

Public Diplomacy in Other Words: Unpacking the Literature in Non-English Languages

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Abstract

Public diplomacy scholarship remains largely confined to English, with limited cross-linguistic engagement, despite the fact that public diplomacy inherently involves communication with foreign publics. To promote inclusivity and dialogue in public diplomacy research, I launched this special issue initiative to explore the literature on public diplomacy in non-English languages. The authors reviewed literature in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Turkish, French, Russian, Japanese, and Bahasa Indonesia. Nearly all the articles highlighted methodological ambiguity or a lack of rigor in the majority of publications in these respective languages. In this editorial, I address two potential explanations for this: 1) the peripheral position of non-English publications in the global knowledge production hierarchy; and 2) potential epistemological American-centrism. Another significant finding is that the countries most frequently mentioned are almost always major countries where the respective language is spoken in a self-reflective way, underscoring the importance of cross-linguistic conversations to enrich the literature. I hope the articles in this special issue will inspire greater interest in “public diplomacy in other words” and encourage more cross-linguistic conversations, ultimately enriching our understanding of public diplomacy theories and practices.

Keywords: public diplomacy, systematic literature review, non-English, non-Western international relations, international relations, communication

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In the first issue of *Journal of Public Diplomacy* (JPD), I wrote

JPD aims to be part of the global conversation on public diplomacy, not only as followers but also leading initiatives to help take the scholarship and practice of public diplomacy to the next levels. JPD, based in Korea, an underrepresented country in the production of knowledge on public diplomacy, will not be confined to Korean, Asian, or peripheral public diplomacy. As a global forum for interdisciplinary research and scholarship, JPD will deliver critical thinking at a critical time in the new and complicated century (Ayhan, 2021, pp. 2-3).

This special issue, the journal's first, reflected this founding spirit of JPD. Public diplomacy scholarship remains largely confined to English, with limited cross-linguistic engagement, despite the inherent nature of public diplomacy being about communication with foreign publics. With the aim of facilitating inclusivity and dialogue in public diplomacy research, I launched this special issue initiative to explore the literature on public diplomacy in non-English languages. The authors reviewed literature in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Turkish, French, Russian, Japanese, and Bahasa Indonesia.

We held multiple special issue meetings and organized three panels—twice at the International Public Diplomacy Conferences in 2022 and 2023, hosted by the Korean Association for Public Diplomacy, and once at the International Studies Association Annual Convention in 2024. These forums allowed us to provide feedback to one another and coordinate a degree of cohesion among the special issue articles. Given that the public diplomacy literature in each respective language presents quite different landscapes, it was challenging to adopt a universal approach for how each article should be written. Nevertheless, through our discussions, we agreed to limit the scope to a description of the state of public diplomacy literature in different languages (not countries), focusing on recurring themes, topics, disciplines, and methodologies. The teams also contextualized the literature and highlighted noteworthy elements. Future studies can build on these initial efforts to foster greater cross-linguistic interaction in public diplomacy research.

This special issue is a preliminary effort to encourage cross-linguistic conversations on public diplomacy while highlighting Western-centric tendencies in both its practice and scholarship (c.f., Zaharna, 2019). I deliberately wrote “preliminary effort” because conducting systematic literature reviews across multiple languages in any subfield is a vast undertaking, with much yet to be uncovered.

Before discussing the key findings of this special issue, I would like to begin with some observations on the structural power of English as a lingua franca in global scholarship and knowledge production, including public diplomacy. These points provide important context for the findings presented in this issue.

In global academia, including public diplomacy scholarship, there exists an implicit hierarchy in scholarly publications. Scholars must publish to survive in academia, as the saying goes, “publish or perish.” At the top of this recognition hierarchy are English-language journals with high “impact factors,” as measured by Web of Science, or other similar measures by Scopus, and others. The most important indicator for these indices is the citation count for articles published in these journals. English-language journals benefit from the widespread use of English as a lingua franca, which provides them with a larger market and greater visibility, thus reinforcing their dominance at the top of the publication hierarchy.

Academic institutions in many countries rely on these indices to incentivize publications in high-impact journals. As a result, individual academics—seeking employment, promotions, and tenure—are often driven to publish their best research in English-language journals to maximize their chances for recognition and professional advancement. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle in which academics prioritize English-language publications for greater rewards and upward social mobility.

In Korea, for example, within the social sciences, journals indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) occupy the top tier of the publication and incentive hierarchy, followed by those indexed in Scopus and then the Korea Citation Index (KCI). In the field of international relations, no Korean-language journals are indexed in either SSCI or Scopus. Although there are some international relations-focused journals published in Korea that are indexed by SSCI or Scopus, these journals are also in English. Universities allocate points—used for promotion and tenure—and offer incentives, such as bonuses or research grants, to academics who publish in journals indexed by SSCI, Scopus, or KCI. These incentives are the highest for journals indexed in SSCI, and lower for journals indexed in KCI. Consequently, if an academic believes they can publish their research in an SSCI-indexed journal, and if they are not under time pressure (since SSCI-indexed publications often take longer than KCI-indexed ones), they are likely to write their manuscript in English and submit it to an SSCI-indexed journal.

Furthermore, in most social science curricula around the world, instructors rely on English language textbooks, or their translations, which again reinforces the dominance of Western thought and methods globally (Bilgin, 2020, p. 15). This contributes to the creation of “arbitrary standard setting, gatekeeping, and marginalizing of alternative narratives, ideas, and methodologies” (Acharya, 2014, p. 649).

Another factor to consider when reviewing articles in non-English languages is the difficulty of accessing sources behind expensive paywalls. In most cases, major institutions in developed countries have access to virtually all English-language publications. However, this cannot be taken for granted in the case of institutions in developing countries. The lack of access often forces researchers in the developing world to rely more heavily on open access articles, which represent only a limited fraction of the literature on any given topic.

Over-reliance on Leonard et al.'s (2002) open access article on public diplomacy in Bahasa Indonesia may be a case in point.

In the special issue, nearly all the articles pointed to methodological ambiguity or lack of rigor in the majority of publications in the respective languages. Most of the non-English manuscripts reviewed tended to be descriptive or literature reviews. In the French case, there was a notable number of critical works. More analytical publications often took the form of case studies using qualitative methodologies, while only a small number of articles across different languages employed quantitative methodologies.

I provided aforementioned notes to offer context for why this may be the case. On the one hand, the lack of rigor in public diplomacy research in non-English publications may be due to these publications' peripheral position in global knowledge production and the indexed (i.e., recognized) publication hierarchy, leading authors to reserve their highest quality research for English-language journals. On the other hand, the perceived methodological ambiguity or lack of rigor might stem from the "epistemological Eurocentrism" (Bilgin, 2020, p. 18)—that is, evaluating methodologies based on Eurocentric (in our case, rather American) standards—which the authors in this special issue, including myself, may have consciously or unconsciously inherited. Either way, this finding warrants further research on decolonization of production of knowledge, not only for "public diplomacy in other words" but also "social sciences in other words."

Public diplomacy publications in non-English languages reviewed in this special issue show a surge beginning in the early 2010s. In English-language publications, this surge begins since the early 2000s following the 9/11 attacks and Joseph Nye's (2004) book entitled *Soft Power* (Ayhan, 2021, p. 1). While public diplomacy-related policies and activities have been occurring for centuries globally, often without the specific concept of public diplomacy, our review was limited to the closest translations of the concept in each respective language. As a result, most of the articles we found focused on public diplomacy as it is understood in English, often borrowing from American practice. This suggests a gap of 6-7 years in the rise of public diplomacy scholarship across non-English languages. Future research could delve deeper, perhaps into historical literature, to uncover research on various practices of engaging and communicating with foreign publics in the context of diplomacy, or other intergroup relationship management goals.

In terms of discipline, most articles in this special issue identified political science as the primary field for public diplomacy research in the respective languages. This aligns with the English-language literature, where public diplomacy is predominantly published in international relations journals (Sevin et al., 2019, p. 4821).

Another notable trend across all articles in this special issue is that the countries most frequently mentioned are almost always the major countries where the respective language is spoken (e.g., Japan for Japanese, Spain and Mexico for Spanish). This self-reflective focus is

likely expected. However, the key value of this finding is that we need to engage with these non-English publications to gain a more comprehensive understanding of public diplomacy in non-English speaking countries. It has been nearly two decades since Eytan Gilboa called for more research on non-US cases of public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008). While we are seeing an increase in non-U.S. cases published in English, particularly in special issues, more work is needed. The body of knowledge will be richer when non-English literature is better incorporated into the conversation.

In addition to the major countries where the language in question is spoken, the other countries mentioned—either as the practitioner or the target country—also provide valuable data points about public diplomacy and/ or foreign policy priorities. For example, in the Turkish review, the authors identified a focus on Africa and Afghanistan as key target regions/ countries of public diplomacy, often conducted by Türkiye.

Some authors noted the differing publication standards in their respective languages, which creates a significant disparity between English and non-English publications. For example, the authors of the French review noted that

In the analyzed French-language literature, public diplomacy was frequently linked with soft power as an analogous concept but without robust theoretical development. The prevalence of this issue stems partly from the restrictive word limits (around 35000 characters, including spaces) imposed by French academic journals, constraining the scope for extensive literature review and critical reflection. Additionally, French-language academic writing often adheres to Cartesian principles, emphasizing critical and reflective stances. These expectations have led to a preference for qualitative approaches in much of the French-language public diplomacy literature and a concentration on fine and critical analysis of the phenomenon. In this way, the structural format of French-language articles significantly differs from the typical structure observed in mainstream U.S. academic papers, which conventionally contain sections for introduction, literature review, method, results, and discussion. In contrast, French-speaking scholars tend to prioritize reflective analysis, focusing on the use of conceptual ideas to visualize and critically interpret cases, often neglecting thorough review of previous studies or enumeration of methodological detail. This approach highlights a distinct difference in academic writing styles and priorities between French-language literature and its American counterpart, the latter of which reflects a more profound cultural and intellectual tradition in scholarly communication.

Similarly, in some languages, public diplomacy publications may appear more frequently in formats other than journal articles. This special issue focuses on journal articles for practical reasons, such as accessibility, ease of analysis, and comparability. For example, a colleague, who decided to opt out of this project, noted that most Israeli scholars publish their

academic public diplomacy work in English, while using Hebrew primarily for opinion pieces.

Another important finding was the role of government in non-English publications. In countries like Türkiye and Mexico, there are journals published by government institutions related to public diplomacy. Additionally, there has been increased public funding for research on the topic in China and Korea.

I hope that the articles in this special issue will spark greater interest in “public diplomacy in other words” and encourage more cross-linguistic conversations, enriching our understanding of public diplomacy theories and practices. Furthermore, we hope that our findings can contribute to further discussions on the issues of epistemological American-centrism in the public diplomacy literature. The *Journal of Public Diplomacy* will continue to serve as a platform for promoting diversity in public diplomacy scholarship. As a continuation of this work, we plan to share bibliographic entries of non-English public diplomacy literature on the project’s website: <https://pdother.netlify.app/>.

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