

A Rhetorical Critique of BTS's United Nations Speeches from the Perspective of Ideological Criticism

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Introduction and Problem Statement:

In recent decades, Korean pop music (K-pop) has transcended its status as a mere entertainment industry to become an effective instrument for the exercise of soft power and cultural diplomacy. BTS, as one of the most prominent groups within this genre, plays a key role in promoting the values, cultural identity, and ideology of the South Korean state. The group's global renown, extending beyond their artistic activities to encompass their social and humanitarian messages and their appearances on international platforms such as the United Nations, has rendered them a significant subject within cultural and political studies. The presence and speeches delivered by BTS members at the UN General Assembly in 2018 and 2021 raise the question of whether these actions merely pursue cultural and humanitarian objectives, or whether they conceal underlying political and cultural ideologies and functions. Previous research has largely concentrated on the dimensions of musical popularity, the economics of the entertainment industry, and fan interactions (fandom), with less attention paid to the discourse-analytical and ideological examination of BTS's speeches. Consequently, a significant research gap exists concerning the critical analysis of these speeches as tools of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Aiming to fill this gap, this study seeks to uncover the latent ideologies and the cultural-political functions embedded within BTS's UN speeches. The main research questions are: What ideologies, values, and socio-cultural messages do these speeches represent? What relationship exists between these messages and South Korea's soft power policies? How are rhetorical devices employed to persuade a global audience? And whose interests or currents does this ideological approach ultimately serve?

Conceptual Framework and Methodology:

The present study is grounded in the approach of "ideological rhetorical criticism." This approach, rooted in cultural studies and communication sciences, posits that every communicative artifact carries specific ideologies and value beliefs that may be manifest or latent within the text. The primary objective of this method is to uncover and delineate the ideology embedded in the text and to examine how power relations and cultural hegemony are represented. Within this

framework, ideology is defined as a "system of ideas, beliefs, and values" that can motivate individual and collective actions and contribute to legitimizing or transforming the status quo. The data for this research consist of the full transcripts of two BTS speeches (led by RM) delivered at the 75th (2018) and 76th (2021) sessions of the UN General Assembly. The analytical process was conducted in three main stages:

- **Identification of Explicit Elements of the Artifact:** In this stage, sentences, keywords, metaphors, and prominent concepts directly employed in the speeches were extracted. These elements include concepts such as "love yourself," "listen to your voice," "generation of acceptance," and metaphors such as "darkest night" and "stars."
- **Discovery of Latent Elements and Significations:** In this step, the critic sought the implicit meanings and concealed concepts behind the explicit elements. This was accomplished by examining the network of signifiers and signifieds to unveil the ideology lurking beneath the naturalized surface of the speeches. For instance, the phrase "We are BTS, cultural representatives of South Korea" implies a diplomatic and identity-based role for the group.
- **Identification of the Principal Ideologies:** In the final stage, the ideologies extracted from both speeches were classified, analyzed, and compared to elucidate the overarching structure of South Korea's soft power discourse.

Research Findings:

The analysis of the speeches revealed that each possesses a distinct yet complementary ideological structure.

❖ The 2018 Speech: The Ideology of Self-Love and Individual Resilience

This speech is structured around the concept of "love yourself, speak yourself." Utilizing personal narratives concerning feelings of loneliness, depression, and frustration stemming from the cancellation of world tours during the pandemic, BTS seeks to establish identification with the audience. The underlying ideology promotes a form of positive individualism, wherein the individual is responsible for discovering, accepting, and cultivating the self, and through this process, can exert influence on the global community. The primary rhetorical strategy is employing personal narrative to build trust and empathy. The core message is transforming "self-love" into a step toward building a better world. This approach projects an image of South Korea as an innovative, humanistic, and culturally productive nation.

• The 2021 Speech: The Ideology of Collective Hope and Global Responsibility

In this speech, the discourse transcends individuality and emphasizes "solidarity" and "collective responsibility." By redefining the younger generation, BTS presents them not as a "lost generation," but as a "generation of acceptance" capable of embracing challenges and shaping the future. The rhetorical strategy in this section involves using tangible imagery (such as the cancellation of ceremonies) and motivational messages (finding new solutions). The latent ideology is the transformation of global crises (pandemic, climate change) into opportunities for growth, learning, and the discovery of human values. In this speech, BTS acts as a "cultural spokesperson for South Korea," presenting a responsible and ethical image of Korean culture by

addressing global concerns (such as environmental issues). Analysis of the discursive oppositions in both speeches reveals that the rhetorical structure is built upon contrasts such as "despair versus hope," "individualism versus collectivism," "limitation versus freedom," and "crisis versus opportunity." These contrasts steer the audience toward an optimistic and resilient outlook. Overall, both speeches serve a unifying ideology: bolstering a global spirit of resilience in the face of crises and showcasing the soft power of South Korean culture.

Conclusion and Discussion:

This research demonstrates that BTS's speeches at the United Nations transcend mere artistic or promotional statements, functioning as effective instruments for the exercise of South Korea's soft power and cultural diplomacy. Messages such as self-love, hope, solidarity, and responsibility, while reinforcing shared human values, simultaneously solidify South Korea's cultural identity on the international stage and extend its influence by forging emotional connections with global audiences (particularly youth). In other words, the language of music and pop culture has been transformed into a language for cultural policy and public diplomacy.

However, the study also notes that BTS's emergence as an international symbol is not merely the result of their artistic capabilities, but also a product of support and strategic planning by a global media-promotional network. More scientifically stated, there exists a dialectical interaction between the group's international prominence and their assigned political missions; BTS appears to have become an instrument for advancing the meta-cultural objectives of the elites who dominate global media networks.

Suggestions and Limitations:

The most significant limitation of this research is its focus on only two official speeches, which may not encompass all dimensions of BTS's cultural discourse. It is suggested that future researchers conduct comparative analyses between BTS's speeches and those of other global artists, or examine their music videos and social campaigns to provide a more comprehensive picture of South Korea's soft power discourse. Furthermore, the application of complementary analytical frameworks such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and cultural semiotics could aid in revealing more latent dimensions of this complex cultural-political, legal, and ideological phenomenon.

Keywords

K-pop, BTS, Rhetorical Criticism, Ideology