



Indonesia's Language Diplomacy as a Strategy for Status-Seeking and International Recognition

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Abstract

Conventional theories of language diplomacy assume a relatively straightforward sequence: influence comes first, language follows. States with powerful economies, globally consumed cultures, or strategic geopolitical positions generate international demand for their languages. Indonesia presents a puzzling exception. Over the last two decades, Indonesia has actively promoted Bahasa Indonesia through the Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program. By 2024, BIPA had expanded to more than 500 institutions in 55 countries and recorded approximately 183,000 active learners. Despite this growth, Bahasa Indonesia has yet to emerge as a major language of international business, diplomacy, science, or global popular culture. Why, then, has Indonesia continued to invest in language diplomacy? This article argues that the significance of language diplomacy lies not only in its outcomes but also in what it reveals about how states imagine their position in the international system. Rather than viewing language diplomacy as a product of influence, the study conceptualizes it as a strategy through which states attempt to project identity, claim international visibility, and pursue symbolic status. The Indonesian case challenges a dominant assumption within public diplomacy scholarship: that language promotion follows power. Instead, it suggests that language promotion may also reflect a state's aspiration for power, recognition, and global relevance.

Introduction

Language has increasingly become an important instrument of public diplomacy in contemporary international relations. Beyond its communicative function, language serves as a medium through which states project national identity, expand cultural presence, and cultivate long-term relationships with foreign publics. Consequently, many countries have invested significant resources in language promotion programs as part of their broader public diplomacy strategies. Prominent examples include China's Confucius Institutes, the United Kingdom's British Council, and South Korea's King Sejong Institutes, all of which have become integral components of their respective soft power agendas (Sun, 2023; Zhou, 2021; Repnikova, 2022; Li, 2023; Gu & Deng, 2024).

Indonesia has also embraced this trend through the promotion of Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing, BIPA). Since its institutional expansion in the early 2000s, BIPA has evolved into one of Indonesia's flagship language diplomacy initiatives. Recent government data indicate that BIPA has expanded to more than 500 institutions across 55 countries and reached approximately 183,000 active learners worldwide (Wulandari & Konety, 2024; Kardinal & Purnama, 2024; Sugih et al., 2025; Fathun et al., 2025; Audrey et al., 2023).

Likewise, official records from the Language Development and Fostering Agency show a steady increase in the number of foreign learners participating in Indonesian language programs abroad (Azizah et al., 2022; Raharja, 2023; Chamalah, 2023; Sari et al., 2023). This expansion reflects a sustained commitment by the Indonesian government to internationalize Bahasa Indonesia and position language promotion as a component of Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy (Wulandari & Konety, 2024; Fathun et al., 2025; Man & Syanurdin, 2023; Sari et al., 2023).

Existing studies generally portray BIPA as an effective instrument for introducing Indonesian culture, fostering people-to-people connections, and enhancing Indonesia's international image (Azizah et al., 2022; Wulandari & Konety, 2024; Kardinal & Purnama, 2024; Audrey et al., 2023; Sugih et al., 2025). Consequently, much of the existing literature focuses on the implementation, challenges, and contributions of BIPA to Indonesia's public diplomacy efforts. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to a more fundamental question: why has Indonesia chosen language promotion as a diplomatic strategy in the first place? (Huang, 2022; Manor & Huang, 2022; Hajdari et al., 2024; Putri & Astuti, 2024).

This question becomes particularly relevant when viewed through the broader literature on language diplomacy. Existing scholarship suggests that the international appeal of a language is often reinforced by a country's economic influence, cultural exports, and geopolitical significance (Gu & Deng, 2024; Zeng & Yang, 2024; Aydinli & Aydinli, 2024; Zhu, 2022; Durrani, 2023). South Korea offers a compelling example. The global popularity of the Korean language has been closely associated with the success of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), including K-pop, K-dramas, and the worldwide expansion of Korean cultural industries (Jin, 2024; Matosian, 2021; Choi, 2024; Yang, 2022). In this context, language promotion through the King Sejong Institute has largely complemented an already existing demand for Korean culture and products rather than creating that demand itself (Choi, 2024; Matosian, 2021).

Indonesia appears to follow a different trajectory. Although BIPA has continued to expand internationally for more than two decades, Bahasa Indonesia has not achieved the same level of international institutionalization as English, Mandarin, or Korean in global commerce, science, diplomacy, or popular culture. Nevertheless, Indonesia continues to allocate resources and diplomatic attention to the promotion of its national language abroad. This raises an important puzzle: why does Indonesia adopt language diplomacy as a public diplomacy strategy despite the absence of the structural conditions commonly associated with global linguistic influence? (Zeng & Yang, 2024; Aydinli & Aydinli, 2024; Fathun et al., 2025; Man & Syanurdin, 2023).

This article argues that Indonesia's language diplomacy cannot be understood solely through the lens of soft power effectiveness. Instead, the Indonesian case invites a broader inquiry into the motivations underlying language promotion itself. By examining Indonesia's adoption of language diplomacy as a public diplomacy strategy, this study seeks to explain why states may choose to promote their languages internationally not only as a reflection of existing influence, but also as an expression of aspirations for international visibility, recognition, and status (Durrani, 2023; Wüsta & Nicolaï, 2022; Mohib & Carroll, 2024; Sevin, 2024; Boughton, 2023; Bell & Kennan, 2022).

Indonesia presents an intriguing case in this regard. While the country has actively expanded BIPA programs and incorporated language promotion into its public diplomacy strategy, the international influence of Bahasa Indonesia remains less pronounced than that of languages commonly associated with strong soft power resources. Consequently, rather than using public diplomacy and soft power theories solely to evaluate the effectiveness of BIPA, this study

employs them to investigate a broader question: why does Indonesia adopt language diplomacy despite conditions that appear to challenge conventional expectations regarding the relationship between language promotion and soft power? By addressing this puzzle, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on the motivations underlying public diplomacy strategies and the role of language in contemporary international politics.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative comparative case-study design based on document analysis. The approach was selected because the study aimed to explain why Indonesia continues to promote Bahasa Indonesia internationally and how this policy reflects identity construction, public diplomacy objectives, and status-seeking behavior. Indonesia constituted the primary case, while South Korea, France, and Germany were used as comparative cases to identify different institutional pathways of language internationalization.

The study analyzed policy, legal, institutional, and scholarly documents concerning language diplomacy and the internationalization of national languages. The Indonesian data included Law No. 24 of 2009, strategic and policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and the Language Development and Fostering Agency, institutional records on the Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) program, information on the Indonesian Language Proficiency Test (UKBI), relevant scholarship and educational exchange programs, and UNESCO Resolution 42 C/28 concerning the recognition of Bahasa Indonesia as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference. Institutional reports and official records were also examined to identify the geographical expansion of BIPA, the number of participating institutions and learners, and the development of supporting language-promotion infrastructure.

Comparative evidence was collected from official and scholarly sources concerning the King Sejong Institute Foundation in South Korea, the Institut français and Alliance française networks, and the Goethe-Institut in Germany. These cases were selected purposively rather than as a representative sample of all language-diplomacy programs. South Korea was selected because its language promotion is closely connected to global popular culture and externally generated demand. France and Germany were selected because they illustrate long-established, network-based cultural-institution models that combine language instruction with cultural, educational, and intellectual exchange. The comparison was therefore used to identify alternative mechanisms of language internationalization, not to rank the effectiveness of the four countries.

Documents were selected when they met four criteria: they addressed the international promotion of a national language; provided evidence regarding programs, institutions, participants, geographic coverage, or multilateral recognition; were published by an official institution or a credible academic source; and were directly relevant to Indonesia or one of the selected comparative cases. Documents containing only general discussions of public diplomacy without evidence related to language promotion were excluded. Where numerical data were reported, priority was given to official institutional records. Academic studies were used to contextualize and interpret the policy and institutional evidence.

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic document analysis. First, the documents were reviewed and relevant information was extracted concerning policy foundations, institutional structures, program coverage, learner participation, sources of international demand, cultural and professional linkages, and forms of multilateral recognition. Second, the extracted evidence was coded into six analytical themes: (1) the institutional expansion of BIPA; (2) the limitations of existing international demand; (3) language-diplomacy instruments

beyond BIPA; (4) multilateral recognition of Bahasa Indonesia; (5) comparative pathways of language internationalization; and (6) identity construction and status-seeking. Third, the Indonesian evidence was compared with the South Korean, French, and German cases to identify similarities and differences in their mechanisms of language promotion. Finally, the findings were interpreted through constructivism and the concept of status-seeking.

Results and Discussion

Assessing the Growth, Limits, and Strategic Orientation of Indonesia's Language Diplomacy

The empirical analysis indicates that Indonesia's language diplomacy has expanded through a combination of legal mandates, institutional programs, overseas educational infrastructure, and multilateral initiatives. The analysis examined policy and institutional documents concerning the internationalization of Bahasa Indonesia, including Law No. 24 of 2009, policy documents issued by the Language Development and Fostering Agency (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa), strategic planning documents of the Ministry of Education, and institutional records concerning BIPA and related language-promotion programs. The analysis also considers comparative evidence from South Korea, France, and Germany to identify alternative institutional pathways for language internationalization. The cases were selected because they represent three distinct mechanisms of language diplomacy: Indonesia's state-led BIPA model, South Korea's integration of language promotion with popular culture, and the European cultural-institute model represented by France and Germany.

Expansion of BIPA as the Core Instrument of Indonesian Language Diplomacy

The documentary evidence demonstrates a substantial expansion of BIPA's international reach. In 2024, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology reported approximately 183,000 active BIPA learners across more than 500 institutions in 55 countries (Aziz, 2024). These figures indicate that BIPA has developed beyond a collection of individual language courses into an internationally distributed institutional program involving government agencies, educational institutions, and Indonesian diplomatic missions. However, the available figures should be interpreted primarily as evidence of programmatic expansion, rather than as direct evidence of language-diplomacy effectiveness. The 183,000 figure represents active learners recorded by the Indonesian government and does not by itself measure proficiency gains, retention, subsequent use of Bahasa Indonesia, or changes in perceptions toward Indonesia. Consequently, the growth of BIPA demonstrates the expansion of the government's language-promotion infrastructure but does not, on its own, establish the extent to which the program produces long-term diplomatic outcomes.

The documentary evidence further indicates that BIPA operates within a broader policy framework for internationalizing Bahasa Indonesia. Law No. 24 of 2009 provides the legal basis for promoting Bahasa Indonesia internationally, while subsequent programs administered by Badan Bahasa have translated this mandate into practical instruments, including BIPA, the Indonesian Language Proficiency Test (UKBI), teacher development, and international language cooperation. The internationalization of Bahasa Indonesia is therefore institutionally embedded rather than dependent on individual diplomatic initiatives. This institutional continuity is significant because it demonstrates that Indonesia's language diplomacy is not primarily a temporary cultural campaign. Instead, it represents a policy area that has been progressively incorporated into the state's broader educational and foreign-policy infrastructure. The evidence therefore supports the interpretation that language internationalization has become a sustained policy objective of the Indonesian government.

The Limits of Existing International Demand

Despite this institutional expansion, the available evidence does not demonstrate a level of global demand comparable to languages supported by large-scale cultural or economic ecosystems. The Indonesian case differs from South Korea, where the expansion of Korean-language education has coincided with the international growth of Korean popular culture. The King Sejong Institute provides a useful comparative indicator. According to the King Sejong Institute Foundation, the network expanded from 13 locations in three countries in 2007 to 248 locations in 85 countries in 2023. The number of learners increased from 740 in 2007 to 216,226 in 2023. The Foundation explicitly links the increasing demand for Korean-language learning to the international spread of Korean culture. By 2024, the Foundation reported approximately 200,000 Korean learners participating through 248 institutes in 85 countries.

The comparison does not demonstrate that Hallyu is the sole cause of Korean-language demand. Rather, it shows that the Korean language is promoted through an institutional ecosystem in which language education, cultural production, and international audiences reinforce one another. This provides an important contrast with Indonesia, where the available BIPA data primarily demonstrate institutional reach rather than comparable evidence of demand generated by a globally dominant cultural industry. Therefore, the empirical distinction between the two cases lies not simply in the number of institutions or learners, but in the relationship between language education and the sources of external demand. South Korea's language-promotion infrastructure operates alongside a highly visible global cultural industry, whereas Indonesia's BIPA infrastructure has developed without an equivalent Hallyu-type ecosystem. This difference helps explain why the Indonesian state remains an important source of demand generation and institutional support.

Language Diplomacy Beyond BIPA

The documentary analysis further indicates that Indonesia's language diplomacy extends beyond classroom-based BIPA programs. Language promotion is connected to educational exchanges, cultural programs, Indonesian studies, scholarship schemes, diplomatic activities, and multilateral initiatives. These instruments create multiple points of contact through which foreign audiences encounter Bahasa Indonesia and Indonesian culture.

However, the evidence should be distinguished according to the outcomes that can actually be observed. Institutional records can demonstrate the existence and geographical distribution of language programs, scholarship schemes, cultural centers, and international forums. They cannot automatically demonstrate that participants subsequently become cultural ambassadors, maintain long-term relationships with Indonesia, or develop favorable attitudes toward the Indonesian state.

For example, the existence of Indonesian alumni or friendship associations provides evidence of continued institutional opportunities for engagement, but it does not by itself establish sustained alumni commitment or diplomatic effectiveness. Such claims would require additional evidence, such as alumni surveys, interviews, membership records over time, participation data, or documented professional and institutional cooperation following participation in Indonesian programs.

Accordingly, the findings support a more cautious interpretation: Indonesian language diplomacy has created institutional channels through which relationships with foreign learners, students, academics, and professionals can be maintained. Whether these relationships translate into measurable diplomatic influence remains an empirical question requiring further evidence.

Multilateral Recognition and the Internationalization of Bahasa Indonesia

A further development concerns the institutional recognition of Bahasa Indonesia at the multilateral level. In November 2023, the UNESCO General Conference adopted Resolution 42 C/28 by consensus, recognizing Bahasa Indonesia as an official language of the General Conference. This represents an observable institutional outcome of Indonesia's broader efforts to internationalize the language (UNESCO, 2023).

The significance of this development should nevertheless be distinguished from claims about broader international status. The UNESCO decision provides evidence of increased institutional recognition, but it does not necessarily demonstrate that Bahasa Indonesia has become a globally dominant or widely used international language. Its significance is therefore better understood as an expansion of the language's formal presence within a multilateral institution.

From an empirical perspective, the UNESCO recognition demonstrates that Indonesia's language diplomacy operates at two interconnected levels. At the societal level, BIPA expands opportunities for foreign individuals to learn Bahasa Indonesia. At the institutional level, Indonesia seeks greater recognition for the language within international organizations. These developments indicate that language internationalization involves both the expansion of individual-level engagement and the pursuit of institutional visibility.

Comparative Findings: Three Pathways of Language Internationalization

First, Indonesia represents a state-led institutional expansion model. BIPA is supported by government policy, legal mandates, diplomatic missions, educational institutions, and language-testing infrastructure. Its principal characteristic is the state's role in creating and sustaining opportunities for foreign audiences to encounter Bahasa Indonesia.

Second, South Korea represents a culturally reinforced demand-generation model. The King Sejong Institute network has expanded alongside the international popularity of Korean cultural products. Its institutional growth is therefore connected to a wider ecosystem in which cultural visibility contributes to demand for language learning. The longitudinal data from the King Sejong Institute Foundation demonstrate a substantial increase in both institutional coverage and learner numbers between 2007 and 2023.

Third, France and Germany represent networked cultural-institution models. France's overseas cultural network combines embassy cultural services, Instituts français, Alliances françaises, and binational cultural centers across more than 140 countries. Germany's Goethe-Institut operates through a legally autonomous institutional structure supported by the German Federal Foreign Office, with 154 institutes in 100 countries and numerous partner organizations. These networks connect language instruction with cultural exchange, education, libraries, examinations, and other forms of sustained institutional engagement.

The comparison therefore suggests that the three cases differ in their principal mechanisms of internationalization. Indonesia emphasizes state-supported expansion, South Korea combines cultural demand with institutional provision, while the French and German models emphasize long-term institutional networks and cultural infrastructure. These differences provide the empirical basis for assessing Indonesia's strategic position rather than assuming that one model is universally superior.

Interpreting Indonesia's Language Diplomacy Through Status-Seeking

The empirical findings can subsequently be interpreted through constructivist and status-seeking perspectives. The expansion of BIPA, the institutionalization of language programs,

and the pursuit of international recognition indicate that Indonesia is not merely responding to existing international demand. The state is also attempting to construct greater visibility and legitimacy for Bahasa Indonesia within international society.

This interpretation is particularly relevant to the UNESCO recognition. While the decision does not establish that Indonesia has achieved higher international status as a direct result of language diplomacy, it provides an observable instance in which Bahasa Indonesia acquired greater institutional visibility within a major multilateral organization. From a status-seeking perspective, such institutional recognition can be interpreted as one component of Indonesia's broader effort to establish itself as a culturally significant and normatively relevant actor.

The findings therefore suggest that the strategic significance of Indonesian language diplomacy cannot be assessed exclusively through the number of foreign-language learners. BIPA's 183,000 active learners and presence in 55 countries demonstrate substantial institutional reach, but the broader strategic objective appears to involve the construction of international familiarity, institutional recognition, and networks of engagement around Indonesia and its national language. These latter outcomes should, however, be treated as an interpretation of the observed policy trajectory rather than as directly measured effects.

Strategic Lessons for Indonesia

Leveraging Creative Economies. Indonesia does not possess a single, globally dominant cultural ecosystem comparable to the Korean Wave (Hallyu). Nevertheless, the country has a growing creative economy encompassing film, music, culinary culture, digital content, and other forms of cultural production. These sectors can be strategically connected to BIPA outreach to generate greater interest in Indonesian language and culture. Recent research on BIPA entrepreneurship similarly indicates that educational games and digital content can create opportunities for language-based creative economies while simultaneously supporting cultural diplomacy (Lawolo et al., 2026). Rather than treating popular culture merely as supplementary material, BIPA programs can incorporate contemporary Indonesian cultural products into curriculum design, allowing learners to encounter the language through music, films, food, social media, and other culturally relevant content. Such integration can help transform cultural curiosity into sustained language-learning motivation.

Institutionalizing Labor and Professional Pathways. Indonesia can also draw lessons from the utilitarian dimension of Korean language promotion by strengthening the connection between BIPA proficiency and professional opportunities. Rather than positioning Indonesian primarily as an object of cultural interest, policymakers could develop clearer language benchmarks for sectors in which Indonesian proficiency provides practical value, including tourism, education, regional business, diplomatic engagement, and cross-border cooperation. This approach would be particularly relevant in Southeast Asia, where Indonesia's economic and political position provides a potential foundation for functional demand for Bahasa Indonesia. The institutionalization of professional pathways could therefore contribute to a shift from voluntary cultural interest toward language learning motivated by concrete educational and occupational opportunities.

The European Model: Decentralized Cultural Infrastructure and Institutional Autonomy

European language diplomacy provides a complementary model centered on institutional networks, cultural infrastructure, and the long-term cultivation of linguistic prestige. The French cultural network, for example, operates through a combination of embassy cultural services, Instituts français, Alliances françaises, and binational cultural centers across more than 140 countries. Rather than relying on a single centralized institutional structure, this network combines state-supported cultural diplomacy with locally embedded organizations

that promote the French language, contemporary cultural production, and intercultural dialogue. Similarly, the Goethe-Institut operates as a legally autonomous and politically independent association while maintaining institutional support from the German Federal Foreign Office. Its activities extend beyond language instruction to cultural exchange, libraries, academic cooperation, and social dialogue (Goethe-Institut, n.d.).

The significance of these models lies not simply in institutional decentralization, but in their ability to establish language-learning spaces as enduring cultural institutions within host societies. Language education is connected to cultural events, libraries, academic exchange, professional opportunities, and community engagement. This creates an institutional ecosystem in which language becomes associated with broader forms of cultural and intellectual participation rather than being treated solely as a classroom subject.

Synthesis for Indonesia's Integrated Strategy

The comparison with South Korea and European language-diplomacy models demonstrates that the internationalization of a national language does not depend on a single institutional formula. South Korea illustrates how popular culture, economic interests, and professional utility can generate external demand for a national language, while European cultural institutes demonstrate the importance of institutional continuity, local partnerships, and the association of language with cultural and intellectual prestige. Indonesia therefore does not need to replicate either model wholesale. Instead, it can selectively adapt elements that correspond to its own political, cultural, and regional position.

Viewed through constructivist and status-seeking perspectives, the internationalization of Bahasa Indonesia can be understood as a process through which Indonesia seeks to shape how its national identity and international role are perceived by external audiences. The country's position as a major Southeast Asian state, combined with its expanding cultural production and growing participation in multilateral institutions, provides resources for constructing Bahasa Indonesia as a marker of cultural identity and international relevance. The UNESCO recognition of Bahasa Indonesia as an official language of the General Conference represents one concrete manifestation of this expanding institutional status.

Accordingly, Indonesia's future BIPA strategy should move from a predominantly programmatic approach toward an integrated language-diplomacy ecosystem (Fathun et al., 2025; Shienlia, 2025; Aqromi et al., 2025). Such an ecosystem could combine the demand-generation mechanisms visible in the Korean model particularly popular culture, digital content, and professional utility with the institutional depth demonstrated by European cultural institutes. Through this synthesis, BIPA can function not merely as a government-sponsored language-learning program, but as an instrument for constructing international interest in Indonesian culture, facilitating people-to-people connections, and strengthening Indonesia's symbolic and institutional standing in the international arena.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine a central puzzle in Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy: why the Indonesian government continues to aggressively invest in language diplomacy through the Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) program despite the absence of the conventional structural advantages such as globally dominant economic markets, widespread technological integration, or massive transnational cultural waves typically associated with influential global languages. While traditional public diplomacy literature often evaluates language promotion primarily through the lens of material soft power accumulation and pre-existing international demand (Nye, 2004), the Indonesian case demonstrates a fundamentally different trajectory. By anchoring the investigation within a constructivist framework and status-seeking theory,

this research revealed that Indonesia's language diplomacy operates largely as a mechanism of identity construction and symbolic statecraft. Rather than merely responding to an organic global appetite for Bahasa Indonesia, the state utilizes BIPA, standardized proficiency testing, scholarship frameworks like Darmasiswa and TIAS, and high-level multilateral advocacy such as securing official language status at the UNESCO General Conference in 2023 as proactive instruments to construct international visibility, legitimacy, and prestige (Fathun et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2023). Furthermore, comparative insights drawn from South Korea's demand-driven Hallyu ecosystem and Europe's decentralized, intellectual cultural models indicate that Indonesia can significantly optimize its public diplomacy architecture. By strategically coupling BIPA with its expanding creative economy and adopting flexible, network-based institutional hubs abroad, Indonesia can bridge the gap between casual interest and long-term professional engagement. Ultimately, this study highlights that contemporary foreign policy cannot be reduced solely to calculations of material power. For emerging middle powers like Indonesia, language promotion serves as a vital medium through which the state articulates its self-image and actively seeks a recognized, respected place within the international order. Future research should build upon these theoretical insights through direct empirical fieldwork and stakeholder interviews, offering deeper qualitative validation into how language diplomacy shapes both national identity at home and diplomatic standing abroad.

Suggestion

To maximize the strategic efficacy of Indonesia's language diplomacy moving forward, future policy initiatives should transition from state-centric administrative expansion toward a more integrated, demand-driven ecosystem that bridges cultural outreach with tangible professional and economic incentives. Specifically, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that should actively embed BIPA certification into regional economic frameworks, bilateral trade agreements, and targeted labor mobility programs across Southeast Asia, while simultaneously empowering decentralized, autonomous cultural hubs within international universities to foster long-term academic and intellectual engagement.

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