

***Oppa* means more than elder brother:  
A comparative study of the usages of the term *Oppa*  
in current Thai and Korean contexts**

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### Abstract

Following the international Korean Wave, the Korean term of address *Oppa* has become widely adopted as a loanword with the meaning shifted from “an elder brother” to “an attractive South Korean man” in English contexts (Salazer, 2021). Similarly, *Oppa* is used in Thai society with its own nuances. Thus, this study investigates the usages of the term *Oppa* in present Thai and Korean contexts (2019-2024) by using language corpora and online search results to discover similarities, discrepancies, and varying perceptions of the term. The results show five senses in Korean contexts: 1A. an attractive man, 2A. a male celebrity, 3A. a close male acquaintance, 4A. an elder male sibling or cousin, and 5A. a male romantic partner. Three senses in Thai contexts: 1B. an attractive man, 2B. a South Korean man, and 3B. a South Korean celebrity, with semantic intersections between 1A and 1B, and 2A and 3B resulting from influences of Korean fandom subcultures and beauty standards in Thai society. In Korean contexts, the term *Oppa* is primarily used to address 3A, 4A, and 5A, while the usages to address 1A and 2A are restricted within subcultures. In the general Korean Population, the term is used mindfully since it can be negatively perceived due to flirtatious or overly cute undertones and association with fandom subcultures. In contrast, the term *Oppa* is used indiscriminately in Thai contexts with 1B and 3B’s frequent co-occurrences with positive phrases, suggesting Thais’ favorable perception of the term.

**Keywords:** *Oppa*, Thai language, Korean language, sociolinguistics, intercultural

## 1. Introduction

Amidst the Korean Wave's global-scale expansion of popularity, the Korean language serves as a medium that connects fans worldwide with their favorite Korean stars. Catchy Korean words or phrases, including exclamations such as *Daebak* (awesome) and *Omona* (oh my god) and gendered terms of addresses such as *Unnie* (sister referred by female), *Noona* (sister referred by male), and *Oppa* (brother referred by female) are among the trendy Korean words fans know. Naturally, after constant exposure to and consumption of Korean culture, numerous people began to incorporate such Korean terms of address into their regular language use, as the cultural contact between the two language communities led to the origin of loanwords (Mahakeaw, 2016, p. 362).

Nevertheless, the gendered term of address *Oppa* stands out as a unique cross-cultural loanword. The term *Oppa* (오빠) was originally a Korean address term used by a female to refer to her elder brother which was recognized by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) in 1963. However, in 2021, due to the undeniable cultural impacts of the Korean Wave on English-speaking communities, OED additionally granted the term *Oppa* a second semantic sense of “an attractive South Korean man” (Salazer, 2021). It seems that the charming male K-pop idols and K-drama actors introduced by the Korean Wave were the key to the semantic change since they are often referred to as *Oppa* within fandoms. The international fandoms then further fashionized the usage of *Oppa* on a global scale, popularizing the semantic shift from its original meaning in Korean.

The usage of the loanword *Oppa* is also found in Thai contexts, as Thailand has the largest group of Korean Wave fandoms in Southeast Asia (The Korean Foundation, 2022). The loanword had undergone semantic shifts which could potentially lead to misunderstandings or conflicts in cross-cultural communication between Thais and Koreans (Tawichai et al., 2022). Therefore, this study will investigate the usages of the address term *Oppa* in present Korean and Thai contexts while considering cultural backgrounds as factors contributing to observable semantic phenomena for sociolinguistic insights. This research will furthermore provide comparisons of the usages of the term in Korean and Thai contexts and discuss these.

### 1.1. Research Question

- 1) How do Koreans and Thais use the term *Oppa*?
- 2) What are the differences and similarities between the usages of the term *Oppa* in present Korean and Thai contexts?

## 1.2. Research Objective

- 1) To study about usages of the term *Oppa* in Korean and Thai societies
- 2) To compare usages of the term *Oppa* in the two cultures

## 1.3. Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that the term *Oppa* would convey more positive meanings in Thai contexts and mainly convey neutral meanings in Korean contexts due to the trend of admiration of Korean popular culture among Thais.

## 2. Methodology and Scope

In this study, relevant cultural documents on topics such as Confucianism, *Nama Seonho Sasang*, patriarchy in South Korea, and beauty standards in Thai society were studied in the literature review section to provide the background of the term *Oppa*. Then several online search results and corpora of the Korean language (2019-2024) were utilized as tools for compiling recent linguistic data on the usages of the term *Oppa* in Korean contexts.

As for usages in present Thai contexts, since the term is yet to have enough frequency to be discoverable in Thai corpus, this study implements manual searching on Google for the targeted term โอป๊า (Oppa), which is the common transliterated term in Thai alphabet for linguistic data. In addition, this study will focus on observing the usage of the term *Oppa* in Thai contexts as a term of address.

In the process of data arrangement, the raw data were firstly digested and then categorized into different usages of the term *Oppa* accompanied by tables of example usages from the linguistic databases. Thereafter, the data were reorganized into a comparative table and a Venn-style diagram to summarize different semantic senses of the term *Oppa* in Korean and Thai contexts in a compact format that facilitates information comprehension.

## 3. Literature Review and Related Studies

### 3.1. Related Studies

Many studies about the term *Oppa* as a loanword have been published since the term has received attention from academic researchers (e.g., Sroikudrua, 2019; Kheddun-Burgoine, 2020, 2022; Tawichai et al., 2022; Ahn & Kiaer, 2023) in recent years due to the growing relevance of the Korean Wave in the international arena. The studies related to the comparison of usages of the term *Oppa* in Korean and Thai society can be divided into three parts as follows.

### 3.1.1. Studies Related to the Term *Oppa* in Korean Contexts

As for the studies related to the usages and perceptions of the term *Oppa*, Jeong and Yu (2021) studied the usages of several gendered terms of address in Korean, including the term *Oppa*, by showing usages of the terms in various contexts and asked native Korean speakers to identify the relationships between the speaker and hearer. The result shows that when using the term *Oppa*, the relationships between the two were mostly identified as romantic relationships, while the rest were identified as siblings which preliminarily shows that native Korean speakers associated the term *Oppa* with romance sense.

Khalil (2023) studied personal pronouns in Korean, including the term *Oppa*. The term is one of the common titles used based on gender and age without indicating a specific occupation or kinship relationship. However, according to the National Institute of the Korean Language, the term *Oppa* is considered inappropriate to use in the public workplace as the term is different from the professional and formal nature of workplaces. Moreover, the term *Oppa* can be intentionally used as a strategy to narrow the distance between the speaker and the listener to become friends or lovers. Thus, the usage of the term *Oppa* can be part of a symbolic and strategic use to achieve a specific goal, not the standard usage which complies with social norms and factors.

Xin (2015) studied the kinship terms *Oppa/Hyung* and *Unnie/Noona* as address terms in Korean dramas since 2010. The results show that meanings and usages of the term also differ from the original meanings in the dictionary, namely, 1. A female calling her real elder brother, 2. A girlfriend calling her boyfriend, 3. A female calling her friend's brother, and 4. A female worker in a nightclub calling a male customer. In the total 78 times, the term *Oppa* is used as a title to refer mostly to a lover (38 times), followed by a real brother (25 times), and an intimate male acquaintance (15 times). The study also shows that the term *Oppa* is mostly used as a third-person pronoun (195 times) and a second-person pronoun (94 times), but rarely used as a first-person pronoun (31 times), except for when the speaker is the real elder brother of a female. Moreover, the term *Oppa* can also be used to call a younger male or even female who seems dependable and able to protect or help the female speaker like her real elder brother.

### 3.1.2. Studies Related to the Term *Oppa* in Western Contexts

Brown (2013) investigated the way six female second language learners of Korean (two Korean and four non-Korean) at a US university perceived the kinship term *Oppa* and how they used or avoided the term as an expression of their identities. The results show that the learners perceived the term rather negatively i.e. childlike, overtly cute, “manipulative”, “implying a gender imbalance” and “uncomfortable sexual connotations”, leading to limited usage of the

term *Oppa*. One out of four non-Korean learners avoided using the term *Oppa* altogether and one Korean learner felt the pressure to adopt the “Korean-style pattern of address”. However, some learners also perceived the term *Oppa* more positively as a way to convey “affection” in certain contexts, namely, referring to romantic partners and Korean idols.

The study by Ahn and Kiaer (2023) also supports the idea that English speakers associate the term *Oppa* with romance and fangirling. A male participant in the study revealed that his Korean girlfriend addressed him as *Oppa* to show affection and admiration. On the other hand, a female participant stated that she refused to use the term *Oppa* with her Korean boyfriend as the term signals an “inequitable relationship in which she is the one who obsessively admires and follows him” due to an image of Korean idols’ fans using the same term.

As for the term *Oppa* as a loanword, Khedun-Burgoine (2020, 2022) studied the semantic shifts and reconstructions of Korean words in English-speaking K-pop fandoms. One of the studied terms is the term *Oppa* which is used more frequently than other Korean loanwords (e.g., *Unnie*, *Skinship*) since the term is easy to pronounce and transliterate into English. The term *Oppa* is mostly associated with a handsome man, a man in a leadership position (within the idol group), a romantic interest, or a term with sexual connotations. The semantic shifts from the original usages in Korean contexts might result from non-Korean speaking fans’ misinterpretations and mistranslations of the Korean term. In addition, the female speakers who use the term *Oppa* could be perceived as “teenage girls who are obsessed with their favorite idols and group” as well as childlike. Furthermore, the term *Oppa* can be used as a tool of mockery e.g. stylizing the word as *Oppar* (mocking fans who overuse the term *Oppa*), *Oppapologist* (referring to fans who overprotect and excuse male idols’ bad behavior), and *Oppa* didn’t mean it (referring to fans who argue that idols did not know when they did something wrong).

### **3.1.3. Studies Related to the Term *Oppa* in Thai Contexts**

A few studies about the term *Oppa* in Thai contexts have also been published as the term was introduced to Thais around twenty years ago through the Korean Wave, or Hallyu.

In 2019, Sroikudrua examined the usages of the term *Oppa* in eighteen Thai news articles from Mic-e-Library. The results suggest that the term had undergone semantic broadening and conveyed three senses 1. a physically attractive man, 2. a South Korean man, and 3. South Korea. Later, in 2022, Tawichai, Sroikudrua, and Punksirikul conducted research about the meaning extension of the term *Oppa* again by examining the usage of the term in 107 phrases from Thai news articles distributed from 2017-2021. The results show that the term

*Oppa* in Thai context does not show kinship relation and is used to address 1. A Korean man, 2. A Thai man, 3. A Thai woman with a Korean-style physical appearance. Furthermore, the term can be used to refer to locations and products related to Korea or Korean people.

From the aforementioned studies, it is apparent that the usages of the term *Oppa* in Thai contexts are different from those in Korean contexts in which the term *Oppa* is mainly associated with a romantic or intimate sense and used in limited contexts, as well as those in Western Contexts in which the term *Oppa* can have a rather negative sense. Thus, it is interesting to study more about the usage of the term *Oppa* in Thai context

### **3.2. Literature Review**

The literature review of this research will be divided into the usages of the term *Oppa* in Korean contexts which covered cultural backgrounds, original usage, expanded usages, and issues regarding the term *Oppa*, followed by a literature review of the term *Oppa* in Thai contexts which covered beauty standards, imports of East Asian media, and the popularity surge of the term *Oppa*.

#### **3.2.1. Cultural Background of the Term *Oppa* in Korean Society**

The practice of Confucianism in Korea, even in the present, remains untouched more than in other East Asian neighboring countries such as China and Japan (Choi, 2010 as cited in Mitu, 2015, p. 32). The philosophy places high importance on collectivism, age-based hierarchy, and patriarchy which influenced many aspects of Korean culture, including language. The influences of Confucianism on the Korean language are shown through various kinship terms on the paternal side (Nguyen, 2021, p. 273), and gender-specific terms of address which marked the relationship between male and female speakers (Park & Cho, 1995 as cited in Khedun-Burgoine, 2022, p. 91). Those gendered kinship terms refer to older brothers and sisters of the family: *Oppa*, *Hyung*, *Unnie*, and *Noona*. While the terms *Oppa* (오빠) and *Hyung* (형) both mean an older brother, *Oppa* is used by younger female speakers and *Hyung* is used by younger male speakers. In the same way, the terms *Unnie* (언니) and *Noona* (누나) mean older sister; the former is used by younger female speakers, and the latter is used by younger male speakers. The fact that these four kinship terms are the only gender-specific terms in the Korean language shows the importance of elder sibling status in Korean society since people only create words for things that are considered crucial or prominent in their culture (Benítez-Burraco, 2017). However, the patriarchal system in Korean society in the past and the international bloom of the Korean Wave in the present make the term *Oppa* worth discussing.

The patriarchal system in Korea led to the emphasis on male members of the society, namely, patrilineality and preference for sons. Patrilineality is the family system that traces descent through father or male relatives. In a traditional Korean family, the oldest son would inherit most of the family property and become the next head of the family after the father passes away, while other siblings would have to move out after marriage. Thus, the eldest son would be on a high level in the family hierarchy, only second to the parents (Khedun-Burgoine, 2022, p. 91). With the emphasis on patrilineal family, Korean society has developed a preference for sons or *Nama Seonho Sasang* (남아선호사상) which is the hope for a son as he can inherit the family clan (Angkula & Tantithumpusit, 2022, p. 25). This preference even led to sex-selection abortion and the male population outnumbered the female population in the past. Therefore, the existence of male children, especially the oldest son, was very important to traditional Korean families. Consequently, the title of older brothers - *Oppa* and *Hyung* - subconsciously signal the superior power of the hearer more than older sisters (*Unnie* and *Noona*). The term *Oppa* was especially highly regarded as it is the term used by speakers who are both female, inferior to males in patriarchal society, and younger, inferior to elders in seniority society.

### 3.2.2. The Original Usage and Expanded Usages of the Term *Oppa* in Korean Society

Originally, the term *Oppa* came from the term *Olapa* (오라바) which consists of the term *Ol* (을) means young and the term *Apa* (아바) means father, hence referring to the men who are younger than the father (Cho, 2005). However, the term was used to refer to a sibling of the opposite sex who was born before the female speaker, thus, the term had the feeling of yearning and affection attached to it (Song, 2014).

According to Choi (2005), the term *Olapa* first appeared in the modern literature *Hwaeum Bangeonja Eihae* (화음방언자의해/華音方言字義解) published in the 1780s. After the *Olapa* was introduced, the term underwent a language transformation where the consonant sound L (ㄹ) was deducted and the P (ㅍ) was added, resulting in the term *Oppa* 오빠 (Cho, 2005), and started to appear in Korean language around the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to Encyclopedia of Korean Culture. The term *Oppa* started as a kinship term used to address a real family member: older brother or *Chin Oppa* (친오빠). However, in the present, it also has four expanded senses of usage.



### 3.2.2.1. The Title for an Intimate Male Acquaintance

The term *Oppa* has become ubiquitous in Korean society as an address term for close male acquaintances in school or the workplace to show close relationships. This is because Koreans think that it is impolite and inappropriate to call older people by their personal name or second-person pronouns which mean you: *Neo* (너), *Dangshin* (당신), *Ja-ne* (자네), *Ja-gi* (자기), or *Geudae* (그대). Moreover, other alternative address terms for older people are quite formal and distant due to the norm of addressing people with roles or positions in the group. Therefore, kinship terms that politely suggest intimacy are suitable for addressing older people who are close to the speaker.

The level of intimacy between the speaker and hearer can be adjusted naturally, meaning after knowing each other for a while, the female speaker would change the title, for instance, from *Seonbae* (선배), which means senior, to *Oppa*. Moreover, in some cases, female speakers would directly ask the one being addressed for permission to call him *Oppa* to reduce the emotional distance between the two.

Another explanation for using kinship terms to address older people, other than real family members, is the influence of collectivism and Confucianism. According to Kim and Brown (2014, p. 267), Korean people use the metaphor of a “large extended family” to describe society. The family metaphor is also included in how Koreans address others, thus, people normally use kinship terms as an address term to portray that the addressee is part of the group/family.

### 3.2.2.2. The Title for a Romantic Partner

The term *Oppa* is also used in a romantic context: referring to boyfriend or husband, because of the intimate sense and cuteness in the term and the traditional norm of Korean families. The intimate sense came from the term *Oppa* itself as it is a kinship term that is fundamentally used for a real family. At the same time, as the term *Oppa* is used for a close male acquaintance, the feeling of friendliness echoes back to the title *Oppa* and reinforces the intimate sense in the term. Moreover, when using the kinship term *Oppa* in romantic relationships, the speaker replicates a “certain culture-specific” sibling relationship in which the elder brother protects and takes care of the younger sister, while the younger sister respects and obeys (Brown, 2013, p.4). The expectation of sibling relations creates the image of a little sister, making the usage of the term *Oppa* associated with cuteness, childlikeness, and

fragileness. Hence, when the term is used with non-family members, the protective man and a cute fragile woman position may lead to a spark of romance.

As for the norm of Korean traditional families, in the past, men were expected to marry equal or younger women (Brown, 2011, p.195). This is because, when considering the age-based hierarchy system in Korean society, an older, and thus more powerful woman in a romantic relationship would be an inappropriate power balance in a patriarchal society. Hence, traditionally, marrying an older woman was disapproved of (Brown, 2011, p. 195). With the older male in romantic relationships, females would refer to the romantic male partner as *Oppa*, which continues after marriage, making the title *Oppa* widely used for women to address male lovers in the present, even when the romantic male partner is younger.

### 3.2.2.3. The Title for a South Korean Male Celebrity

After the Korean Wave started between 1997 and early 2000, the term *Oppa* conveyed an additional sense: the title for a male K-pop idol or celebrity. The origin is from the audience calling the male celebrity “*Oppa*” when they performed. Moreover, as a part of the entertainment industry’s marketing strategy, the term *Oppa* is deliberately used in a lot of songs, series, movies, and TV shows to create the ideal image of a romantic and dominant (older brother-like) man to attract new female fans. Moreover, the usage of social media platforms also makes fans think they know the idols and celebrities best and act like those people are their closest friends or real romantic partners. Therefore, in Korean fandom, which is usually female-dominated, fans usually refer to their idols and celebrities as *Oppa* to show their affection and romantic interest.

At the same time, the reverse phenomenon also exists. A male K-pop fan might consider himself an *Oppa* of a younger female celebrity to signal intimacy. These fans are called *Oppa Paen* (오빠 팬) in Korean dictionaries (Wurimalsaem by the National Institute of Korean Language) which refers to an older male fan of a young female celebrity.

Interestingly, as the Korean wave blooms across the globe, international fans also address their Korean idols and celebrities as *Oppa*, making the sense of fangirl dominate other senses of the term *Oppa* in foreigners’ views. Furthermore, the precondition of the usage in the fangirl sense has also become more flexible: female speakers can use the term to address younger celebrities, which is similar to usage in a romantic sense as the speakers emphasize the intimate sense more than the age difference.

### 3.2.2.4. The Title for an Attractive Male

Since fans refer to their idols and celebrities as *Oppa*, the term is additionally used to address attractive and good-looking men, of any age, as the attractive men mirror celebrities' images. This sense is identical to *Oppa* usage in the fangirl context, in which affection and a romantic sense are attached to the term *Oppa*.

It is noteworthy that the usage of the term *Oppa* as referring to any attractive men is quite limited to fandom culture, meaning the female speakers are mainly fans of celebrities who deliberately use the term *Oppa* in the sense of romantic and fangirling.

### 3.2.3. Issues that Rise from Certain Usages of the Term *Oppa*

In South Korea, females who use the term *Oppa* can be negatively judged and feel awkward due to the romantic and fangirl undertones. When using the term *Oppa* in the romantic context, speaking with high pitch and long syllables, such as *Oppaaa*, it is associated with cuteness or *Aegyo* (애교) (Brown, 2013, p. 6; Khedun-Burgoine, 2022, p. 126). The term *Aegyo* is defined as “overt displays of cuteness, which are typically childlike, submissive and vulnerable” (Brown, 2013, p. 5). Thus, female speakers who use *Oppa Aegyo* might be viewed as a “shallow airhead” or a “crafty flatterer” (Miller, 2004, p. 157). Moreover, with the extension of romantic sense and cuteness, the word *Oppa* can be interpreted as sexy, flirtatious, or manipulative, depending on the tone of the female speakers (Brown, 2013, p. 5).

In addition, the fangirl sense in the term *Oppa* is also an issue. Women, especially foreigners, who call every unknown attractive guy, *Oppa*, are allegedly ignorant of the “real” meaning and usage of the term *Oppa* and over-romanticize the image of South Korea and Korean men due to celebrity culture (Brown, 2013, p. 18). Moreover, others also view that using the term *Oppa* to address idol-fan relationships is not accurate with the meanings of the term (Brand, 2019, p. 21).

The *Aegyo* and fangirling senses of the term *Oppa* have led to several issues since the past. According to Lee (1984 as cited in Kim 1998, p. 273), in the mid-1970s, female college students started to use the term *Hyung* (the term means brother and is used by male speakers) instead of *Oppa*, and in the 1980s, and when students' equality movements were at its peak, the usage rate of *Hyung* was 88% while the usage rate of *Oppa* was only 11%. This was due to the underlying sense that was considered “too intimate”, regarding both the sibling-likeness and romanticness suggested in the term *Oppa* and the increased awareness about equality in the group of female students (Lee, 1984 as cited in Kim 1998, p. 273-274). Nevertheless, the usage of *Hyung* by female speakers rapidly decreased after the 1990s.

In the present, as one way to re-construct their identities, women also started to use the term *Hyung* instead of *Oppa* to avoid unintentional expression of romantic interests or *Aegyo*. According to Jeong and Yu (2021, p. 840), using the term *Hyung* suggests a casual personality and intimacy in a non-romantic sense. Therefore, *Hyung* is an alternative address term for women who want to break gender norms in contemporary society. For instance, Han Sohee, a South Korean actress, uses the term *Hyung* instead of *Oppa*. She explained in an interview that since she has no brother, she feels awkward using the word *Oppa* and uses the word *Hyung-nim* (the term means brother which is referred to by male speakers and adds the suffix *-Nim* to show respect) instead (Park, 2024).

In attempts to avoid awkwardness when using the term *Oppa*, alternative address terms are being used in present Korean society. Those alternative terms for *Oppa* have various semantic nuances according to the intentions to show different degrees of intimacy or politeness. Below is the table of alternative words for the term *Oppa* that the author of this article collected from internet search results such as news and blogs written by native Korean speakers.

Table 1: Alternative Address Term for *Oppa*

Alternative Address Term	Feminine Sense	Frequency			Intimacy			Politeness	Note
		Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High		
No Address Term				✓		✓		✓	politeness depends on the level of speech being used.
Oppa (short and low pitch)	✓			✓			✓		
Name+Oppa	✓			✓			✓		slightly less intimate than Oppa alone
Seonbae			✓			✓		✓	mainly used in school/university but in workplace, a job title is more common
Name+Nim				✓	✓			✓	
Name+Ssi				✓	✓			✓	less polite than Nim
Hyung		✓					✓		used by female with casual personality
Personal Name		✓					✓		used in international context
O.P.P.A	✓	✓					✓		new slang word which is not widely used

The table shows that in the present, when female speakers want to avoid being judged as showing *Aegyo* or flirtatious, they can lower the tone and shorten the length of the word when saying *Oppa* which conforms with the studies by Brown (2013) and Khedun-Burgoinc (2022) that high pitch and long syllable *Oppa* associated with *Aegyo*. Moreover, since the

Korean language is a high-context language that usually omits the subject of the sentence, omitting the term *Oppa* is one of the most common ways to avoid awkwardness when speaking.

It is noteworthy that the term *Oppa* for romantic partners also differs from couple to couple, especially after marriage. Since the term *Oppa* is mainly used by young women to address their older boyfriends, some female speakers might opt for other terms of address to refer to their husbands e.g. with the husband's name, the personal name with *Ssi* (씨), or *Ja-gi* (자기) and *Yeobo* (여보) which means darling.

Moreover, according to Jeong and Yu (2021, p.829), native Korean speakers sense that the standard age gap between older males and younger females when using the term *Oppa* is around 10 years. As a consequence, the younger female might opt to address the older male with other titles e.g. his job title, and his name + *Nim* (님), an honorific particle, rather than *Oppa* to show respect to the senior male when the age gap is more than 10 years.

#### **3.2.4. Cultural Background of the Term *Oppa* in Thai Contexts**

The loanword *Oppa* is introduced to Thai society by the Korean Wave which is reinforced by the common beauty standard in Thai culture. Thus, to understand the background of the term *Oppa* in Thai society, this study started by investigating beauty standards in Thai society and the origin of the Korean Wave in Thailand.

##### **3.2.4.1. The Evolution of the Concepts of Beauty in Thailand**

Thailand has been influenced by different notions of beauty throughout history. Different ideals of beauty have coexisted in Thai society, with a certain notion being more influential than others at certain points in time due to shifting social narratives and ever-changing external influences. Eurocentric beauty ideals came into Thai society during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868). However, the ideals were not widely upheld and the idealizations of golden yellow skin, a Hindu-derived ideal, and yellowish pale skin possessed by the upper class, who do not have to farm under scorching weather, were still commonplace (Phuchongpravech, 2015, p.64). This is because only a handful of Thai aristocrats could afford to receive Western education and thus adopt Western values while the common people could not.

Later, technological advancements, systemic changes, and globalization made it possible for Thai people to be exposed to Western values through Western capitalism centered around winners and runners-up of Miss Thailand and Caucasian models (Phuchongpravech, 2015, p.74). The Western cultural influence made Caucasian facial features e.g., big eyes, tall

noses, and pinkish-pale skin, become the new idealized physical attributes. This is reflected in the modern Thai entertainment industry in which a sheer number of half-Thai and Caucasian celebrities have been given lead roles in mainstream movies and dramas. Moreover, they were also chosen as models for advertisements and dominating top spots in beauty pageants. Stars such as Mario Maurer (half-German), Tasit Sinkanawiwat (half-Italian), Maria Poonlertlarp (half-Swedish), and Ranee Campen (half-British) are some notable names among a long list of half-Caucasian stars in the Thai entertainment industry.

#### **3.2.4.2. East Asian Media: Yet Another Shift**

Despite the idealization of pinkish-pale skin and Caucasian features, East Asian beauty standards emerged as well. A diverse influx of East Asian media such as Japan's J-pop and anime, Taiwan's Meteor Garden (2001), and South Korea's K-pop and K-dramas flowed into Thai society, making East Asian physical attributes become another concept of beauty in Thai society as a consequence. Thai people then popularized the phrases *khǎaw tīi* (ขาวดี) and *khǎaw mǔay* (ขาว-หมวย), which are the combinations of the Thai adjective *khǎaw* (ขาว), meaning white, with *tīi* and *mǔay*, meaning a Chinese boy and a Chinese girl respectively. The phrases have been generally used to positively describe or compliment someone with East Asian facial features and pale skin (Phuchongpravech, 2015, p.75). This perception of beauty has made it possible for *khǎaw tīi* and *khǎaw mǔay* stars, namely Jirayu Tangsrisuk, James Ma, Krisanapoom Pibulsonggram, and Kanyawee Songmuang to rise to fame in Thailand.

#### **3.2.4.3 The Rise of the Term *Oppa***

Among all other imported cultural trends in the past 50 years, a small number have been prevalently popular as the Korean Wave in Thailand (Prasopsorn & Panmanee, 2019, p. 983). The Korean Wave and its cultural products, K-pop and K-dramas stayed influential with new batches of exports such as BTS (boy band), Blackpink (girl group), and Descendants of the Sun (drama) which received overwhelming interest from Thai fans. It is no surprise for these stars to succeed in Thailand since the country certainly has a market for *khǎaw tīi* and *khǎaw mǔay* stars. However, the nuances that set Korean stars apart from other East Asian stars are their K-fashion, characterized by their neat and soft-toned aesthetics. Korean-inspired makeup, hairstyles, and clothes have become the trend, the new coveted stylings and aesthetics. Moreover, South Korea strengthened the Korean Wave's grip on Thailand with marketing strategies that included several Thais in popular K-pop bands, namely GOT7's Bambam, Blackpink's Lisa, NCT's Ten, and G-IDLE's Minnie. K-pop bands and K-drama actors also

occasionally visit Thailand for concerts and fan meetings, bringing fans into their fandoms and creating a positive image of South Korea.

After Thais became fans of K-drama and K-pop, the success led to the adoption of Korean words into the Thai language, especially the term *Oppa* (Tawichai et al., 2022, p. 294). The usage of *Oppa* was fashionized to address favorite artists as an influence from Korean fandom subcultures. Consequently, the term *Oppa* transliterated into the Thai alphabet as “โอบ้า”, began to occur in various media, e.g. entertainment news, crime news, and online videographies, in different semantic senses.

#### 4. Research Results

As this research aims to compare the usage of the term *Oppa* in Korean and Thai contexts, the results are divided into three parts. Starting with contemporary usages of the term *Oppa* in the Korean context and contemporary usages of the term *Oppa* in the Thai context to provide the current usage in both societies, followed by a comparison of the usages in the two cultures.

##### 4.1. Contemporary Usages of the Term *Oppa* in Korean Society

From literature reviews of the term *Oppa* in the Korean context, the term has several senses and usage in Korean society which can be divided into 5 cases.

- 1) Referring to an older brother or cousin
- 2) Referring to an intimate older male
- 3) Referring to a male romantic partner
- 4) Referring to an idol or celebrity
- 5) Referring to an attractive male

However, the five senses are not equally used and similarly perceived in contemporary society. Thus, this study employed Korean corpus and Google Trends to see which senses were the most frequent in contemporary usage (2019-2024).

Based on five Korean corpora, the numbers of the occurrences of the term *Oppa* in sentences and co-occurring terms show that the term was mostly used to address romantic partners, close male acquaintances, and elder siblings or cousins, with a few referring to male singers. The results are summarized in the table below.

Table 2: Korean Corpora Results Summary

Corpus Based on	Number of Occurrences/ Total Sentences	Co-occurrence Words (Times)	Original Text Examples	Translations
News 2019	149/1,232,383	동생/younger sibling (65), 가수/ singer (9.6)	먼저 BTS 와 RM 오빠, 아미 여러분들께 진심으로 감사 말씀을 드리고 싶어요.	Firstly, BTS and RM Oppa want to thank Army (Fans) from their hearts.
Webtext 2019	2,736/32,138,987	언니/older sister (1,902), 동생/younger sibling (674)	자동차 안에는 아빠, 엄마, 오빠, 여동생, 그리고 또 누가 있나요?	Father, mother, older brother (Oppa), younger sister are in the car and who else?
News 2020	255/2,211,344	가족들이/family members(60), 가수/singer(23), 여자/girl (16)	두 사람은 오빠 동생 사이로 지내다 연인으로 발전했다.	The two are Oppa-Dongsaeng (intimate relationship) then changed to lovers.
News 2022	127/1,674,529	남편/husband(16), 가족/family (11)	첫 아이를 임신 중인 임현서의 아내는 “오빠, 꼭 우승하고 와”라고 간절히 부탁했다.	While carrying the first child, Lim Hyun-seo’s wife sincerely asked “Oppa (husband) please bring back victory”
Wikipedia 2021	326/2,126,721	언니/oldersister (150), 그녀의/ that girl’s(125), 남동생/younger brother (83)	가족으로는 부모와 한 명의 언니, 한 명의 오빠, 두 명의 남동생이 있다.	There are parents, one older sister, one older brother (Oppa), two younger brothers in the family.

According to Google Trends Analytics spanning five years (2020-2024), the term *Oppa* is used in the titles of *Manhwa*, movies, and TV programs and has related topics about wife and elder brother. In addition, the term *Oppa* also has interesting related keywords as summarized in the table below.

Table 3: Related Keywords of the Term *Oppa*

Related Keyword	Ranking	Frequency Score	Category	Sense of Usage
서울오빠 (Seoul Oppa)	no. 1	100/100	Lifestyle review platform	The term Oppa was used in the sense of a close male who is reliable and able to guide people (females) around Seoul.
오빠 친구 (Oppa’s friend)	no. 2	97/100	Manhwa	The term Oppa was used to describe the real brother of the main character.
교회오빠 (Church Oppa)	no. 3	89/100	Vocabulary	The term Oppa was used in romantic sense as the word 교회 오빠 means male romantic partners whom females meet at the church
오빠 두 엑셀	no. 4	71/100	Excel online learning	The term Oppa was used in the sense of a close male who is smart and able to teach difficult subjects to people (females).

The results from Korean corpus and Google Trend show that the term *Oppa* is mostly employed to address real family members, romantic partners, and close older male



acquaintances. On the other hand, the references to male celebrities are rarely seen and the references to attractive men are not seen in the linguistic databases employed in this study.

#### 4.2. Contemporary Usages of the Term *Oppa* in Thai Contexts

Upon research, The term “โอปป้า”, has been used in a variety of Thai contexts as an adjective, adverb, and term of address. Usages of *Oppa* as an address term in Thai media can be seen from eighteen online websites and two unique cases of illeism from 2019-2024. It is discovered that the term is used to refer to the following individuals generally categorized as follows.

Table 4: An Attractive Thai Man

Original Text Examples	Translation	Year
โอปป้าหล่อหน้าใส!! "นนกุล" มองมุมไหนก็ตกหลุมรัก	Cleanly handsome Oppa!! “Nonkul” Falling in Love with Any Angle of Him	2021
"เพชรจ้า" เปลี่ยนลุคใหม่เป็นโอปป้าสุดอบอุ่น	“Petjah” Changes Style, Becomes Warm-hearted Oppa	2021
ส่อง 5 ลุคหนุ่มโอปป้า “บลู พงศ์ทวีธา”	5 Fashion Looks of “Blue Pongtiwat” Oppa	2022
หมอดูโอปป้า หนุ่มวิเศษเครื่องกล ผู้หลงใหลและศรัทธา ในโหราศาสตร์	Oppa Fortune Teller, Mechanical Engineering Guy Mesmerized by Horoscope	2022
“เน็ก ชาลี” ปรับลุคส์หนุ่มมาดเซอร์ สู่อโอปป้าหล่อเท่ ไอ้โห...ดูดีแบบตะโกน!	“Nak Charlie” From Indie Boy to Cool, Handsome Oppa OMG...Super-Duper Good-looking!	2023
จากเจอบูลลี่อ้วนไม่หล่อ อดีตพระเอก7สี แปรร่างเป็นโอปป้า งานดีละมุน	From Being Bullied for Being Overweight and Not Handsome, Former Channel7 Male Lead Transformed into Handsome Oppa	2024

Above are six examples of the usages, each of which shows the term *Oppa* being used to refer to “an attractive man” in news headlines; MGR Online, Daradaily, NineEntertain Official, Sentangedtee Online, Teenee Entertain, and TNN Online. The addressees are conventionally attractive Thai men befitting different concepts of attractiveness in Thai society with neat clothes and hairstyles inspired by K-fashion.

Table 5: A South Korean Man

Original Text Examples	Translation	Year
ถ้าอยากมีแฟนเป็นโอปป้า ต้องไม่พูดเกาหลี	If You Want an Oppa Boyfriend, Don’t Speak Korean	2019
"โอปป้า" เดินชายหาดพัทยา โดนกะเทยจูบไล่ ล้วงกระเป๋า เงินหาย 5 พัน	Oppa Strolls on Pattaya Beach, Gets Molested by Lady Boy with His Wallet Stolen, Losing 5 Thousand Baht	2022
ส่องหัวใจ.. สาวสไลด์ไหนถูกใจบรรดาโอปป้าเกาหลี...?	Look into Their Hearts.. What Types of Girls Do Korean Oppas Like...?	2022
เบลล่า ราณี เปิดประสบการณ์ นัดบอดครั้งแรก กับโอปป้าเกาหลี	Bella Ranee Shared Her Experience, First Blind Date with Korean Oppa	2023
เปิดนาทีจับ หนุ่มโอปป้า หลอนไอซ์ ซ้อม-กลั่นผม จังแฟนสาวในคอนโด	Arrest Footage of Meth-hallucinated Oppa Assaulting, Shaving Girlfriend’s hair, Locking Her Up Inside Condo	2023
โอปป้าซึ้งรัก ถูกสาวไทยหลอก	Heartbroken Oppa Scammed by Thai Woman	2023
2 หนุ่มยูทูบเบอร์ โอปป้าคัดแล่น และ พี่จ้อง 2 หนุ่มจากเกาหลีได้	2 Youtubers, Cullen and P’Jung Oppa, 2 Guys from South Korea	2024

themselves “Kyutae *Oppa*” and “*Oppa* Hong”, making *Oppa* part of their creator aliases to distinguish themselves from other content creators.

Table 6: A South Korean Male Celebrity

Original Text Examples	Translation	Year
สตั๊ดจากหัวไม่ได้เลย 5 โอปป้า อยากอยู่ด้วยตอนติดโควิด	Can't Stop Fantasizing, 5 Oppas We Want to Be With If We Get COVID-19	2020
10 หนุ่มหล่อโอปป้าเกาหลีที่สาว ๆ ยกเป็นสามีแห่งชาติ	10 Handsome Korean Oppas Girls Titled National Husbands	2021
เผยอายุโอปป้างานดี พระเอกซีรีส์เกาหลี	Revealing Handsome K-drama Male Lead Oppas' Ages	2021
ส่องไอจี ชาอึนอู โอปป้าสมบัติแห่งชาติของเกาหลีที่สาว ๆ ไทยตามกรี๊ดข้ามประเทศ	Taking a Look into Cha Eunwoo's IG, South Korean National Treasure Oppa Who Gets Cross-border Cheers from Thai Girls	2021
รวมซีรีส์ อีมินโฮ โอปป้า ปังทุกเรื่อง แจกออรัลความหลัว !	List of Lee Minho Oppa's Drama Series. All Spectacular. Sharing His Husband-like Aura!	2022

Above are five examples of the usages, each of which shows the term *Oppa* being used to refer to “a South Korean male celebrity” or a group of such individuals in news headlines. These usages are similar to the fangirl usage in the Korean context; however, it is noteworthy that normally the term *Oppa* is not used in Korean news, especially a formal one.

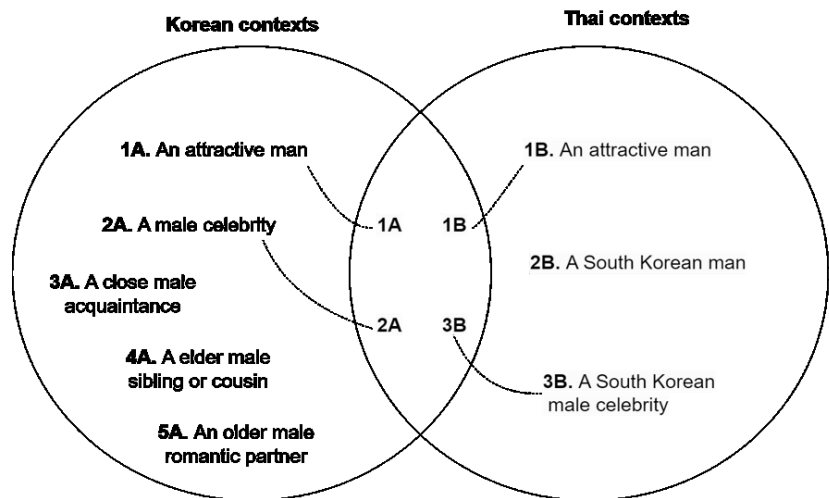
#### 4.3 Comparison of the Contemporary Usages of the Term *Oppa* in Korean and Thai Contexts

Table 7: Usages of the Term *Oppa* in Korean and Thai Contexts

Usages in Korean Contexts	Usages in Thai contexts
Precondition: The speaker has to be woman	Precondition: None
1A. An attractive man	1B. An attractive man
2A. A male celebrity	2B. A South Korean man
3A. A close older male acquaintance	3B. A South Korean male celebrity
4A. A elder male sibling or cousin	
5A. A male romantic partner	

Notes: In each context, the usages are arranged according to semantic broadness, with the one at the topmost position being the semantically broadest in its category.

Additionally, to facilitate further references and discussion, each usage is given an alphanumeric symbol corresponding to its rank of semantic broadness within its category and the category it is from; for instance, the usage of “a male celebrity” is given the symbol 2A, indicating that the sense is the second in semantic broadness within category A. The results can be summarized into a comparative Venn diagram as follows.

**Diagram 1: Comparative Semantics Senses of the Term *Oppa*****Diagram 1: Comparative Semantics Senses of the Term *Oppa***

Based on the results, the usages of the term *Oppa* in Korean and Thai contexts show both similarities and differences. Senses 1A and 1B, along with senses 2A and 3B, have a considerable degree of semantic interconnection worth discussing. In the case of 1A and 1B, the semantic sense is fairly identical due to the existing idealization of *khăaw tñiness* (East Asian facial features and pale skin) and the influence of the image of Korean celebrities in Thai society. As for the semantic similarity between 2A and 3B, it is apparent that sense 3B, or a male South Korean celebrity, derives from sense 2A, a male celebrity, as an influence of addressing cultures in Korean fandom. In both cases, the term *Oppa* may not be used to address the exact same group of individuals, yet the function in the two cultures is similar.

The differences lie in sense 2B as well as senses 3A, 4A, and 5A having no equivalent or semantically comparable pair in another category. However, these are expected results since in the case of 2B, a South Korean man, it is an overtly semantically broadened sense which would be inappropriate for Koreans to use a term that connotes intimacy to address any man in their society. In the cases of 3A, 4A, and 5A, it can be since the Thai language already has terms for female speakers to address their male acquaintances, male siblings or cousins, and male romantic partners.

Another noteworthy discrepancy is the preconditions for usage. In Korean contexts, the term *Oppa* is used by younger females only. However, in Thai contexts, there is no such precondition when using the term *Oppa* to refer to 1B, 2B, or 3B. This might result from the pragmatic transfer from the Thai term *phîi* (พี่) to the Korean term *Oppa*. The term *phîi* is a

kinship term that means older brother or sister. It is widely used as a pronoun in Thai, similar to the kinship terms *Oppa*, *Hyung*, *Unnie*, and *Noona* in Korean. As in Thai culture, kinship terms can be used to address people outside one's family to show respect and politeness (Tawichai et al., 2022, p. 298). However, the term *phii* does not have gender-specific conditions for speakers, thus, Thai speakers might apply the same rule (none gender-specific usage) when using the term *Oppa* as the term is normally translated as *phii* in Thai media.

Furthermore, it was discovered that references to 3A, a close older male acquaintance, and 4A, a male elder sibling or cousin, are the appropriate usages of the term *Oppa* in Korean contexts as 4A is the original sense, and 3A is officially recognized by the reputable standard dictionaries of Korean language e.g. Korea University Korean Dictionary (고려대 한국어대사전) and Yonsei Korean Dictionary (연세한국어사전) (Xin, 2015, p. 9, 11). In addition, sense 5A, a male romantic partner, is prevalent in Korean society as exhibited in the previous section of the literature review and related studies. On the other hand, references to 1A and 2A are restricted within subcultures as the term is associated with flirtatious or fangirling undertones and being used within specific settings in which such teasing remarks are allowed e.g. fandom communities and other casual settings. Moreover, when a female speaker uses the term *Oppa* in Korean contexts, she may be negatively perceived as acting like a fangirl, being overly cute, or flirtatious, thus to avoid such misunderstandings, Koreans use the term with caution.

However, In Thai contexts, the term *Oppa* is used indiscriminately to refer to 1B, 2B, or 3B with no particular caution. Moreover, with 1B being practically equivalent to praise for being neatly handsome and multiple usages in sense 3B co-occurring with the adjective “handsome” and other positive phrases, it seems that the Korean Wave and beauty standards have certainly led Thai society into perceiving the term as rather positive. Moreover, Thai society's trend of admiring Korean popular culture also plays a role. This is because when society already has a positive view toward Korean popular culture and its exports like K-pop and K-dramas, it is easy for Korean loanwords to have positive connotations e.g. having fashionable or cosmopolitan images. Therefore, the hypothesis of this study that the term *Oppa* would convey mainly positive meanings in Thai contexts is proven correct.

In addition, with 1B-3B deviating from the appropriate usages of the term in Korean contexts (3A-5A) and the lack of precondition of usage, it is possible that South Koreans would feel a sense of awkwardness and may have negative perceptions of Thai people when Thai people use the term *Oppa* inaccurately e.g. using the term to call any South Korean man (2B),

since directly addressing any Korean man as *Oppa* can be considered inappropriate and even rude in Korean culture (Tawichai et al., 2022, p. 293).

In comparison to related studies, the findings of this research share similarities with those of Sroikudrua (2019) and Tawichai et al. (2022), as the term *Oppa* in Thai contexts were used to address Korean men and attractive men including Thais. However, this research considered the reference to a South Korean man (2B) and the reference to a South Korean male celebrity (3B) as different senses instead of combining both into one sense since 3B heavily implies a sense of fangirl-like admiration similar to 2A, which 2B does not. Any other differences in results might be due to the use of different data pools and research methods.

As a precaution and respect for the Korean culture and language, Thais, especially journalists, should be more mindful when using the term since such inappropriate usage can mislead the Thai general public. At the same time, Koreans should understand and be open-minded when seeing foreigners incorrectly use the term *Oppa* because, partly, the incorrectness also came from the influence of Korean fandom culture.

## 5. Conclusion

This research looked into the definitions, senses, and usages, including issues related to the term *Oppa* in Korean society. The study then compared how the term *Oppa* is used in Thai society, to illustrate the commonalities and differences in its usage in Thailand and Korea.

The results show that in present Korean contexts (2019-2024), the term *Oppa* has five semantic senses: 1A. an attractive man, 2A. a male celebrity, 3A. a close male acquaintance, 4A. an elder male sibling or cousin, and 5A. a male romantic partner. Nevertheless, senses 3A-5A are more prevalent in Korean society than 1A and 2A as the term *Oppa* usually occurred with the word husband and sibling, according to Korean corpus, and the term *Oppa* was used to create intimate sense between male and female speakers, according to results from Google Trends. This finding conforms with the literature review that Koreans have rather negative perceptions toward the usage of the term *Oppa* in sense 1A and 2A as it is associated with fangirling culture. However, the distinct avoidance of the term *Oppa* to refer to 3A due to the dominant *Aegyo* and flirtatious undertone from 5A was not observed.

On the other hand, in Thai contexts, The term *Oppa* has been introduced to Thai society by the Korean Wave which became popular due to the intersection of Korean beauty standards and the Thai beauty concept of *khǎaw tǐi*. The term has three semantic senses: 1B. an attractive man, 2B. a South Korean man, and 3B. a South Korean male celebrity. Moreover, 1B and 3B's

frequent co-occurrences with positive phrases show that the term is generally perceived positively in Thai society.

When comparing the usages of the term *Oppa* in the two cultures, there are semantic intersections between 1A and 1B, and 2A and 3B due to the influence of Korean fandom culture. This shows that the Korean Wave played a crucial role in shaping Thais' usage of the term *Oppa* including creating positive perceptions toward the term *Oppa*. Nevertheless, the discrepancy lies in the fact that the term *Oppa* in the Thai context is used non-gender specifically due to the similar usage of the term *Oppa* and the term *phii* as pronouns. Therefore, Thais should be aware of the complexity of the loanword *Oppa* and use the term in an appropriate context while Koreans should also understand the difference in foreigners' usages of the term.

### 5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

With time constraints, this research has to employ Korean corpus, which has data from certain years, Google Trends, which shows only the searched words, and manual searching, which could not cover all usages of the term *Oppa*. Therefore, future research may employ social media listening tools to observe usages of the term *Oppa* in actual conversations on social media. Moreover, focus group interviews and online questionnaires are recommended, since the tools can provide in-depth insight about how Korean and Thai people perceive and use the term *Oppa*.

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