



## Meaning extension of the Korean loan word *oppa* in the Thai context

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### Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the meaning extension of a Korean loan word *oppa* in the Thai context. The data of this study were 107 phrases/sentences from news articles of nine Thai newspapers: Thairath, Daily News, Khaosod, Kom Chad Luek, Post Today, Nawena, Prachachat, Matichon, and Manager Online, distributed from 2017–2021. The analytical frameworks are Tyler and Evans' (2003) and Evans' (2019) Principled Polysemy approach. The findings reveal that the meanings of the Korean loan word *oppa* in the Thai context were distinct from its central meanings in Korean. In Korean, it is used as an address term that a woman uses to call her own elder brother, a male older relative, a male friend, or a male upper classmate, which implies a sense of flirting. Normally, a woman needs to get permission from a man before addressing him, an *oppa*. However, in the Thai context, the word is used to refer to Korean men, Thai men, and even Thai women of any age who have typical Korean style physical appearances, and the word does not indicate kinship. The different usage of this loan word in the two cultures, consequently, can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts in cross-cultural communication. Thai people should not directly address any Korean men with an *oppa* because it is considered inappropriate or even rude in Korean culture. Besides, the word extended its meaning to refer to not only human beings, but also to locations and products that are related to Korea or Korean people.

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## Introduction

Due to South Korea's cultural economy policy in exporting its pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas and movies, the Korean Wave has become a global phenomenon since 1999 (Martinroll, 2021). Currently, not only have K-Pop and K-Dramas gained huge popularity, but Korean fashion, cuisine, language, and other products from Korea have also become popular around the world, including in Thailand (Aimthongchai & Nonsrichai, 2006; Kasa, 2014).

The flow of the Korean Wave worldwide has resulted in cultural contact between Korean culture and another culture e.g. the borrowing of traits or ideas from Korean culture and the mixing of Korean language in another language or code-mixing. The success of K-Drama and K-Pop in Thailand has led to the borrowing of Korean words to be used in the Thai language. One of the popular words is *oppa*, which can be found in 17 billion entries from Google search. It originally refers to an actual brother in Korean. The word can also be used as an address term that Korean women used to call their older male relatives, cousins, acquaintances, or classmates. In addition, it can also refer to handsome celebrities (Minjung, 2021). However, when the word *oppa* is borrowed and used in the Thai context, its meanings have deviated from the original meanings in Korean. For instance, “*Nueng Bangpu* changed her appearance by having her hair cut in a short handsome *oppa* -style.”; “Revealing the tricks of illegal Thai migrant workers in The Land of *oppa*”; and “The engine of this *oppa* model [Hyundai i30N Project C] is still the same with the previous ones”. These three examples show that the borrowed word *oppa* can refer to human beings, products, and locations in the Thai context.

This study, consequently, aimed to investigate the meaning extension of the word *oppa* in the Thai context by employing Tyler and Evans' (2003) and Evans' (2019) Principled Polysemy approach to analyze the word *oppa* in 107 phrases/sentences from Thai news articles.

It was expected that the findings of this study would shed some light on how the socio-cultural context affects the meaning extension, which can also fill in the knowledge gap in the study of the meaning extension of loan words in the Thai language.

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## Literature Review

This section covers the notions of the Korean Wave, language contact, the Principled Polysemy approach, and previous studies on the analysis of the meaning extension of a multiple-sense word.

### *Korean Wave*

The Korean Wave refers to the global popularity of South Korea's cultural economy exporting pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas and movies (Martinroll, 2021). The Korean Wave or “*Hallyu*” was coined by a Chinese reporter in mid-1999 to refer to the phenomenal growth of Korean culture and popular culture or the flow of Korean culture worldwide.

There are three stages to the Korean Wave. Its first stage (mid-1996-early 2000) spread to China, Taiwan, and Vietnam via drama and movies. The Korean Wave spread to Thailand during its second stage during 2000–2007. It came in the forms of TV series, films, music, and games. Among many other series, *Winter Sonata* (2003) and *Jewel of the Palace (Dae Juang Geum)* (2005) were hugely successful. In the third stage (2008–present), the Korean Wave has spread to other parts of the world: Asia, Europe, North America, Central and South America. At present, the global popularity of Korean culture takes in pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas and movies to Korean fashion, cosmetics, herbs, cuisine, language, and other products from Korea (Aimthongchai & Nonsrichai, 2006; Kasa, 2014).

### *Language Contact*

When peoples from different cultures interact with one another, it results in culture contact, which leads to the incorporation of artifacts, customs, and beliefs (Gaur et al., 2016), including language contact. One instance of language contact is language mixing or code-mixing. Code-mixing refers to the transition from one language to another within the same speech at the levels of phonology, lexicon, grammar, and spelling. It can take the form of words, phrases, or bigger units, and it usually occurs inside a single sentence or paragraph (Ho, 2007).

In this study, the flow of the Korean Wave worldwide has resulted in contact between Korean culture and another culture, which can appear in many forms such as the borrowing of Korean traits, ideas, and the mixing of the Korean language in another language, which leads to loan words.

### *Principled Polysemy Approach*

In the field of cognitive linguistics or the study of language and the mind, polysemy is one of the phenomena which interests many cognitive linguists since it is the pervasive phenomenon in natural languages. Polysemy refers to a single word with multiple related senses or extended meanings (Vicente & Falkum, 2017). In cognitive linguistics, the extended meanings of a polysemic word are associated with its central meaning in principled ways, which can be analyzed by the Principled Polysemy approach and described by a metaphorical mechanism and a metonymy mechanism (Tyler & Evans, 2003).

The Principled Polysemy approach is a procedural framework that provides methodologically constrained principles used to analyze semantic networks developed by Tyler and Evans (2003) which, however, initially focused only on English prepositions. Evans (2004; 2005; 2019) further proposed three criteria for establishing distinct senses of a polysemic word. First, the meaning criterion which explicates that each distinct sense must contain an additional meaning not apparent in any other senses associated with the polysemic word. Second, the concept elaboration criterion which is related to semantic selection restrictions that determine how each distinct sense can be structured. Last, the grammatical criterion which refers to specific kinds of grammatical constructions of each distinct sense.

Since Tyler and Evans (2003) hypothesized that the approach could be applied to other languages as well, and many previous studies had also used this approach to analyze a polysemic word in a language other than English (e.g. Khormae et al., 2019; Yunkyoung Kang, 2012), this study employed the Principled Polysemy approach to systematically analyze the extended meanings of the borrowed Korean word *oppa* in the Thai language.

### *Previous Studies*

Previous studies in the field of cognitive linguistics have focused on meaning extension of various lexical and

grammatical morphemes; e.g. Korean spatial markers (Yunkyoung Kang, 2012), Persian negative non-verbal prefixes (Khormae et al., 2019), and Thai verbs such as *khao* (enter), *ork* (leave), *do* (look), *mong* (watch), *hen* (see), and *ao* (take) (Hiranras, 2007; Rattanaphanusorn, 2006; Saralamba, 1995; Wongsri, 2004).

Little attention has been paid to the study of meaning extension of a noun, especially a noun which is a borrowed word in the Thai language. This study, therefore, aimed at employing the Principled Polysemy approach to examine the meaning extension of the noun *oppa*, which is a Korean loan word, in the Thai socio-cultural context.

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## **Methodology**

### *Data*

The data for this study were 107 phrases/sentences taken from news articles of nine Thai newspapers: Thairath, Daily News, Khaosod, Kom Chad Luek, Post Today, Nawena, Prachachat, Matichon, and Manager Online, distributed from 2017–2021.

### *Data Collection*

The researchers searched for the Thai word *oppa*, from Google, and approximately 17 billion entries including news, images, videos, and maps, were found. Then, we narrowed our data to only news articles due to their popularity as a source of information that many people rely on, and its influence in shaping the audiences' mind. The word *oppa* appeared in online news articles in the year 2017. Therefore, we started collecting data from 2017 to the present. The word *oppa* was found in eight Thai newspapers and in a variety of news items: entertainment news, economic news, sports news, and general news. Moreover, the word *oppa* can be found in the headline, the lead, and/or the body of the news articles. Finally, the total of 107 phrases/sentences were found and selected to be analyzed.

### *Data Analysis*

To reveal the meaning extension of the Korean word *oppa* in Thai context, this study draws on Tyler and Evans' (2003) and Evans' (2019) Principled Polysemy approach as an analytical framework. The analysis began

with identifying distinct senses associated with the word *oppa* based on two of the three criteria: the meaning criterion, the concept elaboration criterion, and the grammatical criterion, in which the first criterion is compulsory while the other two are optional. The second step is identifying the central sense of *oppa* and constructing the prototype from it. The third step is attesting the semantic network to explain the polysemy of the word *oppa*. The last step is discussing how distinct meanings of the word *oppa* associate with the central sense based on metonymy mechanism and the Thai context.

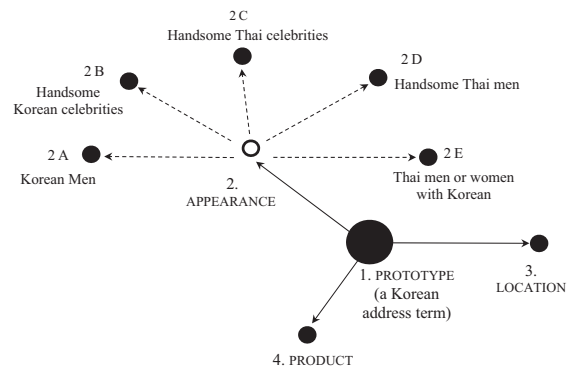
**Results**

The analysis of 107 phrases/sentences based on the Principled Polysemy approach revealed that the meanings of the Korean loanword *oppa* in the Thai context were distinct from its central meanings in Korean which is used as an address term for human beings. The word *oppa* in the Thai context extended its meaning to refer to human beings, locations, and products. From the cognitive linguistics perspective, the distinct meanings are associated with a central sense in principled ways (Tyler & Evans, 2003). In order to determine the relationships between the elements in a polysemous network of the word *oppa* in the Thai context, the semantic network was created as in Figure 1.

Figure 1 depicts the semantic network for the word *oppa* in the Thai context. The biggest shaded circle represents its prototype or original meaning in Korean as an address term as in node 1. From its prototype,

the word extended its meanings when used in the Thai context into three distinct senses represented by a shaded sphere. The first sense refers to human beings with typical Korean style physical appearances denoted by an open circle as in node 2. This sense comprises of five facets denoted by a dot sphere as in nodes 2A–2E. The second sense refers to a location which is Korea itself as in node 3. The third sense refers to a product from Korea as in node 4. The frequency of each distinct sense can be seen in Table 1.

According to Table 1, the first sense or the prototype meaning of the word *oppa* was not found in this study. It literally means “an elder brother”, and it is an address term that Korean women use to address their actual brother and their male relatives or cousins. The word can also be used to refer endearingly to other men who are older than themselves e.g. male friends, acquaintances, or senior classmates, which implies a sense of flirting (National Institute of Korean Language, n.d.; NAVER



**Figure 1** The semantic network for the word *oppa* in the Thai context

**Table 1** The frequency of each distinct sense for *oppa* in Thai

		(n = 107)	
Senses	Number	%	
1 Prototype (central sense in Korean)	-	0	
2 Appearance	104	97.3	
2A Korean men	(15)	(14.0)	
2B Handsome Korean celebrities	(21)	(19.6)	
2C Handsome Thai celebrities	(39)	(36.5)	
2D Handsome Thai men	(8)	(7.5)	
2E Thai male/female celebrities with Korean hairstyle/outfits	(21)	(19.7)	
3 Location	2	1.9	
4 Product	1	1.0	
Total	107	100	

Korean English Dictionary, n.d.) Aside from its literal meaning, currently the word can also be a reference term referring to any handsome man, especially celebrities, of any age (Minjung, 2021).

Senses 2–4 are the meaning extension of the word *oppa* in the Thai context, each of which is associated with the concept of “being Korean” in a certain way. Sense 2 refers to a person who has typical Korean style characteristics, which is the most frequently found one (97.3%). This indicates that the word *oppa* extends its meaning to refer to a person as in its prototypical meaning (sense 1), which is an address term and a reference term that signifies kinship, masculinity, seniority, close relationship, including an attractive appearance. The Thai media, however, used it to refer to both men and women of any age who are Korean or Thai with no kinship. These uses comprise five different facets (2A-E) depending on which meaning is profiled.

According to the meaning criterion of Evans’ (2019) Principled Polysemy, facet 2 A refers to Korean men in general (14%) in which the concept of being Korean is profiled in terms of nationality not good looks. For the concept elaboration criterion, the word *oppa* is used as a noun to refer to a Korean male rapist and a gambler as in examples (1) and (2):

(1) A Thai girl in Korea posted on social media that she was hurt by an *oppa* after she told him not to rape a female masseur. (Thairath, November 8, 2018)

(2) An *oppa* was arrested for running online gambling: Kim Yong-Su, a 35-year-old Korean man, was arrested. (Matichon, February 12, 2019)

Facet 2 refers to handsome Korean celebrities (19.6%) in which the concept of being Korean is profiled in terms of being a Korean male celebrity. In this case, the word *oppa* clearly co-occurs with the name of a Korean actor, the word “series” or other phrases denoting the popularity among Thai fans e.g. “a husband for all Thai fans” as in examples (3) and (4):

(3) Happy Birthday to *oppa*, *Gong Yoo*, a husband for all Thai fans. Although he is 40 years old, he is still good-looking. (Thairath, July 10, 2018)

(4) AIS and VIU cooperate to broadcast many popular K series which are now airing in Korea so that the Thai fans can happily watch their *oppa* in these series. (Thairath, May 25, 2017)

Facet 2 C refers to Thai male celebrities with Korean style handsome looks (36.5%) in which the concept of being Korean is profiled in terms of good looks. Korean style handsome looks are highlighted. In this case, the

word *oppa* normally co-occurs with the name of a Thai actor and a word/phrase referring to nice typical Korean physical appearances e.g. “handsome” and “fair complexion” which are clearly different from those of Caucasian or other races as in examples (5) and (6):

(5) *Best*, a handsome *oppa*, has now become a leading actor in a Thai series, *Love Songs Love Series*, after his success of being an actor in a music video. (Thairath, June 17, 2017)

(6) Getting to know *Phon Nawat*, an *oppa* -style actor with a fair complexion (Daily News, January 26, 2019)

Facet 2 D refers to Thai men with Korean style handsome looks (7.5%). Similar to facet 2 C, the Korean style handsome looks are profiled. In this case, the word *oppa* refers to a Korean style handsome Thai man in general. The word co-occurs with a word referring to nice typical Korean physical appearances and forms such phrases as “an aura of an *oppa*” and “a young *oppa* -style face” as in examples (7) and (8):

(7) *Nong Lego*, a 2-year-old son of *A-Pasin*, is a very handsome boy with an aura of an *oppa*. (Thairath, October 29, 2017)

(8) A father of *Grace Narinthorn*, an MTW 2019, got public attention because of his young *oppa* -style face. (Post Today, August 5, 2019)

For facet 2 E, the word *oppa*, surprisingly, can refer to Thai male or even female celebrities with Korean hairstyles or outfits (19.7%). It co-occurs with the word related to looks or hairstyle as in examples (9) and (10).

(9) *Nueng Bangpu* changed her looks by having her hair cut in a short handsome *oppa* -style. (Kom Chad Luek, February 17, 2021)

(10) *Joke So Cool* changed his looks to be an *oppa* and asked his fans to choose a Korean name for him. (Khaosod, March 14, 2021)

Interestingly, although the word *oppa* is used to refer to a woman who has her haircut short in a Korean style, which makes her look like a tomboy in example (9), the word still implies the male feature of its prototypical meaning in Korean.

For sense 3, the word *oppa* extends its meaning to a location, found in two news articles (1.9%). Based on the meaning criterion, the word extends its meaning from a Korean address term in sense 1 and a person with Korean physical appearances in sense 2 to the new meaning referring to a location. For the concept elaboration criterion, the word is used as a noun to refer to the country, Korea, and co-occurs with the word “land” as in examples (11) and (12):

(11) Revealing the tricks of illegal Thai migrant workers in The Land of *Oppa* (Thairath, May 5, 2018)

(12) Korean customers are very pleased with an Indian motorbike imported to The Land of *Oppa*. (Prachachat, April 30, 2019)

Lastly, the word *oppa* in sense 4 is used to refer to a product from Korea. Although it was found only in one news article (1.0%), this distinct sense indicates the dynamic meaning extension of the word *oppa*. Based on the meaning criterion, the word *oppa* does not refer to human beings as in senses 1–2 nor a country as in sense 3, but it extends its meaning to a product from Korea i.e. HYUNDAI i30N PROJECT which is a Korean car as in example (13). From the concept elaboration criterion, the word *oppa* is used as a noun to refer to the engine of a car produced in Korea by Korean people:

(13) As hot as kimchi, HYUNDAI i30N PROJECT C... the engine of this OPPA model is still the same as the previous ones. (Thairath, September 21, 2019)

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## Discussion

The following section discusses the meaning extension of the word *oppa* based on metonymy mechanism and the Thai socio-cultural context.

All the distinct meanings and facets of the word *oppa* can be described by the metonymy mechanism in which we conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In other words, an entity is referred to by naming something which is associated with it, and metonymy sometimes seems to map across domain boundaries (Croft, 2002; Hopper & Traugott, 2003). In this study, the concept of being “Korean” is profiled differently in each distinct sense. In the Thai media, the original Korean address term (sense1) extends its meaning to human beings (sense 2), locations (sense 3), and products (sense 4) related to Korea or Korean people in certain aspects.

Sense 2 is PERSON FOR APPEARANCE metonymy. The word *oppa*, which is originally a Korean address term, extends its new meaning to certain aspects of Korean physical appearance e.g. being handsome with a fair complexion and a fashionable hairstyle and outfit. Such images of appearance are reproduced and circulated worldwide via Korea’s cultural economy policy. This implies that this concept of PERSON FOR APPEARANCE is the most noticeable perception of Thai people due to the impact of the Korean Wave.

The fact that the borrowed word *oppa* is used differently in the Thai language in the sense that the word can refer to both men and women who can be either older or younger with typical Korean style appearances can be explained by the way Thai people address people other than their relatives. In Thai culture, a kinship term can be used to address a person who has no kinship with the speaker to show respect and politeness. In this case, the word *oppa* has a similar meaning to a Thai kinship term, *phi* (an older brother or sister), which can be used directly to refer to someone’s older brother/sister or can be generally used to address non-relatives. Additionally, from the positive images of a male protagonist reproduced in K-Dramas as a gentleman who normally takes good care of a female protagonist in the same way as an older brother taking care of his sister, Thai people, then, use the word *oppa* in the way that is different from the original usage in Korean.

The different usage of this loan word, however, can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts in cross-cultural communication. In Korean culture, a woman usually needs to get permission from a man before addressing him, an *oppa*, except her actual older brother, because the word implies a sense of flirting. If a Korean woman calls her male colleague an *oppa*, her female co-workers will consider that unprofessional. A preferable and polite way to address a Korean man is addressing him by a name and a title (Minjung, 2021). Therefore, Thai people need to use this word very carefully when they communicate with Korean people. They should not directly address any Korean men as an *oppa* because it is considered inappropriate or even rude in Korean culture.

Sense 3 is PERSON FOR LOCATION metonymy. In this case, a person is used to refer to a country as in the aforementioned example, “The Land of *Oppa*”. The word *oppa* here refers to a Korean person, so the Land of *Oppa* refers to the country of Korean people, Korea. In fact, there are two other typical metonymies in the Thai language that are used to refer to Korea: “the Land of Kimchi” and “The Land of Ginseng”. This finding, then, reveals that currently “The Land of *Oppa*” can also be used in Thai to refer to Korea as well.

Sense 4 is PERSON/PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT metonymy. For this last case, a person who produces a product is used to refer to the product. The aforementioned example, “the engine of this *oppa* model”, refers to the engine of a car manufactured in Korea. The word *oppa* here refers to Korean people who are the producers of the car.

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## Conclusion and Recommendations

The meanings of the loan word *oppa* in the Thai context extended from its original ones in Korean in the sense that it is used to refer to human beings, locations, and products. The outstanding meaning is in the human domain, in which the word can refer to Korean men, Thai men, and even Thai women, of no kinship relationship, and regardless of age. However, in Korean culture, the word *oppa* cannot be generally used in this way. The findings of this study can be beneficial for both Thais and Koreans when they need to communicate with one another. Thais have to realize that they cannot address any Korean men with an *oppa*. Korean men, on the other hand, should be open-minded because Thai people use this word mostly in a positive way. If any Thai people call them *oppa*, they should be proud that the Thais think that they are good looking.

Since the objective of this study was to investigate the meaning extension of a Korean loan word, *oppa* in Thai newspapers only, the meanings of this borrowed word in other text types such as in Thai daily conversations, Thai series and movies, and advertising may yield different results. Consequently, the meanings of *oppa*, other Korean loan words, or borrowed words from other languages in different texts should be further investigated to gain a deeper insight into meaning extension of loan words in the Thai language.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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