The Linguistic Monkeywrench
and the English Shell: Multilingualism in
an East Asian Business Conference

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Abstract

From the point of view of environmental sociolinguistics, the present paper analyzes the language background and environment surrounding an international business conference that took place in Korea, with delegations from Korea, China and Japan. The analysis proceeds with three focal points: (1) the linguistic situation and environment at the conference itself, (2) the use of various written languages in the conference proceedings (in contrast to the preliminary conference announcements and banners, which were all in English), and (3) the results of a questionnaire given to a sampling of participants regarding the linguistic environment of the conference. A major observation was the fact that the conference actually had layers of languages in different roles: an inner spoken core of Korean, Chinese, and (to a much lesser extent) Japanese, surrounded by a written linguistic "shell" of English. It was also found based on questionnaire results that participants could be divided into two main groups viz. their suggestions and observations on the conference language environment. One group of participants recommended the improvement of the present system of interpreting, whereas the other proposed an all-English policy.

1. Introduction

The language of a group of speakers is traditionally assumed to be intimately connected with their environment (e.g., people living in an English environment will be English speakers, people living in Japan will learn to speak Japanese, etc.), but it has more recently been noted that the language use and choice of a group is affected by and responds to changes in the linguistic environment around the group. This linguistic environment includes both the visual "linguistic landscape" (Gorter 2006; Backhaus 2006) and the aural presence of multiple languages around the listener, in addition to more obvious signs of multilingual reality such as national and educational policy. The study of the interplay between language users and their surroundings has been termed "environmental sociolinguistics" (Honna 2007).

In the East Asian linguistic environment, emphasis continues to be placed on English as an academic tool of international communication, with both China, Taiwan and Korea teaching

English in elementary school sometimes as early as 1st grade. Japan lags in this respect, but still over 90% of Japanese elementary schools provide at least a smattering of English. In all three countries, English is an important part of the entrance examination system as well as a ticket to better employment.

Geographically, East Asia is surrounded by English (Fouser 2007; Yoneoka 2007). There is India and South Asia (and farther off, Europe) to the West, Southeast Asia and Oceania to the South and North America to the West. Within the immediate region itself, however, the role of English is still unclear. With a more or less common writing system (Chinese characters) [1], the presence of English plays a different role in this region than it does in other areas of the world. For example, it is often noted to have a "decorative" function in order to promote a modernized, Westernized image. The meaning is often considered secondary, as is evidenced by the many examples of what most English speakers would consider nonsense words and phrases found on websites such as www.engrish.com. Another function of English is iconic; it symbolizes something meaningful to both the inside and outside reader (such as the location of a toilet, police station or departure gate). It also has a very useful role as a common system of notation for pronunciation, as spoken Chinese characters cannot be understood across languages (or even between dialects of Chinese). English letters combined with Chinese characters, then, form a unit that relates both meaning and spoken form, which is extremely useful for signs and situations where knowing how the characters are pronounced is essential (for example, when listening to announcements of bus stops). For this purpose, however, only a very basic level of English ability is required.

Finally, Botz-Bornstein (2006, online) discusses a form of East Asian (EA) English which has a meaningful role in expressing Asian culture and sensibilities. The following quote demonstrates that EA English has a functional, communicative role, but that this function is clearly different from English as a native language or even as a lingua franca:

> the linguistic and cultural reality of what is called "Western culture" or "English language" has shifted towards a sphere that is predominantly playful and dreamlike. East Asian "westernized" culture appears less than ever to be a "real world" in which objectified elements from eastern and western cultures have merely been combined. The emergence of EA English as an autonomous language represents one further step in a series of attempts to construct a "Western" Other capable of embracing all cultural paradoxes of Westernized East Asia. (Botz-Bornstein 2006: online)

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1) A friend recently related a situation during a trip to China where communication that failed in English was resolved by resorting to Chinese characters. In the situation, she wanted to buy a thermometer and said so in English, but the clerk failed to understand her. She then solved the dilemma by typing in   on her cell phone and showing it to the clerk, who understood immediately and came up with the desired product. Such use of Chinese characters as an intermediary language is not uncommon at all in East Asia.

In other words, international communication in East Asia, when not performed in one of the three major native languages of the region, is often aided by a mixture of Chinese characters, roman letters, and a nativized form of East Asian English. This is the reality of the linguistic environment in this region of the world.

There is no denying that English has an important role for communication between East Asians and people from other parts of the world. However, what is the actual role of English as an international language within the region itself? How does its role mesh with the role of Chinese characters as meaningful iconographs within the region as described above? In an academic setting such as a regional conference, how much is English actually employed as a tool of communication, and in what manner? Although a bilateral conference involving two of the three major language groups may easily be handled through use of interpreters, a conference in which all three major language groups are represented is faced with a linguistic dilemma, which is best solved by finding and utilizing the most common and accepted language. To what extent is this language English?

The present paper approaches these questions by analyzing the linguistic environment of one such trilateral conference, using three points of focus: (1) the linguistic situation and environment at the conference itself, (2) the use of various written languages in the conference announcements, banners, handouts and conference proceedings, and (3) the results of a questionnaire given to a sampling of participants regarding the linguistic environment of the conference.

2. The conference: a review of the linguistic environment

The 6th Northeast Asia Management & Economy Joint Conference held from May 30 – June 1, 2007 at Kimdaejung Convention Center in Gwangju, Korea, presented a unique opportunity to observe the role of English viz. other languages in East Asia in a conference setting. In contrast to the naming of the conference, which would seem to include Japan as well as Mongolia and Eastern Russia, the first 5 Northeast Asia Management & Economy Joint Conferences took place alternately at locations in South Korea and China and involved members almost exclusively from one of these two countries. This 6th conference was the first time three countries were officially involved, with a 6-member delegation from Japan (Kumamoto Gakuen University) invited to participate. The entire conference, then, boasted over 100 participants from the three countries.

The addition of a new country was highly welcomed by both the participants and organizers, but presented a linguistic dilemma. Traditionally, the conference had been conducted bilingually (in Korean and Chinese) with consecutive translation offered at each session. This year, however, the inclusion of a new linguistic group (Japanese) threw a veritable linguistic monkeywrench into the works, changing the linguistic environment of the conference from bilingual to multilingual, and therefore either a common language had to be found, or further arrangements for translation had to be made. The conference organizers

chose to do the latter rather than to limit the conference to a single common language, by employing a Korean-Japanese bilingual student to act as guide/interpreter for the Japanese group. In actuality, this choice worked out extremely well, as 2 of the 6 members of the KGU delegation were native Koreans, and a third (the present author) was an American who could speak some Korean as well. Thus only 3 of the members actually needed extensive translation services.

From the Japanese perspective, however, the situation was rather confusing, as the delegates were not aware of the linguistic arrangements that were being made. In terms of papers and presentations, the group was told that "any language was acceptable", but were not told of how translation of presentations would be handled. Up until arrival at Gwangju, then, we had assumed that a Japanese presentation would be translated into English; however, the actual arrangement was that the presentation was translated into Korean by the aforementioned graduate student. This of course made it difficult if not impossible for Chinese participants to listen to Japanese presentations (unless they had their own translators or knew Korean or Japanese themselves). To make matters more confusing, the conference title and program were written in English only, both in the promotional and onsite materials. Moreover, the majority of papers were written in English (see Table 1). Thus, the Japanese newcomers assumed that the conference language was to be English as well.

Upon actual arrival in Gwangju in the late afternoon, the Japanese delegation was met by a Korean professor and the hired student from Chonnam University, both of whom spoke fluent Japanese. We were escorted to the hotel and checked in, and attended a welcome banquet soon thereafter. The conference hotel sported a banner written completely in English except for the two Chinese characters   , meaning welcome. Thus, the first onsite impression was again that the conference language was indeed to be English.

The opening banquet, however, provided a taste of what the linguistic environment was actually to be for the days to come. Giving speeches at the banquet were several dignitaries, including the president of Chonnam University. These speeches were all given in Korean with consecutive translation into Chinese. For the Japanese participants, the professor and student "in charge" of the group were stationed strategically nearby in order to provide impromptu interpreting into Japanese. Not even the name of the conference, so proudly displayed in English only in front of the hotel itself, was ever once uttered at the banquet in English.

2. 1 Linguistic review of the presentations (1st day only)

The following section will review the first day of the conference from a linguistic point of view. It will include information about the languages in use as noted by the author, as well as somewhat more subjective impressions based on observation of interactions between participants and organizers.

The opening ceremony from 9:30 - 10:20 on Wednesday morning (May 30) again featured speeches by dignitaries such as the vice-mayor of Gwangju City and the President of the National Economics and Management Association. These speeches were given in Korean

with consecutive interpreting in Chinese, even though the program introducing the opening ceremony was written completely in English. Similarly, the keynote speech by JeongTae Nam, Director of IBM Ubiquitous Computing Lab, was in Korean and intermittent summarized interpreting of the content was provided in Chinese by an interpreter. The student interpreter was again on standby near the Japanese participants. On the other hand, again, both the keynote powerpoint presentation and the handout in the proceedings were completely in English.

This linguistic environmental pattern turned out to be similar throughout the individual presentations, which were generally given in the presenter's native language (either Chinese or Korean) with consecutive interpretation in the other language [2] as had been traditionally done in the previous conferences. The only provision made for the new linguistic group was the student interpreter, always ready to provide her services for the Japanese participants. This of course presented the Japanese group with two limitations; (1) we could not break up and visit different presentations as only one interpreter was available, and (2) we had a distinct disadvantage in understanding Chinese presentations, which were chain-translated from Chinese to Korean and then Korean to Japanese.

In the conference program, however, all of the Korean and Japanese presentations were listed with English titles, and only 10 of the 32 Chinese presentations were listed in Chinese. In the proceedings, full papers were written in Korean, Chinese, Japanese and English, and one abstract was written in German [3]. Therefore, the role of English in the conference can be likened to a linguistic "wrapper"—the program, the banner at the hotel, the cover of the proceedings—all serving as an outer shell which couched (and perhaps disguised) the languages used in the actual conference itself: Korean and Chinese—and to a very minor extent, Japanese.

What was the actual role of this English wrapper, or shell? Did it merely have a decorative function, or was it iconic, or did it serve a communicative purpose as well? This question was answered by asking the participants themselves. An impromptu questionnaire was drawn up and given to participants (in English) on the second day of the conference [4]. The questionnaire concentrated on three main questions (1) actual reading and speaking ability in all the languages represented at the conference, (2) awareness of the linguistic surroundings of the conference, especially of the addition of the "monkeywrench" Japanese delegation and (3) elicitation of general comments on and suggestions for the linguistic environment. The results are presented in Section 3, but before going on to discuss them, we will first review the languages represented in the conference proceedings.

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2) This is based on observations by the author of the languages used in the afternoon session of presentations on the first day. It is not comprehensive.
3) The proceedings are given further analysis in the next section; see especially Table 1.
4) Unfortunately, there was not enough time to prepare Chinese and Korean versions of the questionnaire, which would have probably resulted in a higher return rate and given a more balanced picture of the overall impressions and characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Languages used in the Proceedings of the 6th Northeast Asia Management & Economy Joint Conference, Gwangju Korea

	English	Chinese	Korean	Japanese	German	total
TITLE	35 (58%)	12 (20%)	10 (17%)	3 (5%)	0	60
ABSTRACT	21 (54%)	8 (21%)	6 (15%)	3 (8%)	1 (3%)	39
FULL PAPER	18 (44%)	12 (29%)	8 (20%)	3 (7%)	0	41
AUTHORS	1 (2%)	20 (36%)	32 (57%)	3 (5%)	0	56

2. 2. Linguistic review of the Conference Proceedings and other written materials

In contrast to the spoken language landscape of the conference itself, all of the written promotional materials as well as the Conference Proceedings were in English—but only on the outside. The front cover and binding of the proceedings were completely in English, although the back cover sported a full color advertisement in Korean. Turning to the inside, the first four pages include the title page, letter of invitation, and conference program—all in English. In the pages that follow, however, we find a virtual linguistic free-for-all, with Korean, Chinese, Japanese, English and even German being used in the research papers and abstracts.

Table 1 shows the languages used in the 39 presentations, including the keynote speech. The proceedings had 41 papers, however, as two of the papers were written in two languages each—one in Korean and Chinese, and one in Korean and Japanese. Almost 60% of the papers had an English title, and 44% were written fully in English. Only 6 of the papers (=15%) had no English title or abstract. All of these were written in Chinese.

Indeed, as can be seen from Table 1, 12 of the 20 papers (=60%) submitted by Chinese authors were written in Chinese, as compared to only 10 of the 32 Korean papers (=31%) and 3 of the 6 papers from Japan (=50%). From this data we can guess that one possible reason for the relative high percentage of papers in Chinese (and to a lesser extent Japanese) is that they may have believed that Chinese characters would be as or more readily understood by the other East Asian language groups than English. Additionally Chinese participants may have been less aware that the conference this year would include a Japanese delegation. The questionnaire will help us to clarify these possibilities.

3. Participant Questionnaire

In order to more fully appreciate the linguistic views and situations of the participants, an informal survey was given (see Appendix) to a total of 29 participants. 14 of the respondents were Chinese, 9 Korean and 6 "Japanese" (including 2 Koreans and 1 American who participated as members of the Japanese delegation and are included as Japanese in the results).

The first question polled the actual written and spoken language ability of the participants

in all of the conference languages [5]. As can be seen from the results shown in Table 2, almost all of the participants—93%, 100% and 67% of the Chinese, Korean and Japanese participants respectively—rated their English reading ability as either good or fair [6]. Only one of the participants (Chinese) indicated a total lack of English reading ability [7]. On the other hand, none of the other conference languages could be considered mutually intelligible in terms of reading: the highest percentage for reading ability in a non-native language other than English was the 44% of Koreans who rated themselves as fair at reading Japanese. However it should be noted that 83% of the Japanese participants indicated that they could read at least some Chinese (including those who answered "poor"). This can be accounted for by the extensive use of Chinese characters in Japanese and study of *kanbun* in Korean and Japanese schools.

Table 2. Self-indicated linguistic ability of participants in the conference languages
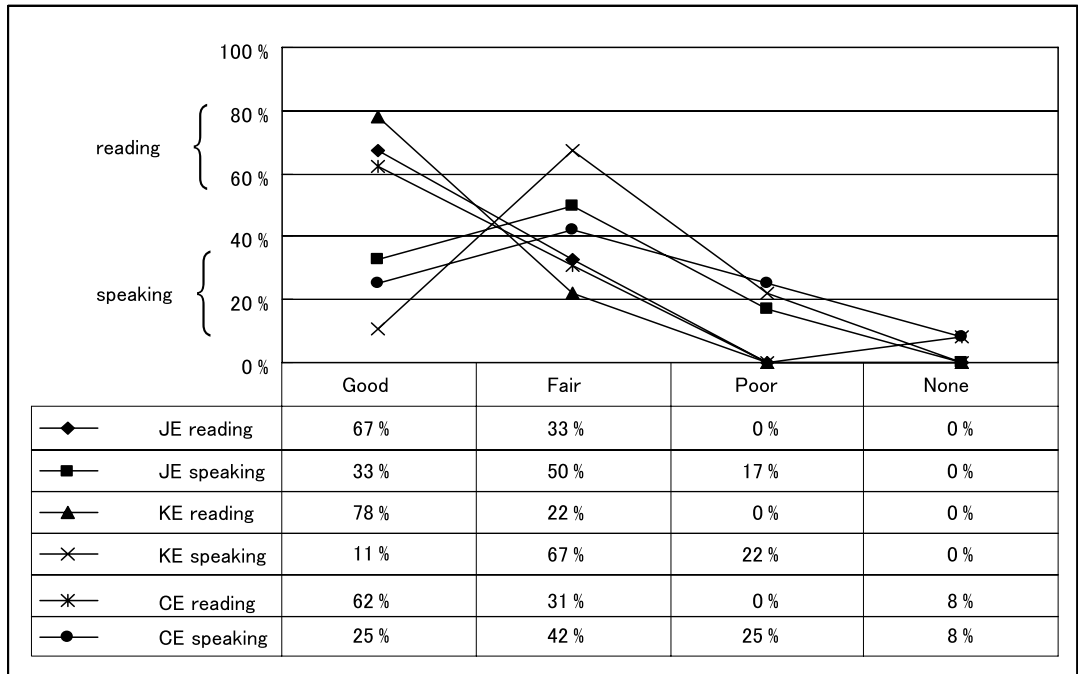
Chinese participants (14)	Good	Fair	Poor	None
English reading	62%	31%	0%	8%
English speaking	25%	42%	25%	8%
Korean reading	10%	0%	0%	90%
Korean speaking	9%	9%	0%	82%
Japanese reading	0%	10%	0%	90%
Japanese speaking	0%	10%	0%	90%
Korean participants (9)	Good	Fair	Poor	None
English reading	78%	22%	0%	0%
English speaking	11%	67%	22%	0%
Chinese reading	0%	0%	22%	78%
Chinese speaking	0%	0%	0%	100%
Japanese reading	0%	44%	22%	33%
Japanese speaking	0%	22%	33%	44%
Japanese participants (6)	Good	Fair	Poor	None
English reading	67%	33%	0%	0%
English speaking	33%	50%	17%	0%
Korean reading	33%	0%	17%	50%
Korean speaking	33%	0%	17%	50%
Chinese reading	0%	17%	67%	17%
Chinese speaking	0%	0%	50%	50%

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5) Here the conference languages were considered to be the native languages of all participants: Korean, Chinese, and Japanese in addition to English. German was not considered a conference language, even though it came

Table 3 reveals again that the three groups rated their English reading abilities much higher than their speaking abilities. Furthermore we see little variation in the responses of the three groups. That is, both the speaking and reading lines for the three groups follow the same general curves, and this trend is especially pronounced for reading. The uniformity of response here across the three linguistic groups points to one reason for the linguistic shell of English in a written form: that it, written English can generally be assumed to be understood by most of the participants, whereas the same is not true for spoken English.

The second part of the questionnaire was designed to ask the participants how much "forewarning" they had been given that, in contrast to previous years, a Japanese delegation would be attending, and whether this knowledge had any effect on their decision regarding their language of presentation. Of course, all the Japanese participants were aware that they

Table 3. Relative abilities of the three linguistic groups at reading and speaking Engilsh

		Good	Fair	Poor	None
◆	JE reading	67 %	33 %	0 %	0 %
■	JE speaking	33 %	50 %	17 %	0 %
▲	KE reading	78 %	22 %	0 %	0 %
✕	KE speaking	11 %	67 %	22 %	0 %
✳	CE reading	62 %	31 %	0 %	8 %
●	CE speaking	25 %	42 %	25 %	8 %

up in one of the abstracts.

6) However, it must be remembered that as the questionnaire itself was in English, and was only returned by approximately 1/4 of the overall participants, the data can be assumed to represent in general those participants who had some ability in reading English. Conversely, it should also be mentioned that as all of the Japanese participants (not simply those who were fluent in English) answered the questionnaire, this was probably one reason their self-assessed English reading level was lower than for the other two linguistic groups.

7) This Chinese participant indicated his or her ability in both written and spoken English as "none" and probably had assistance in filling out the questionnaire itself.

themselves would be attending. 7 out of 9 Korean participants (78%) and 7 of the 13 Chinese participants who responded to this question (54%; one respondent gave no answer) were aware of the addition. Of these, 2 of the 8 Chinese who gave a presentation indicated that they had thought about changing the language of their presentation partially or completely to English in response to the change in language environment. On the other hand, 1 Chinese and 2 Korean presenters were not aware of the Japanese delegation. Comments on this question included the following by one Chinese presenter: "I thought about this [changing the language of my presentation], but Chinese characters can be understood by both Koreans and Japanese so I used Chinese". This comment again suggests that some Chinese wrote in their own language as they assumed the Chinese characters would be understood by all of their readers.

Finally, general comments on the linguistic environment and language preparations made for the conference were solicited. These are reproduced here in their entirety:

1) I felt it was necessary to go over the content of my presentation carefully with the Korean interpreter (Japanese respondent, who presented in Japanese)
2) In either language (Japanese, English) interpreting may be necessary at the conference. (Japanese respondent)
3) First I wanted to make a presentation in Japanese. But I changed my mind because I expected I could use just fifteen minutes or so, not enough to do it well with interpreting in this case. (Japanese respondent, who presented in English)
4) The conference should be held in English (Chinese respondent)
5) English (Chinese respondent)
6) English is good for many people to understand. (Chinese respondent)
7) I suggest that each speaker employ English (oral or written) (Chinese respondent)
8) Effective interpretation will be needed (Korean respondent)
9) All presentations should be written and spoken in English (Korean respondent)
10) Conference language should be restricted to English (Korean respondent)
11) I like international language: English (Korean respondent)
12) The best solution would be to have simultaneous interpreting into four languages. If this is not feasible, then the conference language should be limited to English. (Korean respondent, translated from Korean)

As exemplified by the final comment, the general tone of the opinions fall into two different strategies: (1) restricting the use of language to English and (2) strengthening the present system of using interpreters to allow seamless, more effective and accurate interpretation. Both strategies have advantages and disadvantages. The English-only strategy allows everyone to understand each other at least somewhat, and cuts down time needed for interpretation. It also allows for more uniformity and comparability between the spoken presentations and written materials in the proceedings (the majority of which were in English, as seen above).

On the other hand, the second strategy of multilingual interpreting allows presenters to use whatever language they prefer, and language does not act as a barrier to scholars who do not feel comfortable with their ability to use English. However, as noted in comment 3), the

use of consecutive interpreters effectively cuts presentation time in half[8], even with pre-presentation coordination meetings. Another possible solution would be to provide simultaneous interpretation, but this requires both human expertise and sophisticated equipment, thereby increasing conference expenditures. Therefore it is not surprising that we find two different opinions about how to solve this linguistic dilemma[9].

Finally, we come to the point of participant awareness about the linguistic environment surrounding the conference. We can assume that participants may have come to the conference with two differing sets of stereotypical presuppositions: (1) those that had participated previously would have most likely assumed the same arrangements as previous years (that is, Korean and Chinese as spoken conference languages with interpreting between the two) even if they were aware of the Japanese delegation, and (2) those who were new participants and may have come with expectations that the conference would be held in English, garnered from the conference promotional materials and other international conferences. The latter group, of which the Japanese delegation was part, would have been unaware of how the conference usually played out in terms of language. One of the Japanese representatives comments on this point that he "did not know that there was to be an interpreter."

The present author had also requested information regarding the linguistic arrangements several times from the Japanese office in charge of organizing the delegation, and was told only "You can present and write in any language you want."[10] Judging from other external information (pamphlets, conference title, etc.), we were left with the mistaken impression that "You can present in any language you want, but the conference itself will generally be in English".

4. Discussion and Suggestions

As noted above, the role of English at the 6th Northeast Asia Management & Economy Joint Conference was very much like an outer wrapping or shell, and was largely confined to writing. The actual spoken communication of the conference took place in several languages with the help of official and semi-official interpreting.

There are several possible reasons for why the use of English was delegated to a mainly written, shell-like role. As mentioned above, one explanation is clear from the average abilities of written vs. spoken English reported by the participants, shown again in Table 4. Whereas

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8) It could be argued that even consecutive interpreting does not strictly double the time required, as both the presenter and the interpreter can speak faster as they are using their respective native languages.

9) Although here over 50% (7/12) of the opinions tend to lean towards using English, we must again remember that the respondents who filled out the questionnaire were probably more confident about their English than the average conference-goer. Thus comments such as "I like international language: English" should not be taken as representative.

10) One wonders what arrangements would have been made if a presenter had wanted to present in a completely different language such as French or Malay.

Table 4. Comparison of overall competence of respondents in written vs. spoken English

	Good	Fair	Poor	None
◆ Overall read	69 %	29 %	0 %	3 %
■ overall speak	23 %	53 %	21 %	3 %
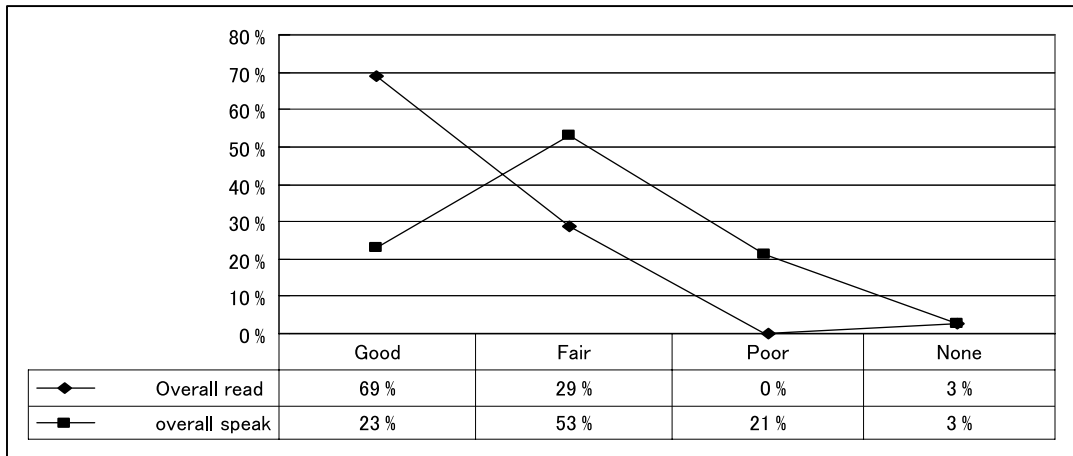
69% of the respondents claimed to have a good working knowledge of written English, only 23% did so for spoken English. Thus the written English used in the conference was clearly communicative, at least for the great majority of the respondents to the questionnaire. We can assume, however, that the same cannot be said for English in its spoken form.

Another reason for the divergence in the roles of written vs. spoken English is the role English plays more generally within East Asia as a "decorative" language. English is the language of modernization, and westernization, and most international conferences in the world today use English as at least one of the conference languages. Therefore it may be assumed that academic conferences in East Asia should be "decorated" with English as well, in order to portray an image of officialdom. In this sense, we can say that the use of English "wrapping" functions as an iconic message to the world (or at least to the host city) that this meeting is a high-powered, global, professional one.

Additionally, as Eriksen (2005, online) observes, "English as an academic and conference language is largely a written version even if it is often spoken. Lots of people at conferences speak more or less like books." In other words, having read extensively about their specialties in English, many academes find it easier to discuss the latest theories using that language than any other, and indeed to speak about their fields of expertise in English may be easier than holding a simple conversation about the weather.

With all of these reasons to use (written) English, we can now ask the opposite question —why wasn't the conference language limited to English completely, as suggested by some of the questionnaire respondents? To answer this we can also point to several factors—first, the number of participants from Japan was highly limited, in contrast to those from Korea and China. Therefore to hold the conference bilingually with an auxiliary Japanese interpreter was a viable option. Second, there is the practical question of exclusion of participants who are less able to use and understand English[11]. Third, we may point to the "traditional" linguistic

organization of the first 5 joint conferences. In essence, the Japanese delegates were special guests, and the special provision of a Japanese interpreter should be interpreted as a gesture of goodwill and a key to understanding the conference in its full tradition, which would not have been possible if the linguistic milieu was changed suddenly to English only. Finally, there is the fact that Chinese characters, as mentioned in the introduction, play just as important a communicative role in the region as English, if not more so.

With the introduction of a third country into the 6th Northeast Asia Management & Economy Joint Conference, the linguistic landscape of the conference changed, presenting a dilemma for both organizers and participants. The efforts made by the conference organizers to accommodate the new linguistic group were laudable. However, they were hampered by two major difficulties: 1. a lack of communication to the Japanese participants of the linguistic arrangements (not necessarily the fault of the Korean organizers), and 2. preconceived notions of the linguistic environment based on past experience.

Two major trends in suggestions by conference-goers of how to handle their multilinguistic needs were identified. The first was to improve upon the present solution of using consecutive interpreters by having organized pre-session conferencing and/or using multiple simultaneous interpreting (which would involve the added expense of special facilities and professional interpreters). The second suggestion was to restrict the official conference language to English only. Although conjectural, we may assume that the solution preferred by the respondents may have been related to their own linguistic abilities and/or preferences; that is, those who feel more at home with English themselves may have tended to prefer this second solution.

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