
Korean Taboo Expressions Among Indonesian K-Pop Netizens

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Abstract. This study examines how Indonesian K-pop fans use pseudo-Korean language in online conflicts that cross national borders. The clash between Seablings and Knetz has become a major online event. Through qualitative netnography, the research examines how Indonesian 'Seablings' and Korean netizens interact on X (Twitter), focusing on hybrid words like kontolyo and knetzteu. The results show that pseudo-Korean is a flexible system with creative suffixes and unique endings. Fans use this playful language to turn taboo words into inside jokes, which helps them build community and solidarity. More broadly, these language forms are used to challenge power dynamics between cultural centres and digital outsiders. By looking at these practices, the research shows how language innovation can shape identity, community, and resistance in the digital age.

Keywords: linguistic hybridity; digital impoliteness; counter-discourse; transnational communication; fandom conflict

Introduction

The global spread of the Korean Wave has expanded the influence of Korean popular culture and gradually changed the ways people interact online across countries. As K-pop fandoms become more involved in international online communities, exchanges between Korean netizens and fans from other countries become spaces where ideas about cultural authority, legitimacy, and belonging are continually discussed. Korean netizens often act as cultural gatekeepers, setting the standards for fandom communities. In this setting, international fans, especially those from Southeast Asia, are often encouraged to follow these standards rather than adapt them to their own cultures. Over time, this pattern strengthens hierarchies and links cultural legitimacy with proximity to the Korean cultural centre.

These tensions became especially clear during the #SEAbblings and Knetz conflict that followed an incident at a DAY6 concert in Malaysia in early 2026. What started as criticism from Korean fan-site administrators about alleged rule violations by Southeast Asian fans quickly turned into a larger online confrontation, especially on X. Within hours, comment threads and hashtags turned the disagreement into a transnational dispute. Discussions that first focused on concert etiquette soon shifted to more hostile exchanges, including racist stereotypes. In response, fans from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam came together under the hashtag #SEAbblings to express shared resistance to narratives that portrayed Southeast Asian fans as economically or culturally inferior. For these communities, the conflict was not just about defending certain behaviours. It became a chance to challenge long-standing stereotypes and to claim recognition and dignity within the wider K-pop fandom. This was seen not only in the sharing of cultural content but

also in the everyday language used across social media. In these digital exchanges, language can both reinforce and question symbolic hierarchies. Previous studies have looked at aspects of language use in K-pop fandom, such as code-mixing, politeness strategies, and cross-cultural communication, but most of this research has focused on neutral language. As a result, the use of local profanity or taboo expressions in transnational fandom conversations has received little scholarly attention. Some research has noted the role of humour and online banter, but there has been little focus on how creative language use, especially through changes in word forms and sounds, acts as a subtle form of resistance in these interactions.

A clear example of this process can be found in the emergence of hybrid linguistic forms such as *Kontolyo* and *Knetzteu* within Indonesian online fandom spaces during the conflict. These expressions reflect a gradual adaptation, as Indonesian fans move from imitation toward the development of their own expressive strategies. By combining the Korean polite suffix *-yo* with Indonesian taboo words and introducing the vowel *-eu*, these forms echo Korean phonological patterns while transforming them into tools for satire. In this way, Korean—often regarded as a marker of cultural authority in global fandom—becomes appropriated and reimagined as a resource for parody and critique. Rather than merely replicating Korean linguistic forms, Indonesian fans engage in creative reshaping, subtly challenging the symbolic hierarchy that casts Korean netizens as the primary arbiters of fan legitimacy.

This transformation raises several important questions regarding the linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms that underpin such practices. First, how do hybrid morphophonemic structures such as *Kontolyo* and *Knetzteu* emerge in Indonesian digital discourse? Second, in what ways does lexical deformation transform taboo language into a form of shared humour that strengthens group solidarity? Third, how does this stylised linguistic performance function as a subtle form of symbolic resistance within transnational digital interactions? To address these questions, this study draws on several complementary theoretical perspectives. The concept of hybridity explains how linguistic meaning emerges within a shifting “third space” where cultural boundaries are continuously negotiated. Stylisation theory interprets phonological imitation as a performative act through which speakers construct identity and stance. The framework of Critical Digital Discourse Studies (CDDS) conceptualises online language practices as sites where global ideological struggles unfold. Finally, impoliteness theory provides insight into how taboo expressions may be recontextualised and reframed as communal humour through pragmatic adaptation.

Considered together, these perspectives make it possible to examine how lexical deformation within Indonesian K-pop fandom serves not only as playful linguistic experimentation but as a strategy for negotiating identity, solidarity, and symbolic power. Through the analysis of these hybrid practices, this research suggests that Indonesian fans transform taboo language into a shared form of satire, gradually unsettling the cultural authority often attributed to Korean netizens. In this way, language becomes more than a means of communication; it emerges as a tool through which peripheral communities assert their presence, resist marginalisation, and quietly renegotiate their place within the global digital landscape of K-pop fandom.

Recent research on digital language practices shows that linguistic hybridity is an ongoing negotiation of meaning, often called the third space. This study suggests that, in global digital communication, people use language flexibly to build connections, express their identities, and adapt to changing social situations. Instead of seeing hybrid language as mere code-mixing, this view treats it as a dynamic and strategic process shaped by power dynamics and the changing nature of identity.

Stylisation, understood as the intentional modification of language to achieve particular social

effects (Coupland, 2007), plays a central role in online communication. Such stylisation unfolds at multiple levels—lexical, phonological, and orthographic—across social media platforms. It is most notable within digital humour and irony (Androutsopoulos, 2014). Through these deliberate shifts, speakers cultivate ironic distance. They transform their utterances into social performances that go beyond straightforward expressions of meaning.

Emerging research on impoliteness increasingly frames offensive speech as a social practice shaped by context and power dynamics. In digital environments, verbal aggression does not always constitute a direct attack; it may also function as playful mockery, reinforcing group cohesion and shared identity. As online cultures continue to develop, the significance of such speech shifts in tandem with broader transformations in social values and the performance of identity. The digital sphere thus becomes a space where language is employed to express belonging, delineate boundaries, and challenge existing power structures. Nevertheless, much of the current scholarship on digital fandom remains focused on the content of communication and the expression of identity, rather than on the strategic manipulation of language as a means of resistance.

While research on translingualism, stylisation, and digital impoliteness has grown, we still know little about how taboo-driven language changes help create shared humour, group cohesion, and collective resistance in online communities. This study is the first to examine pseudo-Korean in 'asbun' practices, showing how language innovation helps build online communities and serves as a new way to shape humour and resistance. The findings offer new perspectives on linguistic and cultural research into transnational K-Pop communities, making clear how taboo-driven language helps shape group identity and supports resistance in digital spaces.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach, guided by a descriptive-interpretive framework and the principles of netnography, to examine how language and social meaning take shape within digital communities. Netnography, which focuses on observing online cultures as they naturally unfold, was selected to allow for careful observation of the Indonesian Seablings community without direct interference. The X (Twitter) platform became the main setting for Indonesian fans and Korean netizens, known as Knetz, to interact, though they sometimes found themselves in conflict. The #Seablings vs Knetz phenomenon began on January 31, 2026, when Korean fan sites violated concert etiquette during DAY6's performance in Malaysia, sparking a chain of events. What started as technical criticism soon escalated into broader, more systemic attacks, and by mid-February, the conflict had intensified. Between February 13 and 18, 2026, Southeast Asian netizens, united under the identity of "SEAbblings," responded with satirical memes and calls for boycotts. By early March, the conversation shifted toward a demand for equal dignity between Korean cultural producers and their audience in ASEAN. To examine these developments, public posts, replies, and threads capturing exchanges between these groups on X (Twitter) were analyzed. The analysis focused on linguistic elements, including words, phrases, and sentences, that revealed hybrid forms blending Korean and Indonesian, such as kontolyo and knetzteu. Data selection was purposive, emphasizing features reflecting changes in word structure and sound, as well as broader patterns of language use in context. The selection of data was purposeful, centring on features reflecting changes in word structure and sound, as well as broader patterns of language use in context. Data collection relied on careful digital observation, using keyword searches, screenshots, and archiving based on the intent behind each expression, whether it was satire, humour, solidarity, or confrontation. In this qualitative inquiry, the researcher's perspective is essential. Interpreting these interactions requires

both familiarity with Indonesian digital slang and an understanding of Korean phonology. The analysis unfolded in several stages: first, reducing the data, then organising it into categories, interpreting patterns, and finally drawing conclusions. Instances of morphophonemic change were identified and coded according to their linguistic structure and their pragmatic function, such as satire or expressions of group solidarity. By examining these hybrid forms through both structural and pragmatic lenses, the study aimed to clarify how language becomes a tool for digital identity and symbolic resistance within global fandom spaces.

This research investigates the structural and social aspects of the *asbun* phenomenon by drawing solely on publicly available data, in accordance with established digital research ethics. Screenshots are used as evidence and to illustrate authentic communication patterns. To protect privacy, account names are changed and personal details concealed. These measures uphold ethical standards and maintain the integrity of the research context.

Results and Discussion

Morphophonemic Patterns in Shaping Korean-Inspired Language Systems

In online conversations among Indonesian Seablings, users often create playful pseudo-Korean words to reflect Korean language influences. For example, they use terms like *kontolyo*, which combines the Indonesian word 'kontol' with the Korean-style ending '-yo', and *knetzteu*, which blends 'knet' with a made-up Korean ending. These words follow clear morphophonemic patterns instead of being random. Users also make pseudo-Konglish phrases like *speakeu engliseu pleaseu* by adding extra vowels to English words. These examples demonstrate a creative and systematic approach to adapting language. The main strategies behind this are adding pseudo-suffixes and using extra vowels on purpose.

The first of these mechanisms, pseudo-suffixation, refers to attaching a suffix, like the Korean honorific *-yo*, to a root word without forming a conventional grammatical structure. This can be seen in *kontolyo*, where an Indonesian taboo word is paired with *-yo*. In standard Korean, *-yo* signals politeness; however, in this context, its function shifts from grammatical to performative, making it a marker of social stance or attitude rather than just politeness. By combining a polite-sounding suffix with a coarse root, speakers create a striking contrast that yields morphophonem. The second mechanism is paragogic vowel insertion, as seen in forms such as *knetzteu* and pseudo-Konglish like *speakeu engliseu pleaseu*. The addition of the middle vowel *-eu* simulates the phonotactic tendency of Korean to avoid closed final consonants. However, these forms are not authentic reproductions of Korean phonology, but stylised, exaggerated simulations for expressive purposes. Thus, Korean phonological structure is represented parodically through selective imitation rather than systemic adoption. This shows that pseudo-Korean deformation operates at the level of phonological performance rather than at language-system integration. Imitation, not systemic adoption. This shows that pseudo-Korean deformation operates at the level of phonological performance rather than at language-system integration.

Taken together, both mechanisms show that Hybrid Linguistics in the data forms a semi-productive pattern that can be replicated across digital interaction contexts, indicating structural regularity in community practices. Therefore, pseudo-Korean in this study cannot be understood as ordinary code-mixing, but rather as a performative morphophonemic system that combines structural deformation, phonological stylisation, and aesthetic manipulation of sound to produce specific pragmatic effects.

Building on this, the finding expands the literature on Korean–Indonesian code-mixing (Lee & Nugroho, 2021), which previously emphasised the use of Korean lexicon as an identity marker, by showing that hybridity can also occur at the morphophonemic level through taboo-based deformation. Furthermore, this study goes beyond the findings of morphological adaptation of suffixes (Park, 2022), which focused on the use of *-yo* in neutral verbs, by showing that this suffix can be performatively recontextualised in profane vocabulary to produce a structural irony effect. Within the framework of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), this practice demonstrates a form of structural re-appropriation, in which the phonological system of the dominant language is not simply imitated, but rearticulated as an expressive medium by peripheral communities. Thus, pseudo-Korean in the data functions as a hybrid space (third space) that enables the transformation of linguistic structures into tools for producing new meanings in transnational digital communication.

Re-Indexicalization of Taboo through Phonological Stylization

The phenomenon of pseudo-Korean deformation shows that language is more than just a tool for communication. It is a dynamic process where people constantly negotiate social meanings. This practice does more than change words; it subtly shifts how linguistic forms relate to the values they express. For instance, when forms like *kontolyo*, which come from taboo vocabulary, are used, people do not see them as direct acts of aggression. Instead, they become a source of shared humour in the community. The laughter that follows does not erase the offence but turns it into a moment of connection through a new, practical understanding.

This transformation unfolds through deliberate phonological stylisation, in which subtle sound shifts introduce a performative distance between what is said and what is meant. The use of the suffix *-yo*, for instance, brings with it a cadence of politeness and gentleness, while the addition of paragogic vowels such as *-eu* infuses the utterance with a sense of playful mimicry. Together, these elements recast what might otherwise be perceived as hostility into a performance of communal playfulness. The force of the original taboo is not erased, but softened, as meaning is reoriented at the level of social interpretation rather than literal content.

What emerges from this process is a broader understanding of how communities navigate the boundaries of taboo in digital spaces. Rather than relying solely on euphemism or avoidance, participants engage in phonetic stylisation to transform potentially offensive speech into a shared source of humour. This ritualised play with language does not diminish the presence of rudeness; rather, it repositions it as a tool for fostering group cohesion. In this way, pseudo-Korean becomes more than a linguistic curiosity; it serves as a mechanism for reshaping the emotional resonance of speech, allowing individuals to participate in collective meaning-making.

This finding expands the study of cyber-banter in digital communities (Dyner; Lee, 2023), which emphasises the social function of humour, by demonstrating that humour transformation can result from phonological manipulation rather than solely from interactional context. Additionally, these results complement research on the phonological modification of profanity (Zappavigna, 2025), which previously viewed sound changes as strategies to avoid algorithmic censorship; in this study, phonological changes are shown to serve as mechanisms for pragmatic meaning transformation. These findings also deepen the theory of impoliteness (Culpeper) by illustrating that phonological stylization can produce affective re-indexicalization, whereby taboo utterances lose their aggressive function and become symbols of collective humor and communitarian catharsis. This phenomenon is also related to literature on digital irony (Gibbs, 2024) and linguistic playfulness (Androutsopoulos, 2024), but goes beyond it by showing that humor and irony in digital communication are not only semantic or discursive in

nature, but can also be constructed through systematic phonological engineering. Thus, pseudo-Korean in the practice of "asbun" shows that sound changes can function as a pragmatic device to shift the social meaning of utterances in transnational digital communication.

Hybrid Linguistics as Counter-Discourse in Digital Hegemony Relations

The use of pseudo-Korean in the Indonesian Seablings community is more than just playful language or inside jokes. As Indonesian K-Pop fans who interact with Korean pop culture online, Seablings navigate symbolic power in global spaces. When they communicate with Knetz, or Korean netizens, Korean often represents cultural authority, while Indonesian is seen as less central in the K-Pop world. By creatively adapting Korean words, like kontolyo, knetzteu, and parodic pseudo-Konglish, the community does not simply reject the dominant language. Instead, they reshape its sounds and meanings, using satire to create their own presence and sense of agency.

This practice develops gradually, as the dominant language is subtly changed and its authority quietly reduced. By changing the sounds of Korean, the community turns what was once a symbol of prestige into something humorous and gently critical. Pseudo-Korean lets them rethink established hierarchies, making the language of the centre meaningful in a new way. Adapting Korean also helps build a shared identity, setting insiders apart from outsiders and creating a sense of belonging through knowledge of both cultures. These hybrid language practices help the community connect and quietly resist symbolic domination. This approach happens in a hybrid space, where meaning is shaped together, not just by the centre or the edges. Modified Korean becomes a way for Seablings to express themselves, rather than just supporting Knetz's authority. By imitating and reflecting on the language, the community negotiates its symbolic power through ongoing changes.

Building on these ideas about discursive inversion, Critical Digital Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik, 2017) describes this as a counter-discursive practice in the global digital space. The conflict between Seablings and Knetz is not just about moral or cultural arguments (as Kim's cross-value conflict study, 2022, points out), but also about using language to contest ideas. Unlike digital nationalism, which often uses local languages to attack international accounts (Lim, 2024), the pseudo-Korean practice uses the opponent's language as a form of resistance. This approach goes beyond linguistic nationalism and shows a more complex kind of symbolic resistance.

This observation helps us better understand the identity of Indonesian Seablings, showing that collective identity comes not just from shared stories and beliefs, but also from the creation of unique ways of using language. The hybrid language practices here quietly mark belonging, set the community apart, and show their ability to shape meaning. These findings also deepen our understanding of cultural hegemony in digital spaces by showing that symbolic resistance often occurs in subtle, strategic ways, such as careful changes in pronunciation. This research builds on Bhabha's idea of hybridity, suggesting that hybrid spaces encourage both mixed identities and gradual shifts in power through language. It also adds to Critical Digital Discourse Studies by showing that both the structure and content of language can help people negotiate power in global digital spaces. In this light, using pseudo-Korean in asbun is more than just creative language use. It is a way for people to shape identity, create humour, and quietly resist symbolic dominance in the wider K-Pop world.

Disruptive Pragmatics as a "Digital Warfare" Model in Fandom Conflicts

This study suggests that "asbun" is mainly used to disrupt conversations and unsettle how people talk, rather than acting as a morphophonemic feature or a taboo. In the Seablings-Knetz conflict, people use asbun not to persuade others but to create confusion and frustration, focusing

on disruption rather than rational discussion.

This can be seen when people use cultural absurdism to derail conversations. For example, someone might reply, “we are flying with kuyang,” when teased about their economic status. Instead of responding directly, the speaker introduces something unexpected and unrelated, disrupting the usual flow of debate. This lets them take control of the conversation and makes it hard for the other person to respond. These tactics are intentional breaks in how conversations normally work. From an interactional-pragmatic view, these actions move away from Gricean cooperative principles and turn communication into more of a performance than a discussion.

Another example is when people reclaim insults, like responding to racist attacks with humour. Indonesian netizens often use irony to neutralise aggression. By ironically agreeing with the taunts, they avoid being seen as victims and turn hostility into humour. In impoliteness theory, this is more than just softening the insult—it reframes the situation and reduces the impact of the offence through shared performance.

Statements like “I don't want to win, I just want to annoy you” show a clear shift from rational debate to emotional interaction. These comments suggest that people see language less as a means of argument and more as a tool for creating emotional disruption. In this way, online conflict becomes more like a psychological contest, where the main goal is to make the other person uncomfortable.

In *Critical Digital Discourse Studies* (KhosraviNik, 2017), disruptive pragmatics is seen as a form of small-scale resistance. Instead of arguing about ideas, people disrupt the flow of communication. This changes how power works online: influence comes from guiding conversations and making debates unpredictable, helping marginalised groups avoid defensiveness.

This analysis reveals that what is often dismissed as mere absurd humour is, in reality, a purposeful means of disrupting conversation and asserting control. Irony and absurdity emerge as intentional strategies for navigating conflict between communities. By viewing disruptive language as a form of digital contest, it becomes clear that words function not only as representations of ideas but as instruments for challenging and unsettling others within the broader landscape of online interaction. Considered collectively, these findings suggest that Hybrid Linguistics operates within a wider system, where the interplay of structural patterns, evolving language practices, and disruptive strategies gives rise to a nuanced form of symbolic resistance in the context of digital fandom conflicts.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the theoretical framework introduced at the outset. They illuminate hybridity, stylisation, impoliteness, and shifting dynamics of symbolic power within transnational digital spaces. Rather than imitation, pseudo-Korean deformation emerges as a gradual process of re-appropriation within a distinct third space. Here, peripheral communities reshape the phonological patterns of the dominant language, layering new meanings onto established forms. This is evident in the morphophonemic patterns observed (RQ1) and suggests that Hybrid Linguistics is best understood as a performative system shaped by ongoing adaptation rather than simple code-mixing. Through techniques like pseudo-suffixation and paragogic insertion, speakers reframe their utterances and alter how they are received. The process of re-indexicalization (RQ2) is central, allowing otherwise aggressive expressions to be seen as shared humour. Thus, stylisation goes beyond aesthetic effect and gradually reshapes the social function of language. The data suggest that pseudo-Korean operates as a counter-discourse, enabling

participants to navigate centre-periphery relations and question symbolic power in digital contexts, as articulated by Critical Digital Discourse Studies (RQ3). The identification of disruptive pragmatics also shows how fandom language can serve as a symbolic tool—not through rational argument, but by unsettling interactional and emotional expectations (RQ4). Collectively, these findings offer a deeper perspective on the interplay of phonological creativity, pragmatic adaptation, and discursive resistance within a unified communicative system.

Conclusion

This study finds that the use of pseudo-Korean in the practice of 'asbun' is not merely a matter of language mixing or casual variation. Instead, it forms a layered system that shapes how people communicate and negotiate meaning in digital spaces. Structurally, pseudo-Korean introduces patterns—such as adding certain endings or sounds—that can be repeated and adapted across different situations. These patterns allow speakers to play with language in ways that achieve specific effects. On a pragmatic level, these sound changes shift the tone of taboo or aggressive statements, turning them from direct offence into shared humour. The original meaning is not erased; rather, it is transformed by how it is spoken, showing that even small changes in sound can alter how messages are received and understood. On a broader scale, pseudo-Korean becomes a way for people to challenge established norms within global K-Pop culture. By reworking the Korean language in creative ways, speakers express resistance and reshape the balance of power in online communities. Practices like absurdism and irony further reveal that digital conflicts often aim to unsettle or confuse, rather than to win arguments. In this environment, language becomes a tool for both connection and disruption. Overall, these findings suggest that manipulating the sounds of language can create new forms of meaning, humour, and resistance, highlighting the complex ways identity and power are negotiated in global digital communication.

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