

## **Public Diplomacy, Soft Power and Language: The Case of the Korean Language in Mexico City**

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*Public Diplomacy (PD) is the third pillar of South Korean foreign policy. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PD aims to attract foreign audiences by means of art, knowledge transmission, media, language and foreign aid. When it comes to the Korean language, its global profile has seen an especially marked increase in recent years (Kim, 2009). Thus, this paper's objective is to explain the relevance of the Korean language in the generation of South Korea's soft power. I draw from César Villanueva's reflections in order to problematize how language promotion can be translated into soft power at five different levels: the empathetic, the sympathetic, the geopolitical, the diplomatic and the utilitarian. I observe that in the case of the Korean language in Mexico City, soft power has the potential to be generated on three levels: it helps to increase knowledge of Korean culture (empathetic); it exercises symbolic persuasion (geopolitical), since the products of cultural industries are mostly in Korean; and it is used as a tool for economic transactions in Mexico City (utilitarian).*

*Keywords: South Korea, public diplomacy, soft power, Korean language, Cultural Center, Mexico City*

### **Introduction**

Public diplomacy (PD) is an international practice that is currently receiving increasing global attention. Several world governments, regardless of the position of their Nation-States in the international system, have embraced it as an important element within their foreign policy agenda.

For South Korea (Korea from now on) public diplomacy is the third pillar of foreign policy, along with political and economic affairs. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PD aims to attract foreign audiences through “the arts, knowledge sharing, media, language, and aid” (MOFA, 2018). This kind of diplomacy goes beyond the traditional agenda, creating room for creative and strategic innovations in the endeavor toward foreign policy goals.

In the case of Korea's public diplomacy, it is possible to observe a continuous evolution in this practice. For instance, according to the Korean diplomat Tae-Wan Huh (2012) “The Republic of

Korea (ROK) designated the year 2010 as the starting point to promote public diplomacy”. Since then, various measures have been adopted, including the establishment of the Korea Public Diplomacy Forum (KPDF), a permanent civilian advisory group in the field of public diplomacy, and the appointment of an Ambassador for Public Diplomacy charged with controlling and coordinating public diplomacy strategy (Huh, 2012).

Kadir Ayhan suggests that there are two changes that have occurred recently regarding Korea’s public diplomacy, reflecting its new approach: “better appreciation of the complexity of public diplomacy and structural reforms within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” (2017: 15). In other words, on one hand the diplomatic elite has deeper knowledge on the transformation of the diplomatic practice<sup>1</sup> and on the other, there’s been a process of institutionalization that has gone as far as to promote a law on public diplomacy.

Korea’s current Ambassador for Public Diplomacy, Enna Park, is aware that to win the hearts and minds of foreign audiences a wide range of skills and actions are needed: “In my shop, we use a wide array of public diplomacy tools including: media relations, strategic communications, advocacy campaigns, cultural promotion, educational exchanges, broadcasting, international business promotion, tourism, and branding” (2017: 10). This reflection goes hand-in-hand with the fact that today Korea’s public diplomacy follows three lines: 1. culture-oriented public diplomacy, 2. knowledge-oriented public diplomacy, and 3. policy-oriented public diplomacy. In addition, one must bear in mind that Korea is making a great effort to transition from a public diplomacy 2.0, centered on intercultural, educational and language exchange, towards a public diplomacy 3.0 that contributes to global goods (USC Center for Public Diplomacy, 2017).

Now, in terms of the institutionalization of public diplomacy, a Public Diplomacy Act was enacted in Korea in 2016. Thanks to this act the Public Diplomacy Committee was founded. The committee incorporates not only governmental actors such as representatives of national and local government, but also non-governmental actors such as people from academia and the private sector (Ayhan, 2017: 16). The definition provided by the Act offers a clearer notion of Public Diplomacy, describing PD as "diplomatic activities through which the State promotes foreign nationals' understanding of and enhances confidence in the Republic of Korea directly or in cooperation with local governments or the private sector based on culture, knowledge, policies, etc." (Korea National Assembly, 2016).

In terms of culture, the promotion of the national language is a key aspect of reaching foreign audiences. As the Korean government’s definition of public diplomacy makes clear, promoting the Korean language is essential. Indeed, the Korean language has definitely increased its global profile in recent years (Kim, 2009), providing a major incentive to continue financing official

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<sup>1</sup> In the current Moon Jae-in administration, Kang Kyung-wha was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. She is the first woman to occupy this position. She holds a master’s degree and a PhD in Communication from the University of Massachusetts in the United States. Although I cannot argue that an academic background in communication is related to support for public diplomacy, I could say that the Minister is aware of the importance of the communication dimension of diplomacy.

language projects worldwide, while offering an excellent framework for scholars to understand the impact of Korea's soft power overseas. Although soft power will be discussed later, here it refers to the way in which a State tries to seduce or co-opt foreign actors so that these actors will favor the State.

Thus, this paper's main concern is to explain the relevance of the Korean language to the construction of South Korea's soft power, which has been promoted under the framework of the Hallyu (Korean wave) by the Korean government, but has received little attention from the academia, which has privileged analysis based on popular culture, specifically the K-pop phenomenon (Hong, 2014; Kim & Choe, 2014; Choi & Maliangkay, 2015; Fuhr, 2016). The interest given to K-pop has spread globally thanks "to the technology of social media and sociality of global fans" (Jin & Yoon, 2016: 1288). Nevertheless, the study of language is necessary in order to understand its role in the projection of the Korean Culture. After all "the language reflects the fundamental values of the given culture and at the same time forms them" (Modebadze, 2013: 102-103). Indeed, the Korean language has the potential not only to express culture, but also to contribute to the formation of values beyond the Korea's geographical borders.

In consideration of the above, this article will focus on the Korean language courses at the Korean Cultural Center located in Polanco, Mexico City. The research questions are: How can soft power be generated through Korean language courses in Mexico City? How do the experiences of administrative staff, professors and students reflect the possibility of generating or observing/proving the soft power of the language?

To answer these research questions, this text is organized as follows: first, I address the relationship between soft power and language and propose a theoretical model for analyzing this relationship; second, I go over some methodological aspects to the research, specifically exploring the relevance of the interview and the focus group; third, I study some historical and political aspects of the Korean language; fourth, I center on the case study, that is to say the cultural center in Mexico city and its Korean language courses. Here I provide the answers to research questions before offering concluding remarks.

## **Language as a soft power source**

### *Language promotion as an international practice*

The relationship between language and power has been fundamental from the perspective of Nation States. This is reflected not only in the imposition of a national language in the process of nation building, but also in the way the power of a linguistic group is related with the prestige and spread of a given national language (Suárez Castiñeira, 2013). Indeed, for States, the establishment of national languages signified the possibility of creating a common cultural identity among their inhabitants. Therefore, the exportation of that common identity overseas can be read as a

celebration of the nation building process, but also as a tool for dominance. This last use language has been a strategy of imperial projects throughout history.

Imperial powers understood the importance of language for creating prestige. Although many imperial enterprises have ended, the spread of language remains, but for purposes other than domination. One can easily identify various cultural institutions that are aimed at attracting people through language as a way of strengthening their national prestige, such as the Alliance Française (France), the British Council (Great Britain), the Goethe Institute (Germany) and El Instituto Cervantes (Spain). While European countries have the longest tradition of promoting their culture around the globe, other international players have come into the language promotion scene in recent decades.

Several Asian countries have joined the club of promoting language learning. One example is China, which promotes the Chinese language and culture through its Confucius Institutes. “In the space of just four years—between November 21, 2004, when the first institute opened in Seoul, South Korea and October 2008—292 Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms opened in 78 countries” (Ren, 2012: 1). The network of the Confucius Institutes has expanded rapidly and globally, promoted by the Chinese government as a foreign policy tool. Between 2004 and 2014, six international Confucius Institute conferences were held in Beijing, with high ranking government officials participating in every event (Zhu & Li, 2014: 327), showing that this kind of cultural promotion is supported politically.

Zhe Ren reads the reaction to Confucius Institutes by various Asian countries as a form of cultural competition<sup>2</sup>, such as the use by Japan, Korea and India of “the names of noted individuals from their respective pasts such as Murasaki Shikibu, Sejong the Great, and Mohandas Gandhi to publicize their respective languages and cultures to the world” (Ren, 2012: 19). These three countries have been dedicating efforts and money to their projects. For Japan language promotion is essential; the government has used surveys conducted by the Japanese Foundation to monitor the relationship between Japanese language learning, mass culture and popular culture (Armour, 2015: 3). For its part, India intends to promote and extend its soft power through the Council of Cultural Relations, which is to open new cultural centers in Asia, Africa and Latin America (ICCR, 2018). Korea has also engaged actively in spreading the study of the Korean language worldwide. In December 2017, Song Hyang-keun, the Chairman of The King Sejong Institute Foundation (KSIF), announced a plan to increase to 200 the branches of the Sejong Institute worldwide, as part of Korea’s public diplomacy policy. The Korean governmental effort also responds to an increasing international demand to study the Korean language (Yonhap, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> It is a common narrative among scholars to claim that developments in the public and cultural diplomacies of Asian countries have been encouraged by Chinese actions. For instance Ian Hall argues that it was not until the Chinese government established a public diplomacy division within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that other countries did the same in their respective ministries; this is true of Japan(2004), Malaysia (2006) and India (2006) (Hall, 2012: 1094 ).

Asia in general is working on raising its cultural profile in the world through the promotion of diverse national languages. For its part, Korea is considering this strategy as an element in its public diplomacy agenda. To understand conceptually the nature of this study, some clarifications about public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and language and soft power will be discussed in the following section.

*Where is culture in Public diplomacy? And how about soft power?*

Historically speaking one might track the term public diplomacy back to the 60s and the United States, with Edmund Gullion having been attributed with coining the term (Cull, 2006). Interest in public diplomacy has been growing ever since, both in academic and professional spheres. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks public diplomacy has been conceived as a foreign policy tool that involves two-way communication and is directed at foreign audiences, which can therefore increase the soft power of a given state (Kim, 2017: 293). This common background does not imply that scholars completely agree on the roles of actors and culture in its success.

Given the lack of consensus among scholars as to the conceptual boundaries of public diplomacy, Kadir Ayhan (In Press) has proposed a taxonomy to be able to locate the main approaches from where PD has been studied. He suggests that there are State-Centric Perspectives, Neo-Statist Perspectives, Nontraditional Perspectives, Society-Centric Perspectives and Accommodative Perspectives. While the two first perspectives consider non-state actors to be the only actors in public diplomacy, the other three consider non-state actors to be subjects of public diplomacy. This discussion is relevant because although this study observes the importance of language promotion from an official point of view, the fact is that within this institutional setting there are actors that are not government representatives in the strict sense. That would be the case of Korean language teachers that are working at the different Sejong Institutes around the world.

Conceptually speaking, another important aspect is the relationship between cultural and public diplomacy. Just as the concept of public diplomacy has a western connotation, so does cultural diplomacy (Kim, 2017). This has an implication for the way culture is understood in the larger framework of international relations. As such, thinking about the relationship between cultural and public diplomacy requires reflecting on the concrete context of study.

Although some scholars make distinctions between the two concepts, recognizing that they are complementary aspects of diplomacy (Villanueva, 2007), for this case study it can be seen that the Korean government understands cultural diplomacy as part of the public diplomacy umbrella. Indeed, there is a strong relationship between cultural relations and public diplomacy. As Jan Melissen has suggested in his book *The New Public Diplomacy*, “the overlap between public

diplomacy and postmodern cultural relations is bound to grow, unless cultural relations' practitioners return to a more limited conception of their work" (2005: 23).

I follow the proposal of Kim Hwajung that supports "the conceptualization of cultural diplomacy as a subset of a new public diplomacy as well as a subset of international cultural relations" (2017: 317). Taking this into account, I argue that the cultural institutions and cultural initiatives of a given Nation State are part of this new public diplomacy paradigm and a source for constructing soft power.

South Korea is an example of a State for which culture plays a definitive role in its new public diplomacy. Nowadays the government is supporting what it calls a public diplomacy 2.0, promoting intercultural, educational and language exchanges, but also working to transition to public diplomacy 3.0 which has a more global responsibility-focused perspective. In this article, the focus is on PD 2.0, since it is where the objective of promoting the Korean language takes place. Besides, PD 2.0 incorporates a significant number of means to generate so-called soft power. The popular concept of soft power was coined by Joseph Nye Junior and it implies having others do what you want them to do but not by means of coercion or carrots and sticks, but by means of attraction. In this regard he finds that there are three sources from which a State can generate soft power: political values, foreign policy and culture (Nye, 2016). Since the concept is more descriptive than analytical, I will problematize it as a means of understanding how soft power could be constructed in the case of language. This is addressed in the following section.

### *The levels of soft power in language*

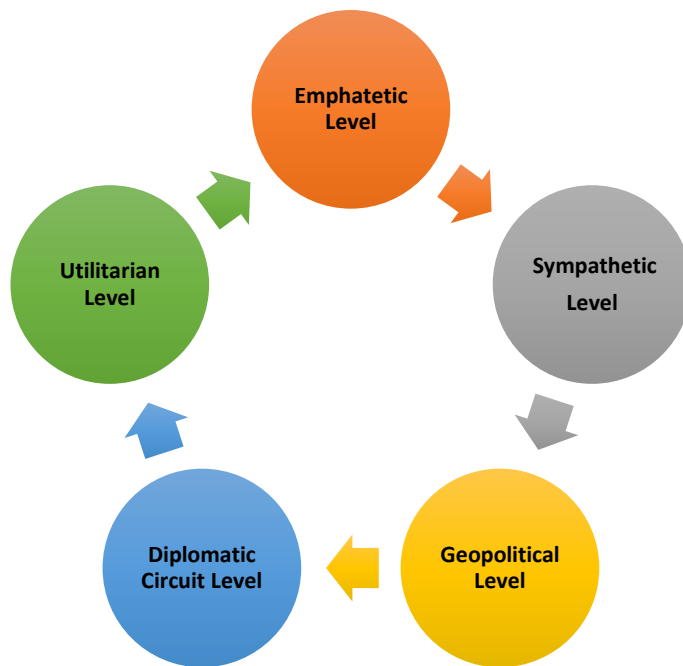
The new public diplomacy centers on communication with foreign audiences, and culture plays a very important role in this relationship. If culture exported overseas generates attraction among international audiences then there is room for soft power. However, when it comes to an analysis of the use of language as soft power, one must consider that language per se may not necessarily be the source of such power. David T. Hill has suggested that it is risky to argue that a country is attracting or co-opting another country, in soft power terms, by teaching a language. Instead, he proposes that the potential to generate soft power lies in the potential of language study to change certain attitudes within a community towards a different Nation State (2016: 365). Although Hill does not elaborate on how the study of language can actually generate positive attitudes or favorable positions towards a Nation State, it does provide a starting point for thinking about the relationship between language and soft power.

William S. Armour has gone deeper into this discussion by proposing a concept to make the relationship between soft power and language more analytical: soft power pedagogy. Departing from research on the study of the Japanese language, he defines it as a form of "teaching and learning Japanese language and culture that relies on using and consuming examples of Japan's' soft power' such as 'manga' and anime in and out of the classroom to perpetuate a positive interest

in Japanese culture and language” (2011: 127). In more general terms, this implies that in the process of learning and studying a language, a nation’s popular culture products are important for creating soft power. Armour has updated his thinking on soft power pedagogy, arguing now that it is crucial “to consider also the geopolitical context by considering the extent to which products of soft power [...] are mediated and then influence [...] education” (2015: 38). Basically, he suggests looking at the larger communicative environment to which language learning is subject, especially the new one based on communication technologies.

Ideas from Armour and Hill are relevant, and complement César Villanueva Rivas’ proposal of possible ways in which soft power is generated through the study of language. He proposes a possibility for soft power can be identified from the very fact that a person feels attracted to studying a language and makes an effort to learn. Furthermore, Villanueva (2015: 140) has gone so far as to propose five different levels of soft power that can be observed in the study of a language (Figure 1): 1. the empathetic (to communicate a world view and national idiosyncrasies); 2. the sympathetic (referring to an esthetic level of the language, such as syntax or the literary tradition); 3. the geopolitical (the exercise of symbolic persuasion and ideological influence over foreign identities through cultural industries); 4. the diplomatic circuit (influence over decision making by positioning language in multilateral forums); and 5. the utilitarian level (to help in economic transactions, to promote businesses).

These five levels bring a wider perspective on the potential of language for creating soft power, but one differentiation should be made between them: on the one hand, the empathetic, sympathetic and geopolitical levels explain the use of language to create cultural attraction, while the diplomatic circuit and the utilitarian level intend to create political-economic attraction. In the end, the aim is to further the national interest of a given State, since promoting the study of a language overseas, as public diplomacy, is part of government’s foreign policy toolkit (Sevin, 2017). Indeed, Villanueva’s framework provides a departure point for the ideal government objectives for language promotion. However, this article focuses on the consideration that identifying the potential capacity of these ideal objectives, as well as complementing these analytical frameworks, requires addressing the perceptions of audiences. In the end, exploring public perceptions is necessary when exploring public diplomacy that targets real people with their own social, cultural and economic conditions. Therefore, this article aims to explore the levels of soft power based on foreign audiences’ perceptions.



**Figure 1** Levels of a language soft power

Source: Created by the author based on a text by César Villanueva (2015)

Villanueva’s model of five levels of soft power fosters reflection on the complex role of culture, specifically language, in new public diplomacy. From this proposal, I see that language is not a mere instrument for symbolic persuasion or domination; it can also have important implications for diplomatic, geopolitical, and economic interests of a given Nation State. This is the main reason for analyzing the narrative of actors involved in the process of Korean language teaching and learning – after all, considering foreign audiences is a basic element of public diplomacy.

Therefore, I apply the “five levels” model of language-based soft power to a case study, the Korean language at the Korean Cultural Center, in Mexico City. To clarify how I have operationalized these theoretical perspectives and made decisions about which actors to include in the research, I will explain some aspects regarding the methodology in the following section.

### **Methodological riddle**

Methodologically speaking, it is assumed that determining the levels at which the Korean language could generate soft power required having conversations with administrative workers, language professors and students at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico City: thus the evaluation of soft power that I make in this article is at the level of perception, based on participant narratives. The project echoes the study conducted by Zhu Hua and Li Wei ( 2014), since they have proposed



having conversations with different stakeholders at a cultural center as a way to learn more about their interests and ideologies. I also give attention to the research conducted by Fang Gao (2010), who studied the motivations and strategies of non-Koreans in China, in the process of learning Korean language. He used an ethnographic approach, where he conducted semi-structured interviews to learn about motivations and strategies.

Therefore, the strategy was to conduct interviews with administrative workers (Appendix 1) and professors (Appendix 2), and to hold a focus group with students (Appendix 3). Questions used in both the interviews and the focus group were designed to be directly related to Villanueva's five-level model of analysis of soft power through language. Thus, the narratives or responses were selected from participants that responded more concretely to the questions associated with the five levels of soft power; in other words, this study embraces a qualitative approach.

Regarding the interviews, I talked to two administrative workers (one Mexican and one Korean) and three language professors (Koreans). All of them were women. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to allow interviewees to express other concerns about their experience as administrative workers or professors. It is important to emphasize that I assume that in the interviews it is possible to capture aspects of the social world outside the interview, while also recognizing that there are certain elements of the narrative that are constructed as part of the interaction in the interview itself (Miller & Glassner, 2011).

In the case of conversations with students I chose a focus group as the most appropriate format. I embrace an ethnographic perspective of the focus group, meaning that I aim at "grounding interpretation in the particularities of the situation under the study and in participants' perspective" (Wilkinson, 2011: 170). This allowed us to look at personal experiences in relation to the study of the Korean language. I decided to talk to the most advanced group of Korean language learners at the Korean Cultural Center: students that participated in the focus group were in Level 4, which is equivalent to a high-beginners level. Before the focus group, any interested students with enough time were invited to participate; with seven women and one man accepting the invitation. Ages ranged from 21 to 35, with most participants being in their 20s.

The interviews and the focus group took place at the facilities of the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico located in Polanco<sup>3</sup>. One interview with one administrative worker and one professor took place in October 2017. The rest of the interviews and the focus group were held in February 2018.

One clarification is in order. On September 19, 2017, one month before I started the interview process, Mexico City suffered a terrible earthquake with human and material losses. This natural event affected the structure of Korean language teaching in Mexico City. Previously there were two main spaces where the Korean Cultural Center promoted the classes: one was the Korean Cultural Center located in Polanco, a neighborhood in Mexico City; the other a building owned by the government of Mexico City located downtown, where the Mexico City government provided

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<sup>3</sup> A diplomat at the Korean Embassy in Mexico City was instrumental in providing contacts at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico, making it possible to conduct the interviews for this research. I am truly grateful for his support.

rooms to the Korean Cultural Center to conduct Korean language classes. This second space served many more students and teachers than the first one, thus the Students with more proficiency of Korean Language were also located there.

Due to the earthquake, the building owned by the Mexican government was damaged, so Korean classes could not continue there. Unfortunately, the Korean Cultural Center did not have the capacity to welcome all the students that had attended classes downtown. As a result, many of those students stopped taking Korean language classes. For the purposes of the research, this situation was the reason that I was unable to approach the Mexican students at the most advanced levels, the significance of which was that this study lacked access to the students who had acquired the highest level of language, who could have provided greater insight into a more transitional kind of soft power in Korean language learning. Thus, the best alternative available was to work with the most advanced level at the Korean Cultural Center in Polanco, which was level 4 as stated before. At this level, there was only one group available.

Due to these circumstances and research decisions, I must point out that the aim of this paper is not to draw general conclusions on the status of Korean soft power in Mexico, but to explore the narratives and perceptions of this specific group of people (administrative workers, professor and students) who chose to participate in the project. In other words, following this methodological approach, I tried to answer research questions concerned with how soft power can be generated by the study of the Korean language in Mexico, as well as the structure of the institutional framework within which these language courses take place, in this specific context and with this group of people.

In the following section, I provide some insight into the importance of the Korean language before moving on to the case study.

### **The Korean Language in perspective**

The so-called Hallyu, or Korean Wave, is one motivation for students to study the Korean language. Korean popular culture has had great success at attracting global audiences. In the Middle East for instance, Hallyu has led to an increasing interest in the Korean language and Korean Studies (Nye & Kim, 2013: 34-35). In general terms, the profile of the Korean language is globally on the rise. Previously considered to be a “boutique” language, by 2012 at least 640 universities and 2100 schools around the world were offering Korean language programs (Kim, 2009).

Korean is spoken by approximately 50 million people in South Korea and more than 20 million people in North Korea. There are also Korean language speakers in Japan, Russia, the United States, Thailand and other countries, giving a sense of the spread of the Korean diaspora. It is estimated that by 2015 there were 77.2 million Korean language speakers worldwide (Thompson, 2015).

The Korean alphabet, or Hangul, has an attractive history that has been strategically portrayed by the Korean government. The narrative says that it was King Sejong of the Yi Dynasty who commissioned a Royal Academy with developing the Korean alphabet in the fifteenth century. In the preface of the proclamation on the Hangul Manuscript or Hunminjeongeum<sup>4</sup> (the Proper sounds to instruct the people), King Sejong stated the following:

Being of foreign origin, Chinese characters are incapable of capturing uniquely Korean meanings. Therefore, many common people have no way to express their thoughts and feelings. Out of my sympathy for their difficulties, I have invented a set of 28 letters. The letters are very easy to learn, and it is my fervent hope that they improve the quality of life of all people” (Lee, 2011: 48-49).

King Sejong is celebrated for having a very genuine interest in ordinary people’s lives; thus, he provided them with the Korean language. In the beginning the Korean alphabet comprised 28 letters, but today it consists of 24 letters – 14 consonants and 10 vowels. Furthermore, the figure of King Sejong himself has acquired an international profile due to efforts by the Korean government. For instance, in 1989 UNESCO launched the King Sejong Prize with the support of the Korean government, which is awarded to a group or an individual who makes an outstanding contribution to the fight against illiteracy (UNESCO, 2014).

The environment surrounding King Sejong and the Korean language seems to be a very favorable one. In addition, language is important to Korean nationalism, due not only to the scientific status associated with its creation, but also because the ability to use Korean freely after 1945 signified the end of the Japanese occupation of Korea – another reason why the creation of Hangul is celebrated on a yearly basis (Kook & Nahm, 2010: 102-103). As such, the promotion of the Korean language overseas can indeed be considered a key part of showcasing Korean culture. In other words, promoting the Korean language is essential to promoting Korea’s Han Style, which consists of “six cultural symbols of Korea, such as Hangul (Korean alphabet), Hansik (Korean food), Hanbok (traditional Korean clothing), Hanok (traditional Korean houses), Hanji (traditional Korean paper), as well as Korean music” (Lee, 2011: 45).

## **The case study**

### *The Korean Cultural Center in Mexico City*

The Korean Cultural Center (KCC) in Mexico City is in the neighborhood of Polanco, which is well known for being a high-income area in the city. The abundance of services available locally attracts a large number of people to seek employment in the area, even when they do not live nearby. Another important aspect of the location is that it is home to a large number of Embassies

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<sup>4</sup> UNESCO selected the *Hunminjeongeum* Manuscript for inclusion in its Memory of the World Register in 1997. The 9<sup>th</sup> day of October is a national celebration to commemorate the creation of Hangul (Lee, 2011: 53).

and Consulates. From Asia, for instance, there are the Embassies of India and Indonesia. The KCC is near Polanco's Metro station, which makes it very easy to reach by public transportation, although travel times will vary depending on the commuter's departure point within Mexico City.

Like other Korean Cultural Centers, the institutional setting of this one is complex. One administrative assistant claimed during an interview, "I don't really know who my boss is," referring to the various institutions involved in the Korean Cultural Center. In the case presented here, the Cultural Center depends on the Korean Embassy in Mexico City, but there are also other ministries and foundations contributing to it, such as the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, through the Korean Culture and Information Service<sup>5</sup>. The Sejong Institute which depends on the Sejong Foundation is also involved, with a specific focus on Korean language promotion.

The connection between the Korean Embassy and the Cultural Center in Mexico City is also highly visible in the digital space. For instance, while the Cultural Center does not have a Facebook page, it shares the Embassy's Facebook page. Nonetheless it does have its own YouTube channel, where it shares content about Korean Culture aimed at a Mexican audience. If the Mexican case is compared with other American countries like Argentina or Brazil, it could be seen that to October 2017, these other Korean Cultural Centers had no presence on social media. The case of Canada is different again, where the Cultural Center boasts its own Facebook page, YouTube channel and Twitter account.

The Korean Cultural Center has several objectives, including the transmission of Korean culture, tourism and sports; increasing cultural exchange, tourism and sport between Mexico and Korea; increasing of cultural exchange, tourism and sport between Latin America and Korea; the promotion of content on Korean culture in Mexico and Latin America; and the promotion of participation in cultural events in Mexico and Latin America (Korean Cultural Center, 2018). This approach suggests that Mexico could play a fundamental role as a bridging actor in bringing Korean culture to Latin America.

The policies of programs offered at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico City reflect the Han Style. They a range of courses on Korean food, calligraphy, Samulnori, Baduk, and the Korean language. According to one administrative assistant, the Korean language class has the highest demand among all classes offered at the center.

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<sup>5</sup> The Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS) was launched in 1971 as the Korean Overseas Information Service (KOIS) under the Ministry of Culture and Information. Its current name was adopted in 2008, following the disbandment of the Government Information Agency. The main Vision of KOCIS is to promote the values of Korean Culture worldwide, but also to improve the country's national image. Currently, KOCIS operates a total of 32 Korean Cultural Centers around the World, which are distributed as follows: 8 centers in the Asia-Pacific region, 9 centers in Europe, 7 centers in the Americas and 4 centers in Africa and the Middle East. In the case of the American continent, there are three centers in the United States, located in New York, Washington D.C and Los Angeles, and one center each in Canada, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico (KOCIS, 2018).

## *Korean language and the Sejong Institute*

The history of the Sejong Institute goes back to 2008, when the Korean president asked his cabinet to develop a strategy to increase the competitiveness of the Korean language worldwide. In 2014, the Institute was designated as a ‘Legal Contribution Organization’ by the Ministry of Strategy and Finance. By August 2017, 171 Sejong Institutes had been established in 54 countries around the world. The geographical distribution is as follows: 96 Institutes are located in Asia (26 in China); 42 in Europe (9 in Russia); the third highest number of Institutes is found in the Americas (9 in the United States, 4 in Brazil, 2 in Canada and 1 each in Mexico, Guatemala, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Costa Rica, Argentina and Colombia) (King Sejong Institute Foundation, 2017). The Sejong Institute oversees the Korean language in Mexico City. The Sejong Institute is not housed separately from the Cultural Center, and the Institute’s logo is placed outside the Korean language classroom inside the Korean Cultural Center.

## *Levels of soft power and the Korean language*

The next section will discuss perspectives on the soft power of the Korean language among members of the Level 4 group at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico City. This is based on interviews with administrative workers, professors and students involved in the study of the Korean language at the KCC. I look at the five different levels proposed by César Villanueva in the narratives of administrative workers, Korean language professors and students: 1. the empathetic; 2. the sympathetic; 3. the geopolitical; 4. the diplomatic circuit; 5. and the utilitarian level. Thus, there is a constellation of interpretations on how the Korean language could exercise attraction for these Mexican students.

*Cultural attraction:* The first three levels explore the relevance of language in attracting foreign audiences to Korean Culture, Korean Literature and Korean Cultural industries. The perception of students at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico reflects the complexity of evaluating the creation of soft power, especially in this environment where the government has a general objective, but the actual implementation of the diplomatic tool lies in hands of non-governmental actors. As is to be expected, external factors also exert an impact.

### *1. The empathetic level*

One thing is clear: the Korean language is helping some Mexican students to learn more about the Korean culture, but exactly what does that mean? The students indicated that studying Korean has been fundamental to their understanding of Korea, but revealed that some other factors are also involved. Thus, it is necessary to think of the language learning process according to individual circumstances. This is exemplified by the following comment by Woman G of the student group:

In my case that does not apply [she refers to study language to understand culture.] Thanks to studying International Relations I learnt perfectly how to understand the culture of other countries. So, it was not the language that changed my perspective of Korea, it was my academic background.

In the case of Woman G, it is clear that her academic background was key to the formation of her perception through its emphasis on sensitivity to other cultures. This might imply the institutional setting of the Korean Cultural Center is not the only factor that determines what can be learnt about Korean Culture. However, other students reported different experiences. For example, Woman B claims:

It is not that I had the wrong idea about Korea [before studying the Korean language], the thing is that I did not know what Korea was at all. Being here has helped me to know more about what Korea really is, not like other people that create an image due to Korean idols and stuff. I don't like K-pop or dramas. [...here] the teachers teach very useful content. For example, if you go to the restaurant, they teach you how to order. This is not boring, we learn useful vocabulary. For example, last Sunday I had the opportunity to talk to someone from Korea and I realized that I have the level to hold a basic conversation with the vocabulary they teach here. They understand you. I like the way they teach here because it is real.

This statement reflects something that is important for problematizing individual experiences with learning Korean at the empathetic level. Woman B is embracing the experience of learning as a starting point for getting to know the real Korea, as she claims. But at the same time, she is rejecting Korean popular culture, because she sees it as something superficial. So even though K-pop is attractive, and is indeed the most commonly-cited reason for studying Korean along with Korean dramas, as Administrative Worker A pointed out, there are aspects of culture that may be not be accepted by all students and might create discomfort in the classroom, or even misunderstanding. This is a standard element in the process of interaction between two cultures, and one of the difficulties inherent in thinking about soft power in a homogenous way.

Problems in interaction may occur not only because of differences in interests between subjects, but may also be influenced by materials used in a classroom, which are fundamental to this process of understanding. According to Professor A: "The books are not necessarily good for the Mexican Students. Books are made for Asian Cultures. The contexts of the books should be adapted to Latin American Cultures". This perception by the professor is not necessarily shared by students, since they did not complain about the content of the books.

Another reading on this level is that besides helping them to learn about culture, the Korean language can enable communication with Korean relatives. As Woman A, married to a Korean man claims:

It has been truly useful for me. When I met my Korean family, I was so ashamed I could not communicate. It has never happened to me. I have traveled [to other countries] and spoken English, Spanish here. But [with them] I could not transmit my emotion [...] I was frustrated. That's the reason why I decided to study Korean. It has been very beneficial in personal and family terms. It has strengthened the relationship between me and my Korean family.

Woman A expressed a sense of gratitude that learning the language has helped her stay in touch with her Korean family. This offers a very interesting perspective from which soft power could be constructed. She already had reasons to like Korea, but now that she can communicate, her personal desire to understand Korean culture has increased.

I cannot claim that there is only one way in which Korean language can be transmitted at the empathetic level. But I see that this diversity of experiences reflects that approaching the perception on Korean culture is a process of negotiation based on people's backgrounds and circumstances.

## 2. *The sympathetic level*

Professor B and Professor C both explain that Korean Literature is not something they include or deal with in their classes, claiming that this would require students to be at higher levels than those offered at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico City. Thus, this is apparently not a level of soft power currently supported by Korean language study at this center. Nonetheless, some students claim this to be one of the weaknesses of the Korean language teaching in Mexico City. Man A mentions:

Something is missing [in the teaching of the Korean language]. I would like to explore other facets of Korea. I know that Asian countries were isolated and that this complicated access to their unique cultural identities, including political, religious and deeply cultural norms, including moral and ethical ones, which served as the foundations of society. More than small pleasures, that is what is missing [in the Korean language class]. When studying French or English I had access to literature and old music. I know this is also a small aspect of language teaching, but [in class] I have not received recommendations on literature, music or other possibilities.

In the focus groups, there was no other mention of Korean literature as a necessary element of the class, but it was clear that the Korean literature is not associated with the learning of Korean language, at least in Mexico City. This particular situation echoes the work of John Lie, who claims that “one genre, however, seems very much outside the Korean wave: literature, or novels, stories, plays, and poems: the Word of imaginative fiction” (2013: 648). The Mexican student cited above happens to agree with John Lie, however more research is needed into the degree to which literature has a stake in the construction of Korea’s soft power.

### 3. *The geopolitical level*

This level is related to the promotion of cultural industries. While some professors used products of Korean popular culture in class (Professor B, for example), other professors claim that they do not use them unless they relate strictly to the class content (Professor C). In terms of how students relate to cultural industries while studying Korean, Woman F stated the following:

I am studying my bachelor’s degree in languages. They teach me English and French and I would like to be a translator, because a language can open many doors. One of the things why I was so interested in Korean language is because I was part of a Fan Club and I wanted to translate [information] from Korean to Spanish. Now, sometimes I can do it, I can translate short sentences and I feel so excited.

In the case of Woman F, learning Korean provided her with an important tool for communicating in Korean to groups interested in K-pop, allowing her to access information on these phenomena first hand. The issue of translation has received attention by scholars. For instance, Kyong Yoon argues that “global fans’ negotiations of geographic and linguistic barriers in the structural consumption of K-pop implies that a cultural form is culturally (rather than literally) on its receiving ends” (2017: 2355). So, a Mexican student’s translation should be understood more as part of a cultural dynamic, rather than as having great potential for creating soft power. Interestingly, the people that participated in this focus group did not mention understanding dramas or music as one of their most important motivations for studying the Korean language.

*Political-economic attraction:* The last two levels deal with the importance of the Korean language for attracting decision makers at the multilateral level to influence policy outcomes, but also with the possibility of seducing foreign audiences into engaging in economic activities with Korean counterparts. This of course has symbolic and material consequences for both Korea and foreign audiences.



#### 4. *The diplomatic circuit level*

This is the weakest level of soft power creation for the Korean language. It is not seen as an area where the language can be useful, as reflected by the following observation by administrative worker B: “Korean is only used in Korea, isn’t it? I mean if you have a purpose related to Korea, then learning the Korean language is an advantage, but I don’t see it as useful in any other way”. One must bear in mind that the analysis takes place at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico City, in the Mexican Republic. Since this State’s official language is Spanish, it naturally follows that the Korean language is not diplomatically relevant.

#### 5. *The utilitarian level*

Along with the empathetic level, the utilitarian level seems to represent an important source of soft power. Administrative workers A and B mention that a number of the center’s students are learning Korean because they work at Korean companies. In addition to this, one can hear a number of stories related to the idea of learning Korean with the intention of participating in the labor market. Woman G reflects this as a future expectation: “I want to be a [Korean language] business or literature translator, or translate whatever is possible. I saw in Chinese you can do the same. My professor of Chinese translates business, literature and academia”. Woman E thinks in terms of an expectation but also reveals another utilitarian dimension to learning Korean, in her present life:

I also want to be a translator like them, but Korean has changed my life a lot, because it has opened the door for me to import fan-made products. Sometimes I bring 100 products [to Mexico] made by fans. Sometimes the Korean girls do not accept to respond in English, sometimes they do. Chinese accept only to speak to you in English. This has given me a way to earn money that I haven’t seen before. People of my age usually look for a part time job or work at a call center, mostly because they don’t have academic credentials. But this is giving me an opportunity to do what I like, to keep practicing the language and to practice with real speakers.

For some people learning Korean is the path to a better life economically and professionally and this is happening because learning the Korean language is breaking down barriers of access to Korean culture, and also to Korean markets. As such, it would be highly worthwhile for future research to analyze the degree to which learning Korean can enable social mobility.

The narratives of the administrative staff, professors and students show that the common perception is that Korean language learning is bringing Korea closer to Mexican Students. These stories also show that it is quite difficult to make a generalization on how the Korean language builds soft power at the five different levels: these will depend not only on the class environment, the teacher’s profile, the institutional setting, but also on the circumstances of students beyond the

Korean Cultural Center. In short, the process of soft power creation due to language teaching is not something over which Korean officials can exercise total control.

## **Conclusion**

Benedict Anderson (1993) refers to the imagined community to describe how the members of a given society feel that they belong to a certain group, even though they do not know each other. He is referring to the process of the construction of the nation in the mind of its people. Somehow the experience of non-Korean students of the Korean language extends the imagined community overseas: foreign audiences, students in this case, re-imagine the imagined community according to their personal and social context and, of course, through the experience of learning the language, even if they have never been to South Korea.

In the analysis, it could be seen that the Mexican students imagined Korea according to their personal experiences, but also according to the context of people living in a metropolis like Mexico City. They were also affected by the institutional vision of King Sejong's Korean language at this particular Cultural Center, as well as by the content taught by professors. In terms of soft power pedagogy, not all professors used products of popular culture to teach Korean. But even so, the materials they use are seen by students as very useful, which has positive implications for Korea's soft power.

The students' stories revealed that Korea has great potential to construct soft power through language. For this group of students, language-based soft power works mostly at the empathetic, geopolitical level and utilitarian levels, with little evidence to support its function at the diplomatic and sympathetic level. While weakness at the diplomatic level can be understood since Korean is not a 'diplomatic language' in international forums, its lack of presence at a sympathetic level might reflect the lack of a clear cultural policy to promote Korean Literature overseas. It is possible that Korean letters could also help to create an image of Korea through imaginative fiction.

Korea is making a significant effort to strengthen its public diplomacy 2.0, and it seems that the promotion of the Korean language can contribute to accomplishing this goal. However, it is very important for this strategy to follow the logic of new public diplomacy, where a two-way communication system through language learning is perpetuated. Korea has the possibility to promote an image of Korea through language or construct an image of Korea amongst foreign audiences: creativity and dialogue are essential for a new Korea to be imagined.

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### **Appendix 1. Administrative workers.**

- Can you tell me your name, your profession and the position you have at the Korean Cultural Center?
- Why do you think is important for South Korea to promote Korean language learning?
- What is the particular relevance of the Korean language to Mexico?
- Do you think Korean language learning helps students to get to know South Korea and its Culture? How?
- Is Korean literature used in this center to promote the Korean language? Is it the other way around?
- Is there a relationship between the promotion of the Korean language and the promotion of cultural industries like K-pop?
- Are class activities related to movie discussions or other cultural activities?
- Is the Korean language important for the Korean government's diplomatic activity in Mexico or in the multilateral forums?
- Is the Korean language important in facilitating business or employment at South Korean companies in Mexico?

### **Appendix 2. Professors**

- Can you tell me your name and profession, please?
  - Why did you decide to teach Korean?
  - Why do you think it is important for South Korea to promote Korean language teaching?
  - Why is it important to teach the Korean language in Mexico?
  - Did you have any training or knowledge about the Mexican culture before coming to Mexico?
  - As a Korean language professor, how do you think that your work impacts the learning of Korean values and culture among Mexican students?
  - Do you use Korean literature in your classes as a teaching tool or do you promote Korean literature in your classes?
  - Do you show your students movies, K-pop or other resources from Korean popular culture?
  - Do you think Korean language teaching and learning is important for Korea's diplomatic relations?
  - Do you adapt your classes according to student's needs? Let's say to the needs of those who want to work in Korean companies?
  - What resources do you use to teach the Korean language?
  - What image of Korea do you think is being transmitted through the Korean classes? A modern or a traditional Korea, perhaps?
  - What are some of the challenges for teaching Korean in Mexico and at this Institution?
- Appendix 3. Students

- Can you tell me your name, your profession or occupation and why you decided to study the Korean language?
- What idea did you have about Korea, before starting Korean language classes?
- Do you have a different idea about Korea now that you have advanced in the study of the language? What elements do you think are influencing that perception? Professors, the institution, Korean movies, etc.?
- Do you consider that you have learnt about Korean culture due to the Korean language classes?
- Have you been able to access Korean literature due to Korean language classes?
- Do you consume more Korean movies or Korean music after taking the Korean language classes or do you consume at the same level as before entering the classes?
- Have you learnt any Korean artists or cultural figures in your classes?
- Do you believe that the language can help you to do business or conduct diplomatic relations?