

# From Kinship Address to Cultural Symbol: A Morphological and Socio-Historical Analysis of the Korean Pronoun Jane (자네) )

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**Abstract:** This study presents a comprehensive morphological and socio-historical analysis of the Korean second-person pronoun Jane (자네), tracing its evolution from a medieval reflexive form to a highly specialized kinship term and, further, to a potent cultural symbol. Through an integrated approach combining historical linguistics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology, the paper argues that Jane (자네) has undergone a process of cultural-semantic metamorphosis. Rather than fading into obsolescence, it narrowed functionally to occupy a precise relational niche—primarily as an address from parents-in-law (cheobumo, 처부모) to son-in-law (sawi, 사위)—while simultaneously accumulating dense indexical meanings. As its everyday use contracted, Jane (자네) became a marked symbol of traditional authority and hierarchical integration, enabling its regeneration across pedagogical, media, literary, and public discourse fields. The paper thus challenges conventional measures of linguistic vitality, proposing instead that a form's persistence may be sustained through distributed symbolic utility rather than frequency of colloquial use. By modeling Jane (자네)'s adaptive trajectory, this study offers broader insights into the mechanisms through which language retains historical social structures and negotiates cultural continuity amid modernization.

**Keywords:** Jane (자네); Korean second-person pronouns; honorifics; kinship address; cultural-semantic metamorphosis; markedness; semiotic condensation; language ideology

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## 1. Introduction: etymological and socio-historical foundations of 'jane (자네) )'

Language is far more than a neutral medium for exchanging information; it is the primary social instrument through which human relationships are instantiated and endowed with meaning<sup>[1]</sup>. Within this system, few grammatical categories are as fundamentally social as personal pronouns. Their selection constitutes a continuous act of social calibration, encoding perspectives on relative status, intimacy, and stance between speaker and hearer. This sociolinguistic weight is exceptionally pronounced in languages like Korean, which possesses one of the world's most elaborate honorific systems. The Korean second-person pronoun paradigm—including forms such as the intimate Neo (너), the formal Dangsin (당신), and the respectful Jane (자네)—represents a finely tuned toolkit for managing social distance, power, and solidarity.

Amidst this array, Jane (자네) occupies a uniquely intriguing position. In contemporary Standard Korean, it functions

as a specialist: its primary normative use is as an address term from parents-in-law (*cheobumo*, 처부모) to a son-in-law (*sawi*, 사위). This specificity stands in stark contrast to the term's traceable broader historical footprint. Its modern usage blends affectionate authority with measured interpersonal distance, distinct from both innate blood intimacy and detached formality. This peculiarity raises compelling questions: What historical trajectory led to this functional specificity? What does this specialized survival reveal about enduring Korean social structures? How does a linguistic form, seemingly marginalized in everyday conversation, continue to exert significant cultural influence?

This study adopts an integrated morphological and socio-historical perspective to analyze *Jane* (자네). Morphology provides the empirical entry point to trace the word's formal evolution, but for a socially embedded form like *Jane* (자네), morphology is a fossil record of social history. Thus, the investigation synthesizes morphological analysis with insights from historical linguistics, pragmatics, and linguistic anthropology. Our central thesis posits that *Jane* (자네) exemplifies a sophisticated process of cultural-linguistic niche specialization and subsequent symbolic metamorphosis. It has not simply faded but has undergone strategic adaptation, narrowing semantically to fulfill a precise, culturally irreplaceable pragmatic function within modern Korean kinship. Furthermore, its contraction in everyday utility has paradoxically catalyzed a transformation in its core semiotic status, allowing *Jane* (자네) to be regenerated as a potent cultural symbol across disparate domains.

### 1.1. The guiding research questions are

- (1) What is the etymological origin of *Jane* (자네), and what key historical stages facilitated its transition from a reflexive form to a socio-relational pronoun?
- (2) How can its contemporary usage patterns be classified, and what do they reveal about the underlying “relational algorithm”?
- (3) How does its pragmatic nuance differ fundamentally from *Dangsin* (당신) and *Neo* (너)?
- (4) In what ways does *Jane* (자네) transcend its communicative role to function as a marker of tradition and a cultural icon?

Significant scholarly groundwork informs this study. Etymological research establishes the origin of *Jane* (자네) in the Middle Korean reflexive pronoun *janae* (자내), meaning “self”<sup>[2]</sup>. Philological studies of medieval texts, especially Buddhist works like the *Seokbo sangjeol* (석보상절), demonstrate that *janae* (자내) was employed in references to revered figures, indicating an early pivot from reflexivity to deferential reference<sup>[3]</sup>. Modern sociolinguistic studies pinpoint the parent-in-law/son-in-law relationship as the core domain of modern *Jane* (자네), analyzing it as a term blending familiarity with authoritative expectation<sup>[4]</sup>. Comparative research further distinguishes *Jane* (자네) from the often ironically formal *Dangsin* (당신) and the intimately superior *Neo* (너)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Building on this foundation, this paper aims for synthesis and theoretical extension. We integrate findings into a coherent narrative of *Jane* (자네)'s social life history and employ theoretical frameworks from linguistic anthropology, such as language ideologies and semiotic condensation<sup>[6,7]</sup>, to explain the mechanisms of its metamorphosis.

## 2. Synchronic analysis: the modern relational algorithm of *Jane* (자네)

This chapter provides a rigorous synchronic analysis of *Jane* (자네)'s usage in contemporary Standard Korean. Our objective is to systematically classify its contexts and elucidate the complex social meanings it fulfills. The data is synthesized from existing sociolinguistic research, normative references, and media observations.

The central thesis is that *Jane* (자네)'s modern utility is predicated on a paradox of highly constrained yet potent specificity. Its distribution is narrow, yet within its niche, it executes a nuanced communicative function that alternatives cannot replicate. This narrowness is not a symptom of obsolescence but of intense functional specialization. *Jane* (자네) operates according to a tacit relational algorithm computed based on social variables: kinship type, generational seniority, gender dynamics, and a cultural script of “guided integration under authority.”

## 2.1. The prototypical niche: the parents-in-law and son-in-law dyad

The most well-documented usage of Jane (자 네) exists within the kinship system, specifically from parents-in-law (cheobumo, 처부모), prototypically the father-in-law (jangin, 장인), toward a son-in-law (sawi, 사위). This relationship is the pragmatic archetypal.

### 2.1.1. Deconstructing the relational algorithm

The son-in-law (sawi, 사위) is an affine—a relative by marriage, not by blood. His integration is contractual and perpetual, creating a dynamic distinct from the biologically-grounded parent-child bond. The relationship is asymmetrically hierarchical, demanding respect and deference, yet framed within mutual benefit and care for the daughter. There exists an expectation for the development of affective connection (jeong, 정) and trust.

Within this interplay of institutional hierarchy and voluntary integration, Jane (자네) emerges as the pragmatically optimized code. It performs “affinal authoritative solidarity.” To appreciate its functional superiority, we contrast it with competing forms:

- (1) Neo (네): Indexes extreme intimacy or unvarnished superiority. In this context, it risks collapsing respectful distance, potentially framing the son-in-law as a child.
- (2) Dangsin (당 신): Involves formal or ironically confrontational distance. Its use would signal severe relational rupture or affective coldness.
- (3) Seobang (서 방, a traditional term for son-in-law): Viable but can feel impersonal and devoid of relational warmth.

Jane (자 네) strategically occupies the middle ground. It is personal and direct, yet historically laden with connotations of respect. It acknowledges the speaker’s seniority while coating that authority in benign proprietorship and inclusive expectation. Its utterance is associated with speech acts of advice (joheon, 조언), mild rebuke, or delegation of family responsibility—acts presupposing both a right to guide and a vested interest in the addressee’s welfare.

### 2.1.2. Gendered dimensions of usage

Although both parents-in-law (cheobumo, 처부모) may use Jane (자네), its use by the father-in-law (jangin, 장인) is prototypical and carries greater sociolinguistic weight, reflecting traditional patriarchal family structures (hojuje, 호주제). The mother-in-law’s use may be perceived as slightly more nurturing but operates within the same framework. The comparative rarity of its application toward a daughter-in-law (myeoneuri, 며느리) further underscores its connection to male-male hierarchical bonding within the family.

## 2.2. Peripheral and analogical uses

Beyond its primary stronghold, Jane (자네) appears in other contexts as analogical extensions:

- (1) Paternalistic Community Elders: An elderly neighbor might use Jane (자네) to address a younger man, extending the “quasi-kin” logic into the community sphere.
- (2) Period-Specific Hierarchies in Media: In historical dramas (sageuk, 사극), Jane (자네) is employed by scholars (seonbi, 선비) or officials toward juniors, reflecting authentic historical usage within a rigid Confucian framework.
- (3) Traditional Professions: In highly traditional settings (e.g., master to apprentice), Jane (자네) might be used to consciously evoke a “master-disciple” (seonbae-hubae, 선배 - 후배) model mirroring familial hierarchy.

These uses are less obligatory, subject to variation, and often carry a stylistic marking of tradition.

## 2.3. The narrowing as functional adaptation

The specificity of modern Jane (자네) is a case of pragmatic and semantic narrowing. Its retreat to the parents-in-law/son-in-law niche by the mid-to-late 20th century is a sociolinguistic adaptation to modernizing pressures: the erosion

of elaborate status-based honorifics, the ascendancy of title-based address, and shifts in family dynamics. Jane (자네) survived because the nuanced social work it performs—encoding authoritative yet integrative expectations towards an affinal male—remained culturally vital and was lexically underserved by other terms. Its “narrowing” represents successful evolutionary specialization.

### 3. Contrastive pragmatics: jane (자네), dangsin (당신), and neo (너) in a tripartite system

This chapter engages in a rigorous contrastive analysis, dissecting the pragmatic boundaries separating Jane (자네) from its two significant functional neighbors: Dangsin (당신) and Neo (너). We argue that the choice among these three pronouns is a powerful metacommunicative act that selects a specific cultural script for the interaction<sup>[8]</sup>. Misselection leads to profound pragmatic dissonance.

Our analysis reveals a core triadic opposition: Neo (너) operates within a schematic of unmediated proximity or clear superiority; Dangsin (당신) imposes a schematic of institutional or oppositional formality; and Jane (자네) invokes a schematic of hierarchical integration within a traditional moral or kinship order.

#### 3.1. Foundational divergences: etymological paths and grammaticalization

- (1) Dangsin (당신): This Sino-Korean compound originated from 當身, meaning “the person concerned.” It grammaticalized from an abstract reference into a respectful, often formal or distanced second-person pronoun.
- (2) Jane (자네): Its native Korean root janae (자내, “self”) was semantically appropriated within concrete, relational contexts of medieval Buddhist deference and later Confucian hierarchy. Its meaning is inseparable from expectations of duty (uisik, 의식) and long-term affiliation.
- (3) Neo (너): This primordial pronoun carries the basic value of unmarked, direct address. Its meaning is contingent on contextual power dynamics.

#### 3.2. A multidimensional pragmatic map

A multidimensional contrast reveals their distinct profiles:

Prototypical Relationship:

Dangsin (당신): Spouses, antagonists, formal correspondence.

Jane (자네): Father-in-law (jangin, 장인) to son-in-law (sawi, 사위); historical superior to subordinate.

Neo (너): Intimates; adult to child.

Core Pragmatic Schema:

Dangsin (당신): Transactional/Oppositional Formality.

Jane (자네): Hierarchical Integration.

Neo (너): Unmediated Proximity/Superiority.

Nature of “Distance”:

Dangsin (당신): Impersonal, insulating distance.

Jane (자네): Structured, affiliative distance.

Neo (너): Either no distance (intimacy) or asserted dominance.

Key Speech Acts:

Dangsin (당신): Complaints, legal arguments.

Jane (자네): Advice (joheon, 조언), mentoring, benevolent reprimand.

Neo (너): Casual conversation, commands.

#### 3.3. Deep analysis: clash of pragmatic worlds

The contrast is illustrated in specific scenarios. For example, reprimanding a junior colleague:

Using Dangsin (당신) frames the reprimand as a procedural corrective, focusing on the breach of protocol. It can feel sterile and disengaging.

Using Jane (자네) would be pragmatically bizarre, inappropriately importing a paternalistic frame alien to corporate culture.

Using Neo (너) constitutes a direct, personal confrontation, often perceived as unprofessional bullying unless in an informally close relationship.

Dangsin (당신) and Jane (자네) propose different models of authority: one based on impersonal rules (Dangsin), the other on moral guidance and relational continuity (Jane).

### 3.4. Pragmatic failure as a diagnostic tool

Inappropriate substitutions trigger strong metapragmatic awareness, diagnosing core meanings:

- (1) A son-in-law using Dangsin (당신) to his father-in-law is a relational declaration of war, dismantling the “hierarchical integration” frame.
- (2) A colleague using Jane (자네) in a business meeting causes confusion and ridicule, misfiring by applying a kinship-like authority to a professional context.
- (3) A young person using Neo (너) to an elderly stranger is a grave breach of deference ethics (cheonbae uirye, 존배 의례).

### 3.5. Sociolinguistic variation and change

The system is dynamic. Dangsin (당신) among young spouses is frequently reported as feeling awkward, suggesting a weakening of mandatory spousal formality. Jane (자네)'s rarity enhances its potency as a stylistic tool in media and literature. The potential for pitfalls fuels widespread Korean use of pronoun-avoidance strategies, a meta-commentary on the system's complexity.

In conclusion, Jane (자네), Dangsin (당신), and Neo (너) constitute a microcosm of Korean sociolinguistic logic, representing three distinct solutions to constructing social relations. The survival of Jane (자네) underscores the enduring cultural value placed on relational ethos where authority is inseparable from benevolent investment.

## 4. The ecology of expressivity: distinctive characteristics of Jane (자네)

This chapter shifts focus from systemic positioning to expressive function, exploring what unique communicative and symbolic work Jane (자네) performs. Its distinctiveness is illuminated in concrete deployment across social rituals, cultural representations, and regional speech communities.

### 4.1. The kinship crucible: performing affinal authority and emotional nuance

In its core context, Jane (자네) is a performative tool managing delicate power dynamics. It performs sophisticated face-work (Brown & Levinson, 1987)<sup>[9]</sup>, satisfying the son-in-law's desire for acceptance while upholding the parent-in-law's right to deference. Compared to Neo (너), Jane (자네) frames criticism as corrective guidance from an invested elder, operating as a pragmatic softener and relational glue. Its use also indexes the speaker's conscious adherence to traditional familial ethics (gajok yulli, 가족 윤리), constructing the relationship as anchored in a recognized cultural tradition."

### 4.2. Stylistic resource in audiovisual media

In film and television, Jane (자네) is a deliberate stylistic choice.

Character Delineation: A father-in-law using Jane (자네) is efficiently coded as traditional, formal, and possessing principled care. Its use telegraphs worldview and social orientation.

Temporal World-Building: In historical dramas (sageuk, 사극), Jane (자네) is indispensable for constructing historical authenticity. Its frequent use accurately reflects pre-modern Confucian speech patterns, creating an aural cue that

demarks the dramatic world as “past.”

#### 4.3. Literary alchemy: creative deformation

Literature, particularly poetry, stretches Jane (자네)’s constraints. The most renowned example is Seo Jeong-ju’s use of Jane (자네) in The Pomegranate House Door (Seongnyugaemun, 석류개문) to refer to a “princess” (gongju, 공주). This creative re-semanticization accomplishes several feats: elevating the addressee through archaism, creating a paradox of constructed intimacy with unbridgeable distance, and potentially echoing medieval Buddhist textual usage. It detaches Jane (자네) from conventional moorings and redeploys it as a poetic symbol of complex emotional posture. Such uses generate productive ambiguity, forcing readers to construe the invoked relationship and enriching the text’s layers.

#### 4.4. Dialectal vitality: a note on regional variation

The expressive life of Jane (자네) extends into regional dialects, though this is not its primary survival mechanism. Variants exist, but their primary significance in this analysis is as evidence of historical diffusion and the non-universality of the “narrowing” observed in Standard Korean. They serve as reminders that the form’s journey is multifaceted, but the core of its modern cultural significance remains anchored in its specialized standard usage and symbolic redeployment.

#### 4.5. Synthesis: multifaceted distinctiveness

Jane (자네)’s distinctiveness manifests across a spectrum: a socio-pragmatic instrument in kinship, a stylistic tool in media, raw material for poetic alchemy. It is a cultural-linguistic palimpsest; its historical layers remain perceptible and exploitable, contributing to its unique expressive density and its capacity for symbolic metamorphosis.

### 5. Conclusion

This study has traversed the life history of Jane (자네), from reflexive origins to kinship specificity and vibrant symbolic afterlife. Its narrative is a case study in linguistic resilience through functional metamorphosis.

Core findings confirm: (1) Its origin in the Middle Korean reflexive janae (자내) and transformation in Buddhist/Confucian contexts imprinted a semantics of respectful, personalized hierarchy. (2) This crystallized into its modern function within the parent-in-law/son-in-law dyad, a perfect pragmatic fit for managing affinal integration. (3) Its identity extends beyond kinship into media and literature as an expressive resource. (4) Its trajectory is explained by a model of cultural-semantic metamorphosis involving path-dependent specialization, semiotic condensation due to markedness, and polycentric regeneration.

The study offers broader theoretical implications. It challenges equating vitality with conversational frequency, proposing a multi-dimensional measure inclusive of indexical potency and symbolic utility. It illustrates that grammatical forms are socially saturated artifacts, their evolution linked to historical structures and ideologies. It underscores markedness as a driver of semiotic change, where social marginalization can intensify a form’s indexical value. The polycentric regeneration model provides a framework for understanding how tradition-encoding features persist in modernizing societies through functional redistribution.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the necessity of triangulating historical philology, pragmatic analysis, discourse studies, and linguistic anthropological theory to fully account for culturally resonant phenomena.

Future research could explore: attitudinal studies on contemporary speaker perceptions; cognitive processing experiments comparing marked and unmarked pronouns; comparative analysis with similar vestigial honorifics in other languages; or diachronic corpus studies pinpointing the decade of its decisive narrowing<sup>[10]</sup>.

In conclusion, Jane (자네) serves as a microcosm of larger cultural forces. It is a linguistic vessel carrying echoes of historical reverence, hierarchy, familial tension, nostalgia, and creative imagination. Its metamorphosis from a general pronoun to a specific term to a multifunctional symbol underscores that language is a dynamic resource in constant

dialogue with society. Forms are repurposed, revalued, and reimagined. The persistence of Jane (자네) is a testament to the capacity to preserve meaningful distinctions from the past by skillfully translating them into the currencies of the present. In its nuances, we find the deep currents of history and the enduring puzzles of human relationship.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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