Talking Cute: How age and gender shape perceptions of Korean aegyo

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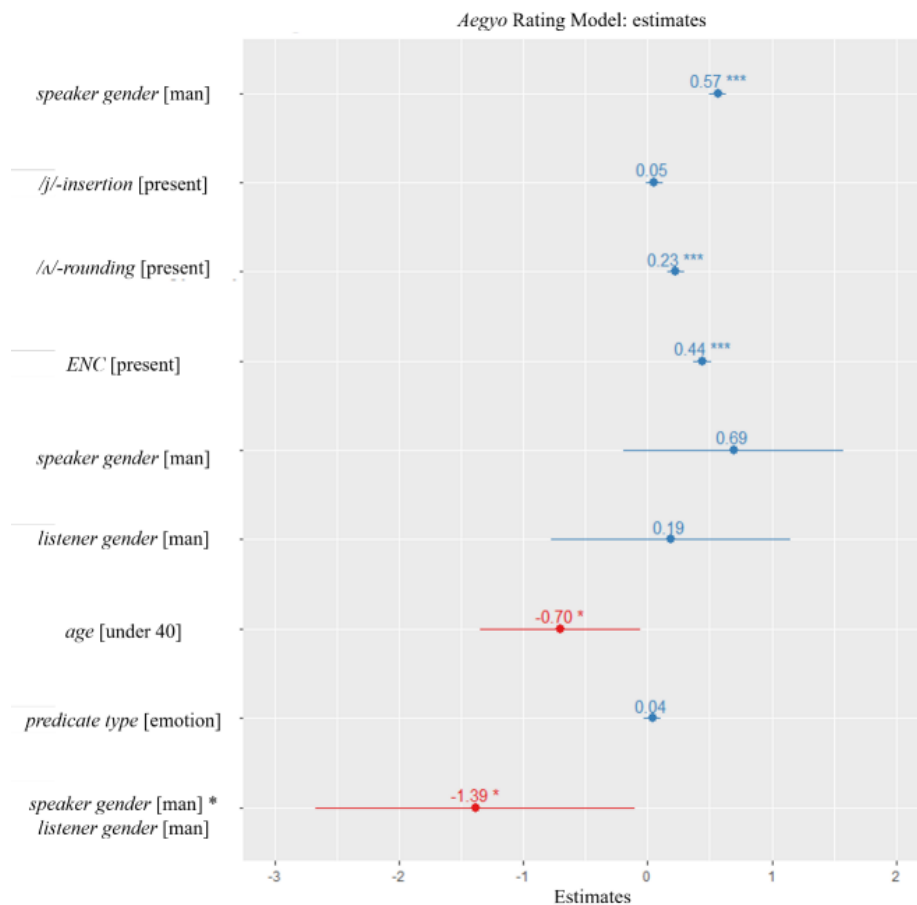[1]*University of South Carolina(USA),* [2] *University of Minnesota (USA),* [3]*Korea University (Korea)*

'Aegyo' is a Korean cute style that is used to sound cute and communicate a 'speaker's desire for love, protection, intimacy or to create an amiable social atmosphere' [1, p. 169]. Previous studies examining *aegyo*'s sociophonetic dimensions have shown it to be strongly associated with rising-falling intonation (LHL%), nasality, and obstruent fortition (OF) (e.g., /hæs*ʌ/'did'→[hæt*ɕʌ]/[hæt*ʌ]) [2]-[3]. Using an aegyo rating task of OF and /j/-insertion in *aegyo*, [4] found effects for age and gender, such that women and older participants were more likely to give higher scores when judging written aegyo forms than men and younger participants. The present study furthers this research via an investigation of the effects of speaker gender, listener gender, and age on the perception of *aegyo* and extends it to include assessments of /ʌ/-rounding and nasal coda insertion.

43 participants completed a cuteness rating task and were grouped according to the gender of the voice they listened to (19 participants listened to a woman's voice and 24 participants listened to a man's voice; see Table 1 for more details). The rating task had participants listen to recordings of several *aegyo* forms and rate each sound on a scale of 1 (not aegyo-ful) ~ 7 (extremely aegyo-ful). Six predicates were used as stimuli; each of them had 15 *aegyo* forms involving different types of *aegyo* segmental alternations which contained: one of four aegyo components (affrication, epenthetic nasal coda (ENC), /j/-insertion, or /ʌ/-rounding, any combination thereof, or a control canonical form. For example, one stimuli was [maɕʰiʌ.s*ʌ] (control form), one was [maɕʰiʌ.tɕ*ʌŋ] (only an ENC), and another was [maɕʰiʌ.tɕ*joŋ] (containing all four alternations). One native-Korean speaking woman and man each produced a set of 15 stimuli. Praat was used to confirm the presence of different segmental alternations [5]. Continuous cuteness ratings were submitted to a linear mixed-effects model with affrication (present, absent), *ENC* (present, absent), /j/-insertion (present, absent*), /ʌ/-rounding* (present, absent), *speaker gender* (man, woman), *listener gender* (man, woman), and *age* (under/over 40) as independent variables.

The results of the model, as shown in Figure 1, suggest that affrication, ENCs, and /ʌ/-rounding result in significantly increased aegyo ratings ($p<0.0001$), whereas /j/-insertion does not. Further, the estimated increase in *aegyo* ratings was of the order affrication > ENCs > /ʌ/-rounding. The model also revealed a significant interaction between speaker gender and listener gender, such that listeners gave speakers of the same gender significantly lower ratings for cuteness than speakers of the opposite gender ($p<0.05$). These findings suggest that there are social constraints dictating how comfortable participants feel rating same-gender voices as *aegyo*-ful. These findings suggest that some *aegyo* forms may index *aegyo* more strongly than others. Of particular interest is that /j/-insertion, despite being associated with *aegyo* in the literature, does not seem to affect *aegyo* ratings in this sample. This is likely because /j/-insertion following the past tense /-ʌs*/ marker in our experiment. /j/ causes backing of the articulation of the /s*/ to [ɕ*], thereby lowering the overall frequency of the fricative in the final syllable which following Ohala's [6] frequency code leads to a percept of largeness and accordingly less cuteness. This accords with research on several varieties of English where fronter /s/ has been shown to be correlated with female gender [7]. If this applies to Korean too, the backer /s/ could be leading to a reduction in the perception of femininity and thus cuteness/*aegyo*-ness. The results also suggest that not only is the percept of *aegyo* not just limited to women but that both listener and speaker are important in producing sociolinguistic percepts. The implications of this research are that phonological alternations in certain styles intimately interact with the auditory phonetic signal they produce and thus perceptual experiments on style should take into account both phonological features and their phonetic effect, and that both listener and speaker demographic information need to be taken into account in perceptual experiments as well.

Table 1. Participants by speaker gender, listener gender, and age group.

	Speaker: Woman	
	Age Group: Over 40; M = 61	Age Group: Under 40; M = 32
Woman Participants	3	7
Man Participants	6	3
	Speaker: Man	
	Age Group: Over 40; M = 61	Age Group: Under 40; M = 32
Woman Participants	7	5
Man Participants	6	6

Fig. 1. Aegyo Rating Model: estimates

References

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