

Representation of Selective Mutism through the Character Ahn Dae-bum in the Korean Drama *Summer Strike*

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ABSTRACT

Selective mutism is a condition of extreme anxiety disorder that results in an individual being unable to speak in certain social situations despite his or her normal speaking ability. These disorders are often affected by past trauma, which creates barriers to verbal communication and encourages individuals to use nonverbal communication. This study aims to uncover the representation of selective mutism through the character Ahn Dae-bum in the Korean drama *Summer Strike*. Using qualitative methods, data in the form of scenes and dialogues were analyzed to see the dynamics of verbal and nonverbal communication, and the influence of trauma on characters. The results of this study show that Ahn Dae-bum faces speech difficulties due to social anxiety and past trauma related to his sister's death. He more often uses nonverbal communication such as body cues, facial expressions, and writing to replace verbal communication. The deep trauma caused by his father's accusations creates a pattern of communication in an attempt to withdraw and avoid. This study provides insight into how trauma can shape individual communication patterns as well as expands the study of selective mutism on representation in drama. The study also emphasizes the importance of popular media such as Korean dramas in increasing public understanding of mental health issues, especially those related to the impact of trauma on communication patterns and social adaptation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a form of verbal communication using words and sentences clearly to convey the meaning fluently (Aprinawati, 2017). However, in certain circumstances there are conditions that cause a person to experience obstacles, difficulties, or even the inability to speak even though their physical abilities are still there. One of the conditions that has attracted attention in psycholinguistic studies is selective mutism, which the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has declared to be a condition or phenomenon of extreme anxiety disorder that causes individuals with normal speech abilities to be unable to speak in certain social situations. Usually this phenomenon is found in children, but it can also occur in adults, especially those who have emotional or psychological trauma (Koenarso, 2020).

In a psychological perspective, trauma is defined as an experience that destroys a person's sense of security, self-esteem, and emotional ability that leaves deep psychological wounds (Mardiyati, 2015). Trauma sufferers mostly show difficulties in verbal communication and choose nonverbal forms of communication as coping mechanisms. For example, children with selective mutism often use body language, facial expressions, or writing to interact (Anggraheni, 2016). In the context of trauma, this communication pattern is also found in adults with selective mutism especially in situations that trigger traumatic memories.

Previous studies on selective mutism have mainly focused on the case of children in the home, school, or community environment. Erawati and Juherna's (2023) research shows that the main characteristics of selective mutism in children are the absence of verbal responses in the environment outside the home, no eye contact, and the tendency to close oneself off in certain social situations. Masholeh and



Erniawati's (2019) research adds that children with selective mutism often use sign language and only talk to people who make them feel comfortable. Meanwhile, Reskiani et al. (2019) discussed the types of selective mutism which include reactive mutism, passive-aggressive mutism, moderate severe mutism, and migrants.

The above studies have limitations because there are not many studies on selective mutism in adults, especially in the context of past trauma. In addition, studies based on fictional media such as dramas or movies have not been widely carried out while popular media has a lot of potential to portray mental health issues in depth.

The Korean drama *Summer Strike* is an interesting object to study because it raises the theme of self-healing and the emotional dynamics of the characters. The drama revolves around Ahn Dae-bum, a librarian whose life is overshadowed by past trauma who meets Lee Yeo-reum, a young woman who moves to the village of Angok to live a simpler life. The character of Dae-bum represents an individual with selective mutism who struggles to communicate while dealing with his emotional wounds. These representations provide in-depth insights into the relationship between trauma, communication patterns, and social adaptations that make the play relevant for psycholinguistic studies.

This study aims to uncover the representation of selective mutism in the character of Ahn Dae-bum in the drama *Summer Strike*. With a focus on the linguistic and psychological dimensions of character, this research contributes to expanding insights into selective mutism in adults, introducing drama as an object of psycholinguistic study, and linking psycholinguistic approaches with media and cultural analysis.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1. Psycholinguistics and Selective Mutism

Etymologically, the word psycholinguistics is formed from the words psychology and linguistics, each of which is a different field of science and stands alone with different procedures and methods but equally researches language as its formal object. The only material object that is different is psychology, the object of study is the soul, while linguistics studies language behavior or language processes. Psycholinguistics is closely related to language that is disturbed, that is, linguistically disorders of the speech mechanism can occur in each person because a person's ability to understand, acquire, and produce language with the sensory tools that each person has is different (Lestari & Setiawan, 2022).

One of the disorders in speech is selective mutism, which is a condition when individuals are expected to be able to speak fluently but fail or refuse to speak consistently at certain times but can speak fluently in other situations such as at home (Melfsen et al., 2022). Mutism is a multifactorial speech disorder or caused by many factors. The sufferers—referred to as mutists—do not speak at all, and some of them may be considered mute or deliberately unwilling to speak. Selective mutism is the embodiment of hysteria because its silencing is not addressed to everyone (Chaer, 2015).

Selective mutism disorder can occur at an early age, especially children who will enter a new environment for the first time and this can interfere with their social development. Children who experience selective mutism disorder basically have no problems or speak fluently, it's just that in a situation children tend to refuse to speak. If not handled appropriately, these disorders will have an impact on future educational, employment, and social life achievements. Communication inhibition is not due to a lack of verbal knowledge or certain communication disorders, but due to anxiety and excessive fear of the environment. Symptoms of selective mutism disorder have several characteristics including refusing to speak and withdrawing when meeting new people, often mute, or using sign language (Farantika et al., 2019).

2.2. Trauma and Its Impact on Communication

While previously the definition of trauma focused on physical wounds, the study of trauma is now beginning to expand into mental and emotional wounds. Humans are basically vulnerable creatures who can experience traumatic events that attack human intraphysicality including the function of the ego that is fragmented (rupture), identity, self-structure, meaning systems, and ideology. Judith L. Herman adds that traumatic experiences attack the system of control, connection, and meaning in survivors. Traumatic events can be said to be extraordinary not because they are rare but because they attack the ability of humans to adapt in life (Sriulina, 2017).

Trauma begins with excessive fear of a situation that will form a weak personality and a timid nature even into adulthood. Psychological trauma experienced in childhood tends to continue to be carried into adulthood, even more so if it is not noticed by the social environment and tries to be cured. As a result, if the child experiences an event that reminds him of the trauma he has experienced, then the old wound will reappear and cause disturbances or problems for him (Mardiyati, 2015). In relation to

connection and adaptability, one of these disorders is known as selective mutism which affects the way a person interacts or communicates, for example they are more likely to use nonverbal communication because if the child is left silent in certain social situations for many years, this behavior becomes conditioned and the child develops this nonverbal behavior as a way to cope with life (Koenarso, 2020).

2.3. Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is a way of human communication that does not use words but through gestures and body language or facial expressions. This communication is important in human interaction because it can help express emotions. The types of nonverbal communication in human interaction are:

1. *Body language*: Physical movements, postures, and facial expressions to express emotions such as joy, disappointment, sadness, etc., also help clarify messages such as indicating direction with hand gestures or showing interest by nodding or smiling.
2. *Voice*: The right tone helps clarify the message and express emotions and shows a person's attitude and personality with a high or low volume of voice.
3. *Touch*: A handshake, hug, or kiss to help build strong social relationships and increase trust even if not everyone feels comfortable with the touch.
4. *Eye contact*: Effective for showing interest and trust in an interaction and helping to build better interpersonal relationships and increase positive impressions (Ramadhan et al., 2023).

2.4. Character Analysis in Media

In literary works, including films, there is a characterization in each role played. The perpetrator who carries out the events in the film so that he is able to weave a story is called a character who is not a real person but an image made specially by the author. The author chooses several aspects of human traits and then determines some that are considered suitable to then be combined into one character character. The character of the character created may be interesting and invite reactions to real people, but in reality the reaction arises according to how the character is created (Mubasyira, 2017). This character is featured in a narrative work or drama that will be interpreted by the reader or audience about his moral qualities and tendencies as expressed in his speech and actions. In fictional stories, characterization is closely related to the plot, because a convincing plot lies in the description of the character of the characters who take part in it (Putri et al., 2023).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Because this research aims to produce an in-depth description of how trauma and selective mutism are represented and produce narratives or descriptive findings, the type of research used is qualitative, that is, research conducted under natural conditions, is descriptive, emphasizes more on processes than results, analyzes data inductively, and emphasizes meaning (Sugiyono, 2017). The subject of this research is the character Ahn Dae-bum in the Korean drama Summer Strike.

The data of this study is in the form of scenes and dialogues that depict selective mutism due to anxiety and trauma stemming from scenes in the drama Summer Strike that depict Ahn Dae-bum's communication. Data collection was carried out by watching all 12 episodes of the Korean drama Summer Strike on the Netflix channel, then observing scenes and dialogues in the drama by the character Ahn Dae-bum to see if there are any indications of anxiety or trauma relevant to selective mutism which includes gestures, facial expressions, body posture, and nonverbal behavior patterns as well as the use of writing to interact with other characters. It is further classified based on the categories of selective mutism and trauma. The data obtained were analyzed by linking them with the literature on selective mutism that characterizes speech difficulties in certain situations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the classification of scenes and dialogues demonstrated by Ahn Dae-bum and his supporting characters in the Korean drama Summer Strike, the results were obtained in the form of dialogue pieces of Ahn Dae-bum and supporting characters that depict selective mutism and the trauma that caused it.

4.1. Selective Mutism

Main characters of the drama Summer Strike Ahn Dae-bum (ADB), a part-time librarian at the Angok Public Library, in the early episodes is described as having difficulty talking to a newcomer

to Angok Village, a woman named Lee Yeo-reum (LYR) who came from Seoul. Because of this disruption, ADB finally used nonverbal communication and written communication which are described most in episode 2 as follows:

- *Data 1: Episode 2 minutes 00:04:34–00:05:47*

LYR: Excuse me. Excuse me, Miss. Where's the real estate agency around here?

ADB: [Only a quick look to the interlocutor (Lee Yeo-reum) but directly turning away to the bookshelf and remain silent].

[Yeo-reum comes out of the library, Dae-bum runs after her and gives her a piece of paper but gets hit by a ball from the children who are playing. The paper had directions to the real estate agency Yeo-reum needed].

In the data, it can be seen that Dae-bum's behavior in this situation is consistent with the symptoms of selective mutism, which is the inability to speak in certain social situations even though he has good speaking capacity. This silence can be associated with social anxiety that hinders his verbal communication skills. Meanwhile, the use of writing shows that Dae-bum tries to fulfill the interlocutor's requests without having to speak, which is an adaptation mechanism to overcome anxiety with verbal communication. Glancing at the person you are talking to but immediately looking away indicates avoidance due to discomfort or social anxiety that indicates that talking is not a comfortable option for him. Meanwhile, giving paper with directions shows that Dae-bum still wants to help by choosing a media that is safer for him, which shows adaptive ability without involving verbality according to [Anggraheni's \(2016\)](#) statement that in addition to using nonverbal communication, people with selective mutism also communicate by writing as a way to express themselves and interact.

In the next scene, there is another form of nonverbal communication ADB which is depicted with the scene with his best friend Cho Ji-yeong (CJY) as follows:

- *Data 2: Episode 2 minutes 00:07:57–00:09:08*

[Cho Ji-yeong enters the room and Dae-bum immediately stops her with a forward hand gesture].

CJY: [walked straight to the window, opened it, and then shouted]

Pass it over here! Go hang out somewhere else, you punks! You're dead meat if you hit my car. Get out here. Darn it.

[Walk to the center of the room]

There's no one here, right?

ADB: [half-ran towards the window, closing it]

CJY: Just how much longer do I have to stay here in Angok? Why won't they transfer me out of here? They screwed me over again, Dae-bum. I won't make it into the district office this time either. I'm so irritated.

[sit]

ADB: [Stay still and take her a glass of water].

CJY: Why are they doing this to me? I want to go to Seoul. I hate Angok! Damn. [drink the water] Whatever. I'm sick of this place.

The above data shows that Dae-bum's silent behavior is also in accordance with the symptoms of selective mutism. Although this situation does not force him to speak, his nonverbal response with hand gestures and taking water indicates a preference to avoid verbal communication even with someone who is quite familiar with him. Giving her a glass of water is a nonverbal response to convey concern and calm Ji-yeong. This reflects how Dae-bum avoids anxiety that may arise from verbal communication. While the hand gesture to stop Ji-yeong from speaking is a clear and effective form of nonverbal communication that shows firmness and a desire to calm the situation. As stated by [Ramadhan et al. \(2023\)](#), stopping with hand movements is a form of nonverbal communication in the form of body language that helps clarify the message.

Nonverbal and written communication by Dae-bum is also shown to be more varied in the following data:

- *Data 3: Episode 2 minutes 00:40:45–00:43:07*

LYR: Mr. Librarian? Thank you [drinks the water provided by ADB].

ADB: [Pointing at his eyebrows]

LYR: [Following his movements on his forehead where there are impact marks]. But why are you here this late? Did you stay because of me? I'm so sorry.

ADB: [Smiling, writing on a piece of paper: You must be sober now. The power will be back up at eight in the morning, and the door opens. Feel free to rest wherever you want until then.]

LYR: [*I see. He must be mute*].

But... Why didn't you wake me up?

ADB: [Silence... heading into the scene 7 hours earlier, Dae-bum had woken Yeo-reum up with clap and book applause even with dropping the book and sliding seats, foot kick and water splash but Yeo-reum never wakes up].

The above data shows that the interaction between Yeo-reum and Dae-bum shows unique communication dynamics. Dae-bum communicates by pointing to Yeo-reum's forehead to show the impact marks, smiling, and writing a message on paper. The tendency to selective mutism is again shown by Dae-bum by using physical cues (pointing to the forehead), facial expressions (smiles), and written communication (messages on paper). This suggests that although Dae-bum has the ability to speak but he has psychological barriers that make him avoid verbal communication or deliberately unwilling to speak even when the situation allows as stated by [Chaer \(2015\)](#). Various ways to wake Yeo-reum are also shown by Dae-bum in flashbacks while still using nonverbal communication, which deals with emotional or psychological trauma that causes her to avoid direct verbal confrontation.

Next there is a scene of Dae-bum trying to talk directly to Yeo-reum as follows:

- *Data 4: Episode 3 minutes 00:22:12–00:22:32*

ADB: [Practice speaking] Hello, you're here again. Hello, you're here again. Hello, you're here again.

LYR: [Enter the library by running]. Hello.

ADB: You're hello again.

LYR: Sorry?

ADB: [*Darn it*].

The above data shows Dae-bum preparing to communicate with Yeo-reum through speaking practice. He repeated the same sentence several times, "*Hello, you're here again*". When Yeo-reum enters the library and says hello, Dae-bum responds spontaneously but irregularly. This is a form of speech failure as a general condition of selective mutism according to [Melfsen et al. \(2022\)](#), which is caused because the sufferer has been silent a lot when communicating so much that they have difficulty when they want to start a conversation.

This speaking exercise shows an effort to overcome his verbal barrier because his high anxiety about social situations as a characteristic of selective mutism makes him need to practice before actually speaking, although the results still feel awkward and unconfident. The communication is still simple and concise which shows the process of adaptation from the condition of selective mutism.

As stated by [Farantika et al. \(2019\)](#), Dae-bum's communication impediment is due to anxiety and excessive fear of the environment, not due to a lack of verbal knowledge or certain communication disorders. Some of the characteristics of the symptoms include refusing to speak and withdrawing when meeting new people, often mute, or using sign language represented by Dae-bum, especially when communicating with newcomers in Angok Village, Yeo-reum, but under certain conditions Dae-bum also chooses to refuse to speak, only using hand gestures when communicating with his best friend, Ji-yeong. This nonverbal behavior is carried out as a way of interacting in facing life ([Koenarso, 2020](#)).

4.2. Trauma

In the drama Summer Strike, the character of Dae-bum represents an individual who has experienced trauma, which is evident in his communication and behavior patterns. The following data analyze how trauma affects Dae-bum's response in various social interaction situations, as well as how it reflects its selective mutism characteristics. Dae-bum's condition of selective mutism is caused by trauma in his childhood due to being blamed by his own father for his brother's death which is described as follows:

- *Data 4: Episode 5 minutes 00:00:56–00:02:12*

[20 years ago, Seon-a's billiards place]

ADB: [sees his father running out of the billiard club, enters and finds his sister, Ahn Seon-a lying on the floor]

[In the hospital]

Father: Ahn Seon-a. Why are you lying here? Seon-a, wake up. Wake up now. I told you to wake up!

[Slap ADB] You should have been there! Why would you leave your sister alone? Why? Why did it have to be Seon-a and not you?

The above data reveals the root of Dae-bum's trauma which is a tragic event that occurred 20 years earlier when Dae-bum witnessed his sister, Ahn Seon-a, lying on the floor of the billiard club, which indicates that he has experienced a serious incident. This incident is exacerbated by his father's attitude at the hospital who blames Dae-bum with destructive sentences and instills a deep sense of guilt in Dae-bum. This scene shows how painful experiences and direct accusations from authority figures such as a father can create psychological wounds that affect his personality and communication patterns later in life as the main cause of Dae-bum experiencing selective mutism and tending to withdraw from social interactions. As stated by [Sriulina \(2017\)](#), humans are basically vulnerable creatures who are prone to experiencing trauma. Here Dae-bum develops a coping mechanism in the form of avoiding verbal and social communication as a form of self-protection against situations that can re-trigger guilt or remind him of the incident.

Dae-bum's mute behavior began when he was interrogated by the police on the following data:

- *Data 5: Episode 5 minutes 00:02:21–00:03:30*

ADB: [play yoyo]

Police 1: Hey, kid. Are you Ahn Seon-a's little brother? I heard you are the one who found her.

ADB: [quiet, keep playing yoyo]

Police 2: Did you see anything strange?

ADB: [Keep playing yoyo]

Police 1: [grabbing ADB's hand]

ADB: [pulling his hand and continue playing yoyo]

Police 1: Was your sister alone in the billiard club when you went out to play?

ADB: [still mute]

Police 1: Hey. Answer me!

Police 2: Hey. Why would you shout at a kid?

ADB: [Drop yoyo]

Police 2: [take it] Goodness. We're sorry. Hey. I heard your sister was a well-known prodigy. Then you must be smart as well.

ADB: [Squirming]

Police 2: You must like yoyos. My son is always playing with them too. It's okay. You can keep.

ADB: [silence and lowering]

Police 2: Do you want me to take you to your mom and dad? [Reaching out]

ADB: [accepts a helping hand and stands following the police]

Police 2: All right. Let's go.

The data shows Dae-bum's reaction to the stressful situation after an incident involving his sister. The interaction between Dae-bum and the police describes the beginning of selective mutism behavior due to the trauma he has just experienced. In this scene, Dae-bum consistently chooses to remain silent and continues to play yoyo in an attempt to distract from the threatening situation. Although the second policeman shows empathy, Dae-bum remains silent which shows that his trauma is very deep, which makes him unable to respond verbally.

This state forms a weak personality and a timid nature as a psychological trauma that is carried into adulthood, which will reappear and cause disturbances if it experiences an event that reminds him of his trauma as stated by [Mardiyati \(2015\)](#). This is also experienced by Dae-bum which is described as follows:

- *Data 6: Episode 7 minutes 00:25:09–00:27:23*

LYR: When we first met, why did you not talk to me?

ADB: [Lowering, smile, quiet a moment] Actually . . . I have trouble talking to strangers. That's why.

LYR: Does that mean you feel comfortable around me now? We talked a lot today.

ADB: Maybe that's why my throat kind of hurts.
 LYR: I don't think you've talked that much.
 [See the writing on the wall "YOU'RE THE ONE WHO KILLED SEON-A"]
 ADB: What the heck? [direct silence in stunning]
 LYR: Are you okay?
 ADB: Excuse me, Yeo-reum. [run to home]
 LYR: Dae-bum. Dae-bum!
 ADB: [Arriving home, squirting, taking the medicine. His mind goes back in time]

The above data depicts an emotional confrontation between Dae-bum and Yeo-reum, which brings back elements of Dae-bum's past trauma over her sister's death. Lowering their heads, smiling, and the reason for awkwardness talking to strangers indicate a psychological defense mechanism that is to avoid being completely open to others, while smiling is used to hide discomfort. Dae-bum's stunned reaction when he saw the writing showed that his trauma was still relevant and unresolved which triggered a deep sense of guilt.

The adaptation of post-traumatic communication can indeed be difficult and takes time due to psychological problems that cause the victim to become quiet, withdrawn, lose confidence, and have difficulty communicating (Larasati et al., 2023). Running home indicates the need to avoid and subsequently try to calm down by taking medication. It indicates a psychological disorder that requires medical treatment such as anxiety disorders. Dae-bum's past trauma greatly affects his communication patterns with others, especially in emotional situations. Triggers such as writing about Seon-a bring about an emotional response that shows how trauma shapes Dae-bum's psychological experiences and communication patterns, including his tendency to avoid deep conversations.

The selective mutism behavior shown by Dae-bum in the above data illustrates Dae-bum's vulnerability and adaptation efforts in interacting with others, especially Yeo-reum. The complexity of her character is further shown by her shy and anxious nature, which makes the storyline convincing as stated by Putri et al. (2023) and make the character interesting and invite reactions as stated by Mubasyira (2017).

5. CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the character Ahn Dae-bum in the drama Summer Strike represents selective mutism in response to past trauma. Through scene analysis and dialogue, it was found that Dae-bum faces difficulty speaking in certain social situations triggered by awkwardness, social anxiety, and traumatic experiences. The trauma stemming from the tragic events surrounding his sister's death and direct accusations from his father shaped Dae-bum's communication patterns dominated by nonverbal actions such as body cues, facial expressions, and writing.

The study also highlights how media, especially Korean dramas, can represent psychological conditions such as selective mutism in depth, providing insight into the relationship between trauma, communication patterns, and social adaptation. This approach expands the understanding of selective mutism in adults in drama, paying attention to the cultural and visual dimensions.

The results showed that Dae-bum relies on nonverbal communication as a defense mechanism to cope with anxiety and emotional distress. Although he tries to adapt through verbal conversations, awkwardness and past trauma often hinder his openness. This study reinforces the importance of understanding the impact of trauma on communication and shows how popular media can be an effective means of improving mental health literacy in the community.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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