

A Case of Membership Categorization: The ‘Korean Male’

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Studies employing MCA often explore how people claim membership or non-membership in specific categories. Bateman (2012), for example, examines children’s use of collective pro-terms in establishing and protecting exclusive dyadic friendships. Lerner and Kitzinger (2007), focusing on repair of self-references, found that speakers switched the reference form from individual (e.g., ‘I’) to collective (e.g., ‘we’) when aggregating themselves to the collectivity; they changed the reference form from collective to individual when extracting themselves from the collectivity.

Following these scholars, this paper utilizes MCA to show how participants (1) define characteristics bound to a certain category, (2) extract participants from a category, and (3) achieve specific social actions. I examine a segment of talk that occurred in a smartphone chatting program. The participants are R, a Korean woman in her early 30s, and her friend H, a homosexual Korean man in his late 20s. R and her husband S, and H and his boyfriend G, are close friends, and they used to go on double dates before R and S left Korea for the United States, a year before this conversation took place.

As I will show in the following analysis, H invokes the category of ‘Korean male,’ derived from two membership categorization devices (MCDs): nationality (Korean) and gender (male) to praise the features of non-members of the category. H explicitly pinpoints negative category-bound features of ‘Korean males’ and then suggests that himself, G, and S, despite their nationality (Korean) and gender (male), do not align with the negative category-bound activities. By doing this, H manages to (1) exclude himself, G, and S from the criticized category, and (2) praise the individuals who do not affiliate with the category-bound activities.

At the beginning of the extract, R and H are talking about a Korean holiday, Full Moon Day. In Korea, married couples generally go to the husband’s side of the family (*shiga*) to perform a ritual ceremony for the husband’s ancestors and visit the wife’s side of the family (*choga*) briefly afterwards. According to tradition, wives work to serve their husbands’ ancestors; the couple does not serve the wife’s ancestors because the married woman is no longer a member of her original family. At the beginning of this extract, R says that she and her husband have a unique rule for celebrating the traditional holiday (going to *choga* first and then to *shiga*, which is the opposite of the general tradition). Upon hearing this, H praises S and begins to define him as ‘not a Korean guy.’ (See Appendix for original transcript.)

- 01 H: You are so fortunate! You don’t have to go to *shiga*
02 cuz you are abroad, right?
03 R: Ye, (laughing tokens) but our *shiga* doesn’t have any
04 rituals anyway.
05 R: Also, since I’m the only daughter, S agreed that we
06 can go to *choga* first to serve our ancestors and then
07 go to *shiga*
08 H: Wow! That’s so cool of S!
09 H: He is so not a Korean guy!
10 R: ((laughing token))

- 11 H: Frankly, I was really surprised when I first saw
12 S.
13 R: Why?
14 H: Well, Korean guys tend to be strongly
15 homophobic
16 R: Damn. Still?
17 H: Of course still! They are extremely homophobic!
18 Still!
19 H: But S is not at all like them!
20 H: So G and I praised him endlessly after we first met
21 him!
22 R: ((*laughing token*)) Thank God.
23 R: Well, if S had been a typical homophobic Korean
24 guy, I wouldn't have married him
25 H: I know! We definitely wouldn't!
26 R: But why are they so homophobic?
27 H: Well, they just don't wanna get along with us,
28 abnormal minorities
29 H: Also, they are so used to discriminating, but not
30 being discriminated against. You know how they
31 treat women.
32 R: Right.
33 H: We say that the world has changed but it is only for
34 some of us, like you guys and G and I
35 H: But for most Korean guys? They still live in the
36 fifties.
37 R: True.
38 H: So, you are so lucky to meet someone like our S!
39 He is one of a kind!
40 R: Thanks!

Several category-bound predicates of 'Korean males' are defined by H and R. The first category-bound predicate is 'being conservative and outmoded.' From lines 03 to 07, R explains that she and her husband do not conform to the traditional way of celebrating Full Moon Day. In line 08, H provides a positive assessment of S's attempt at disregarding the patriarchal tradition. Then, in line 09, H says that S is "so not a Korean guy," an evaluation that is accepted by R with laughter rather than any sign of resistance (line 10). This indicates that both H and R treat 'conforming to tradition' as a specific category-bound predicate of 'Korean males.' In addition, when H evaluates Korean guys as generally homophobic, R first provides a negative assessment of the behavior by saying "damn" and then initiates a repair by asking "still?" (line 16). In lines 17-18, H responds to R's request for repair by answering "of course still," adding "still" again at the end of the sentence. In this sequence of interaction, the negative assessment and the initiation of the repair demonstrate that R treats the idea of "still" having a homophobic stance in contemporary society as outmoded and problematic. This outmodedness is accepted and reconfirmed by H in lines 17-18 with the repetitions of "still." Furthermore, in lines 35-36, H openly states that most Korean guys "still live in the fifties," an assertion which is accepted and

confirmed by R in line 37. Therefore, it is evident that the participants define ‘being outmoded’ as a characteristic that is bound to the category of ‘Korean males.’ They suggest that ‘being homophobic’ is an obsolete idea; they also overtly state the close relationship between outmodedness and the ‘Korean male’ category.

The second category-bound predicate of ‘Korean males’ is ‘being homophobic and discriminating against minorities.’ In lines 14-15 and 17, H overtly defines ‘being homophobic’ as a category-bound activity of ‘Korean males.’ Even though R asks for clarification by initiating repair in line 16, this does not indicate disalignment with the idea of defining ‘being homophobic’ as a category-bound activity of ‘Korean males.’ Rather, R is merely invoking another category-bound activity of Korean-males, ‘being outmoded,’ by producing the adverb “still?” (line 16). R’s acceptance of ‘being homophobic’ as a category-bound predicate of ‘Korean males’ is clearly shown in lines 23-24 and 26. In lines 23-24, R identifies ‘being homophobic’ as a characteristic that is associated with ‘typical Korean guys,’ and in line 26, she seeks a reason for this attitude. The association between ‘being homophobic’ and ‘Korean males’ is not questioned or treated as problematic by either R or H within the interaction, which indicates that both participants are treating “being homophobic” as a category-bound predicate of the group. H then juxtaposes the MCD of social position (social majority) with the MCDs of gender and nationality (‘Korean male’). By using the ‘us-them’ distinction (Grad & Luisa, 2008), H distinguishes ‘Korean males’—the social majority (‘they’)—from social minorities (‘us’) such as homosexuals and females. With this juxtaposition, H defines ‘discriminating against minorities’ as a category-bound activity of ‘Korean males,’ the social majority. This suggestion of a category-bound activity for ‘Korean males’ is again accepted by R (line 32).

By defining these category-bound activities of Korean-males, H and R manage to distinguish H, R, G, and S as outsiders with respect to the category, and hence as individuals who are not associated with the negative category-bound predicates. First of all, R is clearly not a member of the category due to her gender (female). However, it is more complicated for H, G, and S due to their nationality (Korean) and gender (male). To avoid being categorized as a member, H uses ‘us-them’ distinctions throughout the interaction. He refers to the members of the category with the third-person plural pronoun “they” (lines 17, 27, and 29-30). Moreover, H distances himself by positioning himself and his boyfriend as victims of the category-bound predicate (‘being homophobic/discriminating’) of ‘Korean males’ (lines 14-15, 17, and 27-28). With these strategies, H successfully manages to distance himself and G as far from the ‘Korean male’ category as R, a Korean female. This attempt at segregation is shown in line 25. In lines 23-24, R expresses her contempt toward homophobic individuals by saying that she “wouldn’t have married [a homophobic person].” In line 25, H upgrades R’s statement and says “we definitely wouldn’t.” The reasonable answer here would be “you definitely wouldn’t” because it is R who chose not to marry a homophobic man. H, on the other hand, does not have a legal right to say that he “would definitely not” marry a homophobic male, because same-sex marriage is not legal in Korea. Nevertheless, H uses the collective pro-term ‘we’ instead of ‘you (R),’ which indicates that he is trying to create an us/them distinction between those who are homophobic (‘Korean-males’) and those who are not (‘females and homosexuals’).

H’s claim of excluding himself and his boyfriend from the category can also be explained with reference to heteronormativity. According to Kitzinger (2005), there is a tendency to consider heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation, and hence to consider heterosexuals as the ‘typical’ members of society. H and his boyfriend could thus be eliminated from the category of Korean-males because they are not typical members. In other words, H’s categorization of

Korean-males is also based upon heteronormativity, which positions homosexuals as not genuine members of the category to begin with.

The exclusion of S from the category of 'Korean males' is even more difficult than separating H and G from the group, since S is a 'normal' member of the category ('heterosexual Korean males'). Therefore, the attempt at extracting S from the group is much more explicit, with an effort to prove that S is an exceptional case. First, H overtly states that S is not like the members of the category (line 9). In addition, H explicitly claims that S does not align with the category-bound activities of 'Korean males,' and hence, is worthy of praise (lines 19-21). H also distinguishes S from 'Korean males' by contrasting other Korean males ('them') to S ('him') (lines 19-21). Furthermore, R's attempt to separate S from the category (line 23-24) is accepted and upgraded (with the addition of the adverb "definitely" in line 25), which indicates the claim for S's separation from the Korean-male category has been accepted by the participants. H then goes further and includes S among the non-members of the category by referring to H, G, R, and S as "us" (line 34), while referring to "most Korean guys" as "they" (line 35). In the end, H links the positive assessment of S with his exceptional features that go against the category-bound predicates and again incorporates S into the category of 'non-Korean males' by using a collective pro-term, "our S" (line 38), which is accepted and appreciated by R (line 40). Therefore, by accentuating the features of non-membership in the category that is being criticized, the participants manage to praise the individuals who do not adhere to the negative category-bound predicates.

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APPENDIX: Original Transcript

- 01 H: *Nuna-nun kuraedo oeguk-e issoso shidaek an-gago chotta kuch'i?*
Older sister-TOP but abroad-LOC COP husband's house NEG-go fortunate right
You are so fortunate! You don't have to go to *shiga* cuz you are abroad, right? (12:35 A.M.)
- 02 R: *Kuchi~ huhuhu kuraedo uri-n Han 'guk-e isso-do shidaek-eson ch'arye-rul an-jinaeni*
Right (laughing) but we-TOP Korea-LOC COP-still husband's house-LOC ritual NEG-serve
Ye, (laughing tokens) but our *shiga* doesn't have any rituals anyway. (12:35 A.M.)
- 03 R: *Kurigo nae-ka oedong-ira ul-chip-eso ch'arye chunbi kach'i topko Busan kagiyo yaegi toeo-ssoyo*
Also I-NOM only child-cuz our-house-LOC ritual preparation together help and Busan go plan-ANT-HON
Also, since I'm the only daughter, S agreed that we can go to *choga* first to serve our ancestors and then go to *shiga* (12:35 A.M.)
- 04 H: Wa! S-ssi taedan!
Wow S-Mr. cool
Wow! That's so cool of S! (12:35 A.M.)
- 05 H: *Chintcha han 'guk namja an-kata!*
Really Korean-male NEG-like
He is so not a Korean guy! (12:36 A.M.)
- 06 R: (laughing token) (12:36 A.M.)
- 07 H: *Nan sasil S-ssi ch'oum poa-ssul-ttae kkamtchak nolla-t chana.*
I-TOP frankly S-Mr. first see-ANT-time surprise-ANT IE
Frankly, I was really surprised when I first saw S. (12:36 A.M.)
- 08 R: *Woe?*
why
Why? (12:36 A.M.)
- 09 H: *Amuraedo Han 'guk namja-dul-I homophobia-ka simha-jana.*
Well Korean-male-PL-NOM homophobia-NOM strong-IE
Well, Korean guys tend to be strongly homophobic. (12:36 A.M.)
- 10 R: *Chiral... ajik-to?*
Damn still-also
Damn. Still? (12:36 A.M.)
- 11 H: *Kurom-yo ajik-to simhaji! Han 'guk namja-dul-un ajik-to simhae!*
Of course-HON still-also extreme Korean-male-PL-TOP still-also extreme
Of course still! They are extremely homophobic! Still! (12:36 A.M.)
- 12 H: *Kunde S-ssi-nun chonhyo kyene-katchi anun-ko-ya!*
But S-Mr.-NOM not at all them-like not-thing-IE
But S is not at all like them! (12:37 A.M.)
- 13 H: *Kuraeso G-hyong-irang na-rang wanjon p'okp'ung ch'ingch'an!*
So G-older brother-and I-and very extremely praise
So G and I praised him endlessly after we first met him! (12:37 A.M.)
- 14 R: (laughing) *tahaeng-ine.*
Fortunate-IE.
(laughing token) Thank God. (12:37 A.M.)
- 15 R: *Kunde homophobia-innun chonhyongjok-in han 'guk namja-myon nae-ka kyorhon-ul an-haetketchi.*
But homophobia-have typical-ATTR Korean male-if I-TOP marry-ACC NEG-do
Well, if S had been a typical homophobic Korean guy, I wouldn't have married him (12:37 A.M.)
- 16 H: *Kuch'i! uri-n kuroch'i!*
Right we-NOM like that
I know! We definitely wouldn't! (12:37 A.M.)
- 17 R: *Kunde wae-dul kurotke sirohanda?*
But why-they like that hate
But why are they so homophobic? (12:38 A.M.)
- 18 H: *Kunyang uri-katun pichuryu-na pichongsang-irang-un sangdae an-handa igoji*
Just us-like minority-or abnormal-with-NOM get along NEG-do

- Well, they just don't wanna get along with us, abnormal minorities (12: 38 A.M.)**
- 20 H: *Kedaga kibonjok-uro ch'abyol hanun-ge iksukhago ch'abyol pannun kot'ong-do morugo. Yoja-hant'e*
also basically discrimination do be used to discrimination get pain-also ignorant women-to
hanun-go poa.
do look at
**Also, they are so used to discriminating, but not being discriminated against. You know how they
treat women. (12:38 A.M.)**
- 21 R: *Hagin.*
Right
Right. (12:38 A.M.)
- 22 H: *Sesang-I pakkwio-tta pakkwio-tta haji-man kugon chongmal nuna-ne-na uri-katun ilbu-go*
World-TOP change-ANT change-ANT say-but that really you-couple-or us-like some-and
**We say that the world has changed but it is only for some of us, like you guys and G and I
(12:38 A.M.)**
- 23 H: *Taebubun-ui han'guk namja-dul-un? Ajik-to ssangp'allyondo sagobangsik.*
Most-ATTR Korean male-PL-NOM? Still-also 1955 way of thinking
But for most Korean guys? They still live in the fifties. (12:38 A.M.)
- 24 R: *Kuronikka*
right
True. (12:38 A.M.)
- 25 H: *Kuronikka nuna-nun chintcha haengun-ingoya, uri S-ssi katun saram mannasol! Kuron saram obsso!*
So older sister-NOM really lucky-IE our S-Mr. like person meet that kind of person NEG-
COP
So, you are so lucky to meet someone like our S! He is one of a kind! (12:39 A.M.)
- 26 R: *Komawo!*
Thanks
Thanks! (12:39 A.M.)