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"I'm not an ajumma!": *Ajumma* and Comparative Terms of Address in Korean Society

In a 2012 television advertisement for Olleh KT, a major telecommunications company in South Korea, Darth Vader from *Star Wars* and a middle-aged Korean woman stand on a subway platform amidst a crowd of people. As the subway doors open, the woman elbows the miffed villain out of the way in order to snatch an open seat, only for Darth Vader to utilize the speed of Olleh KT's LTE WARP service to teleport into the seat right before she sits down (Moon 65).[1] This middle-aged woman is humorously implied to fit the aggressive, bold, self-seeking stereotype of an *ajumma* that exists in Korean culture. *Ajumma* is the Korean word for a married or quasi-married woman who appears to be around 30-60 years old (Yeon 179). According to the NAVER Korean English Dictionary, the title can translate to "aunty," "lady," and "madam, ma'am" and is the low or less formal form of the term *ajumeoni* ("'아줌마'"; "'아주머니'"). The term is used widely today and is often not offensive, according to informal interviews with Korean speakers, but in terms of certain pejorative semantic features *ajumma*[2] as a term of address is meaningful as a window into Korea's gender norms and hierarchical society. By locating the title *ajumma* (아줌마) in a broad system of Korean kinship terms, I will show that *ajumma* as a generic title fits with the collectivist and face-saving aspects of Korean culture.

[1] Although not verified to be the exact commercial that Moon references, an example of an Olleh KT commercial featuring this scene appears on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iV65KJW17d4.

[2] I will be following the Revised Romanization system for the Korean terms in this paper, with the exception of examples quoted from other sources.

I will then examine the derogatory connotations that the term *ajumma* can take on, focusing on stigmas around loss of beauty, aging, and low socioeconomic status by comparing it to other Korean terms for women, including *missy*, *agassi*, and *samonim*. Finally, I will compare *ajumma* to the seemingly parallel term *ajeossi* and the related term *ajae* to explore Korea's complex gender norms, which the word *ajumma* both upholds and challenges.

In Korea, the term *ajumma* is just one of many kinship terms used extensively to refer to people beyond the family. Terms of address reveal not only the relationship between the speaker and addressee, but also the underlying social systems that shape individuals' roles and relationships in a given community (Jeong and Yu 829). In Korea, the frequent use of kinship terms reflects the nation's collectivism. Both the influence of Confucian dictates for basic human relationships and the political and social instabilities of Korea's past have contributed to a strong inclination toward intra-group ties and communication (Kim, "Korean Cultural Codes and Communication" 100, 101-102). As an illustration, customers in a bank or store might address female clerks with terms that literally mean "older sister": *eonni* (if the speaker is female) or *nuna* (if the speaker is male) (Kim 103). Among friends, the terms *eonni* and *nuna* as well as their male counterparts *oppa* and *hyeong* are broadly used to express familiarity and closeness between individuals who are relatively close in age (Jeong and Yu 829). These four terms are especially meaningful because they tend to be one of the few avenues through which Koreans can express their closeness to others older than them, as addressing them by first name is considered rude and other deferential terms may sound too distant (Jeong and Yu 830). Other kinship terms include *halebeoji* (grandfather), *halmeoni* (grandmother), and *ajeossi* (uncle); kinship terms like these were originally used within the family and are now allowed to be used for strangers (Yeon 177). Finally, the term *ajumma* was used originally for female relatives or

older women but now has taken on a general definition of middle aged or married women who appear to be between 30-60 years old (Yeon 178). Against this background, the term *ajumma* emerges as yet another kinship term used outside of the actual family, fitting into the linguistic expression of collectivism in Korean culture.

Further, the use of generic nouns as address terms aligns with Korea's strong culture around saving face through indirect communication. David Yau-fei Ho defines face as "the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others" on the basis of fulfilling expectations imposed on him by society, both in general and in ways specific to "the relative position he occupies in his social network" (883). As mentioned earlier, Korean culture largely prohibits individuals from calling their elders by their first names, forcing them to turn to other titles relating to aspects of the addressee's position. However, many of these aspects may not be immediately apparent, and explicit naming of such attributes as age, occupation, year in college or membership of an organization, and gender "may violate decorum" (Rhee 964). In particular, mentioning any kind of weakness suggestive of lowered status might lead to a loss of face, which in turn incurs shame (Merkin 208). Resorting to generic terms of address on the speaker's side thus helps avoid any uncomfortable situations from the need to clarify the correct address term in line with one's position. The function of these terms proves even more useful because while English allows for the use of the "noncommittal" pronoun "you" for situations where the speaker is unsure of the appropriate title to use, the use of pronouns in Korean is much more limited, and rarely appropriate in cases where the speaker needs to show deference (Hwang 123). Seongha Rhee offers the following examples where generic kinship terms replace would-be pronouns in English:

a. "아줌마 이거 아줌마 거예요?

Acwumma i-ke acwumma-ke-y-e-yo?

aunt this-thing aunt-thing-COP-END-POL?

Ma'am, is this yours?' (Lit. 'Aunt, is this aunt's thing?')

b. 아저씨 뭐 떨어뜨리셨어요.

acessi mwe ttelettuli-sy-ess-e-yo

uncle something drop-HON-PST-END-POL

'Sir, you dropped something.' (Lit. 'Uncle, (you) dropped something.)" (963)

In the first example, the term *ajumma* is used both as a vocative, to get the addressee's attention, and in place of the possessive pronoun "yours." In the second example, the term *ajeossi* is sufficient so as to bypass the need to use second person pronouns altogether. In view of the prevalent concern in Korean society with avoiding shame and normalizing indirect communication, the usage of generic terms of address such as *ajumma* reflects the highly salient face-saving component of Korean culture.

For the woman addressed as *ajumma,* however, the connotations can be far from graceful. Some of the stereotypes about *ajummas'* appearances include permed hair and brightly colored clothing or gear for hiking and other outdoor activities (Roibu and Roibu 193). One blog post on the Korean travel website creatrip.com added a tinted sun visor and mismatched outfits with clashing colors or styles (마타). One of my bilingual Korean informants informally shared that she would never use *ajumma* to address someone else, but that she has used the term to refer to *ajumma*-style clothing as unfashionable. These rather ridiculous traits appear alongside more serious social associations of *ajummas* with self-neglect and physical unattractiveness. In one woman's words after she delivered a baby:

> "I tried it [*sic*] hard to be in shape. I don't want to be called 'ajumma' (I don't want to be degraded to 'ajumma') . . . My husband used to say with a laugh at me – 'look at your belly, I bet that (look) keeps bothering you.'" (P. H. Jang qtd. in Yeon 179)

The term *ajumma* here connotes an image of a woman lacking an attractive figure and emphasizes in particular the burden on married women and mothers to satisfy the social pressure to look young and beautiful in spite of physical challenges at their stage of life. This stigma around married women demonstrates the strong ageism in Korean culture in that it reveals an inclination to make clear delineations in stages of life and construct negative stereotypes about those in more advanced stages. Comparing the word *ajumma* with other terms for women in Korea further supports this fixation on female beauty. In 1993, the word *missy* (미시) emerged as an alternate term for married women, connoting young, forward-thinking wives who remain attentive to their physical appearances so as to continue looking young (Moon and Abidin). However, according to more recent interviews done by researcher Sook-Kyung Yeon with young Korean wives living in the U.S., the term *missy* received mixed reactions from the interviewees. While one interviewee felt she would be happy to be called *missy*, others commented that the term carries "commercialized concepts" or remains similar to *ajumma* in its association with "wacky and girlish clothes" (Yeon 185). The contemptuously treated image of the *ajumma* and a partial movement to reclaim the image of married women as encapsulated in the rise of *missy* underscores the pressure on females in Korea to maintain a desired appearance in order to be accepted.

Terms specific to younger women, such as *agassi*, further reveal by contrast a cultural stereotype of *ajummas* as unattractive and spent. One 32-year old housewife confessed, "When married women (*ajumma*) like me try to attend physical fitness classes and tend to their beauty,

we do so thinking that if we just made an effort, we could look as attractive as the young girls in the street" (Cho 184). Her testimony points to the way in which the concept of the *ajumma* appears in part as an opposite to the notion of young, beautiful women. The word *agassi* carries some of these latter connotations; the primary meaning is of an unmarried woman but it can also refer generally to a young woman (Kim, "On the Semantic Derogation" 154). According to Minju Kim's study of written and spoken corpus data from Korean language sources, 130 out of 350 written and quasi-spoken (i.e., from drama and television talk show scripts) tokens of *agassi* appeared in contexts relating to romantic relationships with men or the state of being pursued by them (Kim, "On the Semantic Derogation" 160). Further, the most frequent modifiers that appeared in proximity to the word *agassi* in the corpus were words denoting an attractive appearance, totaling 69 tokens, compared to the 22 personality adjectives that made up the next most frequent category (Kim, "On the Semantic Derogation" 163-164). Thus, while the word *agassi* ostensibly refers simply to an unmarried young woman, it carries significant semantic weight toward an image of a woman characterized by beauty and youthfulness in direct opposition to the stereotype of an *ajumma.*

The contrast between the concepts *ajumma* and *agassi* dictate differing social roles, illustrating how beauty and age factor into the opportunities available to women in Korean society. In a case study of the Korea Shipbuilding and Engineering Corporation (KSEC) shipyard, Hwasook Nam explores the influence of female workers in a male-dominated environment, as well as an associated labor union that had formed by the mid-1960s. The yard employed both *agassis* (or *cheonyeo,* which literally translates to "a virgin") and *ajummas,* but the work cut out for the two groups of female laborers differed: while the young, unmarried women were typically designated for clerical work, the older, married women were seen as

cheap labor for "unskilled" jobs such as cleaning, painting, and removing rust from the steel plates of ships (Nam 83). The fact that *ajumma* workers were deemed fit for dirty, hard jobs at the shipyard provides support for the connotations of labor and hard work that the title may carry; *ajummas* continue to face discrimination in the workplace today. Many *ajumma* lack healthcare, pension, or unemployment benefits in their jobs, and are often in the group that employers hire last and fire first (Rowan 328). Meanwhile, employers openly favor *agassis* for certain types of work, in some cases replacing *ajummas* with *agassis* in areas such as sales, office work, and consumer relations (Rowan 329). In the early 1990s, companies recruiting applicants from women's commercial high schools stipulated a height requirement of at least 160 centimeters, reasoning that attractive women would benefit their image and workplace environment (Cho 184-185). Comparing the terms *ajumma* and *agassi* and the manifestations of their social roles in Korea draws attention to the semantic features of *ajumma* as hardworking and tough women whose stage of life nevertheless restricts them from certain career ambitions that younger women can aspire to.

Samonim is another term that contrasts with *ajumma* and highlights the class disparity among women in Korea as tied to an individual's occupation and by extension her appearance and bearing. In one survey, a female respondent testified to the relationship between the title *ajumma* and one's work:

> "'*Ajumma* could have been a convenient word to describe someone who does not have a suitable life to face the outside world. For example, women who teach school are called teachers, in the workplace maybe a worker. However, those without a title are referred to as *ajumma*. . .'" (Rowan 333)

The complex system of titles in Korean society thus directly influences the meaning that has developed around *ajumma* as a woman without official or professional status outside of the home. Because certain jobs provide their own titles, the generic title *ajumma* remains for those women excluded from these positions. For example, a woman who owns her own company can claim the title *sajangnim,* and a female professor can be called *kyosunim* (Yeon 180). According to one of my Korean informants, the word *samonim* can refer to the wife of a well-educated or successful professional, such as a teacher, professor, pastor, missionary, doctor, lawyer, or politician; one might use the word to ask a man how his wife is doing with a special effort to show respect. The wives of poor or uneducated men, however, are not entitled to the term. Literally, *samonim* means "the honored wife of a teacher," but it has come to take on a more generic meaning of "any woman who has money and taste" (Cho 176-177). According to Haejoang Cho, realtors, primarily male, and other salespeople use *samonim* to make a distinction between the middle class woman with buying power and the poor *ajumma* (177). Thus, on the one hand the *ajumma* can be stereotyped as less beautiful and youthful than the *agassi,* and less respected socioeconomically than a *samonim.*

The greatest inequality that concerns the *ajumma*, however, is one of gender. Korea's historically Confucian ideas about strict gender roles both survives in and encounters resistance in the title *ajumma.* There are speculations that the Korean word for wife, *anae* (아내), may have historical ties to the Korean word for "inside," *ane* (안에) (Kim, "On the Semantic Derogation 151). Confucian women traditionally dwelt in specifically designated areas within the house, similar in concept to Western parlors, kitchens, and other rooms for women, dependent on the relationship with their husband's family (Rowan 338). The development of neo-Confucianism

during Korea's Joseon era (1392-1910) solidified the gender hierarchy of men over women as rooted in biological differences and as central to the working of the family and society (Rowan 338). Because the term *ajumma* contains connotations of homemakers and mothers, the title upholds these traditional values in Korea's past. Once *ajummas* leave their sphere of respect within the home, the title's value decreases. It becomes a blanket term for married women once they venture out "into the public, the social space traditionally considered only for men" (Yeon 180). In this way, the title *ajumma* connotes a certain loss of individuality and potential among women once they leave the home, suggesting that their worth may be found primarily in the domestic environment. As explained earlier, *ajummas* face discrimination from employers, and this distinction extends to lines of gender. The gender wage gap in Korea is the highest out of all the nations in the OECD, reaching 32.5% in 2019 and exceeding the runner-up, Japan, by 9% (OECD). The term *ajumma* reveals Korea's sharp gender inequalities and traditional expectations for women to fulfill their duties within the home.

At first glance, the title *ajeossi* seems to be a comparable male counterpart to *ajumma.* The term *ajeossi* can be used to mean "an uncle," "a man of one's parent's age," "a man," or as the address terms "Mister" and "sir" ("'아저씨'"). However, upon closer examination, the term carries different connotations. Haejoang Cho notes that the term *chonggak,* which refers to young unmarried men, has not received the same superior treatment over *ajeossi* in the way that *agassi* has over *ajumma* (186). This suggests that aspects of youth and pleasing appearance are more significant to the ways in which women are evaluated in Korean culture than those of men. *Ajeossi* also embalms Korea's Confucian patriarchal past and the value of hard work as a way of life for men borne out of Korea's rapid modernization and industrialization (Choi 47). Interestingly, a more recent development in popular culture has been the advent of the term *ajae,*

a shortened form of *ajeossi* (Choi 110). Often paired with *gaegu* to form the phrase *ajae* jokes or "gags," the word has been used to describe middle-aged men who tell bad jokes, including on television or in dramas (Choi 110, 116, 123). This cultural phenomenon pokes fun at middle-aged men, which seems to put the term *ajae* in a similar vein as *ajumma.* However, the fact that listeners must listen to an *ajae*'s jokes and laugh potentially against their will, as shown comically in television shows, actually reinforces the authority that these middle-aged men hold in Korea's patriarchal society (Choi 125). Thus, the term *ajae* has a different ring than *ajumma* in that it represents the continued authority and power than men have in Korean society, particularly in the public eye outside of the home. According to an article in The Korea Times, the word *ajae* is further altering notions of middle-aged men through the term *ajae fatale,* paralleling *homme fatale* (Kim, "Men in their 40s, 50s"). Unlike the old-fashioned, hardworking *ajeossis, ajaes* increasingly describe middle-aged men with style and money to invest in their personal grooming; some see the *ajae* lifestyle as one based on personal preferences and desires rather than those of others, such as family members (Kim, "Men in their 40s, 50s"). While *ajeossi* and *ajae* can represent negative stereotypes about older men in a way that *ajumma* may be offensive to some women, these male-specific terms prove opposite to *ajumma* in their emphasis on the power and influence of men in Korea's social fabric.

But the term *ajumma* is not without its own movement of reclamation. The movement to redefine *ajumma* as a term of solidarity and strength among women shows how language can be a vehicle of changing social attitudes. Sook-Kyung Yeon notes that her interviewees in a small Korean American town acknowledged the term can be used between close friends as a sign of intimacy and frankness (184-185). New opportunities are also emerging for *ajummas* to connect with each other through digital platforms, such as the website azoomma.com launched in 2000

(Moon and Abidin 180). On azoomma.com, *ajummas* can participate in various interest groups such as "cyber writers," "azit," and "herstory," allowing them to meet other *ajummas* similar to them as well as collectively shape their self-presentation as a demographic (Moon and Abidin 180). In this way, the term *ajumma* cements a shared identity among middle-aged women, and serves as a flag for a social movement. It is important to note that positive notes have long existed in the term, despite the negative stereotypes. One of my informants, a native Korean speaker, stressed that while the term has the potential to be offensive in a personal sense, the mass media in Korea credit *ajummas'* hard work and devotion to child-rearing with the strong upward trend in Korea's national development. She said that *ajummas* are reputed to do "everything," balancing their different roles in raising children, working, and managing housework; the capableness of an *ajumma* allows her to continue functioning even without her husband, if he should pass away or otherwise become absent. Thus, the Confucian ideals for women mentioned earlier encounter some complications in the title *ajumma*, as these women are respected for the very reason of their ability to move beyond the home as needed to support the family. When confronted with the stereotype of *ajummas* as self-centered and selfish, some female respondents to Bernard Rowan's survey reshaped this understanding by offering that the working lives, sacrifices for the family's benefit, and desire "to live better than do others" in *ajumma* renders this generalization inaccurate (Rowan 333). Thus, considerable momentum exists in opposition to the age, status, and physical appearance-based biases against *ajumma.*

By comparing *ajumma* to other titles in Korean society, including *agassi* and *ajeossi*, it becomes clear that the term engages with the strict lines of age, gender, professional status that crisscross Korean society and determine how a person is treated. The term *ajumma* reveals a variety of contradictions in Korean culture, such as the deeply embedded system of seniority-

based honorifics versus a degree of condescension toward older generations, the image of homemakers versus workers outside of the home, and traditional family values versus advocacy for women's rights. Much work remains to be done for the title to overcome its negative connotations, as seen in the cultural movement around the internet celebrity "Momjjang ajumma," a middle-aged woman whose impressive weight loss journey and online workout videos mobilized other women to follow in her footsteps (Moon and Abidin 181). What seems to successfully challenge stereotypes around the *ajumma's* body image continues to uphold an emphasis on beauty and self-care as a criterion for women's social acceptability. As the term continues to shift, it is clear that the title means much more than a woman who steals your seat on the subway.

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