
Book Review: BTS and Languages

Joowon Suh and Eun Sung Park (eds.). *BTS and Languages: K-pop Transcending Language and Communication*
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BTS and Languages: K-Pop Transcending Language and Communication examines BTS as a sociolinguistic and multimodal case through which K-pop reshapes language, identity, and global communication. Across its three parts, the book analyzes BTS's lyrics, multilingual practices, and media engagement, showing how Korean dialects, inclusive pronouns, lexical bundles, and systemic-functional patterns build intimacy and empowerment with fans. It also explores how BTS and ARMY use English as a lingua franca, translanguaging, fandom neologisms, emojis, Korean expressions, and digital platforms to create shared identities across linguistic and national boundaries. Further chapters examine reaction videos, fan chants, linguistic landscapes, and advertisements to show how BTS-related communication challenges English-centered hierarchies and expands Korean's symbolic presence in global media. The book offers an interdisciplinary contribution to sociolinguistics, fandom studies, media studies, and cultural studies.

Keywords: BTS, Translanguaging, English as a Lingua Franca, Fandom Communication, Multilingual Identity

BTS and Languages: K-Pop Transcending Language and Communication, edited by Joowon Suh and Eun Sung Park, is an academic book that analyzes the success of BTS—who have become a global cultural phenomenon—beyond mere musical achievements, examining it from sociolinguistic and multimodal perspectives of “language and communication.” This book profoundly illuminates how BTS and their fandom, ARMY, localize and hybridize Korean and English and the ways in which they practice multilingual communication across various media, including social media. This review aims to evaluate the major academic contributions and implications of each chapter, focusing on the three sections (Part I, Part II, Part III) that constitute the core discussions of this book.

Part I: Songs and Lyrics deals with the emotional and linguistic impact of BTS's music and lyrics on global audiences.

In Chapter 1, Mi-Young Kim analyzes how BTS actively used Korean regional dialects (satoori) in their early songs to challenge the linguistic hierarchy of mainstream media and represent the voices of the marginalized. Furthermore, she argues that inclusive pronouns such as “we” and “together” appearing in the lyrics provide deep comfort and empowerment to fans, forming a reciprocal,

authentic, parasocial bond.

In Chapter 2, Mina Lee and Kyunghwa Lee apply the “Transitivity” analysis from M. A. K. Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar to BTS’s songs. Interestingly, they reveal that while “relational” and “mental” processes indicating emotional bonds and shared identity with fans predominantly appeared in BTS’s fan songs and healing songs, “material” processes urging physical and positive actions were mainly used in their cheer-up songs during the pandemic.

In Chapter 3, Yu Kyoung Shin and Linlin Yu study the frequently recurring multiword sequences (lexical bundles) in BTS’s lyrics based on corpus linguistics. The analysis shows that BTS’s lyrics primarily use verb phrase (VP)-based bundles expressing actions and emotions along with personal pronouns, which strongly reflects the characteristics of spoken language, contributing to constructing an intimate and personal conversational narrative with the listener.

Part II: Multilingual Communication explores the multilingual usage, translanguaging phenomena, and hybrid communication practices that appear between BTS and ARMY.

In Chapter 4, Eun Sung Park analyzes the way BTS effectively communicates with their fans worldwide despite limited English proficiency from the perspectives of “English as a lingua franca (ELF)” and translanguaging practices. In particular, she highlights the process through which newly coined words or ungrammatical hybrid expressions created by BTS, such as “I purple you (borahae)” and “namjooning,” are reproduced as symbolic language within the fandom to form a strong sense of community.

In Chapter 5, Hyejeong Ahn, Jieun Kiaer, and Simon Barnes-Sadler highlight the multimodal translanguaging phenomena observed on platforms like YouTube, Weverse, and X (formerly Twitter). They demonstrate that fans around the world freely combine emojis (e.g., purple hearts), multilingual texts, and Korean abbreviations like “man-gwan-bu,” practicing a digital grammar that goes beyond simple meaning delivery to construct an identity (register) as a fandom.

In Chapter 6, Shim Lew investigates BTS’s multilingual communication during their appearances on US late-night talk shows through critical discourse analysis (CDA). She analyzes the process by which BTS members boldly use Korean (translanguaging practices)—even if it goes through an interpreter—in the English-dominated US broadcast media, thereby subverting the linguistic hierarchy bound by English hegemony and reclaiming their professional identity and equal voices.

In Chapter 7, Wona Lee and Hiroko Sugawara cover the translanguaging practices within the Japanese fan community. Despite complex historical and political tensions between South Korea and Japan, Japanese fans intentionally borrow Korean vocabulary such as “uri(우리),” “eonni(언니),” and “maknae(막내)” to strengthen solidarity within ARMY and form a pseudo-familial intimacy with BTS, showcasing a pattern of bypassing geopolitical conflicts.

Part III: Multimodal Practices and Engagement deals with the multimodal discourse and cultural engagement of the public consumption of BTS’s media content and offline environments.

In Chapter 8, Joowon Suh defines “reaction videos,” which have recently become a massive genre on the YouTube platform, as a “third space.” Through the case of a Korean-American YouTuber, she proves that reaction videos go beyond the mere consumption of content: They are an active arena for identity negotiation where fans reveal their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identities and rearrange

the cultural hierarchy imposed by the existing mainstream media.

In Chapter 9, Melody Lynch-Kimery explores how BTS and ARMY create temporary “linguistic marketplace pop-ups” in physical US hubs with strong English-centricism, such as the Hyundai commercial premiere in Times Square and the American Music Awards (AMAs). The fans’ Korean fan chants and Hangul signage reconfigure the linguistic landscape and soundscape of these spaces to be Korean-centered, holding symbolic value by dispersing the power of English, the dominant language.

In Chapter 10, Hakyoon Lee examines various advertisements (Lotte Duty Free, Baskin-Robbins, etc.) featuring BTS as models through multimodal discourse analysis. She structurally unravels how playful subversion—use of color semiotics, bilingual wordplay (e.g., visualizing LDF as the Hangul “냠” [nyam]), and phonetic variations within the ads—enhances the commercial appeal of the products while simultaneously maximizing BTS’s unique pop-culture narrative.

BTS and Languages: K-Pop Transcending Language and Communication elevates BTS beyond a simple idol group into an important sociolinguistic lens for understanding language hybridity, cultural fusion, and alternative communication methods of the digital age in modern society. In particular, the chapter-by-chapter analyses clearly show how Korean, a non-mainstream language in the global media environment, uses popular culture as a medium to reorganize Western-centric dominant linguistic power and open an arena of horizontal and inclusive communication with a global fandom. This book is a good academic guide providing very deep insights for scholars wishing to study the evolution of multilingual communication and fandom culture at the intersection of linguistics, media studies, and cultural studies.

References

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