



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Language As A Soft Power

A case study of Hindi language influence in China

Indrajeet Mishra

Research scholar

Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi VishwaVidyalaya

Abstract

In today's world, the role of language has evolved from merely a communication tool to a powerful asset in the soft power arsenal. Attempts to globalize a language can be beneficial for effectively deploying other soft power instruments, since language is the vehicle of culture, ideas, and vision. It thereby contributes to economic and political influence in an increasingly globalized world. In this paper, based on Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, I will explore the role of language as a constituent of soft power, with a focus on examining the competence of the Hindi language as a soft power tool and its potential influence in China.

Keywords: Soft-power, Language, Hindi, China

Introduction

In today's world, the role of language has evolved from merely a communication tool to a powerful asset in the soft power arsenal. Attempts to globalize a language can be beneficial for effectively deploying other soft power instruments, as is the vehicle of culture, ideas, and vision. It thereby contributes to economic and political influence in an increasingly globalized world. The use of language to influence other nations and their people is not a new phenomenon. History offers numerous examples where countries, through both hard and soft power, promoted their language abroad and, in doing so, extended their cultural influence and national narrative across borders. One such example dates back to the period of the Roman Empire, which successfully established Latin as a lingua franca across its vast territories, and in doing so, it provided strategic dominance and facilitated the spread of their cultural values and ideas, and it continued to influence these territories long after the fall of the Roman Empire. Similarly, during the 19th and 20th centuries, colonial powers such as Britain and France used hard power to colonize large parts of the world. They spread their languages—English and French—in such a way that these became deeply embedded in the daily lives of the colonized territories, including India. In fact, these languages are in some of these nations to this day. Due to the deep penetration of English and French, these nations have been continuously influenced by British and French cultures to such an extent that their local cultures, ideas, and values are struggling to survive. America has done something similar after the Cold War: it helped spread English across the world and thus extended its culture, values, and national perspective—not through hard power, but through the carefully calibrated use of soft power. In the current period of, the Chinese government is effectively using the Mandarin language as a soft power and public diplomacy tool to spread its culture, values, and perspective across the world. If we talk about Indian languages, long before the emergence of soft power, Sanskrit language spread in many parts of Asia, including

China, and became the vector of Indian culture, values, and spirit. The embedding of Sanskrit was so profound in these nations that it still resonates in their cultural values and ideas. Similarly, in the current context, does Hindi hold the same potential? Can Hindi match the soft power potential of languages like English, French, Chinese, and even Sanskrit? In this paper, I will analyze the potential of the Hindi language as a form of soft power, with a particular focus on its acceptance as a foreign language in China, as well as the prospects and challenges it faces in becoming a vehicle for transmitting Indian culture, values, ideas, and national perspective to China.

Concept of Soft Power

Power is something that enables you to achieve what you want and to influence others to act according to your will. Power comes from two contrasting means: one is through force, and the other is through persuasion. The latter is what we call soft power. This is not a new phenomenon—it has been present since the inception of the nation-state, but it was only conceptualized more clearly just before the turn of this century. The term soft power was coined by Joseph Nye, who referred to it as the “second face of power.” He defines it as “getting others to want the outcome that you want—it co-opts people rather than coerces them” (Nye, Jr., 2004, p. 5). In his opinion, soft power is, “in behavioral terms, soft power is attractive power; it is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument, though that is an important part of it. It is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acquiescence” (Nye, Jr., 2004, p. 6). Hard power is associated with resources like economy, military force, and natural resources, whereas soft power is intangible power that comes mainly from culture, tradition, values, diplomacy, and the ability to use them to get the intended result. However, a nation cannot solely depend on soft power to shape its global image; it has to mix it with hard power — what Joseph Nye called ‘smart power.’ It is inherent in human nature that people tend to listen to and follow those who are powerful, economically and politically sound, and possess a rich culture. To attain this quality, one must deploy hard power initially and then gradually move towards using “smart power.”

Role of Language in executing soft power

Language and soft power are intertwined. Language is a key tool for executing soft power more effectively, while soft power instruments—such as culture, diplomacy, values, and ideas—have the ability to spread a language in a globalizing world. We can observe this dynamic in the real world: when we find someone’s culture, ideas, and values, we are often motivated to learn their language. Similarly, when we find a language appealing, we tend to become curious about the culture, ideas, and values associated with it. Therefore, this interplay between language and soft power highlights that linguistic appeal and cultural influence can play a significant role in forging cross-cultural relations and helping a nation secure a stronger position in the globalized world. Based on Saussure’s (1966, p. 30) idea of language as a “treasury”—where a community deposits elements such as sound, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary—Altalouli (2021) proposes the addition of soft power techniques to this treasury. Reflecting on this idea, we can argue that the role of language has evolved from being merely a tool of communication to becoming one of the most powerful constituents of soft power and public diplomacy. Many nations have understood this notion early on and have begun using language as a form of soft power through platforms such as the British Council, Confucius Institute, AMIDEAST, and others.

Competence of Hindi as a soft-power tool

Though Hindi is not the national language of India, the majority of Indians can speak and understand it, making it a powerful tool not only for connecting with other languages of India but also for engaging with the world. According to the Ethnologue report—one of the most authoritative sources on the number, location, and status of living languages worldwide—609 million people speak Hindi globally, making it the third most spoken language in the world, after English and Mandarin. However, this data was challenged by a research

report from the now non-operational Global Hindi Research Institute, Dehradun, which claimed that Hindi is the most spoken language in the world.

Regardless of different claims, it is evident with the higher number of speakers that the Hindi language has the potential to become a powerful vehicle for disseminating Indian culture, values, ideas, and national perspectives to the world. Promoting Hindi has the potential to become a strong soft power tool, similar to English or French.

Earlier, the Hindi language was not widely recognized globally. However, after the economic liberalization of 1991, the Indian economy opened up to the world. This was also the period when the world began to recognize the importance of language in public diplomacy and its role as a form of soft power in forging cross-cultural relations. This opening up of the Indian economy to the outside world created opportunities not only in trade but also in increasing global awareness of Indian culture, values, and language. Since then, the paradigm shift in the Indian economy has brought India on the steady path of economic development. With the increasing contact with the world, Hindi has been gradually gaining popularity through concerted government efforts, increasing popularity of Hindi Bollywood films, media exports, and the government push for internationalization of yoga and Ayurveda as well.

The Government of India has been focusing on the promotion of the Hindi language worldwide. The World Hindi Conference, a government initiative to promote Hindi globally, was first held in 1975 in Nagpur. However, it gained momentum and became institutionalized only in the 1990s, being organized regularly as part of India's cultural diplomacy. In the year 2006, during the UPA government, January 10, the day on which the first World Hindi Conference was held, was declared World Hindi Day. Since then, it has been celebrated annually by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Department of Official Languages in India, along with partner countries, to promote the Hindi language.

These efforts received renewed energy under Prime Minister Modi's government, as he himself spoke in Hindi on many international platforms. The Prime Minister addressed the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2014 and 2015 in Hindi, spoke at the Climate Action Summit during the 74th session of the UNGA in 2019, and in 2021, he chaired the UNSC High-Level Open Debate on Enhancing Maritime Security, addressing the gathering in Hindi. He has used Hindi on many other such international occasions. The study reflects the current Indian government's commitment to promoting the Hindi language on the world stage. In fact, it signifies an important shift from the earlier custom where Indian leaders often refrained from speaking in Hindi on international platforms.

Apart from these symbolic gestures, the current government has also taken several concrete steps to promote the Hindi language globally. To promote Hindi at the United Nations, India launched a project titled 'Hindi@UN' in collaboration with the UN Department of Public Information. In July 2023, in pursuance of this project, India voluntarily contributed USD 1 million to promote the use of the Hindi language in the world body. One such step is the promotion of Hindi at the United Nations, as detailed in a reply given by the Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs, Shri V. Muraleedharan, in the Lok Sabha on 31/03/2023. In his reply, he stated: 'We signed a voluntary financial contribution agreement with the UN to promote Hindi within the UN system. Acting upon this agreement, the UN has launched Hindi social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as a Hindi website for UN news. In addition, the UN broadcasts its programmes on the UN Radio website in Hindi, issues a weekly Hindi news bulletin on SoundCloud, and publishes a UN blog in Hindi.'

The Government of India is also establishing Hindi language departments and academic chairs in universities across the world to promote Hindi language, literature, and culture. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has launched an initiative titled “Bharat – Ek Parichay: Sharing Knowledge with the World,” which sets up Hindi and Indian culture corners in libraries of prestigious international universities to help foreign students engage with India. Institutions like Kendriya Hindi Sansthan and Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya had been established to promote the Hindi language globally through academic exchange programs with universities around the world.

Despite its characteristics as a global language and the presence of concrete government efforts, certain limitations hinder the Hindi language's potential to become a global language and an effective tool for India's soft power diplomacy.

Limitation of Hindi language as a global language and effective soft power tools

India is a land of languages and dialects, with language changing every few steps here. With this linguistic diversity, it was impossible for our constitutional framers to adopt one specific language as a national language. Linguistic jingoism has always been so profound and intense in India that it has forced the government to form and reshape many of the Indian states based on the linguistic division. Hindi is therefore not a national language of India; it is one of the 22 scheduled languages of India. Promoting Hindi only on the global stage has always been opposed by non-Hindi states of India, claiming it is undemocratic, downplays other languages, and imposes Hindi. This relentless opposition has always been restraining successive governments from projecting Hindi as the only representative language of India. As a result, Hindi is yet to be established as a global language.

Apart from this, Hindi is not a commercial language, which means it has no economic power that can attract people around the world to learn this language in order to get benefits. The reason for this is that, although Hindi is widely spoken in India, the major economic activities still primarily use the English language. Without this, it is difficult for Hindi to be established as an official language.

Hindi has not been standardized so far; to become a global language, it must be standardized in the near future and be easily accessible for every field, including science and technology.

In India, the influence of English is so profound that people take pride in speaking it and feel ashamed in speaking Hindi, which poses a serious existential threat to the Hindi language, let alone becoming a global language that could be a part of India's soft power diplomacy.

Study of the influence of Hindi in China

Hindi, which has been vying for a global language status and become a tool of India's soft power diplomacy, would be crucial to first get the idea of its influence in neighbouring nations. I am choosing to study Hindi influence in China because of its large population, economic size, and growing trade with India.

Hindi started its journey in China in 1942 with the establishment of National College of Oriental Studies in Kunming, Yunnan province. Hindi was one of the four language courses that had been started, apart from Thai, Vietnamese, and Burmese. In 1944, at the initiative of Professor Tan Yunshan, the head of the Cheena Bhavana at Shantiniketan, Indian research scholar Shri Krishna Kinkar Sinha, who was studying at Shantiniketan, was sent to this college (in China) to teach Hindi language and Indian literature. Shri Krishna Kinkar Sinha was the first Indian entrusted with the responsibility of teaching the Hindi language in China. In 1949, after this college in Yunnan was merged into the Department of Eastern Languages of Peking University, Peking University became the center for Hindi studies in China. In the same year, Shri Prahlad Pradhan, a lecturer of the Odia language at Vidya Bhavan of Visva-Bharati, was sent to the department at

Peking University as a professor of Hindi and Sanskrit. Visva-Bharati University was actively playing a significant role in the promotion of Hindi in China.

In 1950, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and China, relations between these two Asian giants grew manifold. At that time, Premier of China Zhou Enlai, while addressing the students of Peking University, said, “India is an important country; India-China relations are critical, and I hope that the students studying Hindi in the university will develop a good command over the Hindi language (Jingkui, 2019).” The Communist Government of China, as per their ideology, promoted the works of Indian progressive writers. Writings of some of the Indian progressive writers, like Premchand, Rahul Sankrityayan, and Jainendra Kumar, were widely read and translated at this period of time. Despite all these, Hindi, unlike Japanese and Korean, failed to establish itself as a foreign language because of two main reasons: one was India’s limited influence on Chinese society; understanding India was not as important as Japan and Korea. Second, India at that period of time was not a strong economy and had no significant economic impact on China. Only a few passionate individuals in China showed enthusiasm for studying Hindi.

With the turn of the 21st century, when the economic policy of ‘Reform and Opening Up’ initiated by the Chinese government in 1978, started yielding results, China went through an unprecedented economic development. China’s trade with other countries has grown apace, including India, which in turn increased the demand for learning foreign languages, including Hindi, in China to better connect with these nations. This decade was also the period when both India and China, through various agreements and consensuses, were working towards the resolution of their differences, which provided an amicable atmosphere for cooperation. At the same time, India had liberalized its economy in 1991 and took a long stride on the path of economic development. With this economic development of India, learning Hindi became popular among Chinese people. Employment opportunities after learning the Hindi language have increased. As a result, the number of institutions that provide Hindi language courses rose to sixteen from only one institution with the turn of this century. Talking about employment opportunities for Chinese students learning Hindi, students are getting jobs in various sectors in China, such as the China Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce, the Chinese Army, and China state news agencies like CCTV and Xinhua, as well as in universities and research institutes.

Apart from these, Bollywood, being an important asset of India’s soft power tools, has been playing a great role in promoting Indian culture, values, and language to the world. Bollywood has done a tremendous deal of work in promoting Hindi in India and abroad. It has played an instrumental role in making Hindi the most representative language of India for foreigners (Bhatt, 2013, p.324). Raj Kapoor starrer film ‘Awara’, released in 1951, had unprecedented popularity in China, so much so that you can still hear Chinese people often humming the famous song of the film titled ‘Awara hu.’ During my recent visit to China in April 2024, I heard this song from many Chinese. Not only this, I have heard people quoting dialogue in Hindi from films like Bahubali and Dangal. From my personal experience, I can extrapolate the impact and deep penetration of Bollywood in Chinese society. There is no such evidence yet that can verify the role of Bollywood in promoting Hindi language learning in China; however, the extensive exposure of Bollywood Hindi films in China after the economic liberalization and the simultaneously increasing number of Chinese universities providing Hindi language courses do adduce some connection to the impact of Bollywood Hindi films on promoting Hindi language learning in China.

Conclusion

India has been on the path of rapid economic development. The NITI Aayog chairman recently claimed that India has recently surpassed Japan to become the fourth-largest economy and is now on the cusp of displacing Germany to become the third-largest economy in the next 2.5 to 3 years. India is one of the top military powers in the world. Therefore, it could be said that India is gradually acquiring all the required hard power tools to become one of the next superpowers in an increasingly multipolar world. To sustain this power for a longer period, India must not only depend on hard power; it has to execute its soft power as well, or, to put it another way, India must use 'Smart Power' to sustain its global position as one of the superpowers of the world. As far as soft power is concerned, language is an integral part of it; it acts as a vehicle for promoting culture, ideas, values, and national perspective. However, India has no national language. But considering the high numbers of Hindi speakers, it has the potential to become a global language to act as a vehicle of India's soft power. Therefore, we should first reach a broad consensus within India to project Hindi as the only language that represents India globally. In order to compete with other already established global languages like English, French, and recently Chinese, we should follow the example of their respective governments by establishing influential institutions like the British Council, AMIDEST and Confucius Institute dedicated to working towards the promotion of Hindi. India must standardize Hindi language for easy access to every field, including science and technology. It should be user-friendly and equipped with all the resources to be taught in an easy way as a foreign language.

The pace at which Hindi has been growing in China should be taken into account as proof of its potential to become a global language and further become a part of India's soft power diplomacy. The growing influence of Hindi in China has occurred without any significant government involvement, as its popularity stems from India's economic development, increasing economic cooperation with China, and the impact of Bollywood. The promotion of Hindi in China should be integrated into Indian foreign policy, with adequate funding allocated for this purpose, similar to how the Chinese government promotes Mandarin in India. We should prepare Hindi teaching resources bilingual, both in Chinese and Hindi, to make learning more friendly and engaging. It would be worthless to claim that since Hindi is a difficult language, it would be impossible to reach a large population throughout the world. If this were the case, then how could the growing influence of the Mandarin language worldwide be justified?

References:

1. Akashvani Samachar. (2025, May 25). India Becomes World's 4th Largest Economy, Surpasses Japan: NITI Aayog. Akashvani Samachar. Retrieved from: <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/india-becomes-worlds-4th-largest-economy-surpasses-japan-niti-aayog/>
2. Altalouli, M. (2021). *Soft Power: A Driver of the Rise of the treasury of a language*. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 11, 668-671
3. Bagchi, Prabodh Chandra. (1944). *India and China: A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations*, Bombay: Hind kitabs Limited.
4. Bhatt, S. K. (2013). The Popular Culture of Bollywood in Teaching Hindi as a Foreign Language: Facilitator or Debilitator. *Electronic Journal of Foreign language Teaching*, Vol. 10, Suppl. 1, pp. 321-323.
5. Chandrakar, Chandu (2017) 'Competence of Hindi as a Foreign Language'. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, vol.4, page no-55-64.
6. Editorial. (13/09/22) 'Hindi Diwas: Hindi is compulsion or necessary for China'. Newsncr.com. Retrieved from: <https://www.newsncr.com/knowledge-utility/hindi-diwas-hindi-is-compulsion-or-necessary-for-china/>
7. India TV news. (2024, January10). World Hindi Day 2024: PM Modi big push for promoting Hindi internationally. India TV news. Retrieved from: <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/world-hindi-day-2024-india-pm-narendra-modi-push-for-promoting-hindi-internationally-globally-in-the-world-unga-unsco-india-latest-updates-2024-01-10-910988>
8. Jiang, Jingkui. (2019) '中国的印地语教育 (चीन में हिंदी की शिक्षा)'. Madhavi Prakshan
9. Krunal. (13/06/2012) 'Hindi set to make debut in south China'. Retrieved from: <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/hindi-set-to-make-debut-in-south-china/265557-61.html>
10. Ministry of External Affairs. (2017, July 19). Promotion of Hindi in foreign countries. Press Information Bureau. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1496248>

11. Ministry of External Affairs. (2023, March 31) Question No. 4968: promotion of Hindi at UN. Retrieved from: https://www.mea.gov.in/loksabha.htm?dtl/36438/QUESTION_NO4968_PROMOTION_OF_HINDI_AT_UN
12. Nye Jr, J. S (2004). *Soft power: The means of success in world politics*. Public Affairs
13. Saussure, F.de. (1966). *Course in General Linguistics* (W. Baskin, Trans.). McGraw-Hill.
14. Team ScooNews. (2024, January 10). Can Hindi become the next global language? Retrieved from: <https://scooneews.com/news/can-hindi-become-the-next-global-language/>
15. Vajiram & Ravi. (n. d). Hindi in the world: in the era of cultural flattening, India must strengthen its linguistic tradition. Vajiram & Ravi. Retrieved from: (<https://vajiramandravi.com/upsc-daily-current-affairs/editorial-analysis/hindi-in-the-world-in-the-era-of-cultural-flattening-india-must-strengthen-its-linguistic-traditions/>)
16. Varma, k.j. 'India, China sign MoU for extending Hindi language course'. PTI. Retrieved from: http://archive.ptinews.com/news/8602001_India--China-sign-MoU-for-extending-Hindi-language-course.html

