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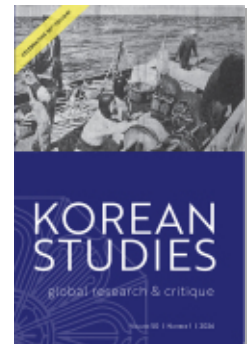
Coming (Out) to Terms with Queerness in Korea: Language Matters

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Coming (Out) to Terms with Queerness in Korea: Language Matters

Eun-Young Julia Kim

This commentary critically examines the South Korean Ministry of Education's decision to remove the terms *sōngsosuja* (sexual minority) and *sōngp'yōngdūng* (gender equality) from social studies and ethics textbooks revised in 2025. It argues that this exclusion hinders societal understanding and acceptance of sexual minorities by denying the use of crucial vernacular terminology. Specifically, *sōngsosuja* is a linguistically accurate, culturally appropriate, and politically strategic term, emphasizing the marginalization and invisibility experienced by these groups within a broader framework of social justice and human rights. This commentary critically examines the prevalent use of anglicized queer terms in Korea, highlighting how uncritical adoption exacerbates communication barriers between queer and non-queer Koreans and undermines the cultural agency and ownership of Korean queer speakers. It calls for collaborative efforts between the National Institute of the Korean Language and queer community organizations to adopt, create, and disseminate culturally relevant and accessible Korean queer terminology.

Keywords: Korean queer language, sexual minorities in Korea, cultural agency

In 2025, a new school curriculum took effect in South Korea. One of the key changes is the exclusion of the terms “sexual minority” (성소수자 *sōngsosuja*) and “gender equality” (성평등 *sōngp'yōngdūng*) from social studies and ethics textbooks. The changes, first announced in November

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2022 by the Ministry of Education, were criticized by those who fear that excluding these terms intensifies the marginalization of sexual minorities in Korea, where homophobic sentiments are prevalent. Critics also argued that the decision stemmed from pressure from the conservative incumbent political party.¹

To outsiders, this recent decision by the government could contradict the image of progress, freedom, and innovation that the country's prosperous pop culture and tech industries portray. The government's decision, however, is consistent with several failed congressional motions to legislate anti-discrimination laws in the country. Scholars have attributed Koreans' homophobic sentiments to the conservative values shaped by Confucianism and outcries from Christian groups, who hold anti-queer protests alongside queer parades, condemning same-sex attraction as sin.²

Removing these terms amounts to invalidating the existence of sexual minorities as valuable members of Korean society and reinforcing misogyny. Furthermore, not recognizing these vernacular terms robs society of a critical tool that can facilitate understanding and acceptance of sexual minorities. Public discussion and open recognition of queer experiences are not common in Korea, and this lack of social discourse left the absence of vernacular queer vocabulary unnoticed. Faced with linguistic scarcity, queer activists on college campuses in the 2000s adopted and popularized English queer terms.³

The English terms have helped fill the lexical gap existing in Korean by providing labels for previously unnamed sexual expressions and empowered Korean sexual minorities to explore and express their sexualities. Queer speakers find English terms of sexuality academic and precise and feel using the terms makes them feel forward-thinking and advanced.⁴ However, many of the English terms are incomprehensible to non-queer speakers. In a YouTube video promoting a 2021 queer documentary, "A Way to You" (너에게 가는 길 *Nøege kanün'gil*), which features the journeys of queer

¹ Choi Bo-geun [Ch'oe Bogün], "Kyoyukpujanggwanbut'ö 'chinbo'kyoyukkamkkaji, söngsosujarül wihan hakkyonün öpta" [From the minister of education to the 'progressive' superintendents, there are no schools for sexual minorities], *Presian*, October 31, 2024.

² Jung Gowoong [Chöng Goüng], "Evangelical Protestant Women's Views on Homosexuality and LGBT Rights in Korea: The Role of Confucianism and Nationalism in Heteronormative Ideology." *Journal of Homosexuality*, 68 (2021): 2097–121.

³ Seo Dong-Jin [Sö Tongjin], "Mapping the Vicissitudes of Homosexual Identities in South Korea." *Journal of Homosexuality* 40 (2001): 65–78.

⁴ Eun-Young Julia Kim. "Usage and Perceptions of Anglicised Queer Terminology in Korea." *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 23, no. 3 (2024): 285–313.

Korean youth and their families, a woman named Nabi (나비) introduces her son as bigender, panromantic, and asexual. She then adds, “Why is it so long and complicated? Why is it all English?”⁵ Another participant, named Pibian (비비안), recalls, “For a long time after my son’s coming out, I could not say the word ‘gay’. The word and the concept were so foreign to me.”⁶ The difficulty of understanding English terms of sexuality often provides fodder for comedy. In an episode of a TV show, “Ask Anything” (무엇이든 물어보살 *Muösidün muröbosal*), where two popular male comics, dressed as female psychics, give advice to participants on various problems, a male participant introduces himself as homoromantic, asexual, and androgen, to which one of the comics responds, “Are you an alien?”⁷

These examples illustrate how relying on English terms can widen the rift between queer and non-queer Koreans and perpetuate the sense of othering of sexual minorities. This paper problematizes the current dominance of anglicized queer terms in Korea and calls for concerted, collaborative efforts between national language authorities such as the National Institute of the Korean Language and queer community organizations to adopt, create, and disseminate vernacular queer terminology. In what follows, I discuss how uncritically adopting English terms can exacerbate communication barriers, undermine cultural agency and ownership for Korean queer speakers, and compromise the development of Korean queer language.

Gender Trouble

Nonnormative sexualities are often discussed through the lens of gender. Understanding the concept of gender, however, presents a challenge to Koreans. The English language has two separate terms—“sex” and “gender”—which helps separate the two. On the other hand, a Korean equivalent for “gender” does not exist. Various translations exist, such as

⁵ Dotface. “Chasigüi k’ömingaut hu, chwach’ungudol ömmadürüi söngjanggii yönghwa ’nöge kanün kil’ k’oment’öri” [After their child’s coming out, the turbulent growth stories of mothers | Commentary on the movie ‘The Way to You’] YouTube, November 19, 2021, 0:35–0:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YwP16x5-Pg>.

⁶ Atninefilm. “Nöge kanün kil: Onüldo han körüm k’wiöyongö aragagi” [A way to you, taking another step today to learn queer terminology]. YouTube, November 10, 2021, 2:30–3:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuUE3J3oQDc>.

⁷ KBS Joy. “Komin. Chönün homoromaensü eiseksyuöl andürojinimnida” [Worried. I am homoromantic, asexual, androgen]. *Muösidün muröbosal*. 20190923.” YouTube, September 23, 2019, 1:00–1:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEsKud78hnU>.

“social sex” (사회적 성 *sahoejök söng*), “mental sex” (정신적 성 *chöngsinjök söng*), “sexual emotion” (성 감수성 *söng kamsusöng*), and “sexual identity” (성 정체성 *söng chöngch’esöng*), among others.⁸ The National Institute of Korean Language (NIKL), which publishes “purified” Korean terms to replace foreign words to facilitate communication in society, lists “sex recognition” (성인지 *sönginjì*) and “gender equality” (성평등 *söngp’yöngdüng*).⁹ While these phrases include some elements of gender, none are precise translations. Particularly noteworthy is that “gender equality” (성평등 *söngp’yöngdüng*), suggested by NIKL, is the least accurate. The divergent interpretations indicate the challenges in grasping the concept of gender. In addition, all these examples incorporate the word for “sex” (성 *söng*). This lexical entanglement makes it even more difficult to separate sex and gender. Interestingly, within the Korean gay community, “gender” (젠더 *chendö*) is often used as an abbreviated slang term for a transgender individual.

“This Side” (이쪽 *itchok*) Culture

Another term of central importance is “queer.” It has become an umbrella term, as demonstrated in the annual “queer festival” (퀴어축제 *k’wiö-ch’ukche*). Though widely used, its meaning is complex and evolving, and it has the potential to exacerbate othering of sexual minorities in Korea because it highlights the sense of distinctiveness and uniqueness, unlike Korean equivalents that reflect a sense of community and harmony valued in collectivist cultures. To illustrate, *iban* (이반) was a commonly used code word before “queer” became popularized. It derives from a common word, *ilban* (일반), which means general or class one (in the ordinal sense) and replaces the first syllable with *i* (이 number two). *Iban* integrates all nonnormative sexualities and enables speakers to covertly indicate their shared marginalized status without risking being outed, since it is a familiar term and does not have negative connotations. Similarly, “this side” (이쪽 *itchok*), another word denoting queerness, consolidates all variations of sexualities. It is a safe word to use when speakers’ sexualities are unknown and carries a sense of community (we-ness) by denoting group membership, connection, and kinship. Because these words are

⁸ Eun-Young Julia Kim, “Usage and Perceptions of Anglicised Queer Terminology in Korea,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 23, no. 3 (2024): 285–313.

⁹ “Tadimün mal: chendö” [Purified words: gender], The National Institute of Korean Language.” https://www.korean.go.kr/front/imprv/refineView.do?mn_id=158&imprv_refine_seq=18732&pageIndex=1.

everyday vocabulary, *iban* and *itchok* help speakers to be stealthy while maintaining harmony with society and solidifying in-group identity.

Further examples can be found in gay slang expressing sexual desires and behaviors. “Appetite” (식욕 *sigyok*) refers to one’s preferred type of gay; “lightning” (번개 *pŏn’gae*) refers to a quick meeting for sex; and “To split a gourd” (박타다 *pakt’ada*) refers to having anal sex.¹⁰ These words utilize familiar concepts that allow gay Koreans to discreetly communicate their same-sex desires and practices without amplifying otherness.

“Confucian” (유교 *yugyo*) Sexual

Maintaining secrecy and harmony with mainstream society is also a common characteristic of Korean lesbian language. For example, “ding dong” (띵동 *ttingdong*), the sound of a doorbell, is a code word used by lesbians upon recognizing someone’s lesbian identity. Older-generation Korean lesbians used the terms *ch’imassi* (치마씨) and *bajissi* (바지씨). Combining “skirt” (치마 *ch’ima*) and “pants” (바지 *paji*) with the polite address suffix *ssi* (씨), these terms used clothing as a synecdoche to represent binary lesbian roles. However, these terms have largely been replaced by the English loanwords *p’aem* (팸 *femme*) and *puch’i* (부치 *butch*).

While the older Korean lesbian terms reflect a traditional heteronormative framework, the landscape of Korean lesbianism is far more complex, and existing terms—be they English or Korean—may not adequately capture the evolving nature of Korean female queerness. Central to the landscape of same-sex attraction, especially for young women in Korea, are subcultural fictional genres, BL (Boys’ Love). Created and consumed mostly by women, BL features fictional romantic pairings between male celebrities. Korean females’ fascination with male romance is a study of its own and beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the blurred lines between fantasy and reality illustrate the fluid nature of Korean females’ engagement with same-sex attraction.

Also noteworthy is the seemingly chaste nature of Korean lesbian slang. Some of the frequently mentioned English lesbian slang terms on social media include “gold star” (a lesbian who has never had sex with a man), “u-hauling” (moving in together after the first date), and

¹⁰ Sŏngjŏksosuja sajŏn [Dictionary of sexual minority]. Korean Sexual Minority Culture & Rights Center. http://ksrcr.org/xc/board_yXmx36/15984?ckattempt=1.

“clitoference” (interference preventing lesbians from connecting or having sex), all of which indicate physical intimacy. But similar terms are not found on Korean social media or in queer dictionaries. Instead of “top” and “bottom”—gay terms indicating sex positions—Korean lesbians use “give” (깎 *kip*) and “take” (텍 *t’ek*). “Stone butch” (a top lesbian who only gives sex) and “pillow princess” (a bottom lesbian who only receives one) become “only give” (온깎 *on’gip*) and “only take” (온텍 *ont’ek*), respectively. Other slang terms circulating in online Korean lesbian spaces include clipped words, such as *mõtchal* (머짧, short hair), *kinmō* (긴머, long hair), and *ilsū* (일스, a straight person’s style), all of which relate to appearance.¹¹ The relative restraint and conservatism in language could reflect the tabooed nature of explicit sexual expressions for Korean women. Maek, a member of a queer K-pop group QI.X, says, “I haven’t found a word to express my identity, so I call myself Confucian (*yugyo*) sexual. I get stressed when other members talk about twerking and stuff. I am a little conservative.”¹²

These examples highlight the primacy of subtlety, discretion, community, and maintaining harmony valued by queer Koreans. While Western terminology and models have undoubtedly played an important role in liberating Korean sexual minorities to a certain extent, the dominance could obstruct cultural agency and ownership in the shaping of the Korean queer landscape and create a conflict with those who prioritize cultural values.

Korea’s Collective Closet

One of the most visible sites of cultural conflict surrounds the focus on coming out. Openly expressing one’s sexual orientation is often praised in Western culture, which values individual authenticity and self-expression. However, in Korea, coming out, especially having one’s queerness outed by others, is extremely dreaded. Most queer Koreans choose to remain closeted, particularly to parents. Korean society highly values traditional family structure, and anything less than that faces stigma. Filial duty and honoring one’s parents are some of the most fundamental Confucian values in Korea,

¹¹ Since I am an outsider to the queer community, I relied on the information gathered from various online sources. Other slang terms which didn’t surface in my data-gathering process could add a nuance to my statements.

¹² LBGT News Korea, “Interview: Queer K-pop Idol QI.X Shines Their Way Through the Scene,” November 20, 2023.

and the thought of bringing disgrace to parents by coming out can be mortifying.

The fact that coming out is largely shunned can also be understood through Korean society's overall stance on sexual expression. The Western notion of "coming out" implies a degree of openness to sexual discussion. In Korean society, discussing sexual matters, desires, and experiences borders on taboo, and as discussed above, sexual expression, especially for women, is suppressed; in this sense, regardless of sexuality, everyone is closeted to an extent. Hence, the notion of declaring one's nonnormative sexuality is accompanied by a heightened sense of shame.

The underlying sexual repression may also explain societal uneasiness with queer parades held each year in major cities in Korea. Ostensible declarations of nonnormative sexualities alongside revealing, provocative costumes some queer participants sport are ill-suited for the conservative Korean cultural climate, where candid, public sexual expressions are highly unusual, and the term "pride" is intrinsically tied to academic or professional success. While queer parades are powerful mechanisms through which the Korean queer community has made their existence and struggles visible, these parades force heterosexual Koreans to bypass the necessary process of coming to terms with candid sexual expression. Not having gone through the internal process of openly engaging with any type of sexuality, public disclosure of queerness is met with outrage and resistance.

Language Matters

English queer terms, along with queer parades, have played a crucial role in shaping the global queer community. However, in Korea, where ongoing social discourse and common parlance surrounding sexual minorities are lacking, culturally nuanced, indirect strategies are essential. Authentic stories of love and the struggles of sexual minorities, in particular, can help break stereotypes and build empathy. Free access to documentaries and other media that authentically portray the lives of queer youth will be invaluable in educational settings and beyond and serve as metaphorical foreplay to help homophobic citizens to come to terms with nonnormative sexualities. Discussing characters who break gender norms that are abundant in contemporary K-dramas could also help promote culturally relatable discourse on gender roles and stereotypes.

However, none of this would be possible without a common language. While queer communities have created and used their own code words, widely understood vernacular terms are limited. Two related umbrella terms, *tongsöngyöaeja* (동성연애자, a person who dates a same-sex partner) and *tongsöngaeja* (동성애자, a person who is attracted to same-sex), are used in the mainstream media to refer to those with nonnormative sexualities. However, these terms do not acknowledge divergent sexualities existing within the queer community.

Söngsosuja (성소수자, sexual minority) is a linguistically accurate, culturally appropriate, and politically strategic alternative. It is inclusive of all nonnormative sexualities and accentuates vulnerability and marginalization common to them as well as to other minority groups in Korea, such as people with disabilities and foreigners. Advocacy work for sexual minorities in Korea is often intertwined with advocacy for these other groups, highlighting their shared struggles for equality and inclusion. In addition, *söngsosuja* does not carry the connotation of oddity and distinctiveness that the English word “queer” (퀴어 *k'wiö*) does. Queer, with its complex meaning, can be vague and confusing for Koreans, and *söngsosuja* can better resonate with the Korean cultural and political context. Furthermore, the term's emphasis on marginalization and invisibility helps to position the struggles of sexual minorities within a broader framework of social justice and human rights.

The fact that *söngsosuja* was intentionally left out of the textbooks reflects the government's choice to ignore the pressing needs and rights of its marginalized citizens. Currently, the official translations of many English queer terms are absent from the dictionary of NIKL. Creating and disseminating understandable vernacular queer terms is critical. Without accessible language, English terms will continue to proliferate, compromising cultural agency and ownership of the Korean queer community and perpetuating othering of sexual minorities.

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