The Sociolinguistic Consumption of K-pop

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Abstract

The notion of sociolinguistic consumption distinguishes between the direct consumption of languages as denotational codes and the indirect consumption of linguistic repertoires that result from engaging in various activities. Since consumption as identity construction means gaining membership into a community of like-minded others, this raises the question of what the presence of these others might mean for the indirect consumption of linguistic repertoires as well as whether initial interest in one activity might lead to interest in yet other activities in a kind of chain consumption, thus further expanding the linguistic repertoire. This paper shows that K-pop presents us with just such scenarios. It makes the following three points. One, experienced consumers of K-pop provide translations and glossaries of key terms for newer K-pop fans, serving as language brokers. Two, interest in K-pop can lead to interest in other aspects of Korean culture, indicating the need to recognize that consumption can foster an anthropological stance. Finally, the indirect consumption of linguistic repertoires can, in turn, lead to the direct consumption of denotational codes, with implications for the roles of identity and investment in language learning.

Keywords: identity, investment, fandom, Korea, repertoires, stance

INTRODUCTION

The notion of sociolinguistic consumption (Stroud and Wee 2007) distinguishes between the direct consumption of languages as denotational codes (e.g., 'I want to learn the Japanese language') and the indirect consumption of linguistic repertoires as a result of engaging in various activities such as having an interest in wine (e.g., 'I learnt some French words because I enjoy drinking wine'). The former has typically been the focus of language learning studies. The latter, however, has been given less attention.

Consumption is a significant aspect of how identities are constructed and legitimized in late modernity (Bauman 1998). In this regard, Stroud and Wee's (2007) discussion of indirect consumption considered only a relatively simple scenario, where participation in a particular activity leads to

the expansion of the individual's linguistic repertoire. But consumption as identity construction also means gaining membership into a community of like-minded others. It needs to be asked what the presence of these others might mean for the indirect consumption of linguistic repertoires. Another question that arises concerns scenarios that go beyond the simple one, where initial interest in one activity leads to interest in yet other activities in a kind of chain consumption, concomitantly expanding the linguistic repertoire. If such scenarios exist, what might then be the implications for our understanding of how consumption, language learning and identity are related?

We show that K-pop presents us with just such scenarios, where a community of K-pop fans plays an important role in helping newer fans gain familiarity with various Korean terms and phrases. K-pop is a part of Hallyu ('Korean Wave'), which refers to the global spread and popularity of South Korean pop music ('K-pop') and serialized television dramas ('K-dramas'). Though other aspects of Korean culture such as the cuisine and the cosmetics may also be implicated, it is the exposure to K-pop and K-dramas that oftentimes fosters interest in these other cultural products and activities. K-pop and K-drama are thus the main channels by which Korean popular culture in its many different forms comes to be globally appreciated and pursued with enthusiasm.

We focus on K-pop here though our arguments are also relevant to the consumption of K-dramas.[1] We make three points. One, there are experienced consumers of K-pop who provide translations of song lyrics as well as glossaries of key terms for other K-pop fans. These more experienced consumers act like language brokers (Morales and Hanson 2005).

Two, interest in K-pop constitutes an initial point of sociolinguistic consumption that can lead to interest in other aspects of Korean culture. This indicates that consumption can lead to the fostering of what we call an 'anthropological stance', where general interest and positive inclination towards Korean culture are encouraged. Understanding how this anthropological stance is cultivated requires treating semiotics as a material phenomenon (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Three, the indirect consumption of linguistic repertoires can lead to the direct consumption of denotational codes. We show how interest in K-pop can lead to a desire to learn the Korean language itself. There are implications here for the roles of identity and investment (Norton 2013).

We begin by providing some background into the spread of Hallyu and, specifically, K-pop.

K-POP AND HALLYU

The spread of Hallyu first gained momentum in the 1990s, due to the successes of the 1991 television drama What is Love? and the 2000 concert by the Korean boy band H.O.T. Outside of their country, both were mainly successful in China. This initial success encouraged South Korea to take the view that its cultural products could find purchase in overseas markets. It was this early success that led to the term 'Hallyu' being coined by Beijing journalists to describe this overseas interest in Korean popular culture Elite Asia Marketing Team 2017).

The success of Hallyu has been a major boost to the Korean economy. According to a 2019 survey by the Korea Tourism Organization (Hong 2020):

> … K-pop was a major influence on Hallyu-related tourism.

> … Some of the K-pop related experiences in which respondents said they participated included buying merchandise related to K-pop stars, visiting subway ads for K-pop stars, visiting K-pop agency merchandise stores, visiting music video filming sites, and visiting cafés owned by K-pop stars.

Sherman (2020) notes that early K-pop bands like H.O.T and S.E.S were very much modeled on American boy bands, J-pop and R&B pop. However, inspired by their domestic and global successes, K-pop gradually found the confidence to work distinct from pop trends that happened to be prevalent in the US rather than emulating such trends. Thus, while from around 2015 onwards, US pop seemed to prefer the more introspective sounds of Billie Eilish and Lana Del Rey, K-Pop idol music 'was the opposite … a maximalist dreamland full of color, high concept performances and

videos, a plethora of performers and unrivaled choreography' (Sherman 2020). K-pop is intended to be enjoyed visually as well as aurally (Lawrensen 2019).

Today, K-pop groups like Blackpink and BTS have been ranked by Bloomberg as among the biggest pop bands in the world (Lim 2020). The music of BTS, for example, has hit the number one spot in the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada etc. It has been estimated that BTS' contribution to South Korea's GDP is almost comparable with Korean Air (Bucholz, 2019).

TRANSLATIONS, GLOSSARIES, AND CHAIN CONSUMPTION

While the catchy music and slick production values helped to make the K-pop products attractive, what really propelled K-pop into a global phenomenon are two factors: accessibility and participation. The first refers to the ease of access that fans have to K-pop products. The second refers to the active participation that fans enjoy with regards to how they might interact with their K-pop idols as well as amongst themselves. Both are facilitated by the widespread adoption of social media and digital technologies (Genius n.d.):

> Korea fully embraced popular social media networks like Facebook (unlike other Asian nations like China, who have their own networks and rarely use international social feeds). This meant K-pop could quite easily be shared online and make its way around the world, with little effort involved.

A good demonstration of how K-Pop has made use of social media and digital platforms to engage its fans is Soompi, an international online K-pop community. According to Wang (2018), 'its users — 22 million and growing fast — spend hours translating lyrics and analyzing K-pop's notoriously intricate music videos …'

A major reason for K-Pop's global reach, then, is its use of social media and digital technologies that allow easy access to the music and accompanying videos. The video content is usually in Korean though automated captioning options and the enthusiastic work of translators make what might otherwise be completely incomprehensible song lyrics or conversations (in cases of interviews with K-Pop performers) easier to follow. For example, Genius English Translations (Genius n.d.) is an online community of users who provide voluntary translations of song lyrics. The English translation to the lyrics of K-Pop songs is categorized under 'Genius Korea' (Kookie_iring n.d.) Media messages do not merely circulate unchanged but, rather, are recontextualized and may even become incorporated into the repertoires of individuals (Rymes 2012). Translation is a form of recontextualization and the ease with which these translated works circulate contributes to the expansion of the linguistic[2] repertoires of K-pop consumers as they are then also able to understand what is being sung.

Social media and digital platforms also enable fan participation. Fans not only watch music videos or other K-pop related content; they can also interact with their idols and with one another, thus further enhancing the sense of community amongst consumers of K-pop. Consider the case of Blackpink. The official YouTube channel of Blackpink (2022) has 62.7 million subscribers. A music video by one of the group's members, Rosé, 'On the ground', premiered on 12 March 2021. It has more than 197 million views. Particularly interesting is that it has more than 2 million comments, such as the following ('Blinks' is the collective name for fans of Blackpink):

> (i)
>
> This song fits best on rosé, it def. made for her. only queen rosé can sing it perfectly.
>
> (ii)
>
> ROSÈ is being herself through the lyrics
>
> (iii)
>
> Blinks let's make this song reach 200M, Rosé very hard work deserves it
>
> (iv)
>
> This masterpiece deserves getting 200M. GO BLINKS!

(i-v) garnered, respectively, 146 Likes, 2.6 thousand Likes, 15 Likes, 14 Likes and 9.5 thousand Likes. Additionally, (i) garnered 4 replies such as 'yes!!! the voice her is perfect' and 'Exactly'. (ii) garnered 33 replies, including 'Yeah', 'True' and 'Yes'.

These are not in-depth critiques or reviews of the video, nor are they expected to be. They are succinct expressions of affect, in this case, positive affect. The opportunity for a fan to 'Like' or 'Dislike' a video, the ability to post a comment that might elicit reactions from other fans – these are facilities that serve to materialize in no trivial way what Ahmed (2004a, b) calls the affective economy. Ahmed (2004b: 120-121) points out that:

> Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to 'contain' affect.

Affect works as a form of capital when it circulates, gaining in value. For example, in discussing hate (racist) speech, Ahmed (2004b: 119) suggests that 'Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement'. The circulation of affect, however, only makes sense once we acknowledge the need to recognize a material semiotics. A more sophisticated understanding of the nature of materiality requires considering the capacities of entities to have effects as well to be affected. A sharp knife, for example, has a different capacity than a blunt one, but even a sharp knife lacks the capacity to cut titanium (DeLanda 2015: 18-19). As DeLanda (2015: 17) points out:

> This implies that capacities can be real without being actual. The technical term for this ontological condition is 'virtual'. This double life of material systems, always actual and virtual, has been emphasised by contemporary materialist philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze: The virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual.

The digital streaming and sharing platforms that K-pop uses have virtual capacities that allow fans to not only view performances but to also share and respond to comments. These capacities are fully and enthusiastically utilized by fans. As illustrated in the Blackpink YouTube channel, as more fans post Likes and positive comments that in turn receive supportive replies, this creates amongst the Blinks a shared appreciation of Blackpink's artistic products. In addition to translation, another way in which messages are recontextualized is via metacommentary (Rymes 2014: 11) The Likes are metacomments, as are the various replies that may be made in response to earlier comments. These metacomments may contribute to how the post is received since readers may Like a comment to encourage others to do the same.

These practices help foster a self-awareness of being a part of a community, in this case, a community of Blackpink supporters, evidenced by the self-referential use of 'Blinks' as a form of salutation ('Blinks, let's make …' and 'GO BLINKS!'). This self-awareness can even go from providing expressions of support and appreciation to active attempts at contributing to the group's success. Hence, the exhortation in (iii) and (iv) by fans to deliberately help push the video towards having 200 million views. In other words, the circulation of K-pop fandom is not to be understood as something which pre-exists in a stable state independent of digital platforms. Rather, these platforms have capacities which effect changes on the nature of this fandom even as they facilitate its circulation.

Moreover, this active engagement with K-pop groups serves to encourage deeper interest in the lives and activities of the idols. It is well known that fans of K-pop avidly keep track of the kinds of products that their idols may use or endorse, contributing significantly to the demand for these products. Thus, Kim (2020) notes the multiple times that K-pop and K-beauty have come together, including BTS, and various lines of cosmetics. And BTS has even collaborated with McDonald's on a 'BTS Meal' (Park 2021). The power of K-pop endorsement is such that fans may even purchase an item simply because it happens to be something that a K-pop idol uses. According to Park (2021):

It has long been known that anything BTS touches will immediately sell out, even items they do not intentionally promote; a fabric softener sold out for two months after Jungkook [one of the members of BTS] mentioned once that he used it.

When RM (the leader of BTS) was spotted reading Early Death, an out-of-print book about Korean artists who died young, this led to demand for copies of the book (The Straits Times 2021).

The case of K-pop thus shows how the consuming of the music and the videos can lead to yet further consumption – of fashion, food, cosmetics, fabric softener, and books. In the course of such consumption activities, fans either pick up particular lexical items ('Hallyu' is of course one obvious example) or they are enjoined to do so – the latter being rationalized on the grounds these are 'slang terms' that 'true fans' ought to be familiar with.

These glossary providers – perhaps even more so than the translators of song lyrics – play a similar role to that of language brokers. Language brokers are typically understood to be young children of immigrant families who, having learnt the language of the host country faster and better than their parents, then take on the responsibility of acting as translators to facilitate communication between their family members and various actors in the new society (e.g., shopkeepers, doctors, police officers, welfare officers). Many of them even take pride in being tasked with such work, noting that it oftentimes earns them respect and admiration from others (Crafter 2018). In the case of K-pop glossary providers, acting as language guides to the many fans for whom Korean is a completely foreign language also imbues them with a sense of pride and respect. This is especially since the information is presented online and fellow K-pop consumers can convey their appreciation in the comments section. The responsibility here involves not merely glossing particular lexical items, it also involves making decisions about what items to gloss.

Some of these lexical items are reproduced below from one such site (Koreaboo 2018):

1. Aegyo 'Acting really cute … can be performed by both male and females (sic). It is often expected from idols'

2. Jeongmal 'The Korean way for (sic) expressing disbelief and annoyance.'

3. Maknae 'The youngest member of each K-pop group'

Yet other lexical items from other sites include Hello to Hallyu. N.d. :

Fighting! or Hwa-ting!: A motivational phrase meaning "You can do it!", "good luck!", or "let's go!" often said at sporting events and before performances.

Visual: The member in a K-pop group that fulfills the role of "best looking" who serves as the face of the group. Although opinions differ among fans, according to the industry producers, this idol is the most conventionally attractive.

Some of these are Korean words. Others are English words but with meanings specific to K-pop. Becoming acquainted with these lexical items is one important way in which fans establish their 'credentials' as 'true fans' of K-Pop.

However, the Korean lexical items that K-pop fans pick up or are enjoined to acquire are not always necessarily related to the music or the performances. Fans also access clips showing their idols giving interviews, taking part in game shows, practising their dance routines or simply having fun. In other words, K-pop groups also produce other content that give fans the chance to experience other aspects of their favorite performers. Run BTS! is a web series freely available in which the band members are seen playing games or taking on activities where they are rewarded with prizes or given punishments. And Bangtan Bombs are short behind the scenes videos, available on the group's YouTube channel, Bangtantv. These show the members having fun during award shows, rehearsal sessions or live performances. Weverse is a mobile app and web platform for communications between artists and their fans. Individual K-pop idols may use the app to interact with fans and post photos of themselves (Kachroo 2021). Contents such as these encourage fans to view their K-pop idols as more than just performers. Fans get to see

them as individuals with quirks and lives beyond the polished performances.

Consequently, the lexical items that K-pop fans are encouraged to know include words that provide insights into Korean culture because they are expressions that indicate how Koreans might react or respond to particular situations. The following words and accompanying commentary are from a posting by a K-pop fan (Polina, 2020):

> "*Annyeonghaseyo*" (안녕하세요) means "Hello" in Korean.
>
> This is the most common greeting in Korea and actually means "Are you at peace?" You can also use the short form, "*Annyeong*" (안녕), for more casual conversation as it means both "Hi" and "Goodbye."
>
> "*Saranghaeyo*" (사랑해요) means "I love you" in Korean.
>
> It may be an expression of love for most couples in Korea, but this word is often used to express fans' feelings of love to their bias [i.e., their favourite member of the group] as well. As such, this is typically a Korean word fans learn almost immediately.
>
> "*Gamsahamnida*" (감사합니다) means "Thank you" in Korean.

Fans therefore expand their linguistic repertoires as a result of being engaged in various K-pop related activities. But as the examples above also show, through this indirect consumption of linguistic repertoire, fans may also go on to explore other Korean products such as cosmetics and fashion. Here, too, glossary providers are available to suggest relevant lexical items, as these 'K-beauty' examples from Arcano (2017) illustrate:

> Chok-chok
>
> This term refers to ultra-hydrated skin that looks borderline moist. It's the K-beauty way of referring to very dewy skin.
>
> *Gwang* refers to the luminous, lit-from-within sheen of hydrated skin.

But more than just the consumption of specific products, K-pop fans are also quite likely to become more aware of particular aspects of Korean culture, such as the emphasis on respect for seniors. It is useful at this point to further consider the case of BTS.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STANCE

BTS fans or ARMY pay keen attention not just to the performances or to the kinds of items the group endorses, they are also deeply interested in how the individual members behave and act, onstage and off. And such interest can lead to observations that, rightly or not, are attributed to the group's Korean identity. For example, Lyons (2020a, b) notes how Jungkook, the youngest BTS member, consistently demonstrates his respect for his elders:

> Lyons (2020a)
>
> At a concert last year, a fancam captured **Jungkook** twirling around near the stage's edge. When he spotted a grandmother in the crowd, he paused to bow to her while flashing his sweetest smile.
>
> Lyons (2020b):
>
> That time he stopped performing to bow to an elder ARMY.
>
> During BTS's 5th Muster: Magic Shop concert, the Golden Maknae spotted a Golden Girl in the audience. He stopped dancing … and bowed to her to show his respect.

And on Amino, an app that brings together communities with shared interests, a post by emberxfae (2018) notes how RM, also known as Namjoon, is respectful to his elders during a drinking session:

> In South Korea the younger generations are taught that they must honor the older generations without expressing any criticism or demanding any conditions …

South Korean drinking etiquette demands that the younger individual turn and not

face the elder while drinking. In the video, Namjoon was seen doing his best to observe the etiquette despite being surrounded by elders so that no matter where he turned, he was facing someone senior.

The availability of video clips showing K-pop idols behaving in various ways, not all of which are strictly related to the performance of their music has the potential to stoke general interest in Korean culture. This more general interest is facilitated because K-pop products do not attempt to mask or downplay their Koreanness. The continued use of the Korean language – in the music and in interviews – is one clear indicator of this.³

Brown-Saracino (2009) suggests that there appears to be a relatively widespread interest among individuals in the consumption of cultural products that provide the consumer with some 'insight experience' into the culture of others. Brown-Saracino (2009: 192, referencing Peterson and Kern 1996) calls such individuals 'cultural omnivores.' The cultural omnivore 'celebrates the idiosyncratic character of people and place …' (Brown-Saracino 2009: 192). Bearing this in mind, we can see how K-Pop is able to hold an attraction from a cultural omnivore's perspective. It is positioned as a celebration of Korean pop culture that is also global in orientation. And it is presented in sufficiently small doses (music videos, chats) that are accompanied by translations and glossaries that make the act of cultural consumption both easy to access and highly participatory.

A taste for cultural omnivorism can easily turn into an anthropological stance – that is, a general interest in better understanding a society's various cultural practices and values – when small doses become bigger and more varied doses, as happens with chain consumption and exposure to other aspects of Korean culture beyond the initial interest in K-pop. At this point, it is important to underscore the affordances (Gibson 1966, 1979) that come with the use of social media and digital technologies, both of which have been so critical to K-pop's global success.

Put simply, the affordances of a particular object refer to the interactional options that are available to the agent vis-à-vis the object. The interactional options can be broadly construed to include a variety of possibilities (mental, physical and perceptual) that either enable or constrain the agent's ability to act. Greeno (1994: 336, 338) describes Gibson's notion of affordance as 'an interactionist view' where 'In any interaction involving an agent with some other system, conditions that enable that interaction include some properties of the agent along with some properties of the other system'. K-pop's use of social media and digital technologies allow fans greater and sustained exposure to various facets of Korean culture even if the initial interest was only in the music. Given the fact that many fans globally would not be familiar with the language, the roles played by glossary providers and communities of translators in fostering the anthropological stance cannot be overestimated. These 'language brokers' not only help to make otherwise incomprehensible content accessible; they also signal that the language need not represent an insurmountable barrier and may actually become a source of fascination, thus possibly encouraging others to learn the language itself. The effectiveness of these language brokers is of course reliant on and enabled by the widespread use and availability of social media and digital technologies.

THE DIRECT CONSUMPTION OF THE KOREAN LANGUAGE

Of particular interest from the perspective of sociolinguistic consumption is the wider adoption of Korean words on the internet. Park (2020) provides the following illustrations:

> For K-pop fans, using simple and common Korean words in English is a novelty. Along with the ultra-common "oppa," (a simultaneously innocent and intimate girlish address to a boy or man who is older than the female speaker — often translated as "older brother") words like "daebak" (an exclamation meaning "awesome!" or "jackpot!") and phrases like "saranghae" (I love you) are some of the most commonly used by K-pop fans on websites.

This use of occasional Korean terms has opened the door towards the direct con-

sumption of the Korean language itself, that is, a focus on Korean as a denotational code. According to MacDonald (2019, no page numbers):

> The interest [in K-pop] has prompted fans to study Hangul in both traditional and innovative ways that include YouTube, individual and college courses, immersion programs, language learning sites and/or via Hallyu fan sites.

> In answer to a company-conducted poll, 90% of their students cited an interest in k-pop as part of the reason they decided to study in Korea.

As examples, consider the following responses to a Reddit discussion about whether K-pop influenced one's decision to learn Korean (LostSoulsAlliance 2018):

> Yes, yes, and it was worth it during the 8 years I was into K-Pop. Stopped learning it when I lost interest in following groups, watching their shows, etc. It was still a fun hobby though.

> Since coming back to Kpop I've been more motivated to learn hangul to start off! Hoping to make sometime after school but i've been busy lately.

> I initially picked up on words and learned the alphabet by reading translated lyrics and watching Korean dramas and variety shows 2 years ago. Now I'm actually learning the language properly on my own time.

> Yes I did because I thought I might as well understand what I'm listening to. I didn't care at first but you get curious after a while.

> Been studying Korean for over 5 years now thanks to Kpop. Got my level 5 on the TOPIK 2 a couple years ago and am fluent to read Korean newspapers with somewhat ease.

> I'm currently learning because of kpop, starting with the LingoDeer app … So far it's been worth it and I think it'll continue to be worth it since I intend on visiting Korea in the future, it's been rewarding being able to read

and recognize small things like idol group names in youtube video titles or some phrases in dramas.

The K-pop industry is aware that many who began as fans of the music are also developing an interest in the language. Thus, BTS and Big Hit, the company that runs the group, have even started providing language lessons (Delgado 2020):

> To say many ARMYs were excited by the prospect of official BTS Korean lessons would be an understatement. "WE ARE GETTING A NEW PROGRAM CALLED "Learn Korean with BTS" WHERE THERES KOREAN EDUCATION CONTENT WITH BTS... BTS RLLY GONNA BE OUR TEACHERS," someone commented, while others were simply ready to ditch Duolingo for Bangtan.

HYBE Corporation launched the video series 'Learn Korean with BTS' also on Weverse. According to Delgado (2020):

> "Learn Korean with BTS is a short-form content designed to make it easy and fun for global fans who have difficulty enjoying BTS' music and contents due to the language barrier," the company wrote in its press email. "We hope that through learning Korean, global fans will be able to deeply empathize with the music of artists and enjoy a wide range of contents." …

> "We are preparing Korean language education content for our fans," Bang Si-Hyuk, Big Hit's founder, said ... "There are many fans who can't enjoy Big Hit content to the fullest due to the language barrier. Foreign media point out that there is 'more demand for learning Korean thanks to K-pop,' but there are only limited ways our fans could learn Korean with ease."

BTS and HYBE Corporation[4] are by no means alone. WeeTV has launched 'K-Language School' and tvN has launched 'K-Pop Cultural Center', both designed to take advantage of interest in the language arising from the popularity of K-pop (Park 2020).

The decision to learn the Korean is interesting not least because language learning requires a fair amount of time and effort. This is not to assume that all who decide to learn the language are engaged in the endeavour with the same degree of commitment, of course. Nevertheless, the decision itself is significant because it, perhaps more so than the buying of Korean cosmetics, eating of Korean food or visiting the country, points to the presence of the anthropological stance being slowly but surely cultivated as a marker of Hallyu's success. This is because, as the Reddit examples demonstrate, the motivations for learning the denotational code itself can be an intention to visit Korea or a wish to be involved in more complex and nuanced exchanges such as reading newspapers.

Norton's (1995, 2000, 2013) arguments about investment in language learning are relevant here. Investment provides an important contrast to the more individualized attention that is usually given to motivation. 'While constructs of motivation frequently view the individual as having a unitary and coherent identity with specific character traits, investment regards the learner as a social being with a complex identity that changes across time and space and is reproduced in social interaction' (Darvin and Norton 2015: 37, italics added). Identity is not a fixed attribute but rather, something that changes and develops over time. It is 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (Norton 2013: 45). Norton (Darvin and Norton 2015) sees investment as a function of identity, ideology and capital. That is, a language learner's investment in a given language depends on the person's identity (which can include not only how that person sees themselves at a given point in time but, crucially, how that person also sees what they will become in an imagined future). It also depends on the prevailing ideologies, that is, normative sets of ideas which are viewed as having legitimacy (Darvin and Norton 2015: 43), especially to the extent that they influence the value of and access to kinds of capital (economic, social, culture, following Bourdieu 1986).

Those who are invested in learning Korean as a result of an initial exposure to K-pop identify as primarily as K-pop fans.

The various K-Pop initiatives for promoting language learning recognize and understand this. Which is why the language lessons that have been created are careful to retain their ties to K-Pop lyrics and performers. Severing this tie would undermine the investment that K-Pop fans have in wanting to learn the language. The concomitant ideologies would then involve an acceptance and even a highlighting of their identities as consumers of K-pop. And while it is not impossible for some fans to convert their fandom and knowledge of Korean language, culture and society into economic capital, the more likely form of capital involved would be cultural. For example, having greater insights into and understanding of Korean culture, especially Korean pop culture – as compared to other fans – may allow for the accumulation of distinction, and it is this greater experience and knowledge that may even lead some fans to over time become 'language brokers' for their less experienced counterparts.

In all this, it is necessary to keep in mind that identity and investment are enabled by the material processes that constitute the multiple ways in which learners are able to interact with and hence, experience K-pop. Learners' initial exposure to K-pop and the indirect consumption of the affiliated linguistic repertoire as well as the subsequent impetus towards the direct consumption of the language as a denotational code are all significantly afforded and shaped by the consistent use of newer apps, digital platforms and streaming devices. Their understandings of what it means to be speaking or more broadly, using, Korean are inextricably linked up with their ever-evolving exposures to the web series and reality shows prepared by K-pop agencies as well as (for those who want a more 'traditional' mode of learning) language courses taught at schools or universities. This is a point that Darvin and Norton (2015: 41, references omitted) are at pains to emphasize when they note that 'Technology has not only reshaped the way we communicate but also enabled new forms of labor and modes of productivity … As social media, SMS, email, and other Web 2.0 functionalities allow them to speak by writing, literacy has become even more essential in being able to claim the right to speak'.

While these observations are correct, they do not go quite far enough. The point that needs emphasizing is that language it-

self is material. As Shankar and Cavanaugh (2017: 1-2, italics in original) point out:

> Rather than view language and materiality in tandem by conceptualizing materiality alongside but distinct from language, we focus instead on the materiality of language, or what we call language materiality …
>
> To regard linguistic practices and the ideologies that shape them as immaterial is to miss not only how language interacts with physical objects, environments, and forces but also to elide the material nature of linguistic practice itself – its sounds, shape, and material presences …

The use of digital technologies does not merely allow one to 'speak by writing'; it transforms in non-trivial ways what it means to speak, to write and to be literate. Learning how to combine words with emojis and gifs, how to understand or interpret the intended meanings of emojis and gifs, how to share links to particular websites, how to upload or download documents and pictures, how to contribute to a communication thread when (as in WhatsApp) there can be multiple conversational topics going on – these are skills that are essential to successful digital communication. Rather than treating 'digital literacy' as separate from 'language literacy', it is important from the perspective of language learning to see these as critically intertwined. It is only by treating language itself as material that 'language can be seen as an entrée into the material conditions under which it is produced, encountered, and circulates' (Shankar and Cavanaugh (2017: 3).

It is also worth reminding ourselves that media messages do not merely circulate unchanged; they are often recontextualized and may even become incorporated into the repertoires of individuals (Rymes 2012, see above). In the case of the sociolinguistic consumption of K-pop, this means appreciating how song lyrics and various phrases that are encountered by fans of K-pop through social and digital media (consider this an initial context) have been skilfully recontextualized by corpora-

tions like HYBE, WeeTV and tvN as parts of a language learning content so that individuals who wish to learn Korean are able to establish links between their initial encounters with the language and a more carefully curated curriculum (this would be a second context). And of course, it is the hope of these corporations that as a person's language proficiency in Korean grows, this will in turn feedback into their consumption of K-pop so that they can better 'empathize with the music of artists and enjoy a wide range of content' (Delgado 2020, see above) (thus constituting yet a third context).

In this regard, Bonta and Protevi (2004: 4, following Deleuze and Guattari 1987) point out that signs must be treated as material entities which can therefore bring about material effects (which the specific effects in question are dependent on the medium involved):

> The problematic of the external reference of the signifier, which so troubles post-Saussurean doctrines, is thus bypassed. Signs are no longer limited to linguistic entities that must somehow make contact with the natural world, and sense or meaning need no longer be seen as the reference of signifiers to each other. Rather, the 'meaning' of a sign is a measure of the probability of triggering a particular material process.

Signs therefore do not merely represent or refer as though the semiotic not only occupies a non-material realm but, worse still, a non-material self-enclosed system that must then somehow try to establish a connection with the material world; the semiotic is material. Because of this, signs can have material effects on other signs by initiating a process where other signs are then ordered. Note that this is highly consequential in that a sign is now understood to not only have material effects, it also goes against a strict understanding of the autonomy of signs as constituting self-contained and sharply bounded systems. This, too, is why Deleuze and Guattari recognize the need for 'mixed semiotics', the idea that there are multiple regimes of signification which do not

necessarily fall into neatly demarcated and consistently separable systems (Bonta and Protevi 2004: 8).

CONCLUSION

Our examination of K-pop from the lens of sociolinguistic consumption has demonstrated how chain consumption can lead to an expansion of one's linguistic repertoire, and how this is facilitated by the presence of language brokers, particularly by more experienced consumers who provide translations and glossaries. We have also shown how the early move towards the indirect consumption of linguistic repertoires does not preclude the direct consumption of denotational codes. Rather, the former can lead to the latter as the anthropological stance is further entrenched and the interest in Korean culture deepened. In all this, we have emphasized that it is critical to acknowledge the affordances that come with the adoption of various forms of social media and digital technologies, and the implications that a material semiotics carries for how identity and investment figure in language learning.

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ENDNOTES

1 The data for this paper comes from a bigger project that presents a sociolinguistic analysis of the relationship between Hallyu and soft power (see authors, under preparation). The project draws on policy documents, media reports, comments from consumers of K-drama and K-pop on platforms such as Reddit, Twitter and YouTube.

2. We use 'linguistic repertoire' here because our focus is on the learning of the Korean language. Rymes (2014: 9-10) uses 'communicative repertoire' because, as she rightly recognizes, communication involves more than just language and draws upon other resources such as posture, dress and insider knowledge about cultural practices.

3 Though BTS have also begun releasing singles such as Dynamite and Butter, which are in English, this is after their Korean identity has already been firmly established. Moreover, there is no indication that they are moving completely to releasing only English songs. Rather, the English songs appear to be ventures that sit alongside the Korean ones.

4 HYBE Corporation was originally established as Big Hit Entertainment in 2005. As of 2021, it became known as HYBE Corporation.