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From Global Expansion to Localization: Recontextualization of the Korean Wave

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Abstract

Hallyu, or the “Korean Wave,” has evolved from a regional phenomenon into a global force shaping media, consumption, and international perceptions of South Korea. As Korean cultural products circulate worldwide, they operate as instruments of soft power while being reinterpreted through local histories of race, gender, class, and nation. Moving beyond media and cultural studies approaches, this special issue foregrounds language and semiotics as central to processes of circulation, advancing a sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological perspective on how Korean popular culture is localized, resemiotized, and negotiated across transnational digital networks. The contributions examine how mediated discourse and diverse engagements with Korean genres shape the global circulation of Korean popular culture across linguistic, cultural, and ideological boundaries. Rather than treating hallyu as a homogenous export, the issue conceptualizes it as an ongoing set of projects in which various actors negotiate authenticity, modernity, and belonging, underscoring how language mediates global cultural flows.

Keywords: hallyu; popular culture; semiotics; sociolinguistics; South Korea

Hallyu, or the “Korean Wave,” has become one of the most visible cultural formations of the early twenty-first century. Since the 1990s, South Korean cultural products—television dramas, popular music, films, beauty culture, food, games, and social media content—have moved from a largely regional circulation in East and Southeast Asia to a genuinely global presence. This expansion has been accelerated by digital platforms that enable fans not only to consume Korean genres but also to recirculate, transform, and embed them in local communicative practices. As Korean popular culture has travelled, it has also come to play an important role in what political scientists call soft power: the capacity of a nation-state to shape international perceptions and preferences through attraction rather than coercion. South Korean idols appear at Buckingham Palace alongside political leaders; debates over BTS’s military service become global controversies; and K-branded products permeate everyday life far

beyond the peninsula. These developments invite close attention to the ways in which Korean popular culture mediates images of the nation, both at home and abroad.

Yet *hallyu* is never simply Korean culture exported intact. As Korean genres circulate, they are reinterpreted, recontextualized, and resignified in the sites where they land. For instance, K-pop in contexts as disparate as Mexico and Thailand has been shown to act as a way for fans to performatively transgress norms of gender and race (Yoo 2023 and Käng 2014, respectively). During processes of localization, meanings about Korea (Korean society and people, about Korean products, etc.) can change when popular culture is consumed outside of Korea. As such, it is not unreasonable to think Indonesian and Chilean audiences may appropriate Korean dramas to think through their own moral and familial concerns. In these processes of localization, meanings about Korea—its people, language, and products—shift as they are refracted through local histories and hierarchies. Although there is now a substantial body of scholarship on *hallyu*, studies of these locally specific engagements remain relatively limited and are often confined to especially visible genres such as K-pop idol music or television dramas.

Language is central to these dynamics. The Korean Wave relies on dense circulations of linguistic and semiotic material: subtitles and fan translations, reaction videos and comment threads, memes, cover dance captions, beauty vlogs, mukbang banter, brand slogans, hashtags, and more. Language is not only the medium of participation in *hallyu*; it is frequently the object of meta-commentary. Global fans debate how to pronounce idols' names properly, argue about what counts as "real" Korean (Chun 2017), and appropriate Korean kinship terms such as *oppa* and *noona* in ways that stretch or transform their meanings. These practices reveal the linguistic ideologies that underpin global fandoms, including tensions between notions of linguistic purity and hybrid creativity. Indeed, with the intensified circulation of K-pop, the most ubiquitous component of Korean popular culture, K-pop idols (pop stars) borrow globalized figures of personhood such as the bad bitch of hip hop (Garza 2021) or become desirable and/or aspirational figures themselves (Yoo 2023).

Hallyu studies of language and semiotics

Despite this, research on Korean popular culture has been dominated by performance studies, media and cultural studies, communication, and area studies. Linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics—fields with long-standing interests in circulation, citation, stance, and mediatization—have only recently begun to develop a sustained conversation about *hallyu*. Jamee Shinhee Lee was one of the first linguists to discuss the sociolinguistics of K-pop with her 2004 article "Linguistic hybridization in K-Pop: discourse of self-assertion and resistance," which focused on the phenomenon of English mixing in contemporary K-pop. By examining the heterogeneous forms and functions of English mixing in Korean popular music, ranging from a single word to an entire song, Lee's work sparked a structural examination of popular cultural lyrics. Lee's early work attended to how the uses of English index styles tied to Korean youths' fashioning and performance of a neoliberal self, which clashed with values that were valorized by and associated with the previous generation. In this way, Lee's work was in conversation with and informed by sociolinguistics research of the period interested in

identity construction and formation (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), style, and, arguably, the early influential work in sociolinguistic crossing given her focus on the use of AAVE in K-pop lyrics. As with many other early works on Korean popular culture, Lee's research suggested that the presence of English could be taken up as empowering for a new generation of young consumers. As Lee herself points out, it is perhaps important to note that during the period of writing, popular culture was not widely accepted in mainstream linguistics as a source of linguistic data.

Building on Lee's work, Elaine Chun (2017) discusses the disparate language norms and ideologies surrounding K-pop held by fans and online content creators. Indeed, her work underscores the lifeworlds made possible by Korean popular genres, including metacommentary by fans, who themselves create, participate in, and hybridize globally popular trends, which can create a kind of feedback loop whereby fans become producers of local and global norms. She studies fans' linguistic ideologies of Korean and English, and how Korean utterances are negotiated and perceived as hybrid by some viewers. Chun treats hybridity not as something inherent in particular linguistic forms, but as a kind of cultural label that only takes shape through the ways it is framed and interpreted in specific discursive contexts. Her focus on K-pop fandom discourse highlights the simultaneously local and global nature of K-pop as a highly mobile mediatized commodity. So, while the work is not about K-pop or even fandom per se, the confluence of specific K-pop discourses and rules of engagement on "YouTube [as] a transnational media space" (p. 58) create the conditions for the fan negotiation of linguistic boundaries, thereby revealing ideologies of linguistic purity or absolutism. Her primary focus, then, appears to be the role of metalanguage—talk that explicitly reifies language and assigns it cultural value. Rather than treating such metalanguage as a straightforward reflection of speakers' or communities' underlying beliefs about language, she analyzes these metalinguistic comments as social actions in their own right.

In a recent and much-needed contribution from sociolinguistics vis-à-vis Korean popular culture, Samosir and Wee (2023) stress the contributions made possible by linguistically studying *hallyu*, focusing their attention on the relationship between *hallyu* and soft power. A most compelling intervention is what they term an anthropological stance that *hallyu* genres have produced towards South Korea. That is to say, Korean genres have fostered a deeper fascination with Korean culture and history, a fascination that the Korean state appropriates to further boost its economy and influence internationally. This higher-level metastance lays the backdrop for more particularized instances of stance-taking by various actors who engage with Korean genres and objects. Crucially, the authors highlight that a more systematic sociolinguistic study of the mediatization of Korean Wave genres on social media would need to pay close attention both to how communicative practices are linked to speakers' agency and to how texts are produced, shared, and repeatedly reworked as they move through different channels. All in all, from a sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological perspective, *hallyu* thus offers a rich site for examining how soft power, artistic citizenship, and everyday language practices intersect. Korean genres provide templates for personhood—ranging from the bad bitch persona in K-hip-hop to new formations of soft or flower masculinity—that are taken up, reworked, or resisted in different locations. They also foreground questions about the relationship between communication

and agency, and about how texts move, transform, and acquire value across digital networks. Yet the number of studies that approach these issues through detailed analysis of language, discourse, and semiotics remains relatively small.

This special issue responds to that gap by focusing on the localization of *hallyu* from a linguistic and semiotic perspective. Rather than treating Korean popular culture as a homogeneous export, the contributions explore how Korean genres are taken up in specific settings, how they are entangled with local histories of race, gender, class, and nation, and how the semiotics of “Korea” are re-entextualized in these processes. Together, the articles ask how the Korean Wave becomes meaningful in diverse sociocultural contexts, and what this reveals about broader dynamics of globalization, mediatization, and inequality.

Overview of the articles in the special issue

The papers in this special issue examine how mediatized discourse (Agha 2011) and resemiotization (Iedema 2001, 2003) shape the global circulation of Korean popular culture across linguistic, cultural, and ideological boundaries. Rather than viewing *hallyu* as a one-way flow of media, the studies show how audiences, institutions and producers interpret and recontextualize Korean cultural signs. Each paper demonstrates how the languages, styles, and affective registers linked to *hallyu* are negotiated within specific sociopolitical contexts, shaping not only the spread of Korean culture but also how modernity, authenticity, and belonging are perceived.

The opening article, by Christian Go and Leif Garinto, analyzes fan activism in the Philippines under the banner “Stanning4GoodGovernance.” They examine how K-pop fandom practices are mobilized in campaigns for government accountability and democratic participation. Drawing on textual and visual data from social media, they show how Filipino fans appropriate repertoires associated with idol fandom—such as coordinated streaming, slogan-making, and aesthetic branding—to support local political causes. The article illuminates how semiotic resources associated with Korean idols are re-keyed in ways that both affirm and exceed the logic of soft power: K-pop becomes a vehicle for articulating situated critiques of Philippine politics, while also signaling cosmopolitan belonging and youth modernity.

Elaine Chun’s contribution focuses on the ideological boundary work between Korean and English in K-pop-related media. Building on her earlier work on reaction videos and fan commentary, she examines how online participants evaluate linguistic “hybridity” in performances that mix or stylize Korean and English. Rather than treating hybridity as an objective property of linguistic forms, Chun approaches it as a cultural status produced through metapragmatic discourse. Her analysis of naming practices, pronunciation debates, and evaluative comments shows how fans’ attempts to police or celebrate linguistic choices are entangled with broader ideologies of authenticity, racialized personhood, and national belonging. This article foregrounds metalanguage as social action and demonstrates how the mediatization of K-pop prompts users to negotiate what counts as “proper” language across multiple scales.

Ayumi Inouchi’s article turns to Japan, exploring the emergent hashtag and aesthetic formation #Koreaish among young Japanese women. Drawing on linguistic and ethnographic data, she analyzes how Korea-related objects, styles, and expressions are

assembled into a sensory complex of “Koreanness” that can be consumed and displayed on social media. Rather than focusing on K-pop or dramas alone, Inouchi traces a broader assemblage of food, cosmetics, fashion, and language that coalesces into a particular mode of feeling and looking “Korea-ish.” Her discussion of *qualia*—the felt qualities of styles and objects—highlights how affect and embodiment are central to the localization of *hallyu*, and how young Japanese women’s engagements with Korean commodities intersect with gendered aspirations, consumer capitalism, and regional histories.

Joyhanna Yoo’s contribution examines the morpheme K-, as in K-beauty, K-food, or K-culture, and the ways it has been re-semiotized over time. Tracing its use across media discourse and commercial branding material, she shows how K- has shifted from a relatively narrow marker of state-promoted cultural industries to a more diffuse and contested signifier in everyday language. The article argues that K- functions as a flexible index of “new” South Korea, mediating tensions between nationalist projects, global market logics, and popular imaginings of Koreanness. By focusing on a small but highly productive linguistic form, Yoo demonstrates how morphological innovation is entangled with changing ideologies of nation, modernity, and value in the era of the Korean Wave.

Together, these four papers show how linguistic and other semiotic forms circulate through media infrastructures and become localized through processes of interpretation, translation, and commodification. Go and Garinto reveal civic activism through fandom, Inouchi examines affective translations of *hallyu* aesthetics, Yoo highlights the global resemiotization of K-, and Chun exposes institutional mechanisms of linguistic commodification. Collectively, they argue that *hallyu*’s global spread is not a simple diffusion of culture but a dynamic semiotic process in which language, ideology, and affect intersect to generate new meanings across local contexts. The special issue concludes with commentaries by Nicholas Harkness and Joseph Sung-Yul Park, scholars whose work has been foundational for understanding language, media, and modernity in Korea and beyond. Together, their commentaries underscore the value of approaching the Korean Wave as a multi-scalar phenomenon that links intimate semiotic practices with shifting geopolitical imaginaries.

By bringing together these diverse case studies, the special issue advances a sociolinguistics of *hallyu* that is attentive to both semiotic detail and structural power. The articles emphasize that the Korean Wave is not a monolithic force radiating outward from Seoul, but a set of ongoing projects in which different actors—state institutions, entertainment companies, fans, critics, and ordinary consumers—struggle over the meaning and value of Korea. They show how local appropriations of Korean genres can both reproduce and contest dominant hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and class, and how language mediates these processes. Our hope is that this collection will encourage further research on Korean popular culture within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, and conversely, that it will invite scholars of media and cultural studies to engage more deeply with linguistic and semiotic approaches. *Hallyu* provides a powerful lens through which to examine how global cultural flows are made legible, desirable, or problematic in particular sites, and how language is central to those negotiations. By attending to the semiotics of localization, the contributions in this issue

aim to show not only what *hallyu* is, but also what it does in the lives of those who take it up.

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