

# ‘Feminist-A man who is kind to women’: Civil society’s involvement in language reform in South Korea

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In recent years, two civil society organisations have been heavily involved in South Korea’s #MeToo movement, including an intriguing interaction with the National Institute of Korean Language (Kr. [국립국어원](#), *Kungnipkugōwŏn*), a governmental organisation responsible for the development and standardisation of the Korean language.

The People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (Kr. [참여연대](#), *ch’amyŏ yŏndae*: referred to as ‘PSPD’ from here on) and the Korean Women’s Associations United (Kr. [한국여성단체연합](#), *han’gung yŏsŏng tanch’e yŏnhap* : referred to as ‘KWAU’ from here on) are perhaps two of the most prominent.

Formally established in 1994, PSPD has played a significant role in South Korea’s pro-democracy movement, tracing its roots back to the 1980s when South Korea was under the authoritarian rule of President Chun Doo-hwan following a coup d’état. Within this landscape, PSPD emerged as a coalition of various progressive groups and individuals dedicated to advocating for democracy, human rights, and social justice. The organisation actively participated in mass protests and movements calling for political reform and the establishment of a democratic system and has continued to be a key player in South Korea’s civil society, promoting participatory democracy, transparency, and accountability in governance while advocating for the

rights and welfare of marginalised communities.

KWAU, formed in 1987 through a collaborative effort among 21 influential women's organisations including the *Korean Women's Development Institute*, the *Women's Society for Democracy*, and the *Korean Women's Association for Social Welfare*, emerged as a unified platform to address the pressing issues faced by women in Korean society. KWAU's formation can be traced back to a pivotal moment when these diverse groups recognised the need for a unified platform to address the pressing issues faced by women in Korean society.

Established in 1991, the main objective of the National Institute of Korean Language has been to research and promote the Korean language, ensuring its accuracy, clarity, and effective usage in various contexts. The Institute conducts extensive linguistic research, compiles dictionaries, establishes grammar rules, and provides guidance on language usage.

Perhaps one of its most prominent products is the Standard Korean Language Dictionary (Kr. 표준국어대사전, *p'yojun gugŏ daesajŏn*), a mainstay of the South Korean online mega-portal Naver and an equivalent to the Oxford English Dictionary in the Anglophone world. The Standard Korean Language Dictionary is the go-to for most Korean speakers largely due to its prominent placement within Naver.

The Dictionary, however, has increasingly gained criticism for some of its gendered and racially biased definitions, a phenomenon that is of course not limited to the context of South Korea; similar examples may be found in the case of most Indo-European languages as well as, for example, Japanese. What is interesting in the case of South Korea, however, is the involvement of civil groups such as the PSPD and KWAU, both of which have been vocal in their denouncing of the Institute's 'conservative' approach to language building.

## ‘A man who is kind to women’

A particularly prominent and recent example which may be seen as correlated broadly with the #MeToo movement that has sparked mass social debate in South Korea, is controversy surrounding the Institute’s definition of the lexical field *feminist*. In 2015, KWAU denounced the Institute’s definition which read:

- A person who adheres to or advocates feminism
- Someone who reveres women or a man who is kind to women (my translation).

While the definition of *feminism* itself was not seen as problematic (defined as ‘The viewpoint that gender-based political, economic, and socio-cultural discrimination should be eliminated. ≙ Gender equality, the expansion of women’s rights’, my translation), KWAU strongly denounced the Institute’s definition of *feminist*, sending the organisation an official letter of protest and request for amendment. The KWAU outlined that the existing definition completely overlooked the broad nature of the feminist movement as one that ‘encompassed various theories and political activism aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against women arising from class, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, geographic location, nationality, or other forms of social exclusion, and not simply sex or gender.’ The KWAU further noted that the existing definition was also highly problematic in that it portrayed feminists as intrinsically men, whereas it is a term that is gender neutral and used in reference to any individual who supports and/or practices feminism.

Although it is unclear if any immediate action was taken as a result, three years later, in 2018, the Institute did finally make a change to its definition, simply adding ‘In the past’ thus amending the second definition to ‘In the past, a term used metaphorically to describe a man who is kind to women.’ When approached for an explanation by the media, Choe Jeong-do, a curator of the Standard Korean Language Dictionary, reportedly gave a rather apologist response, noting that ‘the term ‘feminist’ has been historically defined as ‘wife-fearer’/‘wife-fearing husband’

(Kr.      가, 恐妻家, *kongch'ōga*) and 'wife-lover'/'wife-loving husband' (      가, 愛妻家, *aech'ōga*). Please understand that this information is provided in the context of referring to historical examples and should be considered as a reference when reading older literature.'

It should be noted here that although difficult to verify, there do not appear to be any records of such earlier 'historical definitions' as noted by Choe. Nevertheless, as outdated as they may sound, they are not exclusive to the Korean language (and thus not necessarily purely a problem of the Korean language); both are Sino-Korean compounds with similar Chinese (Mandarin: 愛妻者, *ài qī zhě*; 妻管严, *qī guǎn yán*) and identical Japanese equivalents (Jp. 愛妻家, *aisaika*; 恐妻家, *kyōsaika*) with similarly concerning usage and dictionary examples in the two languages. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that, intriguingly, the definition of 'feminist' in one of the most popular Japanese language dictionaries, the Digital Daijisen (Jp. デジタル大辞泉, *dejitaru daijisen*) is almost identical to the unrevised version found in the Standard Korean Language Dictionary (bar a notation at the end for the second entry, indicating that 'feminist' is a synonym of 'gallant'):

- Someone who advocates gender equality. Women's liberation proponents. Advocates for the expansion of women's rights.
- Men who treat women with care.

Note: The English language equivalent of the second definition is 'gallant.'

## People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy takes action

The Institute's 'amends' (addition of 'in the past') to the second definition were not seen as nearly sufficient. The PSPD's youth wing (*Ch'ōng'nyōn ch'amyō yōndae*) collected over 2,000 citizen signatures both online and offline to 'delete definition #2 and/or completely revise the entry'. The organisation submitted a letter along

with the signatures challenging the current second definition of *feminist*, strongly asserting that it perpetuates gender discrimination and fails to align with the call for gender equality in South Korea. The letter drew attention to the irony behind former Institute president Song Cheol-ui's remarks found on the Institute's landing page at the time, quoted as 'It is time to reflect on whether the Korean language is functioning as a tool for healing conflicts and obstacles.' In their letter, the PSPD emphasised the urgency of redefining *feminist* to accurately reflect contemporary understanding and challenges in achieving gender equality, calling for a definition that aligns with public perception and facilitates effective communication, concluding with reference to the significance of the #MeToo movement in amplifying the voices of oppressed women and calling for recognition of movements toward gender equality in South Korea.

Although the issue surrounding the Institute's definition of *feminist* as well as other gendered entries including the definition of *married couple* (defined in the Standard Korean Language Dictionary as 'a term encompassing 'husband' and 'wife'', my translation) and *marriage* (defined in the Dictionary as 'an official marital relationship tied between a man and a woman', my translation) gained considerable media attention in South Korea, the Institute has remained tight-lipped and taken no action with all of the above definitions unchanged. Marriage equality and treatment of the LGBTQIA+ community in South Korea have been hotly debated issues that have gained considerable media coverage as well as the attention of the Human Rights Watch which, in 2021, published a 76-page report outlining widespread discrimination and bullying of LGBT youth in South Korean schools. There have, nevertheless, been promising signs of change towards more recognition of same-sex marriage earlier this year, with proposed legislations that would legalise marriage equality, with the possibility of introducing civil partnerships for both same-sex and heterosexual couples, with the proposal set to go before the Supreme Court for a final ruling.

## A ray of hope for the future?

Despite the Institute appearing to take no action to amend gendered dictionary entries, there is a ray of hope for the future with the appointment of its 12th director, Jang So-won in late 2021. In later 2022, Jang, who is a woman and a professor at Seoul National University, saw through the introduction of laws protecting staff at the Institute against sexual harassment and violence. At a commemorative reception celebrating 100 days in office, Jang reportedly stressed the importance of comprehensive revisions to the Dictionary, noting that national dictionaries may be seen as a measure for 'how advanced a country is in terms of language resources', continuing to highlight the need for a complete overhaul, 'as many examples in the current dictionary are from literature written in the early to mid-1900s, which may not align with contemporary language usage' (my translations). Perhaps most importantly, Jang is also reported to have said that there will be extensive revisions focusing on 'sexist terms and examples that demean people with disabilities or women' and that the Institute had, in the past, 'deleted the word 'woman' from definitions for terms such as *beauty salon* and *parasol*' (my translations).

### *Mwoni mwoni haedo...*

There is a popular saying in Korean that goes '*mwoni mwoni haedo meoni*' ('*whatever you say, money*', my translation), which may be roughly approximated to the expression 'money is king' in English. And, surely enough, although Jang's vision is commendable, as often is the case, there is the issue of funding. The annual budget for the Standard Korean Language Dictionary operating costs is reported to be 200 million KRW (approximately \$230,000 AUD) whereas the funds required to realise just the first stage of Jang's proposed revisions (2022-2026) are 7 billion KRW (approximately just over \$8 million AUD).

Then, there is also the issue of the 'bigger picture'. Language usage as seen in the

Dictionary is a reflection of the widespread issues faced by women and minority groups within what is still a largely patriarchal and male-centric society and, indeed, something that civic groups such as PSPD and KWAU have been increasingly vocal about. Despite South Korea's significant progress in recent decades, marked by the 'Miracle of the Han River' (a period of remarkable economic and industrial growth between the 1960s and 1990s) and the global 'Korean Wave' in popular culture (as seen through various cultural and culinary products such as K-pop, K-Drama, and K-Food), there are continuing calls for a more inclusive society.

## **K-Nation: 'Ournation', or everyone's nation?**

Coming back to language, my own research indicates that there are much more troubling issues requiring assessment within the Dictionary, in what may be viewed as ethnocentric and ultra-nationalistic (or 'tribalistic') tendencies, with many entries relating to the Korean people (as a racial entity and not the 'nation') and Korean cultural products, such as the Korean language (commonly referred to by Koreans using the proper noun 'urimal' or literally 'Ourlanguage') containing numerous example sentences that position both as 'superior' or (comparatively) 'excellent'. A quick search of the word 'superior'/(comparatively)'excellent' in Korean (Kr.  , 優秀性, *ususōng*) yields 68 results, 34 of which explicitly relate to the Korean people, language, and products, with the top three being 'They showed the excellence/superiority of our people to the world'; 'The excellence/superiority of Ourcountry's electronic technology stood out at the exhibition'; 'The excellence/superiority of Hangeul (the Korean alphabet) is a globally recognised fact.'

The lexical field that perhaps best illustrates linguistically ethnocentric trends is the pronoun *uri* (Kr.  , *uri*). *Uri* can signify 'we', 'us', 'our', and 'my' distinguishing it from most Indo-European and even Japanese and Chinese equivalents. Although commonly used in reference to family and personal ownership between people of

similar social standing, much as the English 'my', the term also carries significant nationalistic and ethnocentric nuances. Although one may argue that such usage is unintentional, there is substantial evidence to suggest otherwise. An analysis of terms such as *urinara* (lit. 'Ourcountry'/'Ournation') clearly indicates how such words are crucial in the creation of what social scientist Michael Billig describes as 'banal nationalism'. When considering a term such as *urinara* it is important to note the typography. Under normal circumstances, *uri* and its connected word must be separated by a space (as the Korean language utilises spacing), much as with the usage of *our* in many Indo-European languages. When in use with certain terms such as 'nation' (and 'language'), however, *uri* has been intentionally amalgamated into one word, thus effectively constituting a new proper noun, or what may be literally translated as Ournation (Kr. *우리나라*, *urinara*), with a capital O. The term 'Ournation' has seen usage to the extent that NIKL subsequently revised official spelling and spacing rules in 1999, effectively rendering the term synonymous with, and the recommended alternative (if you are an ethnic Korean) for, 'Korea' (or, in many contexts more specifically, South Korea). Beforehand, the general rules of the Korean language strictly allowed only for 'uri nara' (with a space), the term thus clearly undergoing a linguistic transformation. On the Q&A section of the Language Institute's portal, a search for *urinara* yields numerous concerning usage stipulations which indicates that the Institute assumes only ethnic Korean people ask questions about the Korean language and actively promotes highly ethnocentric and exclusive language practices. In 2022, a user called 'high school student', for example, queried which of 'correct usage of our language' and 'correct usage of Ourlanguage' was correct. The Institute simply responded that 'Ourlanguage, which is used in reference to the language of the people of Ourcountry, is one word, thus if expressed in this context, should be 'correct usage of Ourlanguage'.' Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Urinara* ('Ournation') itself is defined in the Korean-Korean dictionary on Naver in a highly ethnocentric way: 'A term used in self-reference for the nation that we the Korean people formed'.

Such trends and stipulations are particularly concerning considering the increased



interest in Korean culture and language as well as the future of Korean Studies (and the South Korean soft-power project), with such stances potentially a ‘turn-off’ for advanced learners of the language who may want to build a deeper connection with South Korean society. I would therefore strongly urge civic groups such as PSPD and KWAU, the South Korean government, and the National Institute of the Korean Language, to consider input not only from women and Korean minority groups, but also the broader non-ethnic Korean background citizen community as well as foreigners, both also highly diverse groups that are becoming increasingly invested in the nation’s development and legacy. *We* are, after all, all ‘human’ before we are ‘Korean’.

*Main image credit: Tomasz Tuszko/Flickr.*

*This article was edited slightly after publication.*