

Cohesion and coherence in RM BTS's English speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) 2025 CEO Summit in Korea

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Abstract: This study explores how cohesion and coherence are established in spoken discourse, focusing specifically on RM BTS's speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit in Korea. The primary issue addressed is how a spoken discourse, situated within the realms of cultural diplomacy and business economics across various industries, can resonate with its audience through the use of cohesive and coherent elements enhanced by pragmatic strategies. The purpose of this research is to identify the different aspects of cohesion utilized by RM in his speech and to explain how pragmatics reinforces the overall coherence of the discourse. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach alongside Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this study integrates Halliday and Hasan's theory of cohesion, Van Dijk's coherence theory, and various pragmatic theories that support the concept of coherence. The findings reveal that cohesion and overall coherence in RM's speech are intricately linked and equally essential for constructing a compelling argument. The analysis highlighted 231 instances of grammatical cohesion, 39 instances of lexical cohesion, and 16 instances of coherence, all of which were supplemented by several relevant pragmatic theories.

Keywords: cohesion; coherence; speech; RM; pragmatic

Introduction

Language plays an important role in conveying ideas, creating meaning and helping social interaction. This is in line with Halliday's view (in Sobur, 2018, p. 18), who states that one of the roles of language is to maintain relationships between individuals by providing a means of expressing one's status, social and personal attitudes, judgements, evaluations and similar matters; and this involves engagement in linguistic interaction. The language used cannot be separated from a series of sentences that ensure the smooth flow of communication. The arrangement of these sentences forms a text, which is part of a larger whole known as discourse. Chaer (in Pangestu et al., 2020) argues that discourse is the most complete form of language in terms of grammatical structure.

For a set of sentences to be considered a complete and meaningful discourse, they must fulfil two main criteria: cohesion and coherence. Halliday and Hasan (in Agustina et al., 2025) argue that cohesion is the semantic relationship that links one part of a text to another, thereby enabling the text as a whole to be understood. Halliday and Hasan (in Nurjanah & Rahman, 2021) identify two types of cohesion: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion relates to the structure that forms the text itself. Meanwhile, lexical cohesion refers to the relationships between the various parts of the text in order to achieve a cohesive structural harmony (Mulyana in Maulidiah et al., 2017)

Coherence is described as a pattern of relationships between one part and another, so that sentences possess a comprehensive unity of meaning (Mulyana in Prasetyo & Asmara, 2024). Furthermore, a cohesive and coherent text will be structured systematically, so that ideas can be conveyed in their complete form and in line with the rules of the language (Nurfitriani et al. in Asih, 2020). Consequently, this analysis was carried out to gain a deeper and more focused understanding of how textual unity is formed and to uncover the meaning behind a discourse.

RM's speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit held in South Korea, entitled "The Cultural and Creative Industries in the APEC Region and the Soft Power of K-Pop", is of significant value for analysis as it brings a pop culture perspective into the global economic discourse through the use of coherent and structured language. According to the official website of the 2025 APEC CEO Summit in South Korea, the APEC CEO Summit is a forum for discussion on the global economy attended by global CEOs, leading

experts and senior economic leaders. The speech was delivered by RM on the second day of the APEC CEO Summit, specifically on 29 October 2025. Rather than simply providing entertainment, RM brought the voice of creativity, cultural identity and diversity into serious discussions about the global economy and the future. As reported by the South Korean English-language newspaper *The Korea Times*, by delivering a speech before economic and government leaders in the Asia-Pacific region, RM played a role in positioning creative industries such as music, media and culture as vital sectors deserving of policy and financial support.

This issue has been highlighted in several previous studies, particularly in the field of linguistics (Anahamu, 2016; Montolalu, 2017; Tarigan, 2021). One such previous study on a similar topic is “Cohesion and Coherence in Barack Obama’s Speech ‘The President’s Final Press Conference of the Year’ (Harefa, 2023). This study was motivated by the popularity of Barack Obama’s speech amongst the public, making it an interesting subject for in-depth research to determine the extent to which this speech exhibits cohesion and coherence.

Challenges arise when a speech must bridge cultural and professional differences between the speaker and the audience so that the message conveyed is well received. In RM’s speech, there is a unique aspect in which the use of pragmatic elements is a key factor in creating a coherent and cohesive discourse. Based on this research question, two specific research questions emerge, namely: how are grammatical and lexical cohesion manifested in RM’s speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit in Korea and how is discourse coherence formed through the integration of pragmatics in RM’s speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit in Korea.

Based on the research question outlined above, the purpose of this study is to analyze the types of cohesion markers and their relationship to coherence found in RM’s speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit in Korea. The aim is to reveal how the elements of the text are organized and interconnected to form a coherent meaning.

Methods

The method used in this study was a descriptive qualitative method. As stated by Moleong (in Syah et al., 2024), when using a qualitative approach, the information obtained is descriptive, including written and spoken forms as well as the results of behavioural observations. This descriptive method is used to discuss issues by describing the subject or object under study (Siswanto in Syah et al., 2024). Furthermore, this study also applied the Systemic Functional Approach (SFL) developed by M.A.K. Halliday. Kencana et al. (2026, p. 107) explain that SFL views language as a semiotic system used to create meaning and places stress on the role of language within social and cultural contexts.

Data was collected using the observation method, in which the researcher acted solely as an observer without being directly involved in the events taking place. In this study, the researcher conducted remote observation by listening, paying attention and reading the speech transcripts obtained from the official YouTube channel providing these official recordings. Data collection was then continued using note-taking to gather key information. The purpose of these notes was to obtain data in the form of speech texts that demonstrated the use of cohesion and coherence markers.

The data analysis stages involve identifying speech texts that may use appropriate cohesion markers. Subsequently, a more in-depth analysis will be carried out using the cohesion approach proposed by Halliday and Hasan. At this stage, the texts will be examined to identify elements of cohesion, such as repetition, substitution, conjunctions, reference and others used by RM in constructing credible speeches. Once the cohesion analysis is complete, the speech texts will proceed to the coherence analysis stage, using Van Dijk’s theoretical approach alongside several pragmatic aspects to uncover the intended meaning throughout RM’s speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit.

Findings and discussion

Cohesion

The following table presents the variations in grammatical and lexical cohesion, as well as the number of occurrences found for each variation in RM's speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit.

Table 1. Summary of Grammatical and Lexical Cohesion Markers in His RM's Speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit in South Korea

No.	Type of Marker	Frequency	Total
Grammatical Cohesion			
1.	Reference	138	231
2.	Substitution	-	
3.	Ellipsis	7	
4.	Conjunctions	86	
Lexical Cohesion			
5.	Repetition	13	39
6.	Synonymy	6	
7.	Antonymy	3	
8.	Hyponymy	4	
9.	Meronymy	3	
10.	Collocation	10	

In RM's speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit, data was identified in the form of words and sentences containing personal elements, demonstratives and comparisons. A total of 152 data points were successfully identified.

But I'm just an artist.

I am not a business leader.

I don't think you want to hear any numbers or figures from me.

So today, I want to speak to you as a creator and an artist,

The data above are examples of exaphoric references expressed through the pronoun 'I'. The pronoun 'I' functions as a first-person singular pronoun. All data containing the pronoun 'I' refer to the same referent, namely RM as the speaker. Based on the identified referent, the meaning of these data items can also be determined: they refer to actions carried out by the speaker in his capacity as an artist and performer in Korea who had the opportunity to deliver a speech before a number of business leaders.

*It's a huge honour to be **here***

*and to meet all the leaders of APEC **here** in Korea,*

The data above are examples of endophora with a cataphoric function, expressed through the adverb 'here'. Throughout this data, the adverb 'here' functions as a locative adverb referring to the location where RM delivered his speech, namely at the APEC business forum held in South Korea.

In RM's speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit, data was identified in the form of words and sentences containing ellipsis in nouns, verbs and clauses. A total of seven data were successfully identified.

*Did you ever turned on your TV or radio and **hear** a song that's not in your language or in English?
Probably not very often [Ø], right?*

The ellipsis in the example above is represented by the symbol Ø because the referent has been removed or the referential element has been eliminated because it was mentioned earlier in the preceding linguistic unit. In this example, the entire verb phrase has been omitted. The full sentence should read “you probably don't hear it very often, right?”.

In RM's speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit, data was identified in the form of words and sentences containing additive and adversative conjunctions, clause connectors and temporal expressions. A total of 86 data were successfully identified.

*I don't think you want to hear any numbers or figures from me. **So** today, I want to speak to you as a creator and an artist, I want to share my thoughts on how K-Pop cross borders to move the hearts of people.*

*They asked, “are you from North Korea or South Korea? Where on earth is Korea?” **So**, we had to explain where Korea was before we could event talk about our music, and that was the reality.*

The data above are examples of clause conjunctions. They are all expressed using the conjunction ‘so’, which serves to indicate a cause-and-effect relationship or a conclusion between one clause or sentence and another.

*But there was something even more difficult than those. **When** we said we are artists from Korea, they didn't ask us about our music. They asked, “are you from North Korea or South Korea? Where on earth is Korea?”*

*K-Pop success came from respecting diversity and embracing royal cultures but still holding onto Korea's unique identity. **When** cultural barriers come down and different voices harmonize together, there's an explosion of creative energy.*

The data above represents temporal conjunctions. All of this data is expressed using the conjunction ‘when’, which serves to indicate the temporal relationship between two events in one sentence and another.

A total of 12 data of repetition were found in this speech. The data identified are marked by the linguistic units that are repeated.

*When you think about investing in tomorrow's generations, think about **culture** as well as economics. **Culture** and art are a powerful force that moves hearts.*

*As the leaders of APEC, your policies and support will be the canvas and playground for all the **creators**. The foundation for **creators** all over the world to put out their creativity.*

***They will** blaze a road of true understanding and tolerance. **They will** create the power of solidarity for the future.*

*As an artist, I promise that **I will** also let my imagination fill the canvas you will create. **I will** play my heart out in the playground you will build for us. I promise that **I'll** do my part by sending a message of courage and hope and lots of emotions through music.*

These four data contain repetition. They all make use of the repetition of words, phrases and clauses. This repetition serves to emphasise or highlight the point being made.

The synonyms found in this speech are characterised by similarities in meaning between one word and another. In total, there are six data of synonyms in this speech.

*I don't think you want to hear any **numbers** or **figures** from me.*

*I want to speak to you as a **creator** and an **artist**,*

*So, ARMY support and passion crossed all **borders** and opened up brand new path for me. ARMY was the force that broke down those **barriers**.*

*Please **help** them, give them financial **support** so that their own creativity can bloom*

In the first set of data, the two words in bold refer to statistical figures or economic growth. The use of these two terms indicates that RM will not be discussing technical data, as he is speaking as an artist, as demonstrated in the second set of data. In this second data, RM uses both words to refer to the same concept: individuals in the creative sector. Whilst ‘artist’ focuses more on the arts, ‘creator’ includes a broader range of activities, such as digital content and so on. Furthermore, in the third data set, the words ‘borders’ meaning national borders and ‘barriers’ meaning cultural barriers function as synonyms to symbolise the boundaries that separate K-Pop from a global audience. Then, in the final data set, the words ‘help’ and ‘support’ are used alternatively to emphasise the request for assistance from APEC leaders.

There are a total of three antonyms found in this speech.

*But I’m just an **artist**. I am not a **business leader**.*

*BTS first started to go outside Korea about 10 years ago, and **back then**, we didn’t dream of what we see **today**.*

*They asked, “are you from **North** Korea or **South** Korea? Where on earth is Korea?”*

The first piece of data above is used to describe the limits of his skills by stating what he is not, in doing so, RM highlights his true identity that is, as an artist. Furthermore, in the second piece of data, the phrases ‘back then’ and ‘now’ draw a contrast between a past full of uncertainty and a glorious present. Then, in the third piece of data, this contrast highlights the stereotypes and ignorance held by these Americans regarding Korea at the start of their careers.

There are a total of 4 data in this speech relating to hyponymy.

*So, you take “bap”, which is **rice**, then you put all kinds of **vegetables**, **meat**, **flavourings** on top, and mix it all up, and that’s the **bibimbap part**.*

*K-Pop is much the same. You take Korea’s unique aesthetics, emotions, and production system, but you don’t turn away elements of **Western music** like **hip-hop**, **R&B**, or **EDM**.*

*K-Pop is not just a genre of music. It is a **360-degree total package** of **music**, **dance**, **performance**, **visual style**, **storytelling**, **music video**, and even **social media**.*

*“What is your favourite **song**? Do you remember seeing a **painting** that look your breath away or a **book** you read over and over again?” we all known, we all love **culture and art**, and we are connected by the emotion and resonance that they awaken in us.*

In the first data, hyponymy is used to explain the combination of ingredients used in traditional Korean cuisine. Then, in the second data, RM uses hyponymy to detail the elements of global music that are currently being widely adopted into Korean music. Furthermore, in the third data, hyponymy is used to show that K-Pop is not merely music, but a complete package that includes various other activities. In the final data, this hyponym aims to encourage the audience to reflect on what actually moves them when they enjoy a work of art.

There are a total of 3 instances of meronymy found in this speech.

*So, you take “bap”, which is **rice**, then you put all kinds of **vegetables**, **meat**, **flavourings** on top, and mix it all up, and that’s the **bibimbap part**.*

K-Pop is not just a genre of music. It is a 360-degree total package of music, dance, performance, visual style, storytelling, music video, and even social media.

and the Asia-Pacific region has incredible dynamic cultural diversity. K-Pop's shining success is proof that cultural diversity and creativity are the greatest human potential,

The first data provides the clearest and most straightforward illustration of meronymy in this speech. RM analyses a dish by detailing its constituent components. RM explains that without the combination of these elements, there would be no such thing as Bibimbap. Then, in the second data, RM describes K-Pop as a broad phenomenon involving many supporting elements. In contrast to the previous hyponymy, here RM emphasises that dance and music videos are key components that shape K-Pop as a whole. Furthermore, in the third data, RM places Korea within the context of the APEC organisation.

The total number of collocations found in this speech is 10.

*I'm so proud and excited that this year, for the first time, the **culture industry** was chosen as a **key agenda** for APEC. I'm not sure how familiar you are with K culture or K-Pop, but I'm sure you all agree that the **culture industry** has a great **economic value** and **growth potential**. I don't think you want to hear any **numbers or figures** from me.*

*Please help them, give them **financial support** so that their own creativity can bloom. Give them the opportunities so their talents can really shine. When you think about **investing** in tomorrow's generations, think about culture as well as **economics**.*

The data above consists of collocations that appeared during RM's speech, which was adapted for the participants of the APEC CEO Summit. These terms are referred to as collocations because they are specialised terms within a professional field. At official events such as APEC, key issues are not referred to as 'important topics', but rather as 'key agenda items'. These are collocations that carry a high degree of formality. In an economic context, the word 'value' is almost always paired with 'economic' to separate it from moral or aesthetic values. The term 'potential' frequently appears after the word 'growth' in company reports. This creates the impression that K-Pop is an asset with high financial potential.

Coherence

In this study, pragmatic elements function together to create coherence within a single statement. Therefore, a summary of the coherence data is presented separately in the form of a frequency distribution table showing the frequency of occurrence of pragmatic elements, as follows:

Table 2. Summary of the Frequency of Occurrence of Pragmatic Elements Supporting Coherence in RM's Speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit in Korea

Pragmatic Elements that Contribute to Coherence	Data Code	Frequency of Appearance
Deixis	Data 3, Data 5, Data 6, Data 8, Data 12, Data 16	6
Speech acts	Data 1, Data 2, Data 4, Data 5, Data 7, Data 10, Data 11, Data 12, Data 13, Data 14, Data 15, Data 16	12

Presupposition	Data 3, Data 4, Data 6, Data 8, Data 9, Data 11	6
Implicature	Data 2, Data 4, Data 5, Data 8, Data 11, Data 13, Data 15, Data 16	8

A total of 16 data of coherence were identified in this speech. The following provides a more detailed explanation of the coherence and the meanings identified.

*But most importantly, I'm lucky I met ARMY who accept our music, not just as a diversion, but as our shared language of life. By the way, **ARMY is the name of the official BTS fandom for your information.** Shout out to ARMY all over the world. **The army is where I just finished my military service. I was there for 18 months. I just want to make sure.***

The data above is classified as local coherence, as it involves semantic relationships within the text between sentences to link meaning and clarify context. This sentence also classified as lexical presupposition, as RM assumes that when listeners hear the word 'ARMY', they tend to associate it with the military rather than with the name of a K-Pop fan group. Therefore, he provides an explanation through a representative discursive act that clarifies the meaning of 'ARMY' as discussed and maintains the coherence of the listeners' understanding. Furthermore, this data contains the sentence "The army is where I have just completed my compulsory military service. I was there for 18 months", which explains that at that time, RM was not merely a global artist, but also an individual who had just fulfilled his duty as a South Korean citizen by completing his military service, furthermore, this sentence creates a qualitative implicature regarding his credibility as a citizen who obeys the law in the presence of world leaders. There is also the expressive discourse act "I just want to make sure", which serves as a clarification. The humour conveyed by RM is not merely an addition, but a means of creating cohesion to prevent misunderstandings regarding the intended meaning.

When you think about investing in tomorrow's generations, think about culture as well as economics.

The data above constitutes a directive discourse strategy designed to link the concepts of future investment and the cultural economy. RM did not issue any explicit or confrontational directives that might harm the strategy of politeness in the presence of global leaders. Instead, by conveying his message in the form of advice, RM was able to maintain a positive atmosphere in his interactions with the audience while consistently conveying his request that APEC leaders expand their understanding of investment. RM employed a parallel framework: when thinking about the economy, one must also think about culture. This creates a strong logical consistency, as RM successfully places culture on an equal footing with the economy within a forum known for being highly practical and data-driven. The phrasing in this context fulfils the principle of relevance by inserting the word 'culture' between two economic terms; RM implies that economic investment in the cultural sector acts as an invisible force driving future generations. RM appears to suggest that South Korea's economic success is, in part, linked to investment in the cultural sector and that this strategy should be adopted by APEC leaders.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis of data relating to the use of grammatical and lexical cohesion devices and coherence, supplemented by an analysis of pragmatic elements in RM's speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit in Korea, this study draws conclusions in response to the two research questions posed earlier. The findings of this study also confirm that unity in spoken discourse is determined not only by the use of linguistic structures on paper, but also by the speaker's ability to process implied meaning in a manner appropriate to the social context in which they are speaking. This study has thus successfully

demonstrated that an approach combining cohesion, coherence and specific pragmatic elements can provide deeper and more comprehensive insights into the workings of popular diplomatic communication.

Based on the research findings and the limitations identified during the analysis of the RM's speech at the 2025 APEC CEO Summit, the researchers suggest that future researchers focus their speech analysis on the integration of verbal language with non-verbal elements such as facial expressions, body language and intonation during speeches. This is crucial for understanding how non-verbal elements help to reinforce coherence. Furthermore, the researchers suggest analyzing speeches from a variety of forums with different levels of formality.

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