

# ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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## Episode #005

# What Is Soft Power (And Why Does It Matter)?

December 3, 2019

[00:00:00] Hello and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English. I'm Alastair Budge.

[00:00:10] Today we are going to be talking about how countries win the world politics game without force. We'll reveal why language is such a fantastic tool to [project<sup>1</sup>](#) power across the world and what Donald Trump is doing for US interests outside the US.

[00:00:30] Yes, it's time to learn about how soft power is a vital tool in the global diplomatic [toolbox<sup>2</sup>](#).

[00:00:37] Before we head fully into this podcast, I just wanted to remind you that you can find the key vocabulary and transcript for this podcast on [Leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:00:48] There's also a load of interesting material on the blog about how to learn English effectively with podcasts, so that's well worth a look if you haven't done so already.

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<sup>1</sup> present or promote (a particular view or image)

<sup>2</sup> a box or container for keeping tools in

## What Is Soft Power (And Why Does It Matter)?

[00:00:58] Okay, so soft power. In the age of the [self-proclaimed](#)<sup>3</sup> strong man where world politics is seen by some to be a [zero sum](#)<sup>4</sup> game, it's worth looking at one way in which countries have [projected](#)<sup>5</sup> their power onto the world through soft means.

[00:01:15] We'll start by defining what soft power actually is and look at some examples of soft power.

[00:01:21] Then we'll talk about how countries have used this to their advantage and finish by discussing whether it's actually really important after all.

[00:01:30] Okay, so to begin with, what is soft power? If you were to look up the phrase in a dictionary, you'd find the definition of soft power as 'a persuasive approach to international relations', typically involving in the use of economic or cultural influence.

[00:01:47] Really what it means is the ability of a country to influence other countries and other people through influence and attraction as opposed to [coercion](#)<sup>6</sup>.

[00:01:59] It's the opposite of hard power, which means a country getting its way by forcing another country to do something, normally military force of some kind, threats or [sanctions](#)<sup>7</sup>.

[00:02:10] To give you a practical but basic example, if I'm a country and I want to expand my power by increasing the number of people under my rule, I can either decide to use hard power and invade another country with my army and conquer its

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<sup>3</sup> described as or proclaimed to be such by oneself, without endorsement by others

<sup>4</sup> relating to or denoting a situation in which whatever is gained by one side is lost by the other

<sup>5</sup> present or promote (a particular view or image)

<sup>6</sup> force

<sup>7</sup> a threatened penalty for disobeying a law or rule

## What Is Soft Power (And Why Does It Matter)?

people. Or I could make my country seem so attractive and **aspirational**<sup>8</sup> that people from another country would want to just come and join it so I don't have to attack the other country if I want to get its people to come and live in my country.

[00:02:44] The term was **coined**<sup>9</sup> by Joseph Nye the Harvard political scientist in 1990 but he by no means invented the concept.

[00:02:53] Countries have been engaged in soft power since the start of time, since the birth of nations. However, it has become more and more of a tool for a few reasons.

[00:03:04] Firstly, it's no longer quite so acceptable to just attack another country and steal what they have.

[00:03:11] While this might've been okay for Genghis Khan, and debatably actually still acceptable well into the 20th century, a country normally can't just invade another and expect to get away with it.

[00:03:26] To the majority of the world's population force and aggression isn't really considered aspirational in the way that it once was.

[00:03:35] Secondly, in a globally connected world, soft power can actually spread very easily.

[00:03:41] It's much more effective in many ways than hard power, especially as it's often much cheaper as countries can actually get their citizens to do the work for them. This has its own share of issues, which we'll come to in a bit.

[00:03:57] According to Nye, a country's soft power rests on three things. Its culture, so in places where it's attractive to others.

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<sup>8</sup> having or characterized by aspirations to achieve social prestige and material success

<sup>9</sup> invent (a new word or phrase)

What Is Soft Power (And Why Does It Matter)?

[00:04:07] Its political values, so when it lives up to them at home and abroad. And its foreign policies, so when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority.

[00:04:20] Can you think of any examples of soft power?

[00:04:25] Well, I guess that this podcast is indirectly at least a great example of British soft power.

[00:04:32] Language is one of the oldest and most powerful examples of a country exerting its soft power. English has become the [lingua franca](#)<sup>10</sup> for much of the modern world. This is, I imagine, one of the reasons that you are learning it.

[00:04:48] The fact that English has such a [dominant](#)<sup>11</sup> position is great for the soft power of countries that speak English. It immediately makes them more attractive as destinations, as 20% of the world's population already speak their language, and it gives their citizens an immediate advantage as English is their mother tongue.

[00:05:07] If you wonder why so many countries pour money into helping people learn their language, it's to make their country more accessible and more attractive. Whether it's the BBC putting money into their language learning tools, which are great, by the way, if you haven't checked them out or it's Deutsche Welle in Germany, these aren't just funded out of the goodness of the broadcaster's heart.

[00:05:32] They're there to project linguistic power all over the world. In fact, if you are wondering, which country is often considered to be the best at soft power, it's the UK.

[00:05:46] Does this come as a surprise?

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<sup>10</sup> a language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different

<sup>11</sup> having power and influence over others

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[00:05:48] Well, the UK is the 78th largest country in the world by land area and 21st by population, but it [packs a sizable punch<sup>12</sup>](#) and is currently the sixth largest economy in the world.

[00:06:03] How?

[00:06:04] It's not all down to soft power, of course, but it does play an important part.

[00:06:09] Things like the Royal family, the BBC, the Premier League, the Spice Girls, the English legal system. These are all parts of British soft power that are known all over the world.

[00:06:23] With the [prevalence<sup>13</sup>](#) of the English language as well, the UK is firmly positioned as one of the world's dominant soft power nations, even if economically it's likely to continue its [gradual<sup>14</sup> decline<sup>15</sup>](#) in the world rankings.

[00:06:37] The UK, of course, has been a global or, or at least regional power for hundreds of years. Although colonisation was of course completely the opposite of soft power, what it has left behind are [institutions<sup>16</sup>](#) and laws that continue to project British soft power across the world.

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<sup>12</sup> is powerful, normally beyond expectations

<sup>13</sup> commonness

<sup>14</sup> slow

<sup>15</sup> reduction in size or power

<sup>16</sup> an established official organisation having an important role in a society, such as the Church or parliament

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[00:06:57] But the UK isn't the only country that has realised the power and the potential of soft power. I should also point out that in the 2019 Soft Power report, it has [slipped](#)<sup>17</sup> into second place.

[00:07:11] France always [ranks](#)<sup>18</sup> pretty high in any league table of soft power and came top of the rankings for 2019. It has a strong cultural [footprint](#)<sup>19</sup> with a history of philosophy, arts, film, and literature, and the French revolution has projected it as a strongly [Republican](#)<sup>20</sup> country with values that anyone around the world can aspire to.

[00:07:34] Italy as well, has had a similar [imprint](#)<sup>21</sup> on the world culturally. You can probably find an Italian restaurant, or at least someone who will sell you some sort of pizza almost anywhere in the world. And Rome remains one of the world's most popular cities for tourism.

[00:07:52] The US of course, has historically shown [mastery](#)<sup>22</sup> of soft power.

[00:07:56] The idea of the American dream where anyone can make their way in society has attracted hundreds of millions of people from all over the world, and the success of American business and the projection of the American ideal through music, film, and literature just [amplifies](#)<sup>23</sup> this message all over the world. But also, more recent world powers are just waking up to the importance of soft power and the power of a strong global image.

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<sup>17</sup> pass or change to a lower, worse, or different condition, typically in a gradual or imperceptible way

<sup>18</sup> considered within a ratings system

<sup>19</sup> the impression left by a foot or shoe on the ground or a surface

<sup>20</sup> advocating republican government, i.e. without a monarch (king or queen)

<sup>21</sup> make an impression or mark on

<sup>22</sup> comprehensive knowledge or skill in a particular subject or activity

<sup>23</sup> makes louder

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[00:08:27] China, for example, has of course historically been a great power, but always within a regional context. It never really sought to expand its territory beyond what was [deemed](#)<sup>24</sup> Chinese territory, at least in the way that European powers did. In the past 30 years, China has really started to push its soft power [agenda](#)<sup>25</sup>, funding institutes to learn Chinese around the world called Confucius institutes and then also providing an alternative to World Bank or IMF [funding](#)<sup>26</sup> for countries all over the world, especially in Africa.

[00:09:05] Many Middle Eastern states, especially those with relatively new-found oil wealth are trying to change the image, whether it's buying Premier League football clubs, acquiring Renaissance art, or investing in US technology startups, many of the Gulf States are trying to [portray](#)<sup>27</sup> themselves as enlightened modern states, despite a lot of their politics actually not really keeping up with this at all.

[00:09:32] Of course, being able to practically print money thanks to vast oil reserves makes this all a lot easier, but soft power isn't something that any country can just switch on and off, even if they have enough cash in the bank as we will come to in a bit.

[00:09:48] Okay. So we've established that soft power can be a pretty powerful tool and that countries are starting to invest heavily in it.

[00:09:57] But if soft power is such a powerful option in the diplomatic toolbox, then why isn't every country just prioritising this as an initiative?

[00:10:07] Well, there are a few reasons. Firstly, it takes time. It's a long game and results don't happen immediately.

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<sup>24</sup> considered, thought

<sup>25</sup> the underlying intentions or motives of a particular person or group

<sup>26</sup> providing money for

<sup>27</sup> Show, paint a picture of

## What Is Soft Power (And Why Does It Matter)?

[00:10:17] In an era when politicians are fighting for reelection and are only thinking in [time frames](#)<sup>28</sup> of under five years, for the most part, big soft power initiatives are unlikely to reap benefits during the politicians' time in office.

[00:10:33] Secondly, for the most part, it's not just something that can be turned on when you want it to, especially from a cultural point of view.

[00:10:42] The great artists, filmmakers, writers and creators, they are a product of the society that they grew up in. They're a product of the education they received, and a country can't just decide that it wants to create a great artist or playwright and they just emerge.

[00:10:59] It's something that isn't controllable.

[00:11:01] Although of course you can foster the environment to help culture [blossom](#)<sup>29</sup>, and of course it takes time.

[00:11:10] Thirdly, it's hard to measure. Politicians love [soundbites](#)<sup>30</sup> and hard numbers. You know, GDP has increased by X percent. Unemployment has reduced by Y.

[00:11:22] Really investing in soft power initiatives isn't something that will give immediate results, as we already mentioned. And even when it does, it's not an easy thing to measure.

[00:11:34] And this is one of the reasons why it's so often ignored. One timely example is in the US under the presidency of Donald Trump.

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<sup>28</sup> a specified period of time in which something occurs or is planned to take place

<sup>29</sup> mature or develop in a promising or healthy way

<sup>30</sup> a short extract from a recorded interview or speech, chosen for its succinctness or concision

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[00:11:43] His administration has been forthright in the fact that they are putting America first being [hostile<sup>31</sup>](#) towards immigrants compared to previous administrations and are demonstrating values that I think most people would [struggle<sup>32</sup>](#) to argue are aspirational.

[00:12:00] When compared to Barack Obama, who was a hugely popular president outside the US, Donald Trump has done a lot of damage to America's soft power.

[00:12:11] There was a survey of Europeans in September of 2019 and the results were pretty damning. Just 5% of Europeans said that they trust Donald Trump, and there are multiple reports that support the theory that he is doing severe damage to American soft power around the world.

[00:12:33] Indeed, in 2016 the US was [ranked<sup>33</sup>](#) as the most powerful country in the world in terms of soft power. But by 2019. It had slipped down to fifth place below France, the UK, Germany, and Sweden. As a self-proclaimed strong man, he would likely say that he doesn't care, and the power of economic [sanctions<sup>34</sup>](#) or the US army is all that matters.

[00:12:58] However, history would certainly suggest this isn't completely correct.

[00:13:03] So in a world where so many politicians see hard power as the only method to get what they want, what does the future hold for soft power?

[00:13:13] Well, I want to close with two final points today.

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<sup>31</sup> unfriendly towards

<sup>32</sup> have trouble doing

<sup>33</sup> considered within a ratings system

<sup>34</sup> a threatened penalty for disobeying a law or rule

## What Is Soft Power (And Why Does It Matter)?

[00:13:17] Firstly, the importance of soft power is far from over. While some politicians may be moving away from investing heavily in it right now, this is [bound](#)<sup>35</sup> to come back and bite their countries in the long run.

[00:13:33] While investing in soft power - or rather the institutions that help [foster](#)<sup>36</sup> soft power - today will pay [dividends](#)<sup>37</sup> for years to come, not investing in soft power is just set to disadvantage future generations.

[00:13:49] The countries today with the strongest soft power are [reaping](#)<sup>38</sup> the benefits from things that were [set in motion](#)<sup>39</sup> tens or hundreds of years ago.

[00:13:58] Secondly, this [shift](#)<sup>40</sup> away from soft power by some larger countries, the US for example, has left a void and opportunities for other smaller countries.

[00:14:10] To give a practical example, Estonia, a country with a population of only 1.3 million, which only gained independence from the USSR in 1991 has recreated itself as a digital country, an aspirational place for Europeans to move to or set up businesses.

[00:14:29] This is reaping huge economic [dividends](#)<sup>41</sup> as well with GDP growing almost 5% in 2017.

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<sup>35</sup> Very likely

<sup>36</sup> encourage the development of (something, especially something desirable)

<sup>37</sup> a benefit from an action or policy

<sup>38</sup> receive (something, especially something beneficial) as a consequence of one's own or another's actions

<sup>39</sup> put into place

<sup>40</sup> a slight change in position, direction, or tendency.: "a **shift in** public opinion" "a shift of wind took us by surprise".

<sup>41</sup> a benefit from an action or policy

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[00:14:37] Or Sweden, another relatively small European country, but one that [packs a substantial soft power punch<sup>42</sup>](#), especially with its focus on environmental protection. This just shows that smaller countries can play pretty effectively at the soft power table as well. It's not all about economic size and the amount of cash you have in the bank.

[00:14:59] Okay. I hope that this introduction to soft power has been interesting. It's a subject that I think is going to get more and more important, and the politicians who [neglect<sup>43</sup>](#) it are taking a very short term and dangerous view.

[00:15:14] This podcast and the fact that every one of you is making an active effort to learn a language that was native only to a small island in northern Europe is testament to the power of soft power.

[00:15:27] As always, if you enjoyed the podcast, please do tell your friends, colleagues, classmates, family members, or anyone who you think will be interested.

[00:15:37] The more people who listen well the better the podcast will get.

[00:15:40] If you're listening to this podcast on your favourite podcasting app, then please do take 30 seconds and think about leaving a review. Every review helps more people find out about the podcast, and as I said, that's a good thing for everyone.

[00:15:54] If you're looking for the key vocabulary or transcript, you can grab that on [Leonardoenglish.com](http://Leonardoenglish.com).

[00:15:59] I'll just leave you with this one soundbite from the former president of South Korea, the country that exported Gangnam Style all over the world.

[00:16:08] "In the 21st century culture is power."

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<sup>42</sup> see 'packs a sizeable punch'

<sup>43</sup> fail to care for properly

## English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #005

### What Is Soft Power (And Why Does It Matter)?

[00:16:13] I've been Alastair Budge and you've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:16:18] I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

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## Key vocabulary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Self-proclaimed</b>	described as or proclaimed to be such by oneself, without endorsement by others
<b>Zero-sum</b>	relating to or denoting a situation in which whatever is gained by one side is lost by the other
<b>Projected</b>	present or promote (a particular view or image)
<b>Coercion</b>	force
<b>Sanctions</b>	a threatened penalty for disobeying a law or rule
<b>Aspirational</b>	having or characterized by aspirations to achieve social prestige and material success
<b>Coined</b>	invent (a new word or phrase)
<b>Lingua franca</b>	a language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different
<b>Dominant</b>	having power and influence over others
<b>Packs a sizeable punch</b>	is powerful, normally beyond expectations
<b>Prevalence</b>	commonness
<b>Gradual</b>	slow

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<b>Decline</b>	reduction in size or power
<b>Institutions</b>	an established official organisation having an important role in a society, such as the Church or parliament
<b>Slipped</b>	pass or change to a lower, worse, or different condition, typically in a gradual or imperceptible way
<b>Footprint</b>	the impression left by a foot or shoe on the ground or a surface
<b>Republican</b>	advocating republican government
<b>Imprint</b>	make an impression or mark on
<b>Mastery</b>	comprehensive knowledge or skill in a particular subject or activity
<b>Amplifies</b>	makes louder
<b>Deemed</b>	considered, thought
<b>Agenda</b>	the underlying intentions or motives of a particular person or group
<b>Funding</b>	providing money for
<b>Portray</b>	show
<b>Toolbox</b>	a box or container for keeping tools in
<b>Timeframes</b>	a specified period of time in which something occurs or is planned to take place
<b>Reap</b>	receive (something, especially something beneficial) as a consequence of one's own or another's actions

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<b>Foster</b>	encourage the development of (something, especially something desirable)
<b>Blossom</b>	mature or develop in a promising or healthy way
<b>Soundbites</b>	a short extract from a recorded interview or speech, chosen for its succinctness or concision
<b>Hostile</b>	unfriendly towards
<b>Struggle</b>	have trouble doing
<b>Ranked</b>	considered within a ratings system
<b>Bound</b>	likely
<b>Dividends</b>	a benefit from an action or policy
<b>Set in motion</b>	put into place
<b>Shift</b>	a slight change in position, direction, or tendency.: "a shift in public opinion" "a shift of wind took us by surprise".
<b>Packs a substantial soft power punch</b>	see 'packs a sizeable punch'
<b>Neglect</b>	fail to care for properly

*We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.*

*What did you like? What could we do better?*

*What did you struggle to understand?*

*You can email us at [hi@leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com).*