between him and the supposed target or audience. Used with NPSR, *oppa* creates a romanticized sexual fantasy: a heterosexual male’s desire for having an “intimate” relationship with younger women by appearing cool, wealthy, and attractive.

After the great success of the original “Gangnam Style,” Psy released a sequel called “*Oppan ttak nae style* (‘Oppa is just my style’).” This song and music video features a female singer Hyuna, a Korean sex symbol who also played the role of Psy’s love interest in the original “Gangnam Style.” She does a very deliberate *aegyo* performance in the sequel, using her nasal voice in singing the refrain “*oppan ttak nae style* (‘oppa is just my style’).” However, unlike the original “Gangnam Style” video, this female rendition received immensely negative reviews from domestic viewers. The negative reactions were mostly due to her badly executed *aegyo*; she uses her nasal voice excessively. However, it was also because of the conflict between her “original” image as a sex symbol and her cute performances, which made her performances seem inauthentic and artificial to the Korean public. As a result, while international viewers generally appreciated the cuteness and sexiness of the female role, the Korean public immediately hated the song and the video, calling it a shame to the original version. The Korean viewers’ harsh reactions, which contrast with the relatively generous reactions from the foreign viewers, show the acute cultural awareness of *aegyo* among Koreans, and disapproval of excessive, fake-looking *aegyo* performances. This video, along with the song, is a good example of the public’s negative evaluation of and disdain for failed or poorly maneuvered *aegyo*. 
3) Nasality and building intimacy

An emblematic feature of aegyo speech style is the use of kossori, which is directly translated to ‘nose (ko)-sound (sori).’ Although its lexical meaning is equivalent to ‘nasal sound’ in English – the outcome of the resonance of the nasal cavities due to the lowering of the velum – kossori often refers to more than just a sound. It is almost synonymous with aegyo-ful speech in certain contexts: kossori-rul nae-da (‘make nasal sound’) figuratively means doing aegyo. In the interviews, when asked to give a definition of aegyo in general, several interviewees even used kossori in the definition, saying, “aegyo is a kossori that women make” or “women do aegyo with kossori.” Also, when more specifically asked to give examples of linguistic constituents of aegyo, kossori was the first feature to be mentioned for most people, suggesting a strong indexical link between nasality and aegyo.

The use of kossori as a prominent cue for aegyo style is further supported by its broad application, not only as a voice quality feature but also as a segmental feature. While nasality as a voice quality feature commonly occurs over multiple syllables, words, or sentences, segmentational nasality only occurs within one syllable, and is not extended to other segments of the phrase. It can be applied to any open syllables, typically at the end of an IP, in the form of added [ŋ]. The [ŋ] epentheses is a very common practice in aegyo style, used widely to index intimacy and affection. For example, chal cha (‘good night’) can be chal chang, or bap meogeoyo (‘let’s eat’) can be bap meogeoyong in aegyo speech style. The nasalized production of the words indicates informality and intimacy in a relationship, such as between dating couples or mother and child pairs.

The segmentalization of nasality can also be reflected in writing, in the form of added “○” ([ŋ]) in the coda. The constructed examples of segmentalized nasality in writing are shown in (3):

(3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Script</th>
<th>Aegyo-style Script</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>자기야 잘 자.</td>
<td>자기야 잘 장~~~ <em>^^</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Honey good night.’</td>
<td>(emoticon: smile with blushing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen from example (3) above, when the nasal segment [ŋ] is added in an aegyo context in writing, it is often accompanied by other aegyo resources such as tilde (~) – marking the fluctuating LHL% tones – or various cute emoticons (^^, *^^*, ^o^/, etc.) in writing. This aegyo-style script is used widely among young populations, especially in electronic communications via telephone, e-mail, or social networking services.

Because kossori indexes aegyo through its association with whininess and cuteness that are often related to children’s speech patterns, it is often considered an unusual quality for a grown-up woman. This unnaturalness, therefore, often leads to the impression of being fake and artificial. The fake impression of the exaggerated feminine style of speech associated with a nasal sound is exemplified in the hyper-cute burikko speech of Japanese women in Miller (2004a: 153), with a television show titled Tokyo erebeetaa gaaru ‘Tokyo Elevator Girls’. In the context of an “illicit date” with her married coworker, an elevator girl – a woman whose profession is to greet customers in a posh department store – speaks with a high-pitched register accompanied by an exaggerated nasal voice, pointing out a fortune box beside her. This is undoubtedly interpreted as her faking happiness or excitement, inferred by her vocal performance and the obvious fact that she had already noticed the fortune box long before her utterance. The viewers of this show all understand that “her childlike expressions and innocent vocal qualities are not at all reflective of her actual status” (Miller 2004a: 153). Thus, the elevator girl’s nasal performance not only amplifies the fakeness and inappropriateness of the situation, but also signals her fake personality.

On the other hand, aegyo performance, with nasality as the prominent contextual cue, often indicates a woman’s positive effort to contribute to the relationship. When a woman uses it with good intentions to improve a situation, the faking of a childlike innocence is labeled good aegyo. The media, instead of calling it fake, portray this type of aegyo as appropriate, and teach how to do good aegyo using features such as kossori. In the first episode of UG, Solbi, who is a cute, childish, and affectionate but self-centered woman in her mid-twenties, performs her first aegyo toward her new on screen “husband,” named Andy:

Solbi: Oppa na~ eppko han pen ollaka cwula.
‘Oppa me~ Please carry me up (to our apartment)’
Andy: [laughter] *sipo cungkkaci kyeytanulo?*  
[laughter] ‘You mean up to 15th floor, using the stairs?’

Solbi: *Moss hayyo? Woong* [shaking body]  
‘Can’t you? Woong~’ [shaking body]

[Figure 6] A screen capture and excerpts of the Elevator Scene from *uri gyoelhonhasseoyo* (UG): Episode 1 (nasal sounds underlined).

In Figure 6, in front of the elevator to their apartment, Solbi asks Andy to carry her upstairs, making reference to the western tradition of the groom carrying the bride to their new home. Since their apartment is located on the 15th floor, Andy dismisses her request by replying, “Up to the 15th floor?” in an incredulous voice. Nevertheless, she insists by saying “You can’t? Woong~,” pouting her lips and wiggling her body like a child. In her first attempt to ask him to carry her, she already does aegyo with other resources such as LHL% and oppa, but in the second attempt, she exaggerates her aegyo by using a nasal voice, body wave, and a much more elongated final syllable. Although she uses many linguistic and non-linguistic cues to intensify her aegyo act, what stands out the most is her deliberate use of nasality. She already produces a nasal voice in uttering “moss hayyo (‘can’t you’),” but the use of “woong,” a meaningless exclamation that contains a nasal sound, intensifies her deliberate aegyo to a great degree. “Woong” is a frequent carrier for a nasal performance in aegyo contexts, since the exclamation has a rounded vowel (pouting of lips) and is produced with a closed mouth (coy attitude). It is also contains segmentalized nasality.

An aegyo performance, when placed in a mature context such as a dating situation, functions as an indicator of the speaker’s attempt to build intimacy. In Figure 6, Solbi, with a deliberate nasal voice, asks a seemingly pointless favor of her new husband. However, this aegyo shows her efforts to break the ice in this obviously awkward situation (they need to act as a married couple although it is their first encounter and they barely know each other), and is a way to build intimacy. Therefore, her aegyo is labeled as a good one, which is immediately indicated by the decreased physical distance between her and Andy in the following scene: the camera shows Solbi and Andy in the elevator together with his arm around her shoulder. While her attempt seems to have failed in terms of the original goal (as the husband has obviously refused to carry her to their apartment), their first physical contact on the show indicates that he is playing along with her performance, is pleased by it, and that their intimacy – both physical and emotional – is strengthened with her aegyo. In this obviously artificial and fake situation in a pseudo-reality show, her manipulated aegyo is funny but surprisingly appropriate, creating intimacy and building a successful relationship as a fake television couple.

4) Infantile consonants and immaturity

*Hyeo jjalbun sori* ‘tongue (hyeo)-short (jjalbun)-sound (sori)’ is a term describing an immature-sounding voice commonly produced, or thought to be produced, by girls or young women. Similar to nasality, the periodic appearance of *hyeo jjalbun sori* is interpreted as the speaker’s attempt to sound cute and childlike, through its resemblance to a baby’s pronunciation tendency. However, the association between *hyeo jjalbun sori* and immaturity is far more direct and robust than the association between nasality and immaturity, and is even ridiculed as an object of clinical correction, especially when used by an adult woman.
Although *hyeo jjalbun sori* often refers to a general infantile pronunciation tendency and does not point to a single phonological phenomenon, it can be best described linguistically as the stopping of fricatives and affricates:

(4) Phonological process of *hyeo jjalbun sori*

a. \([s] \rightarrow [t\ Cell]: haesseo → haejjeo ('did')

b. \([t\ Cell/t\ Cell] \rightarrow [d/t\ Cell]: hajima → hadima ('don’t do it')

c. a) + b): haesseo → haejjeo → haeddeo ('did')

(4a) shows the stopping of a fricative \([s]\) to an affricate \([t\ Cell]\). While *hyeo jjalbun sori* can take place with a plain \([s]\), it typically occurs with a tensed segment \([s]\), primarily because the phenomenon is the most active in a verbal conjugation environment, with the past tense marker *eoss/ass* as in (4a). (4b) displays the stopping of an affricate that changes \([t\ Cell]\) or \([t\ Cell]\) to dental stops \([d]\) or \([t\ Cell]\), which can happen on its own or as a subsequent phenomenon after the application of (4a), as shown in (4c).

(4a) in particular can be described as palatalization, which McCammon et al. (2010) reports as a child-directed speech characteristic in English. Also, Hamano (1994) discusses a relationship between the palatalization of Japanese alveolars and childishness. Regarding examples like *pata-pata → patya-patya*, she states that the palatalization entails a number of other characteristics, such as “instability, unreliability, uncoordinated movement, diversity, excessive energy, noisiness, lack of elegance, and cheapness” (Hamano 1994: 154).

A Korean drama called *chenkwukuy kyeytan* ‘The Steps of Heaven’ (2003–2004), was a huge domestic and international hit that eventually became one of the dramas that initiated the *hallyu* wave. The show was extremely popular, hitting 45.2% of viewer ratings in its last episode, and brought fame to the main actor and actress of the drama all over the East Asia. This drama, however, stained the main actress’s career and made her depressed for the following 10 years (confessed in a television program “Healing Camp” in 2012), because of her pronunciation issue that the audience harshly criticized and ridiculed. The controversy was particularly heated in reference to one scene where she pronounced *shiljangnim* \([ʃil\ Cell\ aŋ\ Cell]\) (‘sir’ – a term of address for the head of an office) as \([ʃil\ Cell\ aŋ\ Cell]\). The scene was meant to be a serious and emotional one where she calls her lover, who is also her boss, using a sentimental tone that reveals their tragic love situation, but the viewers burst out laughing because of her *hyeo jjalbun sori* that made her sound childish and inappropriately cute. Subsequently, people started making parodies of her, and circulating a number of stories explaining her bad pronunciation. One speculation was that her pronunciation is a side effect of too much plastic surgery, and that she cannot move her mouth properly due to resulting abnormal muscle tension. This preposterous speculation somehow made sense to people because her pronunciation was too ridiculous to be produced by a beautiful and mature actress like her, who played the role of a tragic woman that fell in love with her long-lost brother.

The following newspaper article on *hyeo jjalbun sori* shows the extremely stigmatized status of infantile consonants, and how it is viewed as an abnormal infantile pronunciation or/and a developmental disorder that is subject to clinical treatment.

(5) “*haessijeoyo*… *hyeo jjalbun sori* for sounding cute, causes communication impediment”

*Korea Economy, August 13, 2010*
Young people’s language misuse is a serious issue these days. They excessively use shortened forms and jargon that are impossible to understand, use curse words consistently, and speak like an infant in order to sound cute. This linguistic behavior is a temporal phenomenon found in adolescent speech and is not too hard to correct. However, if no action is taken, it can be stabilized and can be led to communication impediment. Doctors say that it can also cause other problems like pronunciation and articulatory impediment, learning impediment, and language contamination.

Infant-biased pronunciation is becoming more and more common among adolescents and female professionals. Female professionals are frequently criticized by their bosses due to their infant-biased pronunciation in their professional domain. According to the survey by Frana Otorhinolaryngology Clinic, 70 out of 250 adolescents and women in their twenties (28%) have an experience of infant-biased pronunciation. (……)


In (5), an association between hyeo jjalbun sori and the attempt to sound cute is made directly. The article states that young women are the cause of the “problem”, because they try to sound more cute than professional. In the later part of the article, the author also asserts that the motivation for this aberrant linguistic behavior is “to mimic how children talk like babies to their parents to escape punishments from their wrongdoings.” Thus, making hyeo jjalbun sori is seen as expressing dependence and submission through its direct association with an infantile characteristic.

A case study of an aegyo performance in media: the linguistic resources and meta-comments

An aegyo performance is a collaborative performance by the discourse participants, with each participant taking their role following the advancement of the discourse themes. While the primary agent is the performer, aegyo is often staged and evaluated by other participants, and their roles are as important as that of the main performer. Erving Goffman (1979) uses the term “footing” in describing individual participants’ stance or positioning in verbal interactions. Footing refers to an individual’s alignment toward the situation and other interlocutors. In a discourse, footing is represented by various linguistic and non-linguistic cues, and the footing shifts are marked by the change in these cues. Goffman emphasizes the use of code switching in footing shifts, and notes the use of sound cues such as pitch, volume, rhythm, stress, and tonal quality (1981: 128). The participants use the cues in performing their roles in the given settings, collectively contributing in constructing a speech event.

The following excerpts in (6) are from an episode of a Korean evening television show called Gajokorakkwan (‘Family Entertainment Room’), aired on February 28, 2009. It was a popular family-friendly show, having occupied the Saturday evening primetime slot for 26 years until being discontinued in 2009. This particular episode features the members of Sonyeosidae ‘Girl’s Generation’ (Figure 2), rising superstars at the time of filming. Due to the groundbreaking success of their single “Gee”, released on January 5, and the subsequent promotion in this period, Sonyeosidae was in the middle of becoming Korea’s hot icon. This particular episode thus presents their efforts and struggle to be mainstream in the Korean pop scene, which was obviously successful, as evidenced by their enormous success in this promotion period. On the show, the girls of Sonyeosidae, aged between their late teens to early
twenties, are engaged in a competition against five men. As a part of the competition, the show hosts ask a question to the men: “Among these girls, who would become a ‘cute fox’ in front of men?” In order to answer the question, they decide to see the girls’ aegyo.

In (6), the excerpts from their aegyo performances are presented. They show one of the typical aegyo performances in Korean television, where female guests perform aegyo upon the show host’s request, and the participants of the show all collaborate in evaluating the performance. Even though the main event is the aegyo performances by the Sonyeosidae girls, other participants and the audience take their roles in this aegyo discourse, commenting on and reacting to the performance, constructing a cohesive speech event. The participants’ meta-comments, the audience reactions, and also the comments (subtitles) and sound/visual effects inserted by the show producers are all crucial elements in this speech event, and show how the media teaches the “proper” way to perceive and evaluate aegyo performances. The sequential advancement of the scene is provided below, with focus on the footing shifts as signaled by linguistic and non-linguistic cues.

(6) Excerpts from Gajokorakkwan (February 28, 2009)

Addressed participants:
5 women who do aegyo performances (Tiffany, Jessica, Sooyoung, Sunny, Hyoyeon)
5 men who watch and comment on the performances (m1, m2, m3, m4, m5)
2 moderators (show hosts): 1 female and 1 male (F, M)

Unaddressed participants:
The audience present in the show, and the audience watching the show on television

*Notes: (LHL%) marks verbal instances of LHL% in the preceding syllable, and ~ marks the use of tilde in subtitles. All gestures, sound effects, and facial expressions are marked by [].

1. Announcing a quiz
F: Ok, the first quiz! Tiffany, Jessica, Sooyoung, Sunny, Hyoyeon. Among these five girls, who’s the girl that becomes a cute fox in front of men?
[Sound effects: “ba-ba-ba-bam!”]
M: Let’s see the girls’ aegyo parade. How about we start with Tiffany? Aegyo!

2. Tiffany’s aegyo
F: A-woo- [Shrinking her shoulders a little]
[Men all watch Tiffany in anticipation]
Tiffany: [With a sudden action of putting her hands together with audible ‘clap’ sounds]
Oppa, you must be very tired. [Pulling her hands together in front of her mouth, tilting her head slightly]
[Subtitles: oppa, you must be very tired~]
m1: Argh, I like it!!
[Audience makes “woo” sounds and claps hands a little]
Tiffany: But (LHL%)… cheer up! [Separating her hands and making “inward” fists under her cheeks]
[Subtitles: oppa, you must be very tired–]
M1: Argh, I like it!!
[Audience claps hands]
M: She instantly turns into a fox!
m2: I am not tired at all!
[All men clap hands and look at each other, nodding]
[Subtitles: energy gushing out automatically~!]

3. Jessica’s aegyo
F: Next will be Jessica!
M: (She’s) Only a girl in front of a man.
Jessica: Whew. [Looking down, embarrassed]
m3: Is there something you’re displeased about?
[All laugh and clap hands]
m1,m4: Just try it. Do it for us, please.
Jessica: [Having her two hands meet in front of her chest, shaking her body gently with her
head tilted down a bit] I hope you think well of me. [With a very soft voice]
[Subtitles: I hope you think well of me~]
[Audience claps hands]
m1,2,3,4: Oh!
m4: Asking what? What is she asking for?
[Subtitles: Shy aegyo]
M: [Facing men’s side] Look, they do that sometimes, in front of men, instead of speaking
directly,
m3: Just say anything you want!
M: …they just sit in front of you, tearing off papers for no reason, sometimes crumpling
them… not saying anything. That’s the strategy of aegyo. [Pointing to men] You shouldn’t
fall for it.

4. Sooyoung’s aegyo
M: Next!
W: Next is Sooyoung.
Sooyoung: I really can’t do aegyo. I don’t have aegyo.
M: You seem to be blunt, now that you say it.
[Audience makes disappointed sounds, “ey….”]
Sooyoung: I will try. [pause] Oppa! [with a very exaggerated, scratchy voice]
[subtitles: !!! (big, red exclamation marks)]
[Audience laughs hard, clapping hands]
Sooyoung: Am I pretty? [with a very high-pitched voice, pointing an index finger to her
cheek]
[Subtitles: Am I pretty~!]
[Audience keeps laughing]
[Sooyoung looks down, laughing a little and looking embarrassed, and Jessica embraces
her, laughing]
m2: Ok, you’re pretty, you’re pretty. (sarcastically)
M: This is not it. This is her real self. This cannot be done even if you try to. She doesn’t
seem to have the habit of doing aegyo, or fox-like attitude normally.
[Subtitles: aegyo that cannot be made up]

5. Sunny’s aegyo
M: Next, Sunny.
[Sunny begins to smile suggestively]
M: Look at her eye smile now.
Sunny: [With two index fingers meeting in front of her, shaking the hands as she speaks]
Woong (LHL%). [laughs]
[Subtitles: Woo~~~~~oong~~~~~~~]
[Audience shouts and claps hand]
m3: What should I do (LHL%)?
[Subtitles: Overflowing aegyo]
Sunny: [Spreading fingers of both hands and placing them in front of her mouth as if she is going to shout out something] Oppa (LHL%).
m1,2,4: Why? Why? What do you want?
Sunny: [Two index fingers meeting in front of her, shaking her hands as she speaks] I am hungry. [Speaking slowly, lengthening each syllable]
[All laugh and clap hands]
M: All of you wolves here, you shouldn’t fall for her right now!

The girls’ aegyo performances are thoroughly objectified as a matter of scrutiny throughout the discourse in (6). The main performers are engaged in the two roles: the performers of aegyo, and their “real” selves who are the guests of the show. The girls take control of their own acting as authors, but as the guests of the show who are young and still new to the entertainment business, they are strictly directed by the producers and moderators of the shows. The moderators are the most visible directors of the performances. While the female moderator’s role is quite limited to the introduction of the performers, the male moderator takes control of the whole discourse, deciding who should perform aegyo when, and praising or scolding the outcomes of the performances. The male guests, the “wolves,” mainly act as the active audience to the girls’ performances, but they also function as the commentators, directing the way their female counterparts perform aegyo, and deciding how good or bad their performances are. The audience’s role is mainly supportive, but they also express their stances by showing positive or negative reactions to the performances.

The switching of the performers’ role, from the celebrity persona to the cute, helpless, aegyo-ful girl persona, occurs with the change of the discourse at the beginning of each aegyo performance. The gestural and linguistic cues marking the abrupt change of the discourse are noticeably standardized among them. When a moderator announces their turn, they immediately start their performances (sometimes with a little hesitation) by making some aegyo gestures: they put their two hands or fingers together, and gently shake them.

The only one who does not do these gestures is Sooyoung, who fails to impress the men, moderators, and audience altogether. The male moderator comments that she is just being her “self,” and that she does not seem to possess the habit of doing aegyo. She clearly sticks to herself rather than switching her role as an aegyo actress, claiming that she does not have aegyo. Because she refused to take a fake role and decided to stay real, she becomes a loser in this aegyo game. This incident shows how aegyo is strictly based on inauthenticity; nobody is interested her real self, but in how she puts on a show. Another girl who receives a bad reaction from the men is Jessica. Although she manages to perform aegyo in the end, she receives negative feedback from a man at first (“Is there something you’re displeased about?”), because of her late start and lack of enthusiasm. So the timing mismatch between the change of the
discourse – the start of the aegyo act – and the putting on the aegyo girl persona is subject to punishment, although it is not as bad as not conducting the job at all, like Sooyoung.

The linguistic cues the performers use in the aegyo performances include the use of oppa, LHL%, nasal exclamations, and a gentle/soft voice. Note that Sunny manages to receive the most intense reactions by producing a simple sound “woong,” the same nasal exclamation that Solbi uses in UG, when she tries to persuade her “husband” to carry her upstairs. Her extremely childish and cute performance is immediately complimented and praised by the audience and men altogether, with the subtitles commenting on her “overflowing aegyo.” Then she again does aegyo by saying oppa with LHL%, which is also a very short speech segment but is enough to make the men go wild. On the contrary, even though Sooyoung does use aegyo resources such as a high-pitched voice and cute gestures, her aegyo is not evaluated positively because of its excessiveness (the pitch almost reaches falsetto), and the use of improper resources such as a scratchy voice. Although she successfully makes people laugh with her comical, exaggerated performance, her performance lacks the proper management of the aegyo resources, thus failing to be a good aegyo performance. The feeling of disapproval is immediately shown by the men’s facial expressions and the three big red exclamation marks on screen.

The micro-managing of the aegyo performances is done by the immediate, detailed evaluations uttered by the discourse participants. Most notably, the most salient role in (6) is that of the moderators, especially the male host. The middle-aged male moderator acts as an authority figure who is wise enough to warn the younger males about the danger of women’s aegyo, and is powerful enough to direct women’s aegyo performances to meet his taste. As in Ochs and Taylor’s (1995) study on family dinner time conversations in which interactional identities emerge when the father problematizes other family members’ matters, the male moderator in (6) functions as a problematizer, controlling the whole discourse. The role of subtitles is also crucial, as it shows the noteworthy aegyo lines – usually good or very bad ones – on screen, to make the scene more comical, and to emphasize the positive or negative parts of the performances. The subtitles not only repeat what the performers say, but also add interpretations to the utterances or the overall situation – e.g., big red exclamation marks for Soooyoung’s bad aegyo speech or explanatory comments such as “overflowing aegyo,” or “shy aegyo.” As well as these subtitles, the frequent insertion of tilde, even at the absence of the actual fluctuation in the speech, symbolizes the aegyo performance, making sure that the audience will not miss what is aegyo and what is not.

The success of an aegyo performance in popular media, therefore, depends on how closely it aligns with the standardized aegyo persona and reflects dominant societal norms and values. This standardized aegyo persona is alienated from one’s “authentic” persona, and is marked by performers’ use of shared, salient cues. These cues are deliberately visible and obviously inauthentic, marking the beginning of a staged aegyo performance and showing the audience the switch of the roles. When the other participants control the women’s aegyo performance with explicit comments and evaluations, they are simultaneously evaluating her willingness to participate in the normative gender order, and gauging her femininity by the properness of her deceptive skills.

Conclusion

The Korean mainstream media’s obsession with aegyo is shown by the intense attention to the trivial details of its linguistic components as well as the frequent appearance of aegyo
performances, even though they are often exaggeratedly idealized, mocked, and dismissed. Through the media’s attention on it, aegyo has been safely described as a trivial female trait in the public media, being associated with a young and playful characteristic. While it is common for women’s linguistic behavior to be an object of surveillance (Miller 2004a; 2004b, Inoue 2002), the censoring of aegyo is not so much about the validity of its existence or its “feminine” value, but about its linguistic execution and proper contexts. The detailed descriptions of and adjustments driven by meta-comments on aegyo performances enable aegyo to be highly stereotyped and idealized. In this open public arena of aegyo, open in part because it is a trivial and inconsequential topic, the teaching is done both directly and indirectly with no shame or embarrassment.

Aegyo is placed at the heart of femininity in contemporary Korea, indexing the modern and the trendy. The central characteristic of aegyo, that it is a faked act disguised as an authentic one, plays a central role in this role-playing game of power and gender. Everyone is aware of its fakeness, but it never leads to punishment because of that, as long as it looks natural and authentic. The players and audience are not interested in the status of authenticity in an act of aegyo because they understand, and approve, that aegyo can never be real. This very aspect of aegyo is similar to the idea of hyperreality by Baudrillard (1998), where hyperreality is defined as “a real without origin or reality (1998: 1)”. With the rise of capitalism and consumerism, and the mass-reproduction of simulacra through abundant media technologies, the world is filled with copies that have no original sources. Through the continuous circulation of aegyo acts in the mass media, the image and aesthetics of aegyo is endlessly reproduced, without authenticity or originality. In this way, aegyo becomes an embodiment of post-modern idea of femininity and gender.

Aegyo has already begun to spread outside of Korea, with the recent hallyu wave that has fascinated people from many parts of Asia, and even outside of Asia. While aegyo has been taken for granted by Koreans, the outsiders’ view of aegyo has begun to affect the insiders’ view through its active use among cultural observers. Through the media’s reproduction and circulation of a childish aegyo persona, outsiders see aegyo as a unique and authentic quality of Korean women, and a crucial cultural knowledge to acquire. Thus, the copies of aegyo, circulated by the media to police women’s language, are penetrating other cultures, being evaluated and reproduced within those particular cultural contexts. In this unceasing process of cultural mass production, it will be interesting to see how insiders react to the image of aegyo held by outsiders, who believe that childish aegyo is truly authentic, rather than manipulated or contrived. This view might change the meaning of aegyo, or disturb the gender order in general in the cultural realm of Korea.

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1 Aegyo ([ægyo]) can be transcribed in various ways: egyo, aygyo, aykyo, etc. In this article I choose to use aegyo, following the Revised Romanized System that is the standard system of the Institute of Korean Language, because it is the most common and well-known form for lay people. Aegyo is transcribed as aykyo under the Yale Romanization System, a system generally preferred in academia, but it is hardly used outside the realm of academia.

ii I am indebted to Miyako Inoue for this analogy.

iii In explaining the process of “dollification” of Asian females, Puzar (2011) also uses a similar analogy:

“Innocence that might be pretended, endangered, or even turned into a fetish aside, some fluidity is undeniably in action here: being an Asian doll is often more a choice of specific surgical and cosmetic procedures and a matter of fashion and self-fashioning that includes gesturality and voice alterations, rather than of ‘[‘]being Asian[‘] or ‘[‘]being female[‘] in the first place, or directly engaging with doll images sensu stricto (Puzar: 94).”

iv The authors assume that all East-Asian looking people in the magazines are Korean.

v The word itself has a connotation of skill and manipulation. Aegyo is a Sino-Korean word, consisting of two Chinese characters – ‘愛(ae)’ meaning love and ‘嬌(gyo)’ meaning pretty or conceited. The character ‘嬌(gyo)’ has the female radical (女) in it, indicating the conventional gender reference associated with the word. Other words that are made with the character ‘嬌(gyo)’, such as gyotae or gyoeonyoungsaek, refer to women’s sly and flirtatious acts, using their pretty faces and cute attitude to please or manipulate men.

The Japanese word aikyō (愛嬌), which shares the same Chinese characters and have a similar lexical meaning to Korean aegyo, but seems to lack the meaning of fabrication, as it refers to the natural ability to make people happy, and smile. For instance, aikyō can be used with a newborn baby as in “this baby has an aikyō”, while aegyo is not used in such context, because a newborn baby is generally considered to be incapable of performing or fabricating acts.

vi This differentiates LHL% from HL%, in which the lowest point is located before the beginning of the final syllable (Jun 2001).
Likewise, *komaengmaengisori* (‘nose-stuffing sound’) also refers to a nasal sound, and can imply *aegyo*-ful speech as well.

The audience reaction, of course, is not entirely voluntary because the show producers generate and manipulate their reactions in order to get the desired effects. In this sense, the role of the audience is very similar to that of audio or visual effects.