

English: Bridge or barrier?

The political economy of English in East Asian society.

R. A. Stegemann

Two Opposing Trends

The Separation of Language from Culture

(Language as tool and language as medium)

In this paper language and culture are viewed as two manifestations of the same phenomena -- namely, the ordering of the world into easily recognizable, often logically coherent patterns. Whether we are classifying abstract concepts such as words, physical objects, or even ourselves, the underlying principle is the same: we order the world based upon our past and current perceptions of how it truly is, but can rarely ever know. More important with regard to language and culture, these perceptions are ordered in such a way that others can recognize these individual orderings as part of their own. We pause before those things that others pause, and simply pass without notice those things which others deem commonplace. Finally, language and culture converge when we assign value to particular words and their corresponding objects or symbols. In this sense, words are little more than audio-visual tags for cultural value.

Because language and culture are so intimately related, even when people of different cultures speak the same language, words that appear the same are not, because they are employed differently in each cultural context. In contrast, there are few words in any language for which words with similar meaning are not available in other languages. This is because much of culture is the same as we move across national and ethnic boundaries. Notwithstanding, a one-to-one correspondence between words across cultures is never likely, because most words have more than one meaning or use; where they may agree in one context, they are likely to disagree in another. Thus, we can improve the accuracy of our communication by limiting the contexts in which we employ certain words and much of language as a whole. In a similar but contrasting light, people who use a particular language in their daily goings-on are exposed to a much larger range of linguistic patterns for the same vocabulary than those who do not. As a result these former are able to communicate a much larger amount of information using the same number and kinds of words as those whose linguistic and cultural milieus do not entirely correspond. A French bond trader, who spends many of his working hours on the telephone in English, but the rest of his working day, family life, and social activities in French, is likely to have a much richer command of the French language than of English.

In general, when there are many ways to say the same thing, we choose that expression which best suits the situation. This is not a matter of selecting redundant, highly structured, grammatical patterns employed to filter out audio-linguistic noise, rather it is a matter of choosing that word or expression most often employed in a particular cultural context or linguistic setting. There are usually many ways to get the same idea across, but often a much more limited number of expressions that are truly appropriate. These kinds of expressions tell the listener that the speaker shares, or does not share, the same set of social and physical circumstances; they provide the tone in which the message is likely to be received and probably given; and they can be used to direct subtly one's message towards only certain members of a group. Without this contextual wrapping the message conveyed is much more akin to that emanating from an automated teller window at a local bank or heard over a loudspeaker while one awaits the scheduled arrival of an expected train. Without this *semantic envelop* one's message is conveyed in much the same way one receives money from many a cashier at a busy retail counter during rush hour -- perfunctory, cold, and uncaring. Unfortunately, the language that is being taught and the level of achievement reached for the vast majority of people who study English as a second language never reaches above this fairly primitive level -- a level well suited for giving directions on a street corner, redirecting telephone messages at the front desk of a large corporation, indicating the whereabouts of certain products on a store shelf, demonstrating the proper procedure for operating a mechanical or electrical devices, and filling out pre-formatted documents at government counters. It is poorly suited for sharing an apartment flat, the same office space, a community commons, or dealing with emergencies in which common, but precise language is crucial.

In summary, *language as a tool* employed to achieve particular tasks and *language as a social medium* in which people pass much of their conscious lives are simply not the same. More importantly, the kinds of human relationships that form the social capital upon which enduring and

desirable human social order is built, can hardly be achieved with the former. *Language as a tool* is a poor linguistic surrogate for communicating those thoughts and feeling that one truly would like to share, but cannot for lack of familiarity with the language in whose medium one truly wishes he could conduct his life.

If the goal among East Asian governments is to provide each of their citizens with a linguistic tool to conduct limited business transactions for the purpose of attracting tourist dollars, to permit limited freedom of movement to neo-colonial expatriates for the purpose of attracting foreign capital, and to facilitate technological development through the active acquisition of relatively free scientific knowledge available only to those with at least passive reading skills, then they are largely succeeding. Unfortunately, this success has also resulted in a tremendous waste of human and financial resources that is poisoning the international environment.

While ignoring the role of English as a social medium East Asian governments have erected new barriers to mutual understanding among nations and discouraged foreign residents and non-residents from the acquisition of their host country tongues and cultures. Indeed, the notion of international exchange has become so perverted by this headstrong drive for economic growth and development, that the acquisition of English is now a prerequisite for the study and acquisition of most other languages in East Asia. Furthermore, by overemphasizing the importance of English among their own citizenry, East Asian governments have cheapened the overall quality of English world-wide, while raising the cost of its acquisition to those who need it most. Even in Europe, where the level of trade is much higher and the variety of cultures similarly diverse, English is often learned as a third language, rather than the first second language. In Europe one learns the language of one's neighbors, because it is with them that one shares common borders. Moreover, one improves one's ability in his own language best by learning the languages of others whose language most resembles one's own.

The Recombination of Language and Culture

(Language as both tool and medium)

As East Asian governments seek to appropriate the English language as a tool for the development of their own national economies, and the anglophonic world pushes for an international standard for world-wide communication, many people in East Asia appear to have other ideas.

Language is pretty much the property of those who take the time to learn and utilize it. As such, we tend to do with language as we please. We may have it tattooed to the surface of our rear cheeks, emblazon it on another's clothing, or use it for neon lighting above our businesses. Whether we are Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, or residents of Hong Kong, our English belongs to us, because we and our fellow citizens have spent innumerable hours for many years making it a part of who we are. We need never enter into conversation to enjoy the sound; we have no need to understand the meaning of the words to enjoy their appearance. We are not obligated to follow a particular syntactical pattern, if we find it difficult or cumbersome. Moreover, we can create new patterns that others like and use. We can incorporate English words into our own native language through various standard transformations, or simply reinvent their meanings and use them as they are. What is important is these words and syntax correspond to our already acquired native or non-native linguistic habits and culturally bounded aesthetic sense. No need to worry that they makes little sense to others from a different culture who speak the same language.

There is also the problem of phonetics. In so far as the phonetic system which many East Asians employ to learn a foreign language is the same as that of their own mother tongue, many are surprised when non-resident foreigners cannot understand them. In effect, East Asians have learned to re-employ their own phonetic system so as to make it possible to talk about English but never learn to speak it. Because the phonetic systems of other languages have been reinvented to match one's own, no one among one's classmates, teachers, and work colleagues has trouble understanding. In fact, one has only to adhere to the same grammatical rules and memorized vocabulary familiar to everyone with the same level of education, and limited communication in a foreign language becomes possible among one's own countrymen. Has anyone learned a useful language for communication with foreigners, though?

Generally speaking, what East Asian countries have achieved is the creation of many second languages poorly understandable to all but those who have passed through the same national system of education. That national governments in East Asia appear little concerned about this massive failure to create a global standard of communication can be easily explained by what is to

follow. For the moment, let us simply state that creating a global standard has never been the primary goal of these governments.

Cultivating the soil for further understanding.

In order for English to become a world language, as I am sure is the desire of many, the world must agree that this is what needs to be done. To the best of my knowledge this agreement does not exist. Even if there were agreement, I find it difficult to imagine how the standards necessary to realize it can be reached. More importantly, how can such standards be enforced after having been agreed upon.

In the previous two sections we briefly examined two opposing trends and some of their cultural and linguistic manifestations in East Asian society. On the one hand, we considered part of a world-wide effort to make "English" the second language of every world citizen, and on the other, we observed how East Asian governments are creating many new second national languages poorly intelligible across national borders.

Let us assume in this section that everyone agrees about the need for English to become the world's language and about the standards to be employed. Let us also compare the probable enforcement of these standards with those of actually enforced international industrial and commercial codes that permit cross border transportation, trade, and communication. Enforcement of these latter is possible, because the number of people who utilize international standards in their work is far smaller than the number who enjoy the benefits of their utilization. A commercial airline or provider of a telecommunication network is subject to all sorts of international and national regulations, so as to insure an uninterrupted flow of goods, people, and information across national boundaries. Governments grant operating licenses to firms who own and operate the technology used in providing these flows, and the money received from these licenses is used to monitor those who possess and utilize them.

Obviously this is not the case with language. Those who monitor language are those who use it as a tool and medium for communication. Competent certified instructors and carefully prepared textbooks can go along way toward insuring that certain standards are followed in the classroom, but once students have graduated, who is there to enforce these standards? Only those others with whom one communicates. We uphold linguistic standards, because we depend upon them for communication; without such dependency the need for maintaining them disappears. Moreover, in the absence of continual exposure to other groups our standards undergo change that reflects the exclusive nature of our own society; for it is in this way that we identify ourselves as different and reinforce our respective group solidarities. Thus, without sufficient need and adequate exposure, no amount of schooling can be adequate to ensure world standards. Even if these latter did exist, in no East Asian country does there exist sufficient need or adequate exposure to ensure that these standards can be upheld. In short, the English language can only become the world's language for those who actively depend on it in a world context – a very tiny minority of the world's population beyond those who live in countries where English serves as the native language.

Not only is the artificial dependency on English created by East Asian governments insufficient for achieving this task, the creation of such sufficiency is not foreseeable in the near, or even too distant future. I will spend much of the rest of the paper explaining why such sufficiency has not been created, and why the current trend should be reversed until East Asian governments have decided that it is in their best interest to create the level of dependency required to create a truly universal second language, if only regional in nature.

Finally, those who blame the anglophonic world for "pushing" English language and culture around the globe are pointing their finger in the wrong direction, for there would be few takers, if it were not for the artificial, nevertheless inadequate, demand created by East Asian governments. The wounded pride suffered by many East Asians at the hands of European colonialists and their North American progeny and the morphine-like addiction which has resulted from the belief that English is the key to East Asian development have different sources!

Host nation and hosted guest

It takes at least two to make a trade and many more for a market transaction.

In order to understand the political economy of the English language in East Asia, it is useful to view the problem from a demand/supply perspective and then examine the intervening role of East Asian governments in the region's market dynamics. The general setting for such a model has

already been established in the previous section. In this section I will make an effort to formalize it.

On the supply-side one may include anyone who is a potential source of English language instruction. This includes among others: free-lance educators, US military personnel and their spouses stationed in either Japan or South Korea, graduate ESL teaching programs largely based in the United States, privately owned and managed language schools found in every small and large urban center from Hong Kong to Sapporo, Japan, most public schools under the auspices of East Asian ministries of education, the US American film industry, large segments of the world's publishing industry, and the enormously influential multi-national English news media. On the demand-side we can list a much larger number of East Asian consumers and workers including bored housewives, grade school students at all levels, low- and mid-level managers seeking promotion, most first and second year students in attendance at local colleges or universities, a large number of government employees, just about any worker involved in East Asian industries specializing in overseas trade, investment, or tourism, and a whole host of others too numerous to mention. Many of these same private and public buyers and sellers also play dual market roles, in so far as they are both consumers of instructional inputs and suppliers of similar outputs. In summary, the English language industry in East Asia is both vast and complicated.

So as to simplify matters I divide these market and government players into two major groups: those of East Asia's host nations and their foreign guests. Obviously this we-they, East-West, domestic-foreign polarization of the issue smacks of orientalism and will likely be found offensive by many serious educators and researchers. As a result, I do not take this simplifying assumption lightly and will make every attempt to justify its use before proceeding.

Let us take a quick look at several facts obtained from Japanese, Hong Kong, and world government data bases.

Although Japan is very dependent on overseas trade for its economic existence, only about 10% of all domestically produced goods and services ever leave Japan¹. As a percent of Japan's total economic activity international trade constitutes no more than 23%. Moreover, fifty percent of all imported goods are in the form of large commodity items such as fuel, food, raw materials, basic metals, and chemicals. Large ticket items, such as automobiles and telecommunication equipment, make up an even larger portion of Japan's exports². Since large ticket items likely require far fewer sales personnel in order to transact the same amount of worth, it is reasonable to conclude that for the same number of yen fewer people are required in overseas trading than in domestic commercial activity. In addition, it is unlikely that all Japanese overseas trading is conducted in English. Finally, many of the same people who export goods, also import them; Japan's world famous trading houses are a case in point. Thus, from a strictly economic viewpoint a generous estimate suggests that no more than one out of every ten Japanese requires English to conduct his business.

Now consider Hong Kong, whose total real trade volume is more than four times its real gross domestic product. Even in this former British colony and world famous East Asian trade and financial center less than 50% of Hong Kong's domestic economic activity is devoted to trade in services³. If this service trade resembles even partially Hong Kong's trade in goods, then anywhere

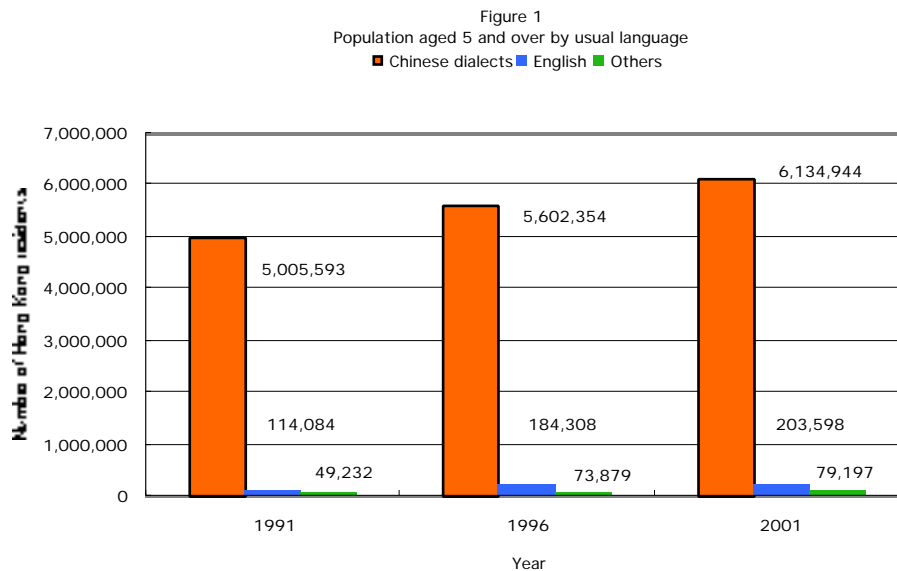
¹ The actual figure from 1990 to 1999 is 12.2%. This number was obtained by dividing total real exports into real gross domestic product (real GDP) for each year and then calculating the average for the aforementioned ten-year period. Both values are measured in real Yen and not subject to changes in the general price level. Real exports measure the amount of domestically produced goods and services sold overseas, and real GDP measures total domestic economic activity. The base year employed was 1990. These statistics were obtained in Japanese from national accounting data supplied by the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan, Economic and Social Research Institute, Statistical Data. <<http://www5.cao.go.jp/2000/g/qe003-68/gaku-jcy00368.csv>> (19 March 2001)

² During the period extending from 1990 to 1999 Japan's total trade volume (exports plus imports) totaled 23.7% of Japan's gross domestic product. An item by item account of what was traded can be obtained from the World Trade Organization's International trade statistics. *Selected long-term trends. Merchandise trade of Japan by region and by product. Table II. 5.* [electronic data base] <http://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/its2000/section2/ii05.xls> (21 April 2001).

³ In 2000 Hong Kong's total export and import of both real goods and services equaled HK\$3,723 billion; its real gross domestic product was only HK\$894 billion. Total services including both exports and imports amounted to HK\$408 billion. As Hong Kong is a trade entrepot for Mainland China and the rest of the world, a large amount of what Hong Kong imports and exports simply passes through Hong Kong ports with no value

from 33% to 50% and more of this activity arises from economic trade with the Chinese mainland or Taiwan. If we include Japan and South Korea in Hong Kong's trade figures, this range increases from 39% to 67%⁴. Furthermore, the degree to which English plays an important role in trade among all Western Pacific countries, necessarily diminishes in those areas, regions and territories that have been subject to strong Chinese or Japanese historical influence. Indeed, the largest number of expatriates living in East Asia appears to be from the Chinese mainland; it is these ethnic Chinese occupying offices in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore who establish the networks and negotiate the contracts for much of East Asian business. Thus, a reasonable crude estimate of the percentage of Hong Kong's economic activity for which the English language plays a crucial role might be about half of that represented by total overseas trade in services -- say, between 16.5% and 25%.

If these trade figures are not convincing proof of the number of people required to do business



in English in Hong Kong, then consider the findings from the Hong Kong 2001 census report depicted in figure 1. In this graph one can readily see the relative proportion of Hong Kong residents who employ English as their *usual language*. In 2001 this number amounted to only 3.2 percent of the entire resident population. These 203,598 residents presumably include both Hong Kong permanent and non-permanent residents of all ethnic groups and are not restricted to foreign

residents⁵. Just how people employ English in their daily lives in a *non-usual* manner is of course uncertain from these statistics, but if we combine these figures with those previously obtained from measures of Hong Kong's service trade can we not comfortably estimate fewer than 1 in 5?

Before we begin with a closer examination of the East Asian English language industry, please turn your attention to one more demographic representation -- namely, the ethnic make-up of the non-Chinese Hong Kong community. These people likely constitute a major portion of the 3.2 percent of all Hong Kong residents who employ English as their *usual language*. Please keep in mind as you view these figures that Hong Kong is considered by many to be one of the most international urban communities in East Asia. The ethnic groups named in figure 2 represent the largest groups

added. For more detailed, easy to obtain statistics on Hong Kong's national income accounts, please see Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department's *Hong Kong in figures. National accounts and balance of payment accounts*. [online data]

<http://www.info.gov.hk/censtatd/eng/hkstat/hkinf/nat_account/nat_account_index.html> (12 January 2002).

⁴ In 2000 Hong Kong imported HK\$839 billion worth of goods from the Chinese mainland and Taiwan. In turn it exported \$60 billion worth of its own domestic production, and HK\$489 billion worth of re-exports to these same countries. Imports from Japan and South Korea amounted to HK\$280 billion. Re-exports to Japan tallied in at HK\$82 billion. These statistics were obtained from the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department's *Hong Kong in Figures. External trade. Trade by main country/territory*. [online data] <http://www.info.gov.hk/censtatd/eng/hkstat/hkinf/ext_trade/ext_trade_index.html> (12 January 2002).

⁵ This graph was produced from data taken from the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department's *Main tables of the 2001 population census. Population aged 5 and over by usual language, 1991, 1996, and 2001*. [online database] <http://www.info.gov.hk/censtatd/eng/hkstat/fas/01c/01c_index.html> (12 January, 2002). Frequently Asked Statistics.

in Hong Kong⁶.

Firstly, whereas USAmericans are Japan's third largest foreign population, they do not appear among Hong Kong's principle ethnic groups. Moreover, those who claim British ethnicity are the third largest non-Chinese ethnic group, but are outnumbered by Filipinos by more than a multiple of seven. There are also more than twice as many Indonesians as there are British. Although many of the individuals included in these latter two groups have probably attended schools in which English was taught as a second language, it is doubtful that most of them are terribly fluent. Even if all the South Asians and Pakistanis were raised in English speaking schools and near-native English speakers, together with the British, they would make up no more than 15% of the total non-Chinese population -- not even 1% of all Hong Kong residents.

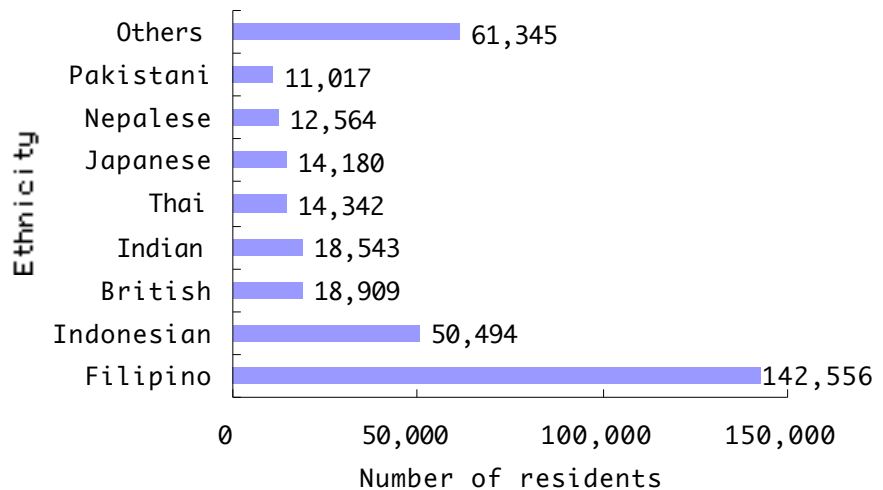
One must keep in mind that a large number of ethnic Chinese residents are brought up in solid bilingual environments, but could this number be more than five times that of the ethnic British population? Adding these English speaking ethnic groups together -- the British, Indians, Pakistanis, and near-native English speaking ethnic Chinese -- we obtain 143,014 Hong Kong residents with at least near-native English speaking ability -- a mere 2% of the total resident population.

Setting both economics and demographics aside for the moment, what if we were to make the brash assumption that all these near-native speakers devoted full-time to the teaching of English? There would be only one teacher for every 50 Hong Kong residents!

So what might we conclude from these numbers? In short, not only is there insufficient economic justification for the amount of English demanded, but there are not an adequate number of people available to satisfy it. Thus, on the one hand there is too much demand to meet supply, and on the other too little demand to insure quality. This heavily distorted demand and supply relationship has resulted in the creation of a large number of nationally certified educators with inadequate preparation in English language instruction, and a many times larger number of certified students with insufficient and improper language training. Though the private sector has attempted to accomplish that which East Asian public school systems have been unable to accomplish, the outcome can be little better -- there simply does not exist a sufficiently large native-speaking national public to provide an adequate check on students once they have graduated.

Of course, what is absurd to one, may appear perfectly reasonable to another. Moreover, I make no claim to have a monopoly on knowledge. I do earnestly hope, however, that this brief introduction to the economics and demography of the East Asian language industry has disarmed, at least in part, those who would label me a troublemaker, racial bigot, or foreign imperialist.

Figure 2
Hong Kong non-Chinese residents by ethnicity
2001 Hong Kong Census



⁶ This graph was produced from data taken from the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department's *Main tables of the 2001 population census. Population by ethnicity, 2001*. [online database] <http://www.info.gov.hk/censtatd/eng/hkstat/fas/01c/01c_index.html> (12 January, 2002). Frequently Asked Statistics.

Host nation perspective

The visible hand and the many mouths it must feed.

We must learn English!

Developmental state approach

In human affairs one thing is certain, the actions we take often have unintended consequences; this is especially true when they are governmental actions imposed upon the lives of every citizen.

In order to minimize the obvious sense of intrusion that many individuals, families, and communities must feel about having to learn a foreign language for which they have little direct use, national governments around the world have employed various justifications. One such justification employed by Japanese Meiji reformers during the late 19th century was national defense. Simply, not learning Western ways in one's own way, meant having to learn them according to someone else's. The English language was the means to learn on one's own. This same political strategy appears to have continued into the present with only slight modification: the new potential threat to cultural and historical self-determination is market competition. That many of the world's new scientific discoveries are published in English, that English is the world's first language of diplomacy and international commerce, and that the United States is the world's largest single buyer of East Asian produced exports, are some of the more popular reasons employed in defense of this new, modern strategy. *That every East Asian citizen must learn English in order to be competitive is of course an entirely different matter.*

Learning something alien to one's own family and community, as a means to defend oneself against foreign aggression, is very much like receiving a vaccination. Most people do not have sufficient medical knowledge to appreciate how vaccines truly work, and must therefore rely on licensed physicians for sound advice. When it comes to administering the *English vaccine* to every citizen, East Asian national educators are serving the role of licensed physicians. Though it is unclear how much confidence East Asian citizenry have in their own national governments, several things are readily evident: one, if the coerced learning of English is limited to that of just another school subject, like mathematics or Sino-Japanese orthography, then it can be swallowed relatively comfortably as part of a much larger package of collectively approved medicine called national education. Two, despite the obvious social disruption, environmental destruction, and mechanization of daily life that technological advancement introduces into local communities, there are many associated personal benefits that obfuscate these larger, more difficult social and environmental dangers. Three, there are always some local residents, who see English as a means to escape local social integument or improve their social status. In this latter context, one can always blame failed innovation on bad English and thus exonerate oneself from blame by others for having sought to introduce an idea that was foreign anyway. Then too, English remains an important symbol of international status, and those who command it believe somehow that they are more global in their outlook than those who do not.

Thus, the close correspondence between national defense and economic development made and continues to make English a relatively popular intrusion⁷. Notwithstanding, for all but a sizeable minority of East Asians the rest appears as magic, for industrialization is far more complicated than the simple, but burdensome task of having to learn a language that one is likely never to use.

Despite their need for rational order, human beings know that much of the world cannot be explained rationally. So, when they are confronted with irrational cause and effect by someone who is applying rational means, they are challenged and demand to know the true relationship. Of course, good magicians never reveal their secrets, for in so doing they would put themselves out of work. As a result the magician's audience must guess, and if the magical act is sufficiently challenging, many walk away none the wiser. Still, the demand for rational order is unrelenting, and when presented with the same magical trick over and over, general publics create their own

⁷ An exemplary proponent of this movement was the Japanese social philosopher and founding father of Keio University, FUKUZAWA Yukichi (1835-1901). In his work entitled *Sekai tsukushi* (1875) Fukuzawa writes about the notion of "rich nation, strong army" (fukokuyouhei). In those days English was not yet a national priority, and Fukuzawa did not begin his studies of the English language until the age of 24, shortly before his first visit to the United States.

explanations and invent new and different ways to perform the same irrational act rationally. Furthermore, not all that appears magical is intended to be magic. Often people err and perform irrational acts which they themselves perceive to be rational, but are not, simply because they are ignorant of the true relationship. Thus, when we point the finger of blame at East Asian national education ministries, we must be careful in the manner in which we render judgment. What may appear to be callous and deceitful, may be nothing more than a problem of well-intended ignorance and follow-the-leader mimicry. In whichever way judgment is finally rendered, the desire to provide rational explanations for irrational acts remains, and the social institutions which have been built upon these explanations are ever-present. The rest of this section is devoted to an examination of some of the more popular explanations and institutions that have arisen from them.

Though some of these may appear more meaningful than others, as I have no objective statistical data to justify their relative importance in the minds of the East Asian foreign and non-foreign general public, the order in which they appear is at best random. In passing let us also consider some of the social ramifications associated with each⁸.

A global standard. Many East Asians believe that the English language is their passport to the world. They believe that everyone in the industrially advanced world, and many who are not, studies English and speaks it at least as well as they.

The extent to which this is true is not at all obvious. In the francophonic and hispanic worlds, for example, surely French and Spanish are the principle second languages where they are not native; and English, if it is taught at all, is acquired as an optional or requisite third language of probable inferior quality to that acquired by East Asians. Moreover, my own ten years of experience among East Asian youth has taught me that the principle medium of international dialogue among them is accomplished in the language of the host nation through various student exchange and other programs – not English. Although many East Asian universities have established special programs in English for international students, the number of students who participate in these appears to be far fewer than those who seek to acquire the language of their host nation and further their academic and professional training after a certain level of proficiency has been achieved. Moreover, students who study abroad are generally eager to acquire the language of their host nation, and there are as many teachers available as there are host country citizens interested in sharing their language and culture with others of the world.

Although English and the internet are often propounded as the obvious medium of modern international dialogue, the number of East Asians who are actively engaged in it appear very few as a proportion of those who study English. If for no other reason, it is difficult to enter into active dialogue when one has only passive command. Moreover, many East Asian students are already overburdened with English language text in school, so that when they finally have time to engage in dialogue on the net, they prefer to do it in their native tongue.

Racial and national prejudice. It is a fairly standard assumption among East Asians that if one appears that he comes from the West, he probably does not know the language of his host country. This prejudice is particularly strong toward those Westerners who arrive from anglophonic countries. The obvious ramification of this belief, together with the notion that English is a global standard, is that all dialogue with the West must be conducted in English. Many reasons are offered to justify this prejudice. One hears that Westerners are lazy, suffer from a cultural superiority complex, or are simply incapable. This prejudice becomes particularly clear, when a Hong Kong postal clerk with formidable English skills states sympathetically, while complementing a foreigner on his ability to write in Chinese, that Chinese characters are difficult for foreigners. Has it never occurred to her that Chinese characters are difficult for everyone including Hong Kong children and even many Hong Kong adults?

It was Japan's creation of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere and the wars and occupation which resulted that made it the interest of every East Asian nation to industrialize as

⁸ In his New Year's address to the nation KIM Dae Jung named the FIFA World Cup, enhancing national competitiveness, and inter-Korea détente as his three priorities. KIM Dae Jung is South Korea's president. He won the Nobel Peace Prize for his effort to stimulate the reunification effort between the peoples of North and South Korea in 2000. See online article entitled "President Kim Declares War Against Corruption" Korea Information Service , 14 January 2002
<<http://www.korea.net/menu/government/newscontent.asp?Number=20020114012>>.

rapidly as possible after the war. The obvious source of technical knowledge and capital to facilitate this development was the United States, for it was the only country that survived World War II relatively free from damage on its own turf. With everyone at its doorstep, competition was keen, and North Americans had little need to know the languages of those to whom they sold. Everyone in East Asia and Europe was eager to learn the language of those from whom they purchased. Today the role is reversed, as the United States is the principal importer of East Asian goods. What has not changed, however, is the fierce competition for US markets. As English is the native language for most US Americans, exporting one's goods to the US requires good familiarity with the English language. Thus, both as the principal exporter of goods and knowledge to East Asia during the immediate post-war period and now as the principal importer of goods from East Asia, US Americans have been placed under little pressure to learn the languages of East Asia. With the growing need for the US to export its products and the rapid growth in the size of East Asian markets, US American desire to learn the languages of East Asia is increasing, however. Unfortunately, this shift has not yet become apparent to many East Asians, or is simply ignored for reasons that we have already considered, or will consider below.

Social prestige and advancement. By making English a basic requirement for entry into national universities mastery of at least passive knowledge of English is a primary educational target for the parent's of most East Asian children. Because it is often difficult to know a child's educational potential until after he has attended school for several years, and because college or university education is often a prerequisite for overcoming one's first employment barrier, there is hardly an East Asian parent who does not encourage his son or daughter to devote substantial time to the study of English. Consequently, social advancement and mastery of English have become somewhat synonymous, and anyone who is anyone in East Asia probably knows some English. Among those who are particularly keen on the way in which they are viewed by others, active knowledge of the English language is of great importance. It really makes little difference, if you use English in any practical sort of way, simply that you are able to utter a few words or include them in what you write, and thus show that you have been *well-educated*...

Learning English as a means to social advancement and prestige does not end with one's attendance at school, however. In order to climb the social ladder of any growth-oriented firm, improvement in your English ability is a necessary requirement. That most everyone else, has to learn it as well, simply makes it easier for you to advance. For what better incentive is there in the struggle to get ahead, than your being able to say to yourself, I know something just a little better than the next guy, and then be able to prove it when it counts? Moreover, the idea of having to swallow bad tasting medicine is much more acceptable, when you know a large number of your peers are also required to suffer from the same medicinal discomfort. The driving notion behind this intra-firm linguistic competition appears simple: each upward step you take on your firm's social ladder, places you closer to the top and the possibility of encountering someone from the outside. In order that you are well-prepared for that encounter when it occurs, everyone is placed on language alert. Accordingly, the higher you rise within your organization, the better you are expected to speak English. It is not important that you use the language for anything other than humoring your fellow employees who share the same plight and ambition. If you want to grow, you must know English, because English is *the* language of technological and export enhancement.

Thus, from cradle to grave, just about any East Asian who wants to make it to the top, is placed under constant pressure to learn English.

Pride of speech. Among one's countrymen and -women it is often enough to speak just a few words of English to let others know that you have studied, and you can enjoy the prestige associated with "knowing" English. It is also considered rude or offensive to speak too much English, because it makes one appear unpatriotic, condescending, or just plain difficult. In the presence of foreigners on the other hand, the need to show that you have studied English is quite different, because it is *on the foreigner's account* that you were compelled to learn English in the first place. Well, was this not the reason everyone told you?

Indeed, no matter how important learning English may have been in order to pass one's examinations, one has probably learned it with the occasional thought of someday being able to use it to communicate with a foreigner. Thus, when an East Asian is suddenly confronted by a *true alien*, he is under significant pressure to speak and exercise that which he has spent so many years to acquire. If the East Asian feels at all confident about his acquired ability, he will use it with little hesitation. He does not bother to ask his interlocutor from where he comes, she does not inquire

about his native language, neither he nor she even check to see, if the foreigner is familiar with his host nation's language. Has the foreigner just disembarked from a plane a few hours before, or has he spent the past five years living in his host nation without a break? Such questions are all quite irrelevant to the average East Asian citizen desirous of practicing his or her English language skills. After all, he learned English for the purpose of dealing with foreigners, and the person before him has all the appearance of being foreign!

If on the other hand, the East Asian does not feel confident in the English language, then the reaction is quite the opposite, but every bit as much predictable. He runs away in search of a co-worker, associate, or classmate, whom he believes to be a better speaker of English than himself; appeals to someone nearby whom he would probably never otherwise address; simply not respond; or go about his way with the words "Sorry, no English". In the end, it has never really been clear to me for whom I should feel the most empathy: the foreigner who is seeking his way in his host nation's language, or his East Asian host who is lost in his own obsession with the English language.

Cultural arrogance or self-deprecation. With the exception of East Asia's several major alphabets learning to read and write East Asian languages for popular consumption is a formidable task. Even in Korea, where the entire native language can be written in Hangul (the Korean alphabet), Sino-Korean characters make up an important part of Korean culture and history.

Indeed, just looking at Chinese and Japanese print is enough to make any non-East Asian wonder how *they* do it. Consider by way of example the Sino-Japanese character for feeling -- *kan*. Writing this common character in either Japanese or Cantonese⁹ requires knowledge of at least four distinct radicals (sub-characters) each with its own distinct meaning. In order to write these four radicals, 13 distinct strokes of the pen are required. Now compare this word with its English equivalent; the number of pen strokes reduces from 13 to nine. Though one may argue that knowledge of six different letters (f, e, l, i, n, and g) is more demanding than five different radicals, this is a false comparison. With only 26 letters in the English alphabet one can write the entire English language; there are more than 249 radicals of varying degrees of complexity in Japanese. One of the more difficult, but quite common radicals is that for dragon; it requires 16 strokes. The Chinese writing system has many more radicals, by the way; some of which are even more complicated.

The most difficult part of East Asian languages is not the writing system; however, it is the correspondence between the writing system and the spoken word. The somewhat randomly selected Sino-Japanese character for feeling *kan* shares the same sound with 103 other Sino-Japanese characters. Of these 45 are considered common¹⁰.

Sino-Japanese characters are seldom employed alone, for one can reduce the level of phonemic redundancy and thus improve overall listening comprehension through various combinations and permutations of the same characters. Through this shrewd linguistic trick the number of new characters that one must memorize is also reduced. Unfortunately, it also increases the number of pen strokes for each word -- sometimes by many fold. Moreover, there are literally thousands of characters.

Needless to say, the Sino-Japanese writing system was not created for the common person. In English these same tasks are achieved by simply rearranging 26 letters of an alphabet whose most complicated figure, the k, requires only 3 pen strokes; all but seven of these 26 letters require only a single stroke.

Whether one should stand in awe or shake one's head in bewilderment with regard to East Asian national education, is not always easy to decide. One thing is clear, without the current writing systems, or modified forms thereof, the languages of these countries would fall into disarray. There are simply too many words that sound alike to make their phonetic transcription into the English alphabet, or any other alphabet for that matter, very useful. Hangul appears to be an exception, and has likely been achieved by severely limiting the homonymous redundancy in

⁹ Cantonese is the Chinese dialect commonly spoken in Hong Kong. In Cantonese the same word is pronounced as *gam* with a high rising tone.

¹⁰ According to *Kadogawa Shoten's* 1989 edition of *Saisan kanwa jiten* the Japanese sound *kou* is used for 192 different Sino-Japanese characters. It was the largest number of characters corresponding to one syllabic sound that I could find.

vocabulary from which both Chinese and Japanese suffer, or enjoy depending on their age and level of education. As these characters are not learned over night, older people have an important advantage over younger people. Also, because these characters are quickly forgotten, if not constantly refreshed, East Asians are some of the world's most avid readers.

When an East Asian citizen is first exposed to the English language, he must wonder how much easier it is to read and write English. Indeed, there are few East Asians, who do not step back, when I write the Chinese or Japanese characters for what I would like to say but am unable, because few people are willing to teach, let alone talk to me in their native language. Indeed, so convinced are East Asians that no one in the world would ever bother to learn their system of writing but them, some actually believe that their ability to write is determined by their culture or genes. In contrast few East Asians are ever confronted with the subtle complexities of English grammar and elements of style at an early stage in their *English language careers*. Moreover, so long as their exposure to the language rarely goes beyond that of specially prepared textbooks approved by their nations' Ministries of Education, they will never be exposed. Since most of the vocabulary and grammar that they do learn is taught by someone brought up in the same educational system as they, only occasionally must they venture beyond the phonetic system of their own native language, and seldom must they reach beyond the narrowly defined patterns of carefully prepared grammar texts.

The sheer task of learning to read and write Sino-Chinese characters well, so overshadows ever aspect of daily living in East Asia that one is forever discussing the proper meaning and way to write a particular character. What many hundreds of years ago must have been an important source of entertainment for Chinese scribes and bureaucrats, is today a favorite national past time -- or unrelenting nuisance depending on one's point of view -- for many hundred millions of people. In contrast, most East Asians learn English in much the same way they acquire mathematics; they study patterned practices and answer questions with fixed solutions. It is as when Latin and Greek were learned in many European countries, and even the United States up until a few decades ago; these were dead languages used for reading scripture and ancient history, memorizing medical terms, and passing bar exams. What is different in East Asia today is the format. Many English publishers have found a lucrative source of income catering to the artificial demand and forsaken goal of teaching East Asians English. Book upon book is filled with colorful pictures and "live" dialogue which offers the illusion of active learning, but can nowhere begin to achieve the stated goal of comprehensive acquisition and communication.

As a result many East Asians are confused about language, its acquisition, and the intimate relationships that all languages share with culture. Their own language is their umbilical cord to their nation's past; English is a crass tool with no inherent beauty used for beating competitors, keeping colonial oppressors at bay, and acquiring new technology.

Some have argued that the languages of East Asia should be discarded, because they have outlived their usefulness. Rather than discarding them; however, East Asian governments have added English to their peoples' already very heavy linguistic burden.

Holding foreigners at bay. There is no better negative reinforcement to learning a foreign language, than receiving a response in a language other than the one you are trying to learn. Notwithstanding, many East Asians simply cannot resist replying in English when addressed in their own language by neophyte learners. More amazing is that most East Asians believe they are courteous in doing so. Then too, there are those, who are cognizant of their ability to discourage foreigners from learning their language, and actively seek to frustrate them¹¹.

Speaking the language of others, who do not speak your own is like living behind a two-way mirror. You can observe those who cannot observe you. Moreover, what those others are able to see, when they try to observe you, is little more than a reflection of themselves. East Asian society and governments are world famous for their lack of transparency in matters of government, business, and law. Keeping one's language unto one's own simply enhances the overall level of obscurity. As a result, there is a strong incentive for many East Asian bureaucrats and business executives to insure that each of their citizens commands just enough English, so as to wear down all but the most aggressive foreign students of East Asian languages. One can hardly imagine that

¹¹ My personal experience in both Japan and Hong Kong have revealed important differences in this regard. Although this tendency is present in both cultures, it appears stronger in Japan.

the invention of this two-way linguistic mirror was ever the intention of East Asian national ministries of education. Rather, it must have arisen as one of the many unintended effects of artificial demand creation and governmental prestidigitation mentioned earlier.

After numerous encounters with foreigners many East Asian citizens learn the power of this mirror, and as a consequence the deception appears to be fairly widespread among those who dislike the foreign presence. If there ever was a conspiracy, as some would probably claim, then it probably arose after the policy of nation-wide English training was instituted¹². Conspiracy or not, it is difficult to believe that those who are in power now, are not aware of the artificial wall they have erected.¹³

Be this as it may, it is the innocent majority, who are not aware of the mirror effect, who provide the greatest stumbling block to neophyte Westerners and others seeking to penetrate the East Asian English language barrier. Recently I found a fairly long Cantonese phrase pasted next to the door of my Hong Kong neighbor wishing her and her newly-wed husband many years of happiness and prosperity. I could read all of the characters but the last one. When I asked another neighbor in Cantonese, whom I met in the hallway, what it meant, she proceeded to translate the whole phrase into English. When she arrived at the last character, she stumbled, and rather than trying to offer an explanation in Cantonese, summarized the entire phrase in English as "They just married" and jumped into the elevator. I waited for the next elevator to arrive no better informed than before I had asked. She is the only neighbor on our floor, by the way, who cooks bacon, buys pizzas, and watches English television for all to hear.

In the end East Asian governments are having their way, and the foreign presence, although permitted, is kept at bay.

Keeping the tourist happy. Another justification for learning English that appears to make sense to both government and the general public is tourism. Most people like to travel, and foreigners are generally fun to be with -- well, so long as one does not have to live next door to them or share the same office space. In short, it is one thing to experience a foreign culture from which one can easily walk away, it is quite another to have to deal with one that one cannot avoid. People in the tourism and tourism-related industries exploit these cultural disparities by doing the work required to overcome them and then providing a smooth interface for those who do not have the time, patience, or desire to overcome them on their own. As such, most tourists never truly come very close to the people whose countries they visit. Moreover, the tourist industry, like the foreign language industry, tends to be dirty, in so far as consumers who venture beyond their own cultural boundaries are easily duped. Fortunately, most people are aware of their vulnerability in this regard, err on the side of caution, and rarely wander beyond the average tourist's, or foreign language instructor's, beaten path. Once again, the number of people required to maintain these paths, so that others may walk them safely, is far fewer than the number of people who actually travel them. As a result, the need for English as a necessary tool even for foreign travel is largely oversold.

East Asian governments see in the tourist industry an important source of foreign reserves, which are valuable in buying one's way out of foreign debt and securing a free hand in the administration of their own governments. The occasional horror of IMF interference is all too well known in East Asia to be treated lightly, and as a result large foreign surpluses are considered the road to independence and freedom from foreign intervention. Little do these governments seem to care that their own workers often do not reap the fruits of their labor, as it is sold overseas in exchange for paper which many workers never see, let alone consume.

More on mirror dynamics. Growing up in a particular culture endows one with a certain expertise vis-à-vis those who have not been raised in the same culture. It is an expertise that most of us undervalue until after several foreign encounters in our own land as national hosts or in the

¹² Although Eamonn Fingleton is never eager to admit it, charges of conspiracy appear as a latent theme in his book entitled *Blindside: Why Japan Is Still on Track to Overtake the U. S. by the Year 2000*, Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

¹³ Several years ago Glen Fukushima, former Deputy Assistant US Trade Representative for Japan and China, and current President of the American Chamber of Commerce Japan, explained that Japanese ministry officials thought that they were in for trouble, when they discovered that their US negotiating partner could speak Japanese.

lands of others as foreign guests. This expertise is a profound intimacy with one's own culture and language, expertise which is difficult for others of a different culture to acquire – according to some impossible. Like most knowledge however, if properly defined, packaged, and measured, bits and pieces of this *natural endowment* can be bartered or traded on the open market. Heuristically speaking, these transactions can take place in either of two ways, but is more generally exchanged in some combination of both¹⁴. One, host nation citizens may either teach their culture in exchange for their guest's language; or two, they may teach their language in exchange for their guest's culture. There are also those who, predisposed to the teacher/student and host/guest relationships of foreign exchange, teach both language and culture. Lucky are the hosted guests who meet these types¹⁵.

Alas, with "learn English or languish" as the standing imperative among most East Asians the typical host nation/hosted guest encounter is of the first type: teach culture in exchange for language. Unfortunately, so much emphasis is placed on learning English by anxious East Asian hosts, they often fail even to teach their culture. Rather than inviting foreign guests into their own homes, or sharing their guest's company with close friends at places rarely visited by tourists, they take them to popular international hot spots where the foreign guest's own culture is most abundant. This unconscious, or conscious, slap-in-the-face is justified as a courteous gesture by most East Asians. "After all", it is remarked, "what better way to make foreign guests comfortable than to treat them to their own culture, while they are many thousands of miles away from home." The result of these *many acts of courtesy* is that foreign guests are often treated to such *oriental novelties* as eating a MacDonald's hamburger in Naka-ku, Yokohama, a pizza made by Pizza Hut in Ginza, Tokyo, a dish of spaghetti in Mong Kok, Hong Kong, or twelve ounces of US grade-A rib-eye and sushi in downtown Kowloon.

To what extent these gestures of *East Asian courtesy* are genuinely intended is difficult to assess. Taking native North Americans and Japanese travelers to such places and filling them with food in an atmosphere suggestive of their native homeland, probably evokes more talk about the foreigner's own country than his host's. As a result the host nation citizen obtains both English language practice and foreign insight and thereby insures that his foreign guest returns to his native homeland with little new knowledge about his host nation – only impressions that serve to reinforce that which he had already seen in travel guides before he boarded his plane for East Asia. What is worse, the foreigner returns to his native land with the belief that East Asia is just like North America, Western Europe, the British Isles, New Zealand, Australia, or even Japan, when nothing could be farther from the truth.

Under such circumstances the need for English is limited to those special areas set aside for tourists, and does not require English language training on a nation-wide scale. Nevertheless, these special areas, and the often wealthy *foreign ghettos*¹⁶ associated with them, receive substantial publicity in domestic medias across East Asia. Many East Asian citizens, especially youth, see these social arenas as international, domestic focal points and another *obvious* justification for having to learn English.

Sunk costs and human capital. This last point is a kind of catch-all for everything not mentioned above, but worthy of mention in its own right.

If learning English can be considered an investment in one's future, then it's worth is measurable in terms of its expected future return. For the reasons given above this expected return

¹⁴ Although this expression may appear to some as an oxymoron or abuse of poetic license, culture and language demonstrate aspects of both acquired and endowed assets. Endowed in the sense that these assets are taught to us by our parents and mentors often with little or no remuneration, acquired in the sense that we sometimes pay dearly for them when subjected to punishments for refusing to acquire them.

¹⁵ There is a third kind of knowledge which is less apparent to many – the observations made by foreigners about their host culture. The English adage that "one cannot see the forest for the trees" is most appropriate in this context. As might be expected, this kind of knowledge can be an important source of friction depending on the foreign guest's familiarity with his host culture. Comments made about the forest without knowledge of the trees can be just as misleading as the other way around.

¹⁶ Modern colonial diaspora of more permanent foreign residents, mostly from the West.

is probably very close to zero for most East Asians.

Though one may argue that important, positive, economic externalities exist from which all East Asians benefit; one may just as easily argue that there are also significant, negative externalities which result¹⁷. Trade friction, trade imbalances, and their resulting domestic social, political, and economic tensions are just a few. In today's world cross-cultural communication has never been so important, and the distorted images that result from poor communication across national borders remain significant. Having made every East Asian citizen a student of the English language has not made these distortions go away, and as I have argued repeatedly above, has probably even worsened them.

What makes investment in human capital so different from other economic and financial investments is the difficulty with which we can rid ourselves of bad ones. Newly purchased machinery already obsolete before delivery can sometimes be given away, idle factories and unoccupied office buildings can often be resold and employed for other purposes, research and design projects that do not pan out can simply be abandoned and their expertise applied in other areas. In contrast, what can we do with a poorly acquired language that we never use? At best we can let it lie, until it finally disappears from lack of use. At worst we can find new uses for it which detract from its intended purpose, such as decorative labels on foodstuffs, clothing, and footwear. Of what we are likely never able to rid ourselves, however, is the disappointment associated with the foregone opportunities that we suffered while learning it. Unfortunately, this disappointment and the anger that sometimes results from it are not aimed at the national governments who made us suffer; rather, our fingers are pointed at those in whose name we were forced to learn the language in the first place – in the case of East Asia, the world's Anglo-Saxon community.

Thus, where many Anglo-Saxons see themselves paving the way to improved communication in an ever-expanding global community, what is actually occurring appears to be quite the opposite – a perpetuation of an inglorious colonial past.

Conclusion

The road to Hell is paved with many good intentions.
(credited to Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784)

In conclusion, I have tried to establish a framework for understanding how the creation of an artificial demand for the English language in East Asia has erected national and regional barriers to cross-cultural communication. I have also attempted to identify some of the more popular justifications for the maintenance of this barrier. Obviously, it would be unfair to treat the conditions of the English language in Japan and Hong Kong as identical; nevertheless, important similarities do exist, which appear typical for all East Asian countries. In the end this paper is not meant to discourage East Asian economic development, rather to encourage it in a spirit of international cooperation and mutual understanding. These latter cannot be achieved by everyone speaking the same language poorly; but it can be achieved by many fewer speaking each other's languages well.

Finally, in this paper I have focused my attention on the source of artificial demand; in my next paper I hope to examine more closely those who serve as East Asia's suppliers.¹⁸

First presented at the International Languages in Education Conference 2001, Hong Kong on December 14, 2001 (word count: 9749; line count: 740; figures: 2)

¹⁷ An economic externality is an economic effect not taken into account by individual economic agents when making decisions, but if taken into account would effect the outcome of those decisions. Externalities can be either positive or negative. For example, firms that are allowed to hire foreign guest workers, but not required to pay the additional taxes necessary to fund the increase in social services associated with their presence in local communities, is an example of a negative externality for which firms are often not held accountable.

¹⁸ For those who would like to receive a better glimpse of the larger picture please take a look at the following internet address: <http://homepage.mac.com/moogoonghwa/ILEC2001/index.html>