

A Linguistic Anthropological Study of the Typification of Middle-Aged Men in Korea: An Examination of *Ajae* Joke Data*

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(In lieu of an abstract) *Ajae* frequently appear in popular media today. So-called *ajae gaegeu*, jokes (“gags”) made by male panelists in their mid-30s to mid-40s on television comedy programs and general entertainment programs, have been met with vociferous reactions from viewers. The popularity of *ajae* jokes has been accompanied by the birth of the *ajae* as a unique middle-aged male figure that has in turn become a common motif and theme in popular culture. *Ajae* jokes first drew attention when chef O Sedek, appearing on broadcaster MBC’s *My Little Television* (마이 리틀 텔레비전) in 2015, came out with various puns, including holding up a piece of garlic and saying, “형만을 위해 살아갈릭” (I only live for you; the sentence contains two garlic-related puns, one each on the Korean and English words.). Since then, the *ajae* boss sketches on broadcaster SBS’s entertainment program *Laughter Seekers* has featured the distress of company interns having to laugh at the jokes of their superiors, while the *ajaessi* section on KBS2’s entertainment program *Gag Concert* (개그콘서트) delivers laughs through the jokes of an “*ajae* demon” character. In this article, I explore the socio-cultural significance of these jokes and the male characters typically associated with them.

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1. Introduction

Ajae frequently appear in popular media today.¹ So-called *ajae gaegeu*, jokes (“gags”) made by male panelists in their mid-30s to mid-40s on television comedy programs and general entertainment programs, have been met with vociferous reactions from viewers. The popularity of *ajae* jokes has been accompanied by the birth of the *ajae* as a unique middle-aged male figure that has in turn become a common motif and theme in popular culture. *Ajae* jokes first drew attention when chef O Sedeuk, appearing on broadcaster MBC’s *My Little Television* (마이 리틀 텔레비전) in 2015, came out with various puns, including holding up a piece of garlic and saying, “형만을 위해 살아갈릭” (I only live for you; the sentence contains two garlic-related puns, one each on the Korean and English words.). Since then, the *ajae* boss sketches on broadcaster SBS’s entertainment program *Laughter Seekers* has featured the distress of company interns having to laugh at the jokes of their superiors, while the *ajaessi* section on KBS2’s entertainment program *Gag Concert* (개그콘서트) delivers laughs through the jokes of an “*ajae* demon” character. Comedian Shin Dongyeop stars in *Ajae Sherlock* on tvN’s entertainment program *SNL Korea* (SNL 코리아). In addition, countless *ajae* jokes appear in commercials and on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, accompanied by a sharp increase in the use of *ajae* as a term of address.²

But despite the importance of the *ajae* phenomenon in Korean society with the ongoing trend for *ajae* jokes and the ubiquity of the noun *ajae* in on- and off-line spaces of communication, it has only been discussed by cultural critics in the media – there has still been no attempt to take a social science-based approach to understanding the socio-cultural significance of *ajae* jokes. This study is an attempt to consider from a linguistic anthropological perspective the structural characteristics and socio-cultural meanings of this brand of humor. Specifically, I aim to answer the following research questions: What are the characteristics of *ajae* jokes and what are their socio-cultural meanings? And how did the

¹ (Editor’s Note) Originally a kinship term, *ajae* is a shortened form of *ajeossi*, referring to a distant uncle. In contemporary usage, it is widely used to address a middle-aged man. The author explains the term later in the article.

² Daumsoft analyzed the number of mentions of the word *ajae* on social media, revealing an increase between 2011 (18,390 mentions) and last year (483,186 mentions); an increase of 27 fold (Chosun Ilbo, June 7, 2016).

word *ajae* come to acquire the specific *ajae* image? In this article, I adopt analytical frameworks of linguistic/semiotic anthropology in order to analyze and describe this process of meaning-making. In the introduction, I start by presenting linguistic anthropological studies and semiotic analytical frameworks on the construction of meaning and the embodiment of things/events/people. In the main body of the article, I describe and analyze *ajae* jokes collected from broadcast media and the Internet in an attempt to grasp the socio-cultural significance of this genre, which is now so ubiquitous in Korea.

1) *Linguistic Anthropological Studies of Speech Play*

Speech play researched in the field of linguistic anthropology includes speech genres such as puns, riddles, and verbal dueling (Sherzer 2002). In Korea, previous studies of speech play have addressed such speech genres (Kang N. 2015; Kim J. 2011; Byeon 2011; Wang 2009, 2010; Jo 2016; Choe 2010). Leading studies of traditional speech play or verbal art include those focused on *nongdam* (jokes) and *gyeonmal* (word play) of Deokjeok-do in Gyeonggi Province (Choe 2010); the *useumaesori* (funny stories), *nongdam*, and *gyeonmal* of Gyeonggi and Ganghwa provinces (Wang 2009), and the *bindam* (word play) of Jo-do in Jindo County, Jeolla Province (Wang 2010). Studies of traditional speech play have generally focused on the contexts in which the play takes place and on its formal structures. Relatively recent research includes studies of the *heomu* (empty, idle) jokes popular among young people (Byeon 2011), ghost speak (*gwisinmal*) (Kim J. 2011), children's speech play (Kang 2015), and bilingual speech play by students at international elementary schools (Jo 2016). These studies describe how children and youths use various linguistic resources to come up with creative puns. Their authors maintain that the speech play of children and youths in Korea is not merely a game but a key way of forming bonds and group identity within peer groups.

Korean linguistic anthropological studies of speech play genres have thus generally consisted of description and analysis of the structural characteristics, uses, and social functions of speech play in everyday life. But there has so far been no research into the social structures that particular types of speech play genres practiced in social media reflect and reproduce, or the socio-cultural significance in Korean society of the figures that employ these speech play genres. This study is an attempt to

consider the socio-cultural meaning of the speech genre known as *ajae* jokes and the *ajae* figures that use this genre. In order to consider the ways in which *ajae* figures are depicted, it is necessary to refer to research on the recreation of men in popular culture, in addition to linguistic anthropological studies of speech genres.

2) *Depictions of Men in Popular Culture*

The depictions of men in television dramas and films, and the ways these change according to era, have been considered in linguistics and culture studies (Kim M. 2014; Yi 2013; Hwang 2008). Yi Hwajeong (2013) analyzed the way male lead characters were portrayed in melodramas broadcast between 1992 and 2012. This research shows a gradual disappearance of the classic male image and the appearance of androgenized male forms in drama texts. Kim Mira (2014) has shown how television, which had previously depicted hegemonic masculinity and ideal manhood supported by patriarchy based on the premise that gender roles and identity were also social edifices, has changed these depictions in accordance with epochal social change. To this end, she conducted narrative analysis of the entertainment programs *Dad, Where are We Going?* (아빠, 어디 가?) and *Superman is Back* (슈퍼맨이 돌아왔다), both of which have recently proved highly popular among viewers. Both programs place child raising and housework, traditionally defined as the roles of women, in central position and give idealized depictions of non-authoritarian fathers in touch with expressing their feelings, unlike a conventional strict and authoritarian father figure, thereby proposing a new type of masculinity. At the same time, Kim Mira (2014) revealed how making child raising and housework into a kind of game failed to convey the everyday oppression and pain that these responsibilities may cause to women.

Cultural studies abroad have addressed masculinity in popular culture by examining the changes in male lead sitcom character portrayal in accordance with social change (Hanke 1998; Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002). Hanke (1998) discusses how in *Home Improvement* a middle-class, middle-aged American man uses strategies such as self-flagellatory jokes to create a caricature of traditional macho masculinity. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) focus on the depiction of gay men in U.S. sitcoms. *Will & Grace*, the weekday sitcom they study, was broadcast from 1998 to 2006 and was famous as the first American sitcom with a gay male lead

character. It was judged to have brought positive change to the image of gay men, who had previously been negatively portrayed in sitcoms (Battles and Hilton–Morrow 2002). By offering diversified depictions of middle-aged men, both *Home Improvement* and *Will & Grace* are deemed to have cast off stereotypes and reflected social change, but have at the same time been criticized for not straying far from the traditional frameworks in which men work outside the home and are heterosexual. Cultural studies of masculinity in comedies and dramas in Korea and abroad have thus critically addressed the reproduction of male typicality or the creation of non-typical identities. *Ajae* in popular culture, the focus of this study, can be regarded similarly as depictions of specific male images. But, unlike the depictions of gender addressed in other cultural studies, in this study I analyze the process by which the figure referred to as *ajae* came to acquire a typified image. To this end, I apply a theoretical framework capable of analyzing the process of linking signs and meanings.

3) *The Effects of Semiosis in Building Meaning*

In this study, I adopt a semiotic framework of analysis applied in linguistic anthropological studies in order to analyze and describe the acquisition of a specific image by the *ajae* sign. Semiotic/linguistic anthropological approaches have focused on the process by which meanings arbitrarily bestowed on signs come to appear as their inherent meanings. Research into the way cultural features such as language and ritual acquire particular meanings in a given society, and in the semiotic creation of brands, is useful in developing the discussion in this study.

First, some linguistic anthropological studies have researched the way linguistic qualities have come to signify characteristics outside language. For example, Urciuoli (1996) considered the phenomenon whereby the Spanish-accented English spoken by Puerto Rican immigrants in New York City has become associated with the qualities of people who were “lazy” or who “like to play.” Urciuoli discussed how the linguistic-ideological effect whereby such prejudice made linguistic qualities appear naturally linked to non-linguistic aspects contributed to typification. Johnston (2009) used a semiotic model to analyze the process of printing Pittsburgh dialect on T-shirts and selling them as products embodying regional pride. According to this study, language users unaware of the linguistic qualities to define language and dialect, come to think that there

was a variant form that could be defined as a local dialect or language, and thus come to play a part in producing, consuming, and distributing discourses that imbued local speakers with a specific character.³ Both of these studies stated that the notion whereby language qualities such as variations or accents were regarded as expressing the character of a person or the identity of a group was a linguistic ideology.

The process by which the character of things/events/people are regarded as inherently and naturally connected to their icon (像) is iconization.⁴ Irvine and Gal (2000) claimed that iconization is a process of reinterpreting linguistic signs and social meanings as if they were essentially linked, and that this is a process of naturalizing indexical connections. Kang Yunhui (2004) uses this analytical framework to address the process of iconization of indigenous native culture in Indonesia's Petalangan society. According to this study, some of the characteristics of Petalangan rituals are erased in the process of iconization, while only elements counted as so-called "folk" culture – music, dance, handicrafts, and so on – are chosen for inclusion.

In addition, Go Gyeongnan (2016) has attempted a semiotic anthropological study of Korean cosmetic color words. Specifically, Go considered semantic composition affecting the branding of low-cost colored cosmetics, resulting in an understanding of the branding work that uses color names as linguistic signs to transform colors, non-linguistic material signs, into something meaningful and usable to consumers. By citing the color names of certain cosmetic companies, Go demonstrates a process of characterization whereby consumers of a specific product ultimately appeared to possess the image associated with that product, in this case "girliness." In this study, Go shows the formation of indexicality linking linguistic signs to particular consumer segments, and the process of

³ The depiction of such figures as having particular characteristics has become more frequent with the development of popular media. In the case of social media, now used even more than its broadcast and print counterparts, the depiction of mediated figures (Agha 2011) has become easier, while its speed of expansion and distribution is faster than before.

⁴ Gal (2013) has reconceptualized iconization as rhematization. Her aim here is to emphasize that reading characteristic A as an icon of B could more accurately be described as a problem of interpretation. In other words, Pierce called an interpretation relying on an icon a rheme. (I would like to thank Go Gyeongnan for pointing this out.) In this study, I use the term "iconization" as I believe the distinction does not make a great difference to the development of this discussion.

iconization whereby it was imagined that these signs possessed the qualities of an ideal girl in contemporary Korean society. Go stated that these were branding processes that project abstract qualities.

The authors of such studies have described and analyzed the process of semiosis whereby specific signs become established with familiar meanings. This process includes meaning formation through repeated citation and boils down to typification that makes signs and other social qualities appear inherently connected (Urciuoli 1996). As in these studies, the name *ajae*, referring to the one who tells the speech genre of *ajae* jokes addressed here, is endlessly cited and talked about in popular media. Here I borrow Nakassis's (2012) concept of citation defined as follows: "a form of reanimation, the breathing of life into an event of discourse through another discursive act that, in one way or another, represents it" (Nakassis 2012: 626). In this study, I use these analytical tools to describe and analyze the formation of the *ajae* icon.

4) *Data Collection and Methods*

In this study, my aim is to understand the socio-cultural meaning of the *ajae* jokes recently so ubiquitous in Korea by grasping their structural characteristics and analyzing the *ajae* discourse. Most of the data analyzed and described here are *ajae* joke examples and *ajae* discourses that can be gathered from broadcast media and the Internet. I began this research in March 2016 when *Gag Concert's Ajaessi* segment first appeared; since then, hardly a day has gone by without the word *ajae* appearing in places such as newspaper articles, cultural reviews, blogs, and Facebook. In other words, as of now – late September 2016 – it has been possible to find the word *ajae* on Internet portal sites every day for at least seven months. It is therefore easy to find not just *ajae* jokes but examples of use of the word *ajae* itself. To see how the word *ajae* was used, I generally read or watched media discourses (mostly cultural reviews), blogs, commercials, and posts and comments on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. I was also able to hear about on-line *ajae*-related discourses through informal interviews with individuals in their 20s, 30s, and 40s around me. I found examples of *ajae* jokes mainly from entertainment and comedy programs broadcast on television between March and September 2016 (*ajaessi* in *Gag Concert*, *bujang gaegeu* in *Utchatsa* (boss jokes in *Laughter Seekers*), and SNL Korea's *Ajae Sherlock*, for example), with others coming from blogs and webtoons. I

collected about 100 jokes in total⁵ and classified these examples according to style of joke, generally referring to comedy-style narrative forms in order to see the relationship between the joke-teller and listener. Countless examples of use of the word *ajae* can be found in media ranging from commercials to Facebook comments; I focused in particular on the meanings of *ajae*.

2. Structural Characteristics of *Ajae* Jokes

1) Definition

There is still no dictionary definition of “*ajae* joke,” but the various definitions circulating on-line have the following elements in common: “an unfunny joke,” “an outdated joke,” “a joke one is forced to laugh at,” and “an unfunny play on words (by an *ajeossi* (middle-aged man, literally ‘uncle’).” Making *ajae* jokes frequently on Facebook or in text messages brings reactions such as “on the fast track to being a lonely old man/woman” or “the way to losing all your friends” (university student, female, 23).

Korea in the 1990s saw a prevalence of “*sseolleong* (lame) jokes” similar to *ajae* jokes. Examples of *sseolleong* jokes are diverse, but one type took the form of riddles to which the answers were so extremely obvious that no one expected they would actually be the given answers, such as, “What happens when you divide an insect into three parts? It dies.”⁶ These riddle-like word games were called *sseolleong* jokes because they made the listener say “*sseolleonghada*,” which literally means “it’s chilly” and implies that the mood has turned cold because of the unfunny joke. It is common to find examples of *sseolleong* jokes now being recycled as *ajae* jokes.⁷

⁵ I did not attempt to count the precise number of *ajae* jokes. Since some *ajae* jokes allowed myriad variations on the same basic word play (such as *siripdae*, homophone meaning “city university” or “is cold”), attempting to number them was meaningless.

⁶ Other than in the researcher’s memory, examples of *sseolleong* jokes could be found in personal blogs on the Internet. For example, http://blog.daum.net/_blog/BlogTypeView.do?blogid=0s331&artid=53.

⁷ One example is the joke “대통령 선거의 반대말은? 대통령 앉은 거.” (What’s the opposite of a presidential election? A president sitting down; a play on the word election (*seongeo*) which is homophonous with a term for “standing up.”) This was also a popular *sseolleong* joke in the 1990s.

By the 2000s, *sseolleong* jokes were sometimes being referred to as *heomu* jokes.⁸ Byeon Hyewon's (2011) examples of the *heomu* jokes by middle school students include large numbers of examples previously called *sseolleong* jokes. Pun-based speech play was thus an existing speech genre, not just something introduced by *ajae*. Descriptions of speech play categorized as *heomu* jokes in Byeon's (2011) study of youth language include the joke “바나나를 먹으면 나한테 반하나?” (If you eat a banana will you fall in love with me?; the part of the question that means “will you fall in love” is homophonous with “banana.”) Other examples of jokes used by youths include “수박을 먹으면 나한테 반할 수박에.” (If you eat watermelon you'll definitely fall in love with me; here, the part that means “definitely” sounds similar to the word for “watermelon.”) These are now held to be common examples of *ajae* jokes.

“Nonsense quizzes” are another popular genre. Like *sseolleong* and *heomu* jokes, these take the form of riddles that can be solved not with direct answers to the question posed but with answers that consider the polysemy and polyphony of words. Examples include questions that can be answered by grasping not the deictic meaning of the question but the ambiguity of the words involved, such as “세상에서 가장 큰 컵은? 월드컵.” (What's the biggest cup in the world? The World Cup.) Since *ajae* gags are thus not very different, in terms of form, from earlier *sseolleong* and *heomu* jokes, they are often labeled “old-fashioned” (university student, female, 21), while some young people have said, “I don't know why they say these days that the things people used to share as nonsense quizzes are *ajae* jokes. It feels like they've taken away something that belongs to us” (university student, female, 27).

An example of a phenomenon similar to *ajae* jokes found in another society is Japan's *oyaji* jokes (おやじギャグ). Used mostly by middle-aged men, these are generally jokes that include elements of *dajare* (駄洒落) – a kind of speech play using puns or similar-sounding words⁹ – or *jiguchi* (地口) – a type of word play that matches similar-sounding phrases such as sayings and aphorisms (Cheon 2014: 123). According to Cheon Hojae (2014), it's so unfunny when middle-aged men tell *oyaji* jokes in Japan that

⁸ (Translator's note) “Futile” or “nihilistic” jokes that make the listener (and maybe even the teller) feel “empty.”

⁹ One example of an *oyaji* joke is “*Kare wa kare*” (Curry is spicy), in which the loan word for “curry” is homophonous with a colloquial way of saying “is spicy.”

young people (those in their 20s and 30s) show hostility and hatred towards the joke-tellers. A familiar example exists in the “dad joke” genre of the United States, which, like Japanese *oyaji* jokes, do not receive very good reactions from listeners. Dad jokes are often said to make those who hear them “groan in annoyance.” In other words, they may become jokes that give their listeners pain rather than laughter.¹⁰ Both Japan and the United States have in common with Korea the fact that it is largely middle-aged men who make jokes using puns, and that such jokes meet with unfavorable reactions.

Speech play using puns in Korea and other countries, therefore, benefits from becoming more varied with the addition of new vocabulary lists and acquiring contexts for interpretation and shared meaning in order to be valid. The jokes should also use different symbols such as Hangeul, Chinese characters, English, and numbers. Pun-based speech play forms that use such diverse signs can generally be divided into speech play using puns and riddle-like forms, as below.

2) *Characteristics of Linguistic Form*

The most common characteristic of *ajae* jokes is speech play using homophony and multiple meaning. The *ajae* jokes below use puns and are now circulating on the Internet:

둘리가 가만히 둘리 없어 (There's no way Dooly will let this go; homophone: “Dooly”/“will let this go”)

참외를 먹으니 참 외롭네 (Eating melons has made me feel really lonely; homophone: “melons”/“very lonely”)

안주는 더 안주나 (Aren't you going to give us more snacks?; homophone: “snacks”/“going to give”)

고기가 고기(‘거기’) 있네 (The meat's over there; near-homophone: “meat”/“over there”)

¹⁰ A reference to the website titled “25 dad jokes to make your kids groan” (<http://mashable.com/2014/06/14/best-dad-jokes/#R74ADZn19sq3>). Many websites show mockery and abhorrence for this genre, with titles such as “How I survived dad jokes.” But given that various other sites feature collections of dad jokes, it seems they do have some consumers. A classic example is the pun-based “How does a Jewish man make tea? Hebrews it.”

조기는 조기(‘저기’) 있네 (The drumfish is over there; near-homophone: “drumfish”/“over there”)

바나나를 먹으면 나한테 반하나? (If you eat a banana will you fall in love with me?; homophone: “banana”/“fall in love”)

자가용이 너무 작아용 (The car’s too small.; near-homophone: “car”/“too small”)

Meanwhile, riddle-like forms (or “nonsense quizzes”) account for about 80 percent of *ajae* jokes. One characteristic of the riddle genre is its strategic use of semantic ambiguity; the most commonly employed language form-based strategies are puns and grammatical ambiguity (Abrahams and Dundes 1972).

새우가 출연하는 사극은? 대하 사극 (What do you call a historical drama starring a shrimp? An epic historical drama; homophonic punchline: “shrimp historical drama”/“epic historical drama”)

허구한 날 미안한 동물은? 오소리 (What animal is sorry every day? A badger; bilingual homophonic punchline: “badger” (Korean)/ “Oh sorry” (English))

아몬드가 죽으면? 다이아몬드 (What do you call a dead almond? A diamond; faux-portmanteau-esque punchline using Korean pronunciations of English loanwords “almond,” “die,” and “diamond”)

비가 1시간 동안 내리면? 추적 60분 (What do you call it when it rains for an hour? In-depth 60 Minutes; homophonic punchline using title of popular Korean TV program that could also mean “60 minutes of drizzle”)

고양이가 미워하는 고양이는? 미어캣 (What do you call a cat that a cat hates? A meerkat; bilingual faux-portmanteau of Korean phrase meaning “hate you” and English word “cat”)

설날에 세배돈을 못받은 사람을 뭐라 하나? 설거지 (What do you call someone who is given no pocket money on New Year’s Day? Washing the dishes; nonsensical faux-portmanteau of Korean words for “New Year’s Day” and “beggar” to make a word that means “dish washing”)

세상에서 가장 가난한 왕은? 최저임금 (What do you call the poorest king in the world? Minimum wage; partial pun: Korean term for “minimum wage” includes word meaning “king”)

손가락은 영어로 핑거다. 그럼 주먹은? 오므린거 (If finger in English is “finger,” how do you say fist? Something closed up. This joke pretends that the

punchline in Korean also means a made-up English word for fist that rhymes with “finger.”)

세상에서 가장 일찍 자는 사람은? 이미자 (Who goes to bed earlier than anyone else in the world? Yi Mi-ja; homophonic punchline: “Yi Mi-ja” [name of a Korean singer]/ “already sleeps”)

싸움을 가장 좋아하는 나라는? 칠레 (What country likes fighting the most? Chile; homophonic punchline: “Chile”/“Go on, hit me!”)

불인데 뜨겁지 않은 불은? 이불 (What fire isn’t hot? A quilt; homophonic punchline: “(a) quilt”/“this fire”)

뱀이 불에 들어가면? 뱀파이어 (What does a snake become if it goes into a fire? A vampire; bilingual faux-portmanteau combining Korean word for “snake” and English word “fire,” pronounced with an initial /p/ due to the absence of an /f/ sound in the Korean language.)

Most such examples of *ajae* jokes, like those of other societies and groups, are incomprehensible to those without a grasp of popular culture, Korean language, and Korean cultural and generational characteristics. For example, the above joke that refers to “In-depth 60 minutes” would be still understood today by members of the public ranging from youths to senior citizens. But the following example of a *sseolleong* joke from the 1990s, which takes the same form as an *ajae* joke, would be hard to understand for teenagers today, who are unfamiliar with Windows 95: “창문 100개 중 5개가 깨지면? 윈도우95” (What do you get if you have 100 windows and five of them break? Windows 95; bilingual pun on Korean and English words for “window.”)

Ajae jokes are a form of speech play that does not require skillful delivery style and can be repeated endlessly. It has been reported that to use *gyeonmal*, a traditional type of Korean pun genre, “You need to be good at delivery” (Choe 2010). *Bindam*, another word for *gyeonmal*, are also defined as “words to make someone else laugh” or “turning words around to be funny” (Wang 2010: 151), demanding good delivery skills. Byeon Hyewon (2011) has discussed how when it comes to use of language among Korean youths, being able to “talk in a really funny way” is a resource that can bring a kind of “power” in certain groups. *Ajae* jokes, by contrast, are characterized by the fact that they can be reproduced or repeated even by somebody without exceptional oratory skills, just by memorizing a few formulas, because of their structural simplicity. For

example, the same words can be used to make many possible variant jokes. As shown below, questions ending with “추우면” (is cold) or “-가 웃으면” (laughs) and answers containing “*siripdae*” (homophone meaning “city university” or “is cold”), “풋” (*put*; Korean or bilingual homophone that can represent a short burst of laughter or mean “unripe” or “foot”) or “킥” (*kik*; bilingual homophone meaning “giggle” or “kick”) can be repeated *ad infinitum*:

서울이 추우면? 서울시립대 (What do you call Seoul when it's cold? University of Seoul/Seoul is cold)

서울대가 추우면? 서울시립대 (What do you call Seoul National University when it's cold? University of Seoul/Seoul is cold)

시립대 가면 손이 시립대 (If you go to a city university your hands get cold.)

시립대 가면 발이 시립대 (If you go to a city university your feet get cold.)

축구공이 웃으면? 풋볼 (What do you call a football that laughs? *Put*ball.; a pun exploiting the conflation of /p/ and /f/ sounds in Korean pronunciation)

사과가 웃으면? 풋사과 (What do you call an apple that laughs? An unripe apple/ha!-apple)

고추가 웃으면? 풋고추 (What do you call a chili that laughs? An unripe chili/ha!-chili)

바나나가 웃으면? 바나나킥 (What do you call a banana that laughs? A banana kick/ha!-banana)

칠판이 웃으면? 킥보드 (What do you call a blackboard that laughs? A kickboard/ha!-board)

As speech plays that can be endlessly reproduced, *ajae* jokes, as already mentioned, were formerly called riddles, nonsense quizzes, *beomu* jokes, and *sseolleong* jokes, and are largely the same as these genres in terms of linguistic form. The structural relations between the participants, which I address in the next section, is the key characteristic that differentiates *ajae* jokes from similar earlier speech plays.

3) *Relationships between Participants in Ajae Jokes*

As mentioned above, *ajae* jokes possess the same characteristics as earlier speech play genres. Where they differ is that their name specifies a certain joke-teller: They are “jokes told by *ajae*.” According to the National Institute of Korean Language’s standard unabridged dictionary of Korean, *ajae* is a derogatory version of *ajeossi*. According to the same dictionary, *ajae* is normally used in the Gyeongsang regional dialect to denote one’s father’s first cousin (FFBS) or one’s patrilineal second cousin (FFBSS), and is also sometimes used in the same circumstances as *ssiajae* (one’s husband’s married younger brother; HBy), provided the man in question is younger than the speaker (Wang 2012: 130-137). Ultimately, *ajae* is a term used for relatives who are of an older generation than the speaker, but in fact younger than the speaker.

But on today’s Internet and in contemporary broadcasting, *ajae* has become used as a quasi-genealogical term in the same way as *ajeossi*; this meaning later expanded to become a title or designation indicating a difference of generation. Some, for example, describe it as “between *oppa* (a woman’s older brother or older male friend) and *ajeossi*” or claim that an *ajae* is someone who is “neither *oppa* nor *ajeossi*” (Chosun Ilbo, June 7, 2016). Quasi-genealogical terms have been widely used in Korean society, with *ajeossi* or *samchon* used to designate men who are a bit too old to be called *oppa*. Perhaps *ajae* can be seen as a variant of these, used to designate a man positioned ambiguously between *oppa* and *samchon*.

Tellers of *ajae* jokes who have begun appearing on television are generally middle-aged men. In dramas, rather than being depicted as family relations such as fathers or husbands, they appear as bosses at work, ordinary *ajeossi* you might see at the shops, or detectives who have come to solve a problem. For example, the *ajae* who appears in the *ajaessi* sketches on KBS’s *Gag Concert* is a middle-aged man disguised as an “*ajae* demon.” The other characters are exorcists who must drive out the demon. This *ajaessi* is a middle-aged man whose behavior is enough to earn him the hatred of those around him. He appears in a white undershirt, shorts, socks pulled up all the way to his knees, toe socks, and sandals. Moreover, he has none of the manners that should be observed in the company of others. He blows his nose in front of them and re-eats food he has picked out from his teeth with a toothpick. But those who see him do these things cannot criticize him directly and merely show reactions of disgust. But the *ajaessi*

acts as if nothing has happened, wearing an authoritative expression on his face. He goes on to tell the joke, “세종대왕이 나온 고등학교는? 가가거겨고교” (What high school did King Sejong graduate from? Gagya geogyeo gogyo; a pun on syllables used to learn the Hangeul alphabet, which Sejong invented, and the abbreviated term for “high school”) before trying to force the listening characters – exorcists who had come to expel the *ajae* demon – and the show’s studio audience to laugh, saying “This is funny, why aren’t you laughing?”¹¹ Such *ajae* jokes and *ajae* on *Gag Concert* make their audience feel uncomfortable and are depicted as objects of booing, criticism, and ridicule.

In relation to this, some cultural critics have begun claiming that *Gag Concert* is no longer funny,¹² citing the example of *ajaessi*. Such critics maintain that *ajae* gags themselves are already unfunny, and that the program has dug itself into a hole by making sketches out of them. Featuring characters who keep trying to make *ajae* jokes that aren’t even funny has the effect of making a caricature of the gags themselves, but does not seem to have a “funny” effect on a comedy program.¹³ Therefore, *ajae* jokes appearing on gag programs trigger laughter as unfunny jokes, and their listeners/audiences are sometimes placed in situations where they have to laugh against their will.

Another comedy featuring a performer telling *ajae* jokes that brings forced laughter from audiences is the *Bujang Ajae* section of *Laughter Seekers*, broadcast by SBS. In the following example, a boss tells *ajae* jokes and a new intern has to put up with them in order to keep his job:

(An intern, happy and excited to have his first job, is approached by his boss.)

Boss: Have you finished the documents I told you to do yesterday?

Intern: Yes, I’ll have them finished by this afternoon.

¹¹ From an episode of *Gag Concert* broadcast on Mar. 13, 2016.

¹² Jeong, Deokhyeon. 위기의 개콘, 웃기지도 못하면서 무엇을 바라는가 [Crisis-stricken *Gag Concert* – not even funny anymore, so what is it trying to do?] (Enter Media, September 26, 2016).

¹³ According to Hong and Jo (2012), strategies used by comedy programs like *Gag Concert* to produce laughter include narrative strategies such as social satire, and the kind of strategies using physical hierarchy that are often found in traditional comedy. Going by this analysis, simply featuring an *ajae* telling endless jokes, as in the *ajaessi* sketches, will not produce much laughter.

Boss: I wasn't like that when I was an intern, you know. As for me, I'm a zebra. [Audience laughs.] ["As for me" is almost homophonous with "I'm a horse," a coincidence that the boss extrapolates into "I'm a zebra."]

Intern: Pardon?

Boss: [Imitating a horse's front legs with his hands] Neighhgh! Weren't expecting that, were you?

Intern: Er, no. Not at all.

Boss: It's okay to laugh at moments like this.

Intern: [Forcing himself to laugh] Er, yes sir. Hahaha.

Boss: Yes! That's right!

(...)

(Later, as the boss's *ajae* jokes continue, the intern stares into the air and sobs, "Mom, I guess I have to put up with this if I want a full-time job, don't I?" The audience laughs.)

(From *Bujang Ajae* on episode 156 of SBS's *Laughter Seekers*. Broadcast on July 29, 2016.)

The link between *ajae* jokes and power abuse is clear in this program that features a boss telling *ajae* jokes. In traditional Korean society, a "joking relationship" (Choe 2010) means an equal and close relationship, albeit temporary. In the case of *gyeonmal*, another speech play genre, the teller is characterized as someone "just not that funny" (Choe 2010: 447) and someone who likes messing around; there are no cases in which the relationship between the participants is actually defined as a hierarchical one, as in *ajae* jokes. But when it comes to the *ajae* jokes in the program mentioned above, only an individual in a superior position in an asymmetrical social relationship can be the joke-teller, while listeners in a relatively inferior position or of low status have to react with passive laughter. In the case of the *Bujang Ajae* episode on *Laughter Seekers*, the listener must laugh at unfunny *ajae* jokes because he has to put up with even the hardest and most degrading work in order to get through his internship and become a full employee. In this way, *ajae* gags are a good linguistic form for reflecting hierarchical relationships in Korean society, as represented by the terms *gap-eul gwangye* (dominator-dominated

relationship) and *sangmyeong habok* (上命下服; superiors give orders and inferiors obey). The *ajae* characters in *ajaessi* and *Bujang Ajae* show the power that middle-aged men embody and crave in everyday life. The *ajae* that appears in *ajaessi* is a middle-aged man behaving rudely and incurring the disgust of others in a public place, while in *Bujang Ajae* the boss seems to be making friendly jokes, but ultimately these scenes appear to show embodiments of the authority of middle-aged men in that the listener, on the lower side of an unequal relationship, is forced to laugh. Through the performance of gags like *ajae* jokes, these comedy programs are on one hand maintaining and confirming this authority; on the other hand, they are parodying and making a caricature out of it. While showing a decline in the authority of middle-aged men, they reenact the position that these men still hold within the hierarchy of Korean society.

But the power abuse of *ajae* jokes is parodied not only in comedy programs. The following example quotes an *ajae* joke and reveals a metapragmatic discourse about it:

Today, our professor said “Is *sanchae bibimbap* on the menu today? Better than *jugeunchae bibimbap*.”¹⁴ All the teaching assistants laughed. I wish I had that kind of authority. (August 12, 2015. From a Twitter account)

This *ajae* joke quote, like the *Bujang Ajae* episode described above, depicts a scene in which a speaker superordinate to his interlocutors makes an *ajae* joke and his listeners laugh (against their will). The Twitter user goes further, adding the metapragmatic assessment, “I wish I had that kind of authority.” In other words, the very telling of an *ajae* joke by someone in a superior position is depicted as an expression of his authority.

So far, I have described characteristics of *ajae* jokes including their linguistic forms and the relationships between tellers and listeners. The former include potential for endless reproduction and repetition, while the latter include the structural characteristics of being told by people of a specific gender and age group – roughly middle-aged men – and being listened to by people subordinate to the tellers. It is precisely these structural characteristics that are closely linked to the typification of *ajae* as

¹⁴ (Translator’s note) *Sanchae bibimbap* is a version of *bibimbap* (steamed rice topped with vegetables) made with wild herbs and vegetables (*sanchae*). *Sanchae* can also mean “alive.” The professor’s joke thus can be interpreted as meaning “Is live *bibimbap* on the menu today? Better than dead *bibimbap*” (*jugeunchae* means “dead”).

discussed in the next section. There, I analyze and describe the way *ajae*, the narrators of *ajae* jokes, are built into a typical image through citation and mention in various discourses.

3. Typification of *Ajae* through Citation

In this section, I focus on the way the structural characteristics of *ajae* jokes discussed in Section 2 are variously cited and used in diverse channels of communication and projected into social categories. While in Section 2 I listed the qualities of *ajae* in terms of linguistic form and participant relationships, I describe here the processes by which these qualities become fixed into a specific image through semiotic effects.

1) *Indexicality and Iconization of Ajae*

As mentioned above, though similar speech plays have previously existed under different names, none have been as frequently mentioned in popular media as *ajae* jokes. But in addition to the *ajae* joke genre, the word *ajae* itself is cited endlessly in on- and off-line forums of communication. In particular, the *ajae* regarded as possessing power and authority in an unequal relationship, as discussed in the previous section, is cited as a representation of the patriarchal authoritarianism of middle-aged men in Korean society.

For example, this opinion section from local paper *Gangwon Provincial News* (2016), titled “Ajae Provincial Assembly,” contains a passage linking political conservatism to qualities of *ajae*:

For the sake of the community, older generations should not settle for the status quo or insist on their own beliefs alone, but correspond actively with younger generations. ... Late in the election primary stage, it has effectively [already] been decided that nine positions, including the speaker, deputy speaker, standing committee chairman, and chairman of the special budgetary committee, will all go to Saenuri Party¹⁵ assembly members. The Saenuri Party, which holds 81.8 percent of assembly seats, will claim that this should naturally be the case, but the eight seats held by opposition parties and independent representatives account for 18.2 percent of all seats. So it is

¹⁵ (Translator’s note) Korea’s main conservative political party at the time.

regrettable that this [allocation of key positions to Saenuri Party representatives] goes against today's *zeitgeist*, which emphasizes consideration of minorities and governance through cooperation. Do we need to start calling it the Ajae Provincial Assembly?¹⁶

Labeling authoritarian politicians with poor communication skills and a lack of consideration as *ajae* means defining the qualities of *ajae* in terms of practices of the past. They belong to the older generation but can be called *ajae* because they are stuck in their ways and should stop “insisting on their own beliefs” and show “consideration for minorities” but are unable to do so.

The term *ajae* is thus not used exclusively to designate middle-aged men but often in reference to people with certain behavioral qualities, as in the opinion piece above. Examples include phrases such as, “If you act like a *kkondae* (boor), you're an *ajae*... Even if you're 25 years old, you're still an *ajae* if you act like a *kkondae* to middle school students... Even if you're 20 years old, you're still an *ajae* if you act like a *kkondae* to elementary school students.”¹⁷ In other words, anyone, regardless of actual age, can become an *ajae* by asserting seniority and trying to instruct somebody younger than him in an authoritarian manner. In these examples, *ajae* was used synonymously with *kkondae*. According to the National Institute of Korean Language's standard unabridged dictionary of Korean, *kkondae* is a slang term for “old man,” or a word students use for a teacher. These days, anyone who tries to instruct someone while saying “I know because I did it in the old days” can be labeled a *kkondae*.

Ajae, a word to demonstrate the new identity of “middle-aged men,” is thus also used to signify the “older generation” and applied regardless of age. Some refer to themselves as *ajae*, too; these are people who see themselves as having fallen behind the times or who long for their childhoods. In some cases even university students in their 20s define themselves as *ajae*: as shown below, they are referring to themselves as “elders in life.” Recently, an anonymous student, born in 1995 and returning to university after completing his military service, left a post containing advice on his university noticeboard in which he adopts the position of an elder. The post has been doing the rounds on Facebook and various blogs; the

¹⁶ *Gangwondominilbo* [Gangwon provincial news], July 21, 2016.

¹⁷ http://www.gasengi.com/m/bbs/board.php?bo_table=commu07&cwr_id=1218882 (2016.05.18.)

following is an extract from it:

I am a '95 *ajae*. I'd like to offer a few words of advice as your elder. ... These days people sometimes call me an *ajae*, too.

When I was really young I at least had spirit and ambition. Now that I'm older, even those have gone. Still, if I had to offer a few bits of advice as your slightly aged elder...

(July 7, 2016)

Though the use of the term *ajae* is exaggerated here, unofficial interviews with university students indicate that male students returning to university after performing military service are sometimes referred to as *ajae*. For example, one student on an anonymous noticeboard posted the following question: "If a student who started university in 2011 comes back [after military service] do people call him an *ajae*?"

Moreover, according to unofficial conversations with students in their 20s, "If you make an unwelcome unfunny joke, it's called an *ajae* joke. For example, 'If you eat a banana will you fall in love with me?' That kind of thing [laughs]. It's not very funny. What's worse is that some older students back from military service sometimes make jokes like that, so we sometimes call them *ajae*" (female student, 22 years old). Such comments do not differ much from on-line discourses. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the tellers of authoritarian *ajae* jokes that "force laughter" are found not just on comedy programs but in real life too.

Also striking are strategies of equating *ajae* with consumers of certain products, given that they belong to a relatively older generation. Examples include an individual aged about 25 on Facebook posting "I've just changed from an iPhone to a Samsung phone" and being met with comments from younger acquaintances saying "*Ajae*," and an older male student (back from military service) being told by a younger man, "You've become an *ajae*" because he liked listening to heavy metal. Another post on an anonymous university noticeboard read, "When I asked younger members in my club if any of them wanted to go to Mt. Jirisan for the summer vacation, they just mocked me, saying hiking was for *ajae*." Going by these examples, Samsung phones, heavy metal, and hiking can be listed as indices of *ajae*-ness.

Ajae does not merely index old-fashioned-ness in Korean society; its

range transcends space-time. During the 2016 Olympics, multiple medal-winning swimmer Michael Phelps appeared with circular marks on his shoulders that seemed to be the result of cupping therapy. This prompted some Korean netizens to label him an *ajae*. Here, the netizens' discourse temporally-spatially linked the symbol of cupping marks on the body of a foreign sportsman to the meaning of a "middle-aged Korean man"; in other words, they constructed an index. In the same way, *ajae* has been used in the title of a newspaper to designate people other than middle-aged Korean men. One example is a title that read "Wearing 10 million-won luxury brand Brioni 'ajae style,' Trump wins over low-income white males."¹⁸ While Democratic Party candidate Clinton wore white suit pants, Republican candidate Trump wore a suit by Brioni, the brand that also dresses James Bond. But because, Trump's suit, unlike Bond's, appeared loose-fitting, he was judged to be an unsophisticated-looking *ajae*. Both Phelps and Trump have thus been labeled with the indexical symbol *ajae* in different temporo-spatial contexts.

Another strategy that attempts to link *ajae* characteristics with the *ajae* icon is the use of the formula "if..." Examples include listing various qualities including clothing, food, and age to define an *ajae*, such as "a 39-year-old man who wears a polo shirt with the collar turned up and eats *chueotang* (loach soup)."¹⁹ On the Internet, too, discourses making the rounds include, "[Pointing to a bottle of Chilsung Cola from 1970] If you remember this cola you're an *ajae*"; "If you remember when bus fares were 130 won, you're an *ajae*"; and "If you use lots of tildes in text messages, you're an *ajae*." In this way, cupping therapy, *chueotang*, loose fitting suits, Samsung phones, and tildes are presented as indices calling to mind *ajae*, thereby being used as a strategy to typify them. This shows that in discourses of consumer culture including music, food, and fashion, *ajae* is being created as an indexical symbol in accordance with particular contexts.

Classifying *ajae* in this way can be summarized as creating texts regarded as presenting clear evidence, along the lines of "If you eat, do, buy or wear X, then you are an *ajae*." The task of imagining the *ajae* as qualities that can be experienced becomes possible by distinguishing A from B, while "similarity – iconographic relationships – can be interpreted in the context of difference" (Gal 2013: 34). Discussing the semiotic effect

¹⁸ *Hangukgyeongje* [Korean economic daily], July 15, 2016.

¹⁹ *E-Daily*, June 10, 2016.

whereby mutually distinct linguistic characteristics are composed into something that appears substantial, Gal (2013) has described a tendency for this effect to depend on distinguishing contrasting characteristics. For example, if the character of Magyar²⁰ is regarded as “calm and simple,” the grammars of German and Italian are regarded as being “twisty and turny” (Gal 2013: 36). In the same way, the formula, “If you do X, you’re an *ajae*” indexes older generations to the “*ajae*” group by citing signs such as a Samsung phone in a sentence, thereby forming a meaning of *ajae*, or “*ajae*-ness,” that anyone can understand with ease. In addition, the binary opposition of *ajae* vs. *oppa* is used as a strategy for confirming and reinforcing this. Through this oppositional structure if wearing a loose suit indicates an *ajae* and wearing a tight suit indicates an *oppa*, a similarity between symbols and people-types is established, thereby succeeding in typifying the *ajae*.

In sum, iconization is the process of making the connection between the properties of things/incidents/people and their icons appear inherent and natural. In the same way that, as described by Johnston (2009), the linguistic qualities of Pittsburgh dialect become indices that express the characters of people or the identity of a group, the various indices mentioned above appear to express the group identity of *ajae*. Likewise, typification of the *ajae* icon when the *ajae* symbol is linked to specific indices occurs when decontextualized symbols are reinserted into different contexts through citation.

2) “Safe” Ajae Jokes and the Creation of a New Middle-Aged Man

In the section above, I listed the characteristics of authoritarian and old-fashioned *ajae* and described the *ajae* icon that is believed to reflect them. We saw how *ajae*, a term for conveying the new identity of stodgy middle-aged men, is used to signify old-fashionedness and authoritarianism and applied regardless of age. In this section, I describe how *ajae* jokes are used in commercials, a different context and space, thereby creating variants that differ from the conventional *ajae* icon. In the commercial below, we see a famous actor telling an *ajae* joke:

[Commercial 1] Hamburger chain Burger King recently released a TV

²⁰ Another name for the Hungarian language.



Figure 1. Actor Yi Jeongjae about to eat a shrimp burger in the Burger King commercial

commercial using *ajae* jokes to mark the launch of its new Whole Shrimp Burger. In the commercial, actor Yi Jeongjae [Lee Jung-jae] is seen sitting pensively in a car on a dark, rainy day like a scene from a *film noir*. Suddenly, as if he has seen something shocking, he shouts at his driver, “Stop!” I said stop!” In front of the car, we see several shrimps standing upright as they saunter across the road. This is a play on words, which has used the similar pronunciation in Korean of *seuda* (“to stop [the car]”) and *saeuda* (“it’s shrimp”). When the scene changes again, we see Yi Jeongjae eating a Whole Shrimp Burger and saying “When it comes to shrimps, whole shrimps are the best.” On the screen, copy reading “Creating pride for shrimp”²¹ appears.

In this commercial, Yi Jeongjae, as he shouts “Stop! I said stop!” with a serious expression on his face, is a middle-aged man far removed from the *ajae* indices listed in the previous section – loose-fitting suit, *chueotang*, Samsung phone. In other words, by using a male actor rather than a recreation of the *ajae* icon mentioned previously, the commercial has distanced itself from the conventional *ajae* icon, despite the fact that its protagonist tells an *ajae* joke. Below, we see another example of a commercial in which a famous actor delivers an *ajae* joke:

[Commercial 2] Amid commercial copy text, we see actor Jeong Useong [Jung Woo-sung] in a space suit. After crash landing on an unknown planet, he and actress Kim Jiwon are getting bored in their spaceship. “There’s nothing good to eat!” they complain angrily. “We’ve got no nice clothes!” Their faces show that whatever they do, they remain deeply bored and fed up. Eventually, with expressions that suggest they can endure no more, they

21 (Translator’s note) In Korean: “새우의 자존심을 세우다.” Here, too, the word *saeu* (shrimp) sounds the same as the first two syllables of *seuda* (“to stand up” or, in this context, to create [pride]).

shout, “Nothing’s any good,” whereupon copy appears that reads “When nothing’s any good, let’s go to the stars.” The commercial then ends with a scene of Jeong and a young female actor carrying bags around as they shop at Hanam Starfield mall.

This commercial features an *ajae* joke based on a word play: In Korean, *byeollo* (“no good”) is identical in pronunciation to *byeol-lo* (“to the stars”). The latter term also alludes to the name of Hanam Starfield Mall, the subject of the ad. In fact, many previous commercials have featured speech play using puns, albeit not *ajae* jokes (Gu 2001; Kim J. 2003; Han 2007). But here, it must be noted that the pun-based *ajae* gags are told by middle-aged men in their 40s.²² *Ajae* jokes told on TV entertainment programs by middle-aged male chefs such as O Sedeuk or by comedians on comedy programs are already meant to trigger laughter. But Yi Jeongjae and Jeong Useong, who feature in the commercials above, frequently play strongly masculine characters in gangster films. By appearing as serious characters with grave expressions, then ending up telling *ajae* jokes, they present an image unlike that of the conventional *ajae*. Though they tell *ajae* jokes, these actors do not depict the authoritarian, patriarchal middle-aged *ajae* outlined above.

In these appearances of a “new image” of a middle-aged man in broadcast media, commercials feature expressions of an image unlike that of the conventional authoritarian, outdated middle-aged man labeled a *kkondae*, by showing a popular male telling childish *ajae* jokes. Here it is perhaps necessary to compare the way *ajae* jokes have improved the image of middle-aged men to studies of *Will & Grace*, the show that proved popular for some time in the United States (Battles and Hilton–Morrow 2002). *Will & Grace* is sometimes judged to have contributed to changed awareness and prejudice about homosexuality, in that it showed how gay men could live alongside heterosexuals in a “safe” space, namely as lawyers in New York. In the same way, by telling *ajae* jokes, the actors are creating an image of “a cute, attractive *ajeossi* doing his best to communicate.”

We can thus see the existing negative image of the *ajae* – authoritarian, rude, childish – actually changing to one of “youth and attractiveness” or “willingness to communicate” through the use of popular and handsome

²² The above Burger King Whole Shrimp Burger commercial featuring Lee Jung-jae clocked up at least 220,000 on-line searches in the first week of its release, driving up sales (Newsday, June 9, 2016)



Figure 2. Actor Jeong Useong searches for something to eat on a spaceship with a restricted menu.

middle-aged men telling *ajae* jokes for marketing purposes. Of course, as mentioned above, famous actors Yi Jeongjae and Jeong Useong will already have had personal images of their own, but we can see a strategy aimed at building a different image for the *ajae* icon in their use of *ajae* jokes. On a related note, the *ajae* icon when projected like this for marketing purposes is built not just through marketing but also through the citation of new terms such as “*ajae fatal*.”²³ Coined from a partial combination of *ajae* and *homme fatal*, *ajae fatal* denotes an *ajae* who exudes a fatal masculine charm (News 1, September 3, 2016). In recent marketing, however, we find the contradiction whereby one has to break free of “*ajae*-ness” in order to become an *ajae fatal*. One advertisement from a specialist hair transplant hospital, for example, contains the text, “You need hair. The escape from *ajae*-hood starts with a hair transplant!” The ad suggests hair transplants and scalp tattoos as strategies for achieving this escape. As previously noted, the building of various *ajae* indexicalities depends on oppositional structures, variants of *ajae* are other symbols that compose an oppositional structure of *ajae* versus non-*ajae*.

In short, *ajae* and *ajae* jokes found in commercials and marketing discourses do not contribute to composing the *ajae* icon signifying stodgy older generations and imperviousness to communication, as discussed in previous sections of this study. But given that they still presuppose the characteristics of the *ajae* to be those of a patriarchal and authoritarian middle-aged man, even while trying to escape these same characteristics,

²³ Jeong Useong, who appears in the Hanam Starfield commercial, was once ranked first in a list of *ajae fatal* (Seoulgyeongje, September 30, 2016).

we can see that they fail to break out of the formulaic framework of iconizing the *ajae* through an oppositional structure as discussed by Gal (2013). And this iconization contributes to the building of a singular group identity of typical middle-aged men in Korean society.

4. Conclusion

In this study I have examined *ajae* jokes as a speech genre and the use of the term *ajae* in popular culture, attempting to understand the structural characteristics and social significance of *ajae* jokes. To this end, I analyzed and described examples of recently prevalent *ajae* jokes, and focused on materials collected from mass media and the Internet to consider what social characteristics constitute the *ajae* symbol and what it typifies. After studying examples of speech play-based *ajae* jokes, performances on comedy programs, and *ajae* discourses expressed on-line and in commercials, it appears that they are condensed versions of the current discourse on middle-aged men in Korean society. *Ajae* appear to have moved beyond conventional patriarchal authoritarianism because they engage in speech play known as *ajae* jokes, but the context and participant structure in which *ajae* jokes are told indicates that they are still regarded as authoritarian middle-aged men who can be given alternative labels such as “boss” and *kkondae*.

According to Cohen (2016), the current concept of middle-age has existed for only about 50 years, and how it is defined in terms of age range is actually meaningless. This is because a generation is a concept created in historical, social, and cultural contexts. Just as a middle-aged man cannot be reduced to a single identity, the male images that comprise *ajae* may be diverse. But when a linguistic/semiotic anthropological analytical framework is applied, we find a typification process that makes all Korean middle-aged men appear to have one monolithic identity. Here, the connection between sign (*ajae*) and object (*ajae*-hood) is naturalized to appear like an inherent property. In other words, the range of masculinity encompassed by the term *ajae* could be diverse, but this typification process makes it appear as if all Korean middle-aged men possess a single identity.

With this study I have applied a linguistic/semiotic anthropological framework of analysis to address personhood, a phenomenon not touched on by existing studies of speech genres. In so doing, I hope to have

broadened the horizons of linguistic-anthropological research of these genres. Previous studies of speech genres have focused on analyzing their categories, divisions, structural characteristics and use, and on understanding their social functions. But this study has determined how the properties of the *ajae* gag as a category of speech genre have been strategically used to construct the imagined figure of the *ajae*, thereby contributing to its iconization. This study has also shown how linguistic anthropology can be useful in the study of popular culture. Cultural studies of masculinity in Korean and foreign comedies and TV dramas have taken a critical approach to how their texts reproduce male typicality, or how they depict identities outside this typicality. But these studies are analytically limited in that they do not show the processes by which specific signs, images, and characteristics are connected. Unlike other research of the depiction of masculinity in fields such as cultural studies, in this study I have regarded figures cited in mass media as signs and focused on the process of their creation, thereby attempting to understand how the identity of a specific group is constructed. One limitation of this study is that I did not pursue in-depth discussion of the recent use of middle-aged men as variant forms of *ajae* in marketing discourses – for example, the *ajae fatal*, taken from *homme fatal*, “trend-setter,” and “cute middle-aged man.” I hope to further the study of the typification of Korean men in future research.

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