

GENDER INEQUALITY THROUGH LANGUAGE USE IN KOREAN DRAMA SERIES WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU TANGERINES

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.30983/mj.v4i2.10413>

Submission: September 11, 2025	Revised: October 24, 2025	Published: December 31, 2025
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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan unit linguistik yang digunakan dalam dialog antartokoh yang mengungkapkan perbedaan penggunaan bahasa antara laki-laki dan perempuan, serta menganalisis makna kontekstual dan ketimpangan gender yang muncul dalam serial drama Korea *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. Penelitian ini dikategorikan sebagai penelitian kualitatif deskriptif dengan menggunakan pendekatan sociolinguistik, khususnya mengacu pada teori Peter Trudgill (2000) dan Janet Holmes (2013). Data berupa frasa, klausa, dan kalimat yang merepresentasikan ketimpangan gender diambil dari dialog-dialog terpilih dalam serial tersebut dan dianalisis melalui tahap identifikasi, klasifikasi, dan interpretasi berdasarkan teori Judith Lorber (2001). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa berdasarkan makna kontekstual dari dua frasa, enam klausa, dan empat kalimat, terdapat ideologi patriarki dalam masyarakat Korea. Lebih lanjut, analisis mengungkapkan bahwa ketimpangan gender terlihat dalam drama Korea *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. Bentuk ketimpangan gender tersebut meliputi akses yang tidak setara, kesenjangan ekonomi, kurangnya representasi politik, dan stereotip sosial.

Kata Kunci: Ketidaksetaraan Gender, Drama Korea, Kajian Sociolinguistik

Abstract

This study aims to describe the linguistic units used in the dialogues between characters that reveal differences in men's and women's language use, and to analyze the contextual meanings and gender inequality that appeared in the Korean drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. This research is categorized as a descriptive qualitative study employing a sociolinguistic approach, specifically drawing on the theories of Peter Trudgill (2000) and Janet Holmes (2013). The data, in the form of phrases, clauses, and sentences that represent gender inequality, were taken from the selected dialogues in the series and analyzed through identification, classification, and interpretation, based on Judith Lorber's (2001) framework. The study found that, based on the contextual meaning of two phrases, six clauses, and four sentences, a patriarchal ideology exists in Korean society. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that gender inequality is evident in the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. These include unequal access, economic gaps, political underrepresentation, and societal stereotypes.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Korean Drama, Sociolinguistic Study

1. Introduction

Language has a fundamental role in shaping human interaction and society. Language is not only a form of communication but also a reflection of cultural norms, values, and social structures. According to Keraf (2007), language is the means of communication between community members, a system of speech sounds generated by humans. In the sociolinguistic field, Holmes (2013) said language is the study of the interaction between language and society. Holmes demonstrated how language use is shaped and shapes social contexts, including those related to gender and social norms. Similarly, highlights that language variation often reflects social identities, including gender, class, and ethnicity. Based on those theories, it can be concluded that language is not only a form of communication but also plays a role in shaping a society's perspective and shaping perceptions of identity. In this case, analyzing language use in media, such as Korean dramas, is a great idea because the number of Korean

drama enthusiasts has increased recently. Korean dramas portray a social life that encompasses cultural issues and social conflicts, which share similarities with the problems faced in other countries. For this reason, Korean dramas are easily accepted by the audience, as viewers can relate to the emotions and experiences portrayed by the characters.

Korean drama becomes an interesting topic to study due to its portrayal of the rich background and culture of Korean society, which often addresses social issues such as gender equality and inequality, social class, and power relations, all presented in a neat and engaging form with interesting visuals. Through their various forms of narratives and presentations, Korean dramas not only reflect the dynamics of contemporary Korean society but also provide valuable insights into sociocultural and ideological constructions. The study on *When Life Gives You Tangerines* has been conducted before by Fadhillah et al. (2025), who focused on semiotic analysis by examining signs, symbols, and hidden meanings to identify how ideological messages, employing denotative, connotative, and mythical meaning analysis, contain gender representation. Moreover, Sevia et al. (2024) analyzed the *Mulan* movie, focusing on differences in language use between male and female characters that illustrate gender power dynamics. Additionally, Artini et al. (2024) examined gender representation in Indonesian EFL textbooks, demonstrating that linguistic elements in educational materials often mirror gender stereotypes. Based on the previous studies, there is a research gap that can be filled; therefore, this study focuses on the language use of English subtitles in the Korean drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, describing the linguistic units from the dialogue between characters and analyzing contextual meaning and social functions to identify the type of gender inequality.

The widespread presence of Korean culture in Indonesia could be related to the phenomenon known as the Korean Wave (Hallyu). The term refers to the global diffusion of South Korean popular culture through various entertainment products, including dramas, music, and fashion. This phenomenon has been facilitated by the increasing accessibility of information in the digital era, as well as in South Korea, which is continually making efforts to advance and globalize its entertainment industry. In this regard, analyzing language use in media—particularly in Korean dramas—offers an insightful avenue for research, as the global popularity of these dramas continues to grow. Korean dramas frequently portray complex social realities that include cultural issues and social conflicts, many of which mirror those experienced in other societies. As Mehta (2024) explains, the media plays a vital role in shaping and disseminating gender ideologies, often influencing cultural perceptions and behavioral norms. Korean dramas, therefore, become an ideal site for examining the intersection between language, culture, and gender, as they present relatable narratives, emotions, and experiences that resonate with audiences across cultural contexts. Through narrative and visual storytelling, they not only reflect the dynamics of contemporary Korean life but also construct ideological frameworks that reinforce or resist societal norms Santoniccolo et al. (2023). The reason *'When Life Gives You Tangerines'* is an object of research is that a South Korean coming-of-age series follows the life of a family that seeks to break the patriarchal rules of society.

Shafira (2022) further supports this claim, showing that gender-based language variation often reflects broader societal ideologies. Moreover, Salsabila et al., (2024) argue that language functions as both a reflection and a reinforcement of gendered social hierarchies, thus serving as a key mechanism in constructing power relations. These findings align with Holmes' (2013) argument that language is used not only to communicate but also to maintain or challenge existing power structures in society.

When Life Gives You Tangerines provides an interesting case study for examining the gender gap through sociolinguistic patterns. Korean society has deeply ingrained gender norms that profoundly influence personal relationships, social dynamics, and family dynamics. These norms are often

reinforced through language, including speech styles, politeness, and speech dominance Holmes (2013). The relationship between language and gender is challenging to analyze due to the language use between men and women in society, even though this is often represented in drama series.

Dealing with that, gender as understood in sociolinguistics, is not just a biological difference but a socially constructed identity shaped by language, culture, and power relations. According to Holmes (2013), men and women tend to use language differently due to social conditioning and expectations, and language is often used to maintain or resist power structures. Trudgill (2000) further supports this by arguing that language differences between male and female speakers are shaped by social norms. These theoretical perspectives align with Hikmah (2025) finding that language functions as a performative expression of gender identity in digital and social media spaces. This series showcased the linguistic choices made by male and female characters to represent gender inequality and how they were treated by society. This study aims to provide insight into how media can both reflect and challenge traditional gender roles, which show gender inequality.

According to Lorber (2001), gender inequality refers to a systemic and institutionalized form of social inequality that arises from the social construction of gender, rather than from biological differences. Gender is used as a fundamental organizing principle of society, creating hierarchical relations in which men, as a social group, are privileged over women and other gendered groups in terms of power, resources, and opportunities. These inequalities are often maintained and legitimized through cultural norms, ideological beliefs, and everyday social practices that present gender hierarchy as something natural that cannot be avoided. Gender inequality, as identified by Lorber (2001) in the form of unequal access, economic gaps, political underrepresentation, societal stereotypes, is evident in this Korean drama series, as analyzed through its linguistic units.

Therefore, this study employs the sociolinguistic approach suggested by Holmes (2013) and Trudgill (2000) to investigate how gender inequality is reflected in language use within the Korean drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. The aim of this study is to describe the contextual meaning of the linguistic units that appear in the dialogues between characters and to analyze to gender inequality represented in the linguistic units in Korean drama series, based on Trudgill's (2000), Holmes' (2013), and Lorber (2001) theories. In short, the novelty of the research lies on the approach and focus to see the different angle from the previous studies.

2. Method

This study is categorized as descriptive qualitative research, emphasizing data in the form of words rather than numbers, as stated by Creswell & Creswell (2017). The descriptive qualitative method aims to portray circumstances, events, and objects accurately and in detail. his approach is particularly suitable for exploring the meanings underlying linguistic and social phenomena Furidha (2023). Creswell & Creswell (2017) further explain the emerging goals related to qualitative research. Qualitative research aims to uncover the meanings underlying actions or outcomes that are usually measured by quantitative research. Therefore, qualitative research investigates meanings, interpretations, symbols, as well as the processes and relationships among actions and social contexts (Furidha, 2023; Tussa'diah et al., 2022).

The descriptive qualitative approach has been widely employed in sociolinguistic studies to analyze language variation, gendered speech, and communicative behavior (Putri, 2024; Hikmah, 2025). It allows researchers to examine language use not merely as a structural system but as a reflection of social identity and interactional dynamics (Saadiyah et al., 2019). Accordingly, this study adopted a

sociolinguistic framework to investigate how linguistic forms and choices in the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* represent gender inequality and social hierarchy.

The data used in this study, comprising linguistic units (clauses, phrases, and sentences), were directly collected from the main source: the Korean drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines* on Netflix, as well as the original transcript from the English subtitles, which contain the dialogues. The data were collected through non-participant observation, transcription, classification, and contextual interpretation—are consistent with best practices in recent sociolinguistic studies employing qualitative descriptive methods (Furidha, 2023; Putri, 2024). The researchers observed and transcribed the dialogues from the selected scenes that represented gender-based interaction (Rizki et al., 2023). The transcription was then carefully examined to identify utterances that reflected gendered expressions or gender inequality. Each dialogue was recorded, noted, and categorized based on its relevance to the research objectives (Tussa'diah et al., 2022; Akmal et al., 2022).

The analysis in this study was conducted using Trudgill (2000) theory to describe the linguistic units that appear in the dialogue between the characters to know the difference between men's and women's language use, and Holmes (2013) theory to analyze the contextual meaning and social functions that indicate gender inequality.

This study employed a sociolinguistics framework to explore the relationship between language and society, particularly in the context of gender. The analysis was conducted in three main stages. The first stage was identification, which involved selecting and segmenting linguistic units such as clauses, phrases, and sentences from the dialogues that contain gender relations. The second stage was classification, in which the identified linguistic forms and features were described and categorized based on Trudgill (2000) theory of language variation to determine the differences in men's and women's language use. The final stage was interpretation, which focused on analyzing the contextual meanings and social functions using Holmes (2013) theory to uncover how language use reflects and constructs gender inequality. In this case, the study not only focuses on the linguistic analysis that refers to structural meaning, but it also analyzes the social functions of language use in the drama series.

3. Results and Discussion

The following is the result table of gender inequality represented in the language use in Korean drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*.

Table 1. Gender Inequality Represented in the Language use in Korean Drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*.

No	Linguistic Units			Gender Inequality Represented in The Linguistic Units			
	Phrase	Clause	Sentence	Unequal Access	Economic Gaps	Political Underrepresentation	Societal Stereotypes
1.		... between you and Man-Ki there's something that goes beyond just		Power and leadership position			

	nine votes, okay?		
2.	“How can you compare him to her?”		Gendered assumptions embedded in everyday discourse
3.	... stealing his son’s luck		Male privilege
4.	“A woman as the chief?”		Power authority
5.		... she married into a family that values sons	Unequal treatment and Constrain women’s life choices
6.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Are you a literary girl?” • “What’s the point of letting girl get an education? It’ll just frustrate her.” 	Male dominance and render gender inequality socially acceptable

The results of this study were obtained from the selected dialogue in the Korean drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, which contains gender-related terms. The analysis revealed that linguistic units, such as phrases, clauses, and sentences, can reveal social hierarchy and gendered power relations. Moreover, the contextual interpretation of these dialogues suggests that language is used as both a tool to reinforce and challenge gender inequality within the narrative. The analysis of these data is presented and discussed in the following section.

A. The Linguistic Units and Contextual Meaning Represented Gender Inequality in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*

Several linguistic units that represent gender inequality are found in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, expressed through phrases, clauses, and sentences.

1. Phrase

Here are some phrases that represent gender inequality found in the drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*.

- (1) Ae-Sun: He says having a girl around who gets good grades and awards is stealing **his son’s luck** (Episode 1 (47.52 - 47.48))

This utterance above carries a deeper social meaning beyond its literal meaning. The dialogue reflects a patriarchal belief that the presence outstanding daughter threatens or diminishes the opportunities and recognition that should belong to boys. The phrase “**his son’s luck**” here represents not only good fortune, but also academic success, social status, and future perspectives that patriarchal culture expects only boys to have. The contextual meaning, therefore, highlights the gender inequality embedded in the narrative, where girls’ achievements are trivialized and even considered harmful to boys’ success, reinforcing the traditional idea that men should remain superior and privileged in the educational and social spheres. This is illustrated by the different treatment given to Ae-Sun in the

series. Ae-Sun is treated differently from other children her age, namely the son of her uncle, Oh Jong-Gu, who is a boy.

“**His son’s luck**” is a gendered phrase that implies the girl’s success disrupts the “natural order” favoring men. This phrase represents how patriarchal ideology views female achievement as a threat to male privilege. In linguistic terms, this phrase is a semantic marker of social hierarchy, where male success is treated as the standard and female success as a deviation.

(2) Ae-Sun: We didn't vote because there was only one candidate, but if there are more, we should vote!

Ae-Sun: Let's just go head-to-head

Bu-Sang Gil: **A woman as the chief?** (Episode 5 (21.11 - 20.51))

In this dialogue, Ae-Sun suggests fairer participation in leadership by proposing that voting should take place when there are multiple candidates and even suggests competing directly (“Let’s just go head-to-head”). Her words reflect a progressive stance that challenges traditional norms by asserting women’s right to participate in decision-making. However, Bu-Sang Gil’s dismissive question, “**A woman as the chief?**”, reveals the patriarchal mindset that devalues female leadership and assumes that such a role is reserved exclusively for men.

The contextual meaning highlights how gender inequality operates not only within the family but also in the broader community setting, where women’s capabilities are doubted or dismissed outright when it comes to positions of power. Ae-Sun’s assertiveness contrasts with the deeply rooted patriarchal belief that leadership is incompatible with womanhood, thereby exposing the systemic barriers women face in stepping into roles of authority.

The phrase “**A woman as the chief?**” is structured as a rhetorical question, implying disbelief or rejection rather than genuine inquiry. The absence of a verb like “can be” or “could be” intensifies the bias; the suddenly makes the statement more dismissive. It linguistically excludes female leadership by framing it as absurd.

2. Clause

Several clauses that represent gender inequality are found in the drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*.

(3) Hong Kyung-Ja (*Haenyeo*): You remarried for a good life, but became even more stubborn. **You put up with your shrewish husband, but are unwilling to share with master haenyeo?** (Episode 1 : 07.05 – 07.14)

The clause “**You put up with your shrewish husband, but are unwilling to share with master haenyeo?**” represents gender inequality through the normalization of female endurance within patriarchal marriage structures. The expression “**put up with**” implies sustained tolerance of unpleasant or oppressive behavior, positioning the woman as a subject expected to endure marital hardship without resistance. This reflects a gendered social norm in which women are socially conditioned to accept dissatisfaction and emotional burden within marriage.

The adjective “shrewish” functions paradoxically. While it appears to criticize the husband, it also reinforces gendered stereotypes that frame domestic conflict as a personal flaw rather than a consequence of structural inequality. The clause suggests that endurance of such a marriage is both expected and morally justifiable, thereby normalizing unequal power relations within the household.

The contrastive conjunction “but” introduces a moral judgment, positioning the woman’s unwillingness to share resources or authority within the *haenyeo* community as socially unacceptable. This contrast implies that while women are expected to submit privately in marriage, they are simultaneously expected to sacrifice autonomy and resources publicly for collective or hierarchical structures dominated by senior authority.

- (4) Teacher: Those 37 votes who took everything but didn’t vote for Man-Ki are unethical, but wherever it may be, **a person at the top should be competent both mentally and financially**, you know? (Episode 1: 21.57 – 22.07)

This clause represents gender inequality through the articulation of leadership standards that implicitly privilege male-dominated forms of authority. The phrase “**a person at the top**” appears gender-neutral on the surface; however, in the socio-cultural context of the narrative, positions of power and leadership are historically and structurally associated with men. As a result, the statement operates as an implicit exclusionary criterion that disadvantages women.

The verb “should” conveys a normative obligation, presenting mental and financial competence as unquestionable prerequisites for leadership. While seemingly merit-based, this standard ignores structural inequalities that limit women’s access to financial resources, economic independence, and leadership training. Consequently, the clause reinforces a gendered hierarchy in which men are more readily perceived as meeting these criteria.

Furthermore, by equating leadership legitimacy with financial capability, the utterance reflects a capitalist–patriarchal ideology that marginalizes women, whose labor particularly domestic and care work is often undervalued or unpaid. This framing obscures systemic barriers and recasts inequality as an issue of individual competence rather than social structure.

- (5) Teacher: So what if you got 37 votes? do your 37 votes matter now? in real life, 37 votes don’t mean anything, **between you and Man-Ki there’s something that goes beyond just nine votes**, okay? (Episode 1: 21.57 – 22.07)

This clause represents gender inequality through the delegitimization of formal democratic or merit-based evaluation when a female character competes with a male counterpart. The prepositional phrase “**between you and Man-Ki**” foregrounds a personal and hierarchical comparison, shifting the focus away from objective criteria such as votes and toward implicit social distinctions.

The existential construction “**there’s something**” deliberately obscures the basis of authority, suggesting the presence of an unspoken but socially recognized hierarchy. This vagueness allows gendered assumptions such as seniority, masculinity, or perceived leadership suitability—to operate without explicit articulation. The relative clause “that goes beyond just nine votes” minimizes numerical legitimacy through the quantifier “just”, thereby undermining the female character’s achievement.

Contextually, the clause implies that socially ingrained power structures outweigh quantifiable accomplishments, a dynamic that disproportionately disadvantages women. Despite obtaining more votes, Ae-Sun’s legitimacy is questioned, while the male figure, Man-Ki, is implicitly positioned as inherently more qualified due to factors beyond measurable performance.

- (6) Gwang-Rye (Ae-Sun’s mother): Well, **I see the general’s son always first**, hmm? The general’s son gets to be class president? We all have to bow down to the general’s son? (Episode 1 ((31.37 - 31.26))

The clause “**I see the general’s son always first**” is a satire of social injustice. This clause is not just alluding to the position of a child who is a child of a general who gets special treatment, but more broadly, namely, the existence of privilege or nepotism, where a person gets a special position or

treatment not because of ability, but the social status of their family. Moreover, Lee-Manki is a boy whose existence is highlighted in this series as a form of gender inequality. Rhetorical questions are used to show dissatisfaction and protest against injustice. Gwang-Rye's delivery further emphasizes the emotion towards the reality that others are forced to submit to their social status.

Gwang-Rye's utterance **“Well, I see the general's son always first, hmm?”** The general's son gets to be class president? We all have to bow down to the general's son?” — demonstrates how linguistic structure can reproduce and critique social hierarchies at the same time. The repetition of the clause “the general's son” shows the privilege of Lee-Manki, that he was a general's son and always got special treatment. This repetitive clause construction is not merely stylistic; it functions as a discursive strategy to emphasize the recurring pattern of male favoritism and to underscore the speaker's frustration. “Well, I see the general's son always first, hmm?” is a rhetorical question that is used to show dissatisfaction and protest against injustice. This clause also revealed nepotism, where a person receives a special position or treatment not because of their ability, but due to the social status of their family, in this case, their father.

(7) Uncle: **How can you compare him to her?** A man can lose his land or his home while running a business. Why do you keep bringing him up? (Episode 3 (53.16 - 53.09))

In the context of *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, uncle's words, **“How can you compare him to her? A man can lose his land or his home while running a business. Why do you keep bringing him up?”** reveal the patriarchal mindset that positions men's struggles as more legitimate and valuable than women's. By rejecting the comparison between a man and a woman, Uncle reinforces the belief that men operate in a more serious, risk-laden sphere (such as land, home, or business), while women's experiences and hardships are considered less important or irrelevant.

The contextual meaning here highlights a core aspect of gender inequality: men's failures are seen as natural consequences of their role in the public and economic domain, while women's efforts and struggles in domestic or social spheres are dismissed as insignificant. This reflects a societal hierarchy where male experiences are prioritized and validated, while female experiences are minimized or erased. The dialogue illustrates how language is used to sustain patriarchal values, reinforcing the notion that men's worth and struggles cannot be compared to women's, further marginalizing women in both family and community life.

At the clause level, **“How can you compare him to her?”** is an interrogative clause-structured as a rhetorical question. Grammatically, it contains a modal auxiliary (can), the subject (you), and the main verb (compare), followed by the object (him to her). However, the purpose of this question is not to seek information, but to challenge and reject the idea that a man and a woman can be compared equally.

The word “how” functions as an expression of disbelief or criticism, not curiosity. It implies that such a comparison is absurd or inappropriate. Through this rhetorical form, the speaker—Uncle—uses language to assert a patriarchal viewpoint that men and women occupy different social positions and therefore should not be measured by the same standards. This clause also reveals a power dynamic in the way it is delivered. By questioning the comparison itself, the speaker denies women's equal value and reinforces the belief that men's roles, struggles, or achievements are naturally superior.

(8) Gye-Ok (Mother-in-law): To put it bluntly, not all children survive. you might give birth to eight, but two could die. **She married into a family that values sons.** she should fulfill her duties, how could she expect everything for free? She didn't bring us anything, not even a silver spoon. (Episode 4 (57.55 - 57.37))

In this scene, Chun-Ok questions the cruelty of a mother-in-law who still expects more children from her daughter-in-law despite harsh treatment. However, Gye-Ok responds by normalizing women's suffering, stating that "not all children survive, you might give birth to eight, but two could die." This reflects the patriarchal mindset that a woman's primary value lies in her ability to reproduce, particularly in producing sons. Her further statement, "She married into a family that values sons. She should fulfill her duties. She didn't bring us anything, not even a silver spoon," highlights two layers of gender inequality: women are reduced to their reproductive function and judged by the material benefits they bring into the marriage through dowry.

The contextual meaning here shows how patriarchal norms dehumanize women by equating their worth with their usefulness to the husband's family through childbirth, economic contribution, and the production of male heirs. Women are denied individuality or equal standing in marriage; instead, they are expected to sacrifice their bodies and dignity to fulfill rigid gender roles. This moment exposes how gender inequality is perpetuated not only by men but also by older women (such as mothers-in-law) who uphold and enforce patriarchal values within the household.

3. Sentence

The following are the sentences that represent gender inequality found in the drama series *When Life Gives You Tangerines*.

- (9) Teacher: So what if you got 37 votes? do your 37 votes matter now? **in real life, 37 votes don't mean anything**, between you and Man-Ki there's something that goes beyond just nine votes, okay? (Episode 1: 21.57 – 22.07)

This sentence represents gender inequality through the discursive dismissal of women's achievements and formal legitimacy. The sentence-initial adverbial phrase "**in real life**" functions to reframe the discussion from procedural fairness to socially constructed reality, privileging informal power relations over measurable outcomes.

The negation "**don't mean anything**" completely invalidates the significance of the votes, which Ae-Sun has obtained in greater number. Contextually, this rhetorical move undermines the female character's success by suggesting that numerical or merit-based accomplishments are irrelevant when they conflict with entrenched social hierarchies. Such hierarchies are implicitly gendered, as authority and leadership are culturally aligned with men.

By devaluing the votes, the speaker reinforces a patriarchal logic in which women's competence must be constantly questioned or reinterpreted, while male authority is treated as self-evident. The utterance thus shifts responsibility away from structural inequality and reframes exclusion as a reflection of "reality" rather than discrimination.

- (10) Byeong-Cheol (Ae-Sun step father): What's the point of letting girl get an education? It'll just frustrate her. (Episode 1 (54.26 - 45.21))

The clause "**What's the point of letting girl get an education? It'll just frustrate her.**" reflects a deep-seated patriarchal mindset in the community. The statement implies that education is considered unnecessary for women because it supposedly goes against their "natural" role in society. Here, the contextual meaning extends beyond a literal rejection of education. It conveys the belief that women here are restricted in their movement because of the social limitations imposed on them. This reflects gender inequality, where opportunities for personal development are reserved for men, while women are expected to remain tied to domestic roles. Therefore, this sentence emphasizes how the systemic

patriarchal system suppresses women's ambitions by portraying education as a futile or even detrimental effort for women.

“**What’s the point of letting girl get an education? It’ll just frustrate her**” is a rhetorical question; it’s not a request for information but a rejection of women’s education disguised as inquiry. The rhetorical form makes the patriarchal belief seem self-evident and unquestionable. The clause “It’ll just frustrate her” presents a false causal relationship: women + education = frustration. This syntactic pairing of cause and effect linguistically validates the belief that women are emotionally unsuited for intellectual pursuits.

(11) Uncle: **Are you a literary girl?** You want to go to a college that even Jong-Gu didn’t attend?
(Episode 2 (31.37 - 31.26))

“**Are you a literary girl?**” is a form of satire that undermines a woman's ambition to pursue higher education. The rhetorical question posed is not intended to seek an actual answer, but rather to question and demean the choices of women who want to attend college. The mention of the character Oh Jong-Gu as a comparison shows social bias, as if a man does not continue his education, then a woman should not do so either. Contextually, this expression highlights the existence of gender discrimination in education, where women are seen as less worthy and do not have as much interest in obtaining academic opportunities. The phrase in this dialogue can be interpreted as a representation of the inherent gender inequality that persists in social and cultural norms.

The question “**Are you a literary girl?**” functions as a rhetorical clause rather than a genuine inquiry. Grammatically, it follows the structure of an interrogative clause (with the auxiliary verb are, the subject you, and the complement a literary girl). However, in this context, the speaker does not actually want an answer. Instead, the clause is used to mock and question Ae-Sun’s ambition to study or engage in literature. The use of the adjective “literary” combined with the noun “girl” carries a sarcastic and gendered meaning. It suggests that being “literary” educated, intellectual, or creative is unusual or inappropriate for a girl. This creates a contrast between gender and intellectual identity, implying that intellectual activities are typically associated with men, rather than women.

(12) Bu-Yeong (Yeong-Beom mother): You're gonna keep working?
Geum-Myeong: Sorry? Bu-Yeong: You're gonna keep working after marriage?
Geum-Myeong: Well.. I mean, Yeong-Beom and I have we already talked about it.
Bu-Yeong: Don't you think too much greed can stem from some kind of emptiness? that kind of emptiness can lead to vanity. sudden wealth often leads people to show off. It's funny to see poor women who marry into wealth start to love luxury brands.
Bu-Yeong: Yeong-Beom is our eldest son, and he's talented. **So why would his wife need to be out working instead of supporting him as a housewife?** Put yourself in my shoes.
(Episode 4 (37.37 - 36.42))

In this scene, Bu-Yeong directly questions Geum-Myeong’s desire to keep working after marriage, implying that a married woman’s proper role is confined to the domestic sphere. By equating women’s ambition and independence with “greed,” “emptiness,” and “vanity”, Bu-Yeong reinforces the patriarchal ideology that women who pursue careers or wealth beyond their marriage are morally flawed or socially inappropriate. Her remark about “poor women who marry into wealth” reflects class-based prejudice layered onto gender inequality, suggesting that a woman’s social mobility through marriage should be matched with humility and domestic conformity, not independence or self-expression.

When Bu-Yeong emphasizes that “**Yeong-Beom is our eldest son, and he’s talented. So why would his wife need to be out working instead of supporting him as a housewife?**” she exposes

the expectation that a woman's identity and duties revolve around her husband's success. Here, Geum-Myeong's personal aspirations are dismissed as unnecessary because the husband's talent and social status supposedly make her labor redundant. The closing imperative, "Put yourself in my shoes," is not an invitation to empathy but a demand for compliance with patriarchal family norms.

Thus, the contextual meaning highlights how gender inequality is maintained through familial and marital expectations: women are discouraged from pursuing independence, pressured to embrace the housewife role, and valued only in relation to men's achievements. This reflects the drama's broader theme, which is that women's choices are limited by cultural norms that privilege male authority and success.

The dialogue shows gender bias where sons are always given the privilege to choose their own path in life and are always praised, while daughters are treated as secondary and less significant. This dialogue reflects a patriarchal belief system in which women are positioned as subordinates within a male-dominated culture. **"So why would his wife need to be out working instead of supporting him as a housewife?"** pointed out how grammatical structure mirrors patriarchal ideology: women's external ambitions are linguistically negated, while domestic obedience is validated.

Men and women should have equal opportunities to pursue careers based on their abilities, interests, and talents. Marriage should not signify the end of a woman's right or opportunity to work and continue her career. The phrase "supporting him as a housewife" implies that a woman's value lies in serving her husband. It reflects the assumption that a man's success is central, while a woman's labor and identity must revolve around it. The command "Put yourself in my shoes" functions as a directive speech act, but rather than inviting empathy, it demands conformity. The imperative reinforces power asymmetry Bu-Yeong as an elder and enforcer of tradition, and Geum-Myeong as the younger, submissive woman.

B. Gender Inequality Represented in the Linguistic Units Used in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*

1. Unequal Access

This clause, "between you and Man-Ki, there's something that goes beyond just nine votes, okay?" reflects unequal access to power and leadership positions in the school. According to Lorber, such standards are characteristic of gendered institutions, where women's access to power is limited through unwritten rules, social expectations, and male-centered norms. These mechanisms create unequal access by privileging men as inherently more suitable for leadership, regardless of performance. Thus, the clause illustrates Lorber's argument that unequal access is maintained through institutional practices that appear neutral but function to sustain gender hierarchy. Women may participate and perform successfully, yet their access to authority remains constrained by structural gender bias rather than individual competence.

On the other hand, "How can you compare him to her?" reflects unequal access as conceptualized by Judith Lorber, where gender functions as a social institution that organizes differential access to economic legitimacy and risk. The explicit contrast between "him" and "her" constructs male economic activity as inherently serious and risky, while implicitly denying women equal recognition within the same economic sphere. According to Lorber (2001), unequal access is maintained through gendered assumptions embedded in everyday discourse, which legitimize men's access to property ownership, business opportunities, and economic authority while rendering women's participation as secondary or incomparable. By framing financial loss and business risk as uniquely male experiences, the utterance naturalizes men's dominance in the economic domain and restricts women's access to economic power and credibility.

2. Economic Gaps

The utterances collectively illustrate how economic gaps are socially produced and normalized through gendered institutional practices and everyday discourse. Lorber argues that economic inequality between men and women is not merely a matter of income differences but a structural outcome of gendered expectations that allocate economic authority, resources, and credibility unequally.

The clause **“You put up with your shrewish husband, but are unwilling to share with master *haenyeo*?”** reflects the normalization of women’s economic dependence and self-sacrifice within marriage. Women are expected to tolerate unequal domestic arrangements while relinquishing control over communal or productive resources, reinforcing their limited economic. Similarly, the statement **“a person at the top should be competent both mentally and financially”** presents financial capacity as a prerequisite for leadership, yet ignores the structural barriers that restrict women’s access to wealth, property ownership, and income-generating opportunities. **“I see the general’s son always first”** further demonstrates how economic advantage is inherited and gendered, privileging men through familial and patriarchal networks that secure access to resources and opportunities. This reflects Lorber’s view that economic gaps are reproduced through social stratification and intergenerational transmission of privilege. **“In real life, 37 votes don’t mean anything”** dismisses non-economic forms of legitimacy and reinforces the idea that economic and social capital are more important than achievement or collective support. This delegitimization disproportionately affects women, whose economic contributions are often undervalued or invisible.

3. Political Underrepresentation

“A woman as the chief?” reflects Lorber’s concept of political underrepresentation, in which gender operates as a structuring principle of power and authority within social and political institutions. It conveys disbelief and resistance, indicating that leadership is socially constructed as a masculine role. According to Lorber (2001), political underrepresentation is not the result of women’s lack of capability but stems from institutionalized gender norms that define men as natural leaders and women as unsuitable for positions of authority. This utterance reproduces such norms by framing female leadership as abnormal and questionable, thereby reinforcing male dominance in decision-making spaces.

The utterance exemplifies how political underrepresentation is sustained through everyday discourse that delegitimizes women’s leadership aspirations and restricts their access to political power, even before formal exclusion occurs.

4. Societal Stereotypes

The expression **“his son’s luck”** linguistically represents a patriarchal belief that male privilege is natural and must be protected. According to Lorber (2001), societal stereotypes are central mechanisms through which gender inequality is normalized and reproduced. **“So why would his wife need to be out working instead of supporting him as a housewife?”** reflects deeply entrenched beliefs that associate men with productivity, inheritance, and public authority, while confining women to domesticity, emotional dependence, and reproductive roles. The devaluation of girls’ education exemplifies how women’s intellectual potential is systematically dismissed, reinforcing limited access to social and daily life.

Furthermore, **“she married into a family that values sons.”** The privileging of sons and the expectation that women prioritize marriage and household labor demonstrate how patriarchal norms structure family and social institutions. Lorber argues that such stereotypes are not merely cultural

attitudes but institutional practices that legitimize unequal treatment and constrain women's life choices. “**Are you a literary girl?**” or “**What's the point of letting a girl get an education?**” By framing women's ambitions as unnecessary or disruptive, these discourses sustain male dominance and render gender inequality socially acceptable. Thus, those statements illustrate how societal stereotypes function as a powerful tool in maintaining gender hierarchies, shaping expectations, opportunities, and identities in ways that disadvantage women.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings and analysis, the linguistic units in the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* reveal how gender inequality is reflected through the characters' utterances. The data, consisting of clauses, phrases, and sentences, show that clauses appear most frequently as the linguistic form expressing gender-based distinctions, indicating that structural patterns in language play a central role in shaping gendered discourse. Using the sociolinguistic frameworks of Holmes (2013) and Trudgill (2000), the analysis shows that differences in men's and women's speech are not merely stylistic but represent deeper social and cultural norms tied to patriarchal values. These linguistic forms illustrate how unequal access, economic disparities, political underrepresentation, and societal stereotypes are embedded in everyday interactions, rendering the drama a site where gender norms are both applied and questioned (Lorber, 2001).

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of two theoretical frameworks—Holmes's sociolinguistic perspective on gender and Trudgill's theory of language variation—to analyze how linguistic units both reflect and construct gender inequality in dialogue. This combined approach not only identifies linguistic forms but also interprets their contextual meanings within the framework of Korean patriarchal culture. Through this analysis, the study provides a new understanding of how gender norms, social class, and local cultural values intersect and are expressed in everyday speech. The analysis further reveals that female characters are frequently positioned as subordinate, silenced, or morally judged, while male characters are given authority and social validation. This pattern highlights how language serves as a tool for sustaining gendered hierarchy in both cultural representation and daily life.

However, this research is limited to the linguistic units found in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* and focuses solely on the frameworks of Holmes and Trudgill. Other sociolinguistic perspectives, pragmatic theories, or comparative cultural analyses remain unexplored. Future studies may expand this work by examining additional episodes, incorporating other speech act categories, or comparing multiple Korean dramas to explore broader patterns of gendered discourse. The findings of this study also have theoretical and cultural implications, highlighting how linguistic analysis can enhance our understanding of gender inequality and its representation in the media.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the Department of English Literature, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, for providing academic support and facilities that enabled the completion of this research. The author also acknowledges the contributions of lecturers and friends whose suggestions and discussions significantly improved the quality of this study.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

All authors contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, analysis and interpretation of the data, and writing and revising of the manuscript. Mufida: Conceptualization, collecting data, analyzing data, writing the manuscript, and compiling references. Budiwati: Conceptualization, supervision, providing advice, editing the manuscript, overseeing the project, providing critical feedback throughout the study, organizing and leading the writing of the article, and completing the revision process.

Funding Statement

The study received no specific grant or funding.

Data Availability Statement

The main data, *When Life Gives You Tangerines* drama series, was gained from Netflix premium, and the supporting materials of articles and books have been acknowledged in the references list.

Declaration of Interests Statement

There is no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

[1] During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used premium Grammarly tool solely for language editing. The authors reviewed, revised, and verified the final text and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

[2] The authors used ChatGPT to support initial drafting and/or structuring of parts of the manuscript. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, rewritten where necessary, and verified against the study data and cited sources. The authors remain fully accountable for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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