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English-influenced neologisms and their functions in Korean youth language

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Research Article

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Abstract

This study examines English-Korean hybrid neologisms as a dynamic feature of youth language in contemporary Korea. Employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates linguistic analysis with survey data from university students, it investigates how hybrid expressions such as *gatsaeng* 'God-life' and *juchabilleon* 'parking villain' are formed through derivation, compounding, blending, pseudo-affixation, wordplay, and semantic duplication. These hybrids creatively embed English lexical elements within Korean grammatical and discursive structures, reflecting both linguistic innovation and cultural localization. Survey findings reveal that such hybrid expressions are widely used in casual conversation and digital spaces, often without conscious awareness of their hybrid nature – indicating lexical normalization. While participants only moderately associated hybrids with global or cultural identity, they valued them for their brevity, relatability, and ability to foster peer connection in fast-paced, media-rich environments. Some hybrids, such as *noepisyeol* 'brain + official', also function as tools for humor, irony and social critique. Overall, the study argues that English-Korean hybrid vocabulary serves not only as a site of linguistic creativity but also as a sociocultural marker. By blending global English with local communicative practices, Korean youth use hybrid terms to construct identity, reinforce group belonging, and engage with increasingly digitalized cultural spaces. These findings contribute to broader discussions on language change, identity and media influence in non-English-dominant contexts.

1. Introduction

The integration of English into Korean has become a defining feature of contemporary Korean society, reflecting broader dynamics of globalization, media convergence and shifting generational identities. Among Korean youth in particular, English is not simply borrowed for communicative purposes but is reimagined through hybrid word formation that blends linguistic creativity with cultural expression (Ahn and Lee 2020; Lee 2006). This hybridization has given rise to unique English-Korean vocabulary that has become culturally resonant, circulating widely in digital communication, social media and peer discourse.

Parallel to the global spread of Korean-origin expressions such as *noraebang* (recently added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* 2024), the localized adaptation of English elements within Korean illustrates a bidirectional process of linguistic globalization. English serves not just as a borrowed language but as flexible resource for cultural adaptation (Fayzrakhmanova 2016). Hybrid neologisms such as *real*, used in Korean to mean 'really'; *ssagang,* a clipped form of 'cyber lecture'; and *gatsaeng,* short for 'God-life', demonstrate how English is localized to reflect uniquely Korean social contexts and values. While previous studies have examined structural features of borrowing and code-mixing (Ahn 2018; Kiaer and Bordilovskaya 2017; Kim 2016), fewer have explored how hybrid vocabulary reflects lived experience, informal identity signaling, and sociocultural negotiation.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing the structural patterns and social functions of English-Korean hybrid neologisms. Drawing on linguistic analysis and survey data from Korean university students, it investigates how these terms function as both creative linguistic forms and sociocultural artifacts. Just as *noraebang* represents the outward diffusion of Korean linguistic culture, English-Korean hybrids represent the inward adaptation of global language. These hybrids are not merely lexical novelties but expressive tools through which Korean youth articulate modern values, group

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affiliation and Korea's negotiation of local and global cultural currents in an increasingly globalized world.

2. Literature review

This literature review surveys prior research and relevant theoretical frameworks to contextualize English–Korean hybrid vocabulary. It integrates global perspectives on English use, linguistic creativity and neologism formation, while identifying the gap this study addresses.

2.1 Global spread of English and localized neologism formation

English has become a global language with profound social, economic and cultural implications for non-English-speaking countries (Crystal 2003; Jenkins 2009). While much scholarship on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) focuses on its functional role in facilitating intercultural communication, in many contexts English also carries symbolic and creative functions, serving as an index of prestige, modernity and cosmopolitan identity (Moody and Matsumoto 2003). In Korea, English use extends beyond communicative practicality, operating as a sociocultural resource for constructing modern identities and aligning with global connectivity (Ahn and Lee 2020; Lee 2006).

Among younger generations, the integration of English into daily language use serves as a generation marker, distinguishing youth from older generations and signaling cultural capital (Bucholtz and Hall 2000; Kiaer and Bordilovskaya 2017). In Korea, the phenomenon is especially evident in hybridized forms such as *real* 'really' and *geolkeu* 'girl crush', which reflect global linguistic trends filtered through local cultural sensibilities. Kiaer and Bordilovskaya (2017) view such hybrid words as both valuable linguistic assets and indicators of the future trajectory of global English in localized contexts.

Building on this, Labov's (2010) sociolinguistic perspective highlights the interplay of internal linguistic mechanisms and external social pressures in driving language change – a dynamic highly applicable to Korea's evolving lexicon, where English functions both as a symbol of modernity and a vehicle for linguistic creativity. Neologisms – newly coined words or expressions – often emerge in response to novel social phenomena, technologies or cultural trends (Crystal 2002). Characterized by recentness, innovation and cultural relevance, these expressions typically originate within specific communities before gaining broader social currency (McDonald 2005; Yule 2020).

Processes such as compounding, blending, affixation and abbreviation play central roles in neologism formation. In English-Korean hybrids, blending (e.g., *gatsaeng* 'God + life') and compounding (e.g., *ssagang* 'cyber lecture') exemplify how global elements are localized to convey culturally nuanced meanings. By enriching the lexicon and aligning language with social change, these forms illustrate how linguistic innovation both reflects emerging behavioral patterns and becomes normalized through communal use.

2.2 Linguistic creativity and sociocultural influences

English-Korean hybrids exemplify code ambiguation – the creative manipulation of bilingual resources to produce new meanings, identities and stylistic effects (Lee 2023; Moody and Matsumoto 2003). This creativity emerges through morphological adaptation, semantic shift and playful recontextualization, processes that are reinforced by Korea's high exposure to global media, digital culture and English education (Ahn and Lee 2020; Ahn 2019). English-influenced vocabulary in Korea thus represents a dynamic intersection of global linguistic inputs and local cultural adaptation, contributing to the country's ongoing negotiation with global English (Ahn 2018; Kim 2016).

Adaptation processes, including abbreviation, phonetic alteration and semantic shift, transform borrowed English words into compact and culturally resonant expressions. For instance, *gwichanijeum* 'annoyance-ism' exemplifies how English-derived suffixes can be repurposed in humorous or stylistically marked ways. Similarly, *gatsaeng* 'God-life' blends English and Korean to express an idealized, disciplined lifestyle.

The commercial and digital spheres play a central role in the diffusion of hybrid vocabulary. Brand names, product slogans, and social media trends promote these neologisms by capitalizing on their novelty, brevity and global resonance. For example, hybrids like *insaengtem* 'life-changing item' and *pilsutem* 'essential item' gain traction not only through linguistic creativity but also through their relatability, humor and repeated exposure in digital contexts.

This pattern is further supported by Korea's sociocultural emphasis on English education and its alignment with global, especially U.S.-based, consumer and media cultures. The prioritization of English in formal education and pop culture has fostered widespread familiarity with English elements, enabling the fluid blending of Korean and English in everyday interaction (Ahn and Lee 2020; Kang 2022; Moody 2020). English now pervades domains such as fashion, entertainment and technology, functioning as both a communicative and symbolic resource.

Research by Moody and Matsumoto (2003) on Japanese pop culture parallels the Korean case, showing how bilingual blending functions both symbolically and creatively. In the Korean context, Ahn (2019) highlights orthographic variation in translingual K-pop vocabulary, linking it to fan culture and the Korean Wave. Taken together, these studies illustrate that linguistic creativity in Korean hybrids is inseparable from broader sociocultural forces – consumerism, digital community norms, global cultural capital, and educational priorities all shape hybrid word formation and uptake.

2.3 Structural dynamics of neologism formation

Language evolves through the continuous generation of new forms, driven by social change and communicative necessity (Hickey 2003; Labov 2010). Neologisms typically gain acceptance when they fill lexical gaps, resonate with specific user communities and integrate into established morphological systems (Crystal 2008). These factors help explain why hybrid vocabulary in Korea has gained traction across both formal and informal domains.

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Research on neologism formation has predominantly focused on morphological and semantic analyses. Morphemes are generally classified into free morphemes, which carry meaning independently, and bound morphemes, which must attach to other morphemes to form complete words (O'Grady 1997). Analyses of newly coined vocabulary reveal diverse word-formation processes, including combinations of free and bound morphemes, as well as constructions composed solely of free morphemes. Common strategies include compounding, derivation, abbreviation, blending, clipping, conversion and borrowing (Algeo 1991; Yule 2020). Aitchison (1991) found compounding and affixation to be dominant, together accounting for approximately 70% of neologism formation.

Ahn's (2018) study of newly listed Korean words in the National Institute of Korean Language's corpus describes hybrid word formation as involving complex combinations of English, native Korean and Sino-Korean elements, often yielding expressions that feel both familiar and novel. English-Korean hybrid vocabulary illustrates these principles vividly. For instance, terms like *raenseon* 'online' and *billeon* 'villain' are highly productive in compound formation, while hybrids like *gatsaeng* 'disciplined life' and *gilbodeu* 'street Billboard' demonstrate the creative use of blending to convey culturally specific meanings while preserving the essence of the original words. Lee (2023) notes that such formations are not mere stylistic novelties; instead, they signal communicative needs, cultural values and the recontextualization of global linguistic elements into local discourse.

2.4 Research gap and objectives

While prior studies have examined English borrowings in Korean (Ahn 2018; Kiaer and Bordilovskaya 2017; Kim 2016), few have combined detailed morphological analysis with sociocultural interpretation, particularly in relation to youth identity construction and digital discourse. For instance, You et al. (2020) explore attitudes toward East Asian-origin words in English but do not investigate the structural patterns or identity functions of English-Korean hybrids in depth. Furthermore, the sociolinguistic motivations driving the creation and uptake of these hybrids, especially in generational and digital contexts, remain underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by integrating morphological typology with a sociocultural analysis of hybrid vocabulary, drawing on recent concepts such as code ambiguation (Lee 2023; Moody and Matsumoto 2003) and functional variation (Ahn and Lee 2020). It examines how these forms act as identity markers (Bucholtz and Hall 2000), creative expressions, and tools for global-local engagement, shaped by social media, meme culture, and consumer trends. Framed within World Englishes scholarship, the study explores both the local distinctiveness and global resonance of English-Korean hybrids.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1) What are the primary linguistic structures and processes involved in the formation of English-Korean hybrid vocabulary?
2) In what ways do English-Korean hybrid words function as markers of social identity among Korean youth?
3) What sociocultural factors influence the creation, dissemination, and popularization of English-influenced vocabulary in Korean?

3. Method

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining linguistic data analysis and survey research to examine the structural and sociocultural dimensions of English–Korean hybrid vocabulary. This approach provides a multidimensional account of how such neologisms function as markers of identity, peer affiliation and engagement with digital culture in contemporary Korean society.

3.1 Linguistic data compilation

Lexical data were compiled using a digital ethnography approach (Lee 2023), focusing on naturally occurring language use in online environments frequented by Korean youth. Hybrid terms were collected from platforms such as Naver, KakaoTalk, and public forums, with additional examples drawn from television, online journals and advertisements to reflect both everyday and commercial usage. Terms were selected based on frequency in youth discourse, structural diversity across morphological processes (e.g., compounding, blending, affixation) and their relevance to evolving linguistic trends. To ensure coverage of contemporary vocabulary, the search extended to online dictionaries (e.g., the National Institute of Korean Language's *Urimalsaem*, Naver Dictionary), language-focused blogs, and trend-monitoring sites. All Korean terms are romanized using the Revised Romanization system via the PNU-NARA converter (2001).

3.2 Survey design and administration

A survey was developed to investigate youth speakers' familiarity with, usage of, and attitudes toward English–Korean hybrid vocabulary. Drawing on previous attitudinal and sociolinguistic studies of East Asian-origin vocabulary in English (You et al. 2020), the instrument adapted Likert-scale items for the Korean context. While the linguistic analysis focused on structural patterns, the survey targeted sociocultural dimensions, including usage contexts and identity-related functions.

Using 5-point Likert scales, participants rated how often they encountered and used selected hybrid terms, as well as their perceptions of these terms in relation to modernity, global orientation and peer group identity. Additional items explored how hybrids express generational belonging and solidarity. To identify drivers of popularity, the survey included multiple-choice and open-ended questions addressing ease of use, relatability and digital exposure.

The survey was administered to 90 university students (46 male, 44 female), primarily in their early twenties ($M = 20.0$, $SD = 0.95$), from diverse academic disciplines, ensuring a broad perspective on youth language practices. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all respondents provided informed consent.

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4. Results

This section presents findings from both the linguistic analysis and the student survey. It first examines the structural patterns of English–Korean hybrid neologisms, identifying key morphological processes and creative formations. It then analyzes survey data to explore how these expressions function in everyday communication, peer interaction and cultural positioning among Korean university students.

4.1 Word formation patterns

This section addresses the first research question by categorizing hybrid words according to their formation processes: derivation, compounding, blending, and other notable patterns. Emphasis is placed on the creative use of pseudo-affixes and the productivity of each structure in contemporary Korean discourse.

4.1.1 Derivation

Derivation involves forming new words by adding affixes to a root that carries a distinct meaning (Plag 2018). In English-Korean hybrids, both Korean and English elements function as prefixes or suffixes, reflecting linguistic innovation and cultural adaptation.[1] The following categories summarize these patterns with representative examples.

4.1.1.1 Korean prefixes. Korean-derived prefixes such as *go-* 'high' and *jeo-* 'low' – are frequently attached to English loanwords to convey contrasting meanings, as in *gokallori* 'high-calorie', *jeokallori* 'low-calorie' and *goseupek* 'high specification.' This highlights the ease with which Korea-derived morphemes integrate with English roots to express nuanced distinctions in hybrid vocabulary.

4.1.1.2 Korean suffixes. Korean-derived suffixes such as *-nam* 'male', *-nyeo* 'female', *-jok* 'group' or 'tribe' and *-chung* 'insect' or 'obsessive person' are commonly attached to English root words to indicate gender, group identity or behavioral traits. For instance, *seuwinnam* 'sweet guy' and *neodeunam* 'nerdy guy' reflect how suffixes add social or gendered nuance. Group-related suffix *-jok* appears in terms like *kagongjok* 'café-studying tribe' and *dingkeujok* 'DINK tribe', while *-chung*, often pejorative, labels obsessive behavior, as in *inseutachung* 'Instagram addict.'

Recent hybrids also demonstrate how biomedical terminology is recontextualized into playful gendered slang. For example, *tetonyeo* – a blend of 'testosterone' and the suffix *-nyeo* meaning *'female'* – refers to a strong or masculine woman, often used playfully or ironically in online and media contexts. Similarly, *egennam* (from 'estrogen' + *-nam* 'male') denotes a feminine man considered sensitive or gentle. These forms illustrate how clipped English scientific terms are combined with Korean suffixes to produce culturally loaded labels that reflect evolving youth discourses on gender identity.

4.1.1.3 English pseudo-prefixes. English prefixes are rarely used in hybrid neologisms. However, pseudo-prefixes such as *gat-* 'God', *kwin-* 'queen' and *king-* 'king' are creatively employed in Korean to elevate or honor the subject they modify. These terms do not form entirely new words with balanced semantic contributions from both elements, as is typical in compounding. Instead, these elements attach to proper nouns – usually celebrity names – to express admiration or superiority, functioning more like evaluative markers than true prefixes. Examples include *Gatheungmin* 'God Heungmin', referring to the footballer Heung–min Son; *Gatpeikeo* 'God Faker', referring to the world-renowned professional gamer Faker; and *Kwinyeona* 'Queen Yuna', referring to the Olympic figure skater Yuna Kim. These forms illustrate how English-derived components are reinterpreted to fit Korean expressive norms. They reflect playful linguistic innovation and serve as symbolic tools of praise in pop culture, sports and digital communities, exemplifying Korea's adaptation of global language elements for expressive purposes.

4.1.1.4 English suffixes. The final derivational pattern involves English-derived suffixes such as *-ijeum* '-ism', *-riseu* '-less' and *-reo* '-er', which are phonologically and semantically adapted into Korean to create culturally resonant hybrids. For instance, *gwichanijeum* 'annoyance-ism' refers to a state of laziness or demotivation, while *eouiriseu* 'no-reason-less' describes behavior that lacks clear rationale.

Notably, *-reo,* adapted from the English suffix *-er*, is widely used to denote individuals characterized by a specific behavior or identity, as in *honbapreo* 'a person who eats alone.' Though its origin is debated, it likely stems from a misinterpretation or creative reanalysis *-er*, which was then stylized in online and social discourse. For example, *peurobulpyeolleo*[2] describes someone who frequently expresses discomfort, often in an exaggerated or critical way. It combines *peuro* 'pro' (from English), *bulpyeon* 'uncomfortable' (Korean) and *-reo*. Terms like *peurobulpyeolleo* 'professional discomfort-seeker' poke fun at individuals seen as overly sensitive or critical, reflecting contemporary digital discourse.

Similarly, *akpeulleo* refers to someone who writes malicious comments online, combining *ak* 'malicious' (a Sino-Korean root), *peul* (a clipped form of *reply*), and *-reo*. Such formations reflect broader pseudo-affixation trends in youth language, where English morphemes are reinterpreted to label identity types with humorous or critical nuance. While *-reo* is highly creative, its productivity remains largely confined to humorous or performative contexts, rather than functioning as a fully productive derivational suffix. These examples illustrate how affixation is reimagined in Korean internet culture, enriching the hybrid lexicon with linguistically inventive and socially expressive terms.

These examples highlight how Korean and English affixes are creatively combined in hybrid neologisms to construct culturally nuanced expressions. Whether through playful exaggeration (*peurobulpyeolleo*) or ironic labeling (*akpeulleo*), such formations reflect the satirical tone of Korean internet culture. Overall, derivation in English-Korean hybrids demonstrates how affixation is reinterpreted and localized to enrich the youth lexicon with inventive and socially expressive vocabulary.

4.1.2 Compounding

Compounding, the process of forming new words by combining two or more content morphemes, is one of the

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most productive word-formation strategies in English (Plag 2018). Cross-linguistic research confirms its central role in lexical innovation; for instance, Liu and Liu (2014) found that compounds accounted for 73.8% of all neologisms in their dataset, highlighting the prominence of this process in language innovation.

In English-Korean hybrid neologisms, two major compounding patterns emerge: (1) English-only compounds, such as *geolkeureoswi* 'girl crush', and (2) Korean–English compounds, which mix Korean and English elements. This study focuses on the latter, which best exemplify the interplay of global English and local Korean in youth discourse. A notable example is *deungjjak seumaesing*, which combines *deungjjak*, the Korean word for 'upper back', with the English word *smashing* to humorously depict moments of sudden regret or emotional repercussion. Frequently circulating as meme language, this hybrid illustrates how compounding enables playful exaggeration and fosters digital community bonding.

One of the most productive compound elements is *billeon* 'villain', originally denoting comic book antagonists but now widely used online to describe socially disruptive or inconsiderate behavior. The term forms highly flexible compounds such as *juchabilleon* 'parking villain', *ganguisil billeon* 'lecture room villain' and *jihacheol billeon* 'subway villain.' The spread of these compounds in meme culture demonstrates how borrowed English roots are resemanticized into culturally resonant templates for social critique (Lee 2023).

Another highly productive English-derived root is *tem* (from *item*), which serves as a base noun in compounds such as *insaengtem* 'life-changing item', *pilsutem* 'essential item' and *chucheontem* 'recommended item.' These expressions, along with *keopeultem* 'couple item' and *ittem* 'it item', referring to a highly desirable or must-have product, illustrate how English roots are flexibly adapted into Korean syntax, embedding global consumer discourse into everyday youth vocabulary.

The prefix-like element *raenseon* 'online', derived from LAN cable, is highly productive in hybrid noun formation, particularly within informal digital contexts. Examples like *raenseon imo* 'online aunt', *raenseon chingu* 'online friend' and *raenseon jipdeuri* 'online housewarming' reflect the normalization of digitally mediated roles in Korean social life. Another notable case is *raenseon jipsa* 'online pet caretaker', which playfully redefines *jipsa* or caretaker to describe individuals who watch pet videos or livestreams without owning pets, highlighting the impact of digital culture on lexical meaning and youth identity practices in Korea.

Finally, hybrid terms such as *kkultip* 'honey tip' and *nojaem* 'no fun' have gained wide popularity in both media and casual conversation. *Kkultip* blends *kkul* 'honey' with the English word *tip* to convey the idea of a valuable or sweet piece of advice. Meanwhile, *nojaem* merges the English negator *no* with the Korean root *jaemi* 'fun' to describe something dull or unentertaining. These compounds exemplify how Korean speakers creatively use compounding to coin evaluative slang that is both semantically transparent and culturally resonant (Ahn 2019). They also reflect a broader youth-driven trend of merging global lexical elements with localized affective registers, producing hybrid expressions that are immediately intelligible and socially expressive.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how compounding in English-Korean hybrids merges communicative function with humor, critique and cultural relevance. Whether in *billeon*-based compounds that satirize social behavior, consumer-oriented *tem* compounds, or digitally grounded *raenseon* forms, hybrid neologisms serve as adaptive tools through which Korean youth navigate identity and articulate everyday experiences. Compounding thus emerges as a flexible mechanism for integrating global influences into locally meaningful discourse.

4.1.3 Blending

Blending is a word-formation process in which segments of two words are merged to create a new term (Algeo 1977). Unlike compounding, which typically combines full morphemes, blending fuses partial forms from each source word while still preserving meaning from both (Cannon 1986). This process is especially common in English-Korean hybrid neologisms, where partial overlap enables compact, trendy and culturally embedded expressions that resonate with younger speakers.

One highly productive pattern appears in affectionate fan discourse. The format *X-beulli* fuses a descriptor or name with the English word *lovely* to form affectionate nicknames. For example, *Mabeulli* blends the name of actor Dong–seok Ma with *lovely*, highlighting the contrast between his rugged appearance and his unexpectedly endearing personality. Similarly, *ppobeulli*, derived from actress Bo–young Park, and *Yumbeulli*, from Yu–mi Jung, are affectionate formations that reflect public admiration for their sweet and approachable charm – either as personal traits or qualities of the characters they portray. Similar nickname formations circulate widely in K-pop fandoms, online forums, and social media, creating intimate personas and reinforcing in-group solidarity.

Blending also extends into humorous recontextualization of authority. *Noepisyeol* 'brain + official' merges *noe* 'brain' with a Koreanized clipped form of *official*, describing an unverified but confidently asserted opinion – often presented online as though it were authoritative. The term satirizes digital knowledge-sharing, reflecting how blending encodes irony, peer critique and playful resistance to self-proclaimed expertise.

Blending stands out as one of the most productive and socially expressive word-formation strategies in Korean youth language. It serves as a key mechanism for conveying emotion, group identity, irony, and trendiness. Through blending, young speakers creatively reshape global and local linguistic elements into compact, witty expressions that reflect their digital lifestyles and cultural sensibilities. What distinguishes blending from other hybridization processes is its brevity and informal flair. Blends are often concise and visually well-suited for digital contexts – ideal for hashtags, usernames or fast-paced online interaction. Their punchy, meme-like quality makes them especially resonant in youth discourse shaped by speed, humor, and shared cultural reference points.

4.1.4 Wordplay

Wordplay in word formation refers to the creative manipulation of language to produce humorous or clever effects, often

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achieved through blending, compounding, and phonetic or semantic play (Renner 2015). In the context of English-Korean hybrids, wordplay involves the playful reinterpretation of English loanwords as they are localized within Korean cultural and linguistic frames. Unlike blending or compounding alone, wordplay emphasizes irony, parody and cultural commentary, making such terms particularly salient in popular and digital discourse.

A notable example is *gilbodeu*, a clever recasting of the English *Billboard*. It combines *gil,* the Korean word for 'street', with *board* to describe playlists of songs frequently heard in public spaces, parodying the global chart while grounding it in everyday Korean urban life. Another example, *mossol*, is a blend of *motae* 'from the womb' and *solo*, referring to someone who has been single since birth. This self-deprecating, light-hearted expression is widely used in casual conversation, particularly in dating-related contexts among younger speakers.

Perhaps the most socially charged case is *Heljoseon*, which combines *hell* with *Joseon* (a historical Korean dynasty) to satirize contemporary Korean society as harsh and hypercompetitive. Popularized in online discourse, the term functions as both slang and social critique, capturing widespread youth frustration with economic insecurity and systemic inequalities (*Busan Ilbo* 2019).

Wordplay in hybrid vocabulary thus highlights the linguistic creativity and critical edge of youth discourse. By weaving together humor, cultural references and social commentary, these hybrids serve not only to entertain but also to function as tools of critique, solidarity and self-expression. In doing so, wordplay illustrates how global linguistic elements are localized into expressive forms that capture both the playfulness and discontent of a generation.

4.1.5 Duplication

The final category, referred to here as *duplication*, describes instances of deliberate semantic repetition across Korean and English. This includes expressions like *hondonui kaoseu* 'chaos of chaos' and *gaepchai* 'gap difference.' In *hondonui kaoseu*, the Korean word *hondon*, meaning 'chaos', is paired with the English-derived *kaoseu,* also meaning 'chaos', resulting in a phrase that redundantly conveys the same meaning in both languages. Rather than reflecting linguistic error, this bilingual repetition serves to intensify meaning, dramatize expression and lend a playful or exaggerated tone, especially in digital and informal contexts.

Similarly, *gaepchai* combines *gap* – a borrowed English word commonly used in Korean to mean 'difference' – with *chai*, the Korean word for the same concept. As with the previous example, the redundancy serves a rhetorical function, emphasizing disparity through humor and stylistic force. Such duplicated expressions demonstrate how Korean and English elements are layered not only for semantic reinforcement but also for expressive and ironic effect.

This pattern reflects an emerging stylistic trend in youth and online discourse, where hybrid redundancy is used for emphasis, parody and meme-based humor. These forms exemplify how cross-linguistic play is harnessed not merely for clarity or novelty, but as a socially meaningful and performative tool.

4.1.6 Summary

Table 1 summarizes the key linguistic structures found in the English–Korean hybrid neologisms discussed in Section 4.1. It provides a concise reference to the main word-formation processes, accompanied by representative examples that illustrate how English elements are integrated into Korean lexical innovation.

4.2 Hybrid vocabulary and youth identity in contemporary Korean culture

Building on the structural patterns identified in the previous section, this section turns to the social functions of English–Korean hybrid vocabulary. It addresses the second research question by analyzing survey responses and qualitative data from Korean university students, with a focus on how these hybrid terms are perceived, used, and understood as markers of youth identity, digital belonging, and sociocultural positioning in contemporary Korean society.

4.2.1 Perceptions and social identity construction through hybrid vocabulary

When asked about their general perception of hybrid vocabulary, the majority of respondents (71.1 %, 64 out of 90) indicated that they use such words without consciously recognizing their English-Korean hybrid nature, treating them instead as ordinary vocabulary. This suggests that many hybrid expressions have reached a level of normalization, perceived less as marked borrowings and more as routine elements of youth speech.

Respondents also reported a high degree of familiarity with the concept of English-Korean hybrid words, with an average rating of 3.74 ($SD = 0.98$) on a 5-point Likert scale. Similarly, the frequency of use in daily conversations was rated at an average of 3.85 ($SD = 0.81$), further supporting their integration into everyday discourse. Specific examples such as *goseupek* 'high specification', *kagongjok* 'café-studying tribe', *honbapreo* 'a person who eats alone', *noepisyeol* 'brain + official', *juchabilleon* 'parking villain' and *hondonui kaoseu* 'chaos of chaos' received even higher ratings (range: 4.08-4.79), highlighting their prevalence and relevance (see Table 2).

Survey responses also reveal the primary contexts in which hybrid vocabulary is used. A majority of participants (76.7%, 69 out of 90) reported using these expressions most frequently in 'casual conversations with friends', suggesting their role in fostering peer camaraderie and a shared sense of group identity. In addition, 70% of respondents (63 out of 90) identified 'online platforms and social media' as the second most common context, highlighting the centrality of hybrid words in digitally mediated youth interaction.

Taken together, these findings indicate that English-Korean hybrid terms are deeply embedded in the everyday linguistic repertoire of Korean youth. While participants demonstrated a high level of familiarity with the concept, many use these expressions unconsciously, treating them as routine vocabulary – a reflection of lexical normalization. Their widespread use across both offline and online domains

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Table 1. Linguistic structures of English-Korean hybrid words

Category	Description	Examples
Derivation (Korean prefixes)	Korean prefixes attach to English roots to express nuanced meanings.	*gokallori* 'high-calorie' *jeokallori* 'low-calorie' *goseupek* 'high specification'
Derivation (Korean suffixes)	Korean suffixes specify gender, group or pejorative tone.	*seuwinnam* 'sweet guy' *tetonyeo 'strong woman'* *kagongjok* 'café study tribe' *inseutachung* 'Instagram addict'
Derivation (English pseudo-prefixes)	English elements like 'God-','Queen-' used evaluatively to elevate names.	*Gatheungmin* 'God Heung-min' *Gatpeikeo* 'God Faker' *Kwinyeona* 'Queen Yuna'
Derivation (English suffixes)	Suffixes like *-reo* (-er), *-ijeum* (-ism) and *-riseu* (-less) are adapted with new functions.	*honbapreo* 'a person who eats alone' *gwichanijeum* 'annoyance-ism' *eouiriseu* 'no-reason-less'
Compounding	Combining Korean and/or English morphemes into compound expressions.	*kkultip* 'honey tip' *juchabilleon* 'parking villain' *raenseon jipsa* 'online pet caretaker'
Blending	Merging segments of two words to create new meanings.	*X-beulli* 'lovely person X' *Noepisyeol* 'brain + official'
Wordplay	Humorous or culturally meaningful reinterpretations of loanwords.	*mossol* 'single since birth' *gilbodeu* 'street Billboard'
Duplication	Redundant semantic repetition across Korean and English.	*hondonui kaoseu* 'chaos of chaos' *gaepchai* 'gap difference'

Table 2. Perceived familiarity, usage frequency, and popularity ratings of English–Korean hybrid vocabulary

Variable	*M*	*SD*
Conceptual familiarity with hybrid vocabulary	3.74	0.98
Frequency of use in daily conversation	3.85	0.81
Popularity ratings of selected expressions		
goseupek 'high specification'	4.79	0.49
kagongjok 'café-studying tribe'	4.55	0.62
honbapreo 'a person who eats alone'	4.41	0.75
noepisyeol 'brain + official'	4.28	0.68
juchabilleon 'parking villain'	4.74	0.55
hondonui kaoseu 'chaos of chaos'	4.08	0.79

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; N = 90. Ratings based on a 5-point Likert scale.

highlights their function as informal markers of identity and cultural belonging.

Taken together, these findings indicate that English–Korean hybrid terms are deeply embedded in the everyday linguistic repertoire of Korean youth. Participants demonstrated a high level of familiarity with the concept and reported using these expressions frequently in both offline and online interactions. Notably, many reported using such terms unconsciously, suggesting that these hybrids are perceived as ordinary parts of youth vocabulary rather than marked linguistic borrowings. Their prevalent use in peer and digital contexts highlights their relevance to informal communication and group identity among young speakers.

4.2.2 *Cultural relevance and generational identity of hybrid vocabulary*

Participants showed moderate agreement that hybrid words express a modern or 'cool' image, with a mean score of 3.17 ($SD = 1.09$) on a 5-point scale. The perception that such vocabulary reflects global trends and strengthens connections with foreign cultures received slightly lower endorsement ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.07$), indicating a more localize, rather than globally oriented, view of hybrid terms (see Table 3).

Hybrid expressions were also seen as moderately associated with specific social groups or subcultural trends ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.02$), indicating a perceived link to youth affiliation, though not a strongly endorsed one. Similarly, the role

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Table 3. Participant ratings of perceived functions of English–Korean hybrid vocabulary

Item Description	*M*	*SD*
Expresses a modern or 'cool' image	3.17	1.09
Reflects global trends or global culture	2.83	1.07
Associated with specific social groups or cultural trends	3.20	1.02
Represents generational identity	3.13	1.14
Makes communication more engaging and trendy	3.81	1.09
Strengthens peer-group connections	3.74	1.01

Note: All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

of hybrid words in expressing generational identity received a moderate mean score of 3.13 ($SD = 1.14$), indicating that participants somewhat recognized these terms as reflective of their generational cohort. In contrast, respondents more strongly agreed that hybrid vocabulary enhances communication and keeps language engaging ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.09$) and strengthens connections within peer groups ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.01$). These results emphasize the interpersonal and social utility of hybrid terms, which outweighs their symbolic value as global or cultural symbolism.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while English-Korean hybrids are moderately linked to identity and cultural signaling, their primary function lies in enhancing fluent, relatable, and socially resonant communication among peers. These expressions not only serve as linguistic shortcuts but also operate as shared cultural references that reinforce group cohesion in both offline and online spaces.

4.3 Sociocultural drivers of hybrid vocabulary popularization

This section addresses the third research question by examining the sociocultural factors influencing the creation and spread of English-Korean hybrid vocabulary. Survey results indicate strong agreement among respondents that these hybrid terms make communication more 'fun' and 'trendy', with an average score of 3.94 ($SD = 1.05$). Respondents also noted that such vocabulary strengthens peer relationships ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.01$), highlighting their role in fostering social cohesion and group identity.

Open-ended responses, although completed by only about one-third of participants, provide further insight. These responses were not formally coded but selected for thematic relevance and illustrative clarity. Several participants pointed to peer influence and generational familiarity as key drivers: 'I think I end up using them naturally because everyone else around me does,' and 'Just as each generation has its own slang, I believe hybrid words are a trend.' These reflections highlight how hybrid terms are embedded in youth social norms and are adopted through habitual exposure rather than conscious choice.

Another strong theme involved brevity, efficiency, and communicative precision. Many participants emphasized the practicality of hybrid expressions: 'These neologisms are born because they perfectly capture a situation,' and 'It's hard to find other words that express the exact same nuance.' This suggests that hybrids serve not only stylistic or social functions but also fill lexical gaps in casual and online communication.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter serve as key dissemination channels for hybrid vocabulary. Participants highlighted this influence, noting that 'these words often appear in internet broadcasts and YouTube' and 'they often become catchphrases and are frequently exposed as memes in media.' Such responses clearly illustrate how meme culture, amplified by pop culture and algorithmic exposure, accelerates the spread of hybrids. Expressions like *billeon* 'villain' and *kkultip* 'honey tip' gain traction through humor and relatability, rapidly embedding themselves into everyday speech through viral circulation.

5. Discussion

This study explored the structural, identity-related, and sociocultural dimensions of English-Korean hybrid vocabulary, addressing three core research questions concerning linguistic formation, identity marking and the broader social drivers of hybrid usage.

5.1 Structural innovation and linguistic adaptability

The linguistic analysis uncovered a diverse set of hybridization strategies, including derivation, compounding, blending, wordplay and pseudo-affixation. Forms such as *gat-* 'God' and *-reo* (from English *-er*) demonstrate how English morphemes are creatively reanalyzed to conform to Korean grammatical and phonological norms. Productive compounds like *kkultip* 'honey tip' and *billeon*-based neologisms (e.g., *jucha billeon* 'parking villain') illustrate the dual goals of expressive conciseness and cultural resonance.

This study builds on existing research on lexical borrowing and hybridization in Korean (e.g., Ahn 2018; Kiaer and Bordilovskaya 2017) but contributes a more systematic and fine-grained typology of hybrid formations. In particular, it identifies and analyzes underexplored patterns such as pseudo-affixes (e.g., *gat-*, *-reo*) and semantic duplication (e.g., *hondonui kaoseu* 'chaos of chaos'; *gaepchai* 'gap difference'), offering a more nuanced account of how these forms operate both morphologically and pragmatically in youth discourse. Unlike earlier studies, this analysis categorizes hybrid types according to their structural and sociolinguistic functions, revealing deeper patterns of innovation.

The duplication category, in particular, reflects a growing stylistic trend in Korean hybrid vocabulary, where intentional redundancy is used for emphasis, irony, or humor. This pattern aligns with Crystal's (2008) account of neologisms gaining currency through affective and rhetorical appeal and supports Labov's (2010) view that language change often emerges from sociocultural pressures and the expressive needs of speech communities. Together, these findings reveal the complex interplay of linguistic innovation, identity expression and cultural adaptation that characterizes hybrid vocabulary in contemporary Korean society.

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5.2 Lexical normalization of hybrid vocabulary in youth language

This study defines *lexical normalization* as the sociolinguistic process through which hybrid vocabulary loses its markedness and becomes part of routine speech (Hoffer 2005; Thomason and Kaufman 1988). A related concept, *unconscious use*, refers to individuals employing these terms without recognizing their hybrid nature, signaling an internalized view of them as familiar and linguistically unremarkable. In this sense, unconscious use is not separate from normalization, but a behavioral reflection of it.

Survey findings show that although participants reported high familiarity with hybrid expressions, most used them in casual conversation and digital communication without consciously noticing their English components. These terms are no longer perceived as foreign borrowings, but as integrated parts of everyday vocabulary. This tendency was strongest in peer-related contexts, with 76.7% citing casual conversation and 70% citing online platforms as primary domains of use.

The widespread, unconscious use of these hybrids highlights the bottom-up trajectory of lexical assimilation – shaped not by institutional efforts but by informal, youth-driven language practices. In line with contact linguistics, borrowed forms often begin as novel or marked but gradually become normalized through repeated and socially meaningful use (Hoffer 2005; Thomason and Kaufman 1988). Similarly, Ahn (2019) observes that many hybrids are no longer viewed as foreign but part of a naturalized youth vernacular.

This shift largely occurs below the level of speaker awareness, showing that how language change can emerge through habitual, socially embedded usage rather than conscious stylistic choice. In short, the normalization of English–Korean hybrids reflects not just lexical assimilation but broader dynamics of language contact, in which global forms are recontextualized through local, peer-mediated practices in Korea's digital youth culture.

5.3 Hybrid vocabulary as social identity marker and peer affiliation

Beyond lexical normalization, the study found that English-Korean hybrid words serve as informal social markers of identity and affiliation. Respondents moderately associated these terms with generational and cultural identity but more strongly emphasized their role in peer interaction and everyday speech. This pattern suggests that hybrid vocabulary functions less as a marker of broad cultural ideology and more as a peer-group marker, signaling in-group solidarity and stylistic alignment.

Such usage supports sociolinguistic models that position language as a tool for constructing and negotiating identity within specific communities (Bucholtz 2000; Trudgill 2000). In peer contexts, hybrid terms act as linguistic shortcuts for shared meanings, values, and humor. For example, expressions like *gatsaeng* 'God-life' or *mossol* 'born single' encapsulate youth aspirations and self-deprecating humor in culturally resonant formats. Their digital portability, especially through memes and hashtags, further enhances their value as peer-group capital.

This also echoes Kiaer and Bordilovskaya's (2017) concept of hybrid vocabulary as cool capital, linguistic currency that signals insider status and generational belonging. In this sense, even when global symbolism is weak, hybrid terms remain socially powerful due to their embeddedness in local youth discourse. In digital and social contexts, these hybrid expressions function as communicative tools and indexical markers of youth identity, aligning speakers with modern, globally aware and youth-centered identities.

Taken together, Sections 5.2 and 5.3 demonstrate that English–Korean hybrids are not only lexically embedded but also socially meaningful. They reflect both linguistic innovation and the sociocultural bonds that shape contemporary Korean youth culture, especially within fast-paced, media-rich and digitally connected environments.

5.4 Sociocultural drivers and media influence

The widespread adoption of English–Korean hybrid vocabulary among Korean youth is shaped by intersecting sociocultural forces, including globalization, digital media, meme culture and pop culture, consistent with broad patterns observed in language change in East Asia (Moody 2020; Moody and Matsumoto 2003). Survey findings indicate that these expressions are valued for their ease of use, brevity, humor and relevance, especially in online environments. Social media platforms act as amplifiers, enabling the viral spread of hybrid terms that align with the communicative norms of youth discourse. This pattern aligns with broader trends in the digital vernacularization of English, where youth-driven platforms increasingly serve as spaces for the localization and social embedding of global linguistic forms (Im and Park 2025; Würschinger 2021).

Meme culture plays a particularly influential role in embedding hybrid expressions into everyday language. Expressions like *billeon* 'villain' and *kkultip* 'sweet/useful tip' gain popularity not only for their humor and conciseness but also for their viral adaptability – qualities that make them ideal for use in hashtags, comments and social media captions. As noted in other East Asian contexts, such hybrid forms carry symbolic capital as markers of generational affiliation and stylistic fluency in digitally mediated peer communities (Kiaer and Bordilovskaya 2017). Advertising, entertainment, and K-pop also reinforce habitual use, embedding hybrids in both consumer culture and everyday speech. These dynamics reflect Moody and Matsumoto's (2003) account of youth linguistic practices are shaped by market forces, stylistic play and peer evaluation.

Importantly, hybrid vocabulary is not limited to playful expressions. Certain hybrids, such as *Heljoseon* 'hell + Joseon', reflect a critical stance, satirizing inequality and generational frustration. This dual function – both expressive and critical – demonstrates the sociopolitical relevance of hybrid neologisms in digitally mediated youth culture. More than lexical novelties, these terms serve as tools for navigating identity, group belonging and expressing dissent.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that English–Korean hybrid neologisms are not superficial borrowings but culturally embedded

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innovations. Through processes such as derivation, compounding, blending, and semantic duplication, English elements are creatively reanalyzed and localized within Korean youth discourse. Survey findings reveal their normalization – often used unconsciously in casual and digital communication – and highlight their appeal for brevity, humor, and peer-group relevance over global orientation. Notably, some hybrids also serve critical functions, employing irony and satire to express social commentary.

While the study focused on youth speakers, prior research suggests older generations often view hybrid vocabulary as linguistically impure or culturally trivial (Kim 2021). The use of survey data also limited the depth of individual perspectives. Future research could adopt qualitative approaches to explore generational and gender-based differences, offering deeper insight into how hybrid terms shape identity and sociolinguistic boundaries in Korean society.

By integrating morphological typology with sociocultural analysis, this study contributes a more fine-grained account of English-Korean hybrid formation to World Englishes scholarship. It positions hybrid vocabulary as a key site of peer identity, linguistic creativity and cultural expression in Korea's increasingly globalized and digitally mediated environment. These findings also carry implications for language education, including the need to acknowledge hybrid forms as part of evolving youth discourse and to incorporate discussions of linguistic hybridity into instruction on cultural and communicative competence.

Notes

1 For clarity and consistency, this paper refers to all Korean-origin affixes – including those derived from Sino-Korean morphemes such as *go-* 'high' and *-nam* 'male' – as 'Korean prefixes' or 'Korean suffixes.'
2 The Romanization of *-reo* as *-leo* reflects phonological assimilation in Korean, where a final /n/ followed by /r/ becomes a geminate /ll/, yielding *peurobulpyeolleo* in Romanization.

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