

# Proposing a Common “Ideologyscape” of State and Company in Japan’s EFL Industry—A Research Note

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Private language education in Japan, by virtue of its association with a national policy favoring American English and communication for internationalization, puts private companies in the position of providers of or proxies for a domestic state agenda. As costs rise in the public JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program, in which young native English speakers (typically recent university graduates from the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand) are paired with Japanese English teachers to model English communication for public elementary, junior and senior high schools (see McConnell 2000), foreign staff from private language school companies have even assumed the same duties on contract to the public education sector. Of course, as the spectacular collapse of the industry’s largest company Nova Inc. in 2007—following charges of fraud and murky bookkeeping—shows, any association between lofty national policy and for-profit corporate practice is approximate at best. Nevertheless, the experience of work and intercultural representation that we find within these corporate spaces provides original evidence for common ground at the level of ideology, with innovations upon worker practice and direction in the enactment of a (merchandized) state policy that allow the industry and its staff to share in the construction of an

“ideologyscape” between state and company.

What is the meaning of designating an area of ideologyscape? Private language school companies operate offices and classroom facilities in addition to outsourcing their teaching staff to other corporate or public offices and classroom environments. Furthermore, the nature of company-native speaker employment is often structured by means of contracts that forbid specific personal behaviors or personal relations with clients/students and thereby reposition lines between private and professional space/obligations by employee understanding. The result is a multi-sited research environment that conforms to specific physical frames of interaction only partially and often demands a running performance of foreignness by the employee for broader interactions. Representing English and the exotic “other” for Japanese consumption then becomes the task of company and individual, together and apart—and where this consumption is also seen to fuel or draw upon the stated goals of national development (social, economic, diplomatic, or educational) it also falls to the state—where the ideals of all parties to the task take shape in the resulting product. The “ideologyscape” is then a largely hidden lingua franca of representations: but because these representations are engaged to shape the quality of personal, corporate and policy outcomes they also confer motive powers and are not simply static fictions. Veena Das (2004: 230) similarly looks to determine the state not by its direct rational representations but at the contested and vulnerable signature that it presents in everyday experience, showing that the state is a duality “suspens[ed] between a rational-bureaucratic entity and a magical entity.” Das (p. 226; with reference to Coronil 1997) cites magic here “not to suggest that the state tricks the audience,” but because “magic has consequences that are real,” and yet occupies a hidden order. The ideologyscape, as a concept, thus locates our analysis in the hidden order of everyday work in Japan’s EFL industry where the ideologies of company mission, state policy, and employee purpose offer a view of the

company as a “magical” duality of powerful collective aspirations and divisive real-world boundary rationalizations.

This paper presents results from an ethnographic study at one Japanese corporation in the English language school industry to advance the analytical concept of an “ideologyscape” in order to provide a common basis from which to examine the formation of identities, belonging, and the outcomes of functional governance in state and company.

## **The Industry**

Private English conversation schools in Japan, known as *eikaiwa gakkou* in Japanese or more colloquially as *eikaiwa*, are a varied and not easily conformable collection of company types. From unincorporated one-employee/owner private lesson providers to the same only officially incorporated (increasingly as *kabushiki gaisha* since legal changes in 2005) and on upwards to franchised conglomerates, companies in this industry can appear in many forms and market capacities. While the bulk (68.5%) of the 1,144 companies surveyed by the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry (METI) in 2005 were small (each with fewer than 10 employees) and localized, the market was dominated by a very small number (1.7%) of companies with more than 100 employees each (several thousand employees in the largest cases) and a national (or even international) presence. Every company in this industry is eligible to become a member of one or both of the two national industry associations for language school companies, the All Japan Linguistics Association (AJLA) and the Japan Association for the Promotion of Foreign Language Education (also known as “*Zengaikyo*”), but most do not. Of the industry’s total 3,702 business establishments listed by METI as operating in February 2010, Zengaikyo has only 73 member companies and AJLA just 25.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, these associations are not representative of the whole industry nor any particular segment of it; they promote no common

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<sup>1</sup> The figure for AJLA is from 2004-2005 and in all likelihood has declined even further relative to the current figure for Zengaikyo.

management style or instructional method and can be seen more as accessories where member companies make use of the logos in advertising to lend the appearance of being nationally certified as language schools (despite the fact that there is no national certification or licensing in the industry that directly relates to the teaching of languages). There are, however, commonalities from the perspective of Japanese consumers, where for example, we see that both associations promote the study of foreign languages for self and social betterment: Zengaikyo aims to “cultivat[e] international persons through the encouragement of foreign language studies as a lifelong pursuit,”<sup>2</sup> while AJLA provides information and events “to support learning foreign languages and to connect you and schools in a trustful way.”<sup>3</sup> Such statements may even appear reminiscent of Japanese educational policies in not only supporting the acquisition of English language skills, but also the fostering of expressive abilities for future life benefit (see MEXT, 2002). It is also by this theme of building expectations for real and lasting personal enhancement that companies—whether association members or not—express their outward face of a collective ideologyscape.

Certainly, where the companies in this industry do not produce uniform sales results, external advertising—both for potential customers and for potential employees—also varies, with traditional print and television visibility going to larger eikaiwas (those with over 100 employees in the MITI statistics) while smaller companies rely more exclusively on word-of-mouth advertising or community canvassing. Bailey (2006) argues that the domestic market advertisements placed by these larger companies play to a gendered or eroticized sense of longing for life-change (as discussed by Kelsky, 1999) via the white foreign male

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<sup>2</sup> From the website of the Japan Association for the Promotion of Foreign Language Education, accessed April 25, 2012 at <http://www.zengaikyo.jp/English/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> Taken from the website of the All Japan Linguistics Association and translated by the author, accessed April 25, 2012 at <http://www.ajla.org/index.html>

most frequently featured, and the transformative power of English. The imagery of such ads, combined with student interpretation and the fact that an overwhelming majority of students encountered by Bailey were young women, lead to the conclusion that these large eikaiwa companies represent an almost magical destination for (mostly female) Japanese consumers: A place that fuels and entertains aspirations for new selves outside of the possibilities of everyday life. Bailey concedes that, in addition to finding some companies whose ads did not conform to the gendered model, he was unable to study the creation of these advertisements and was instead forced to base the analysis entirely on the domestic reception of these images (2006: 126). While a gendered longing may indeed be reflected in the advertisements of some of Japan's largest eikaiwas, it is a subset of the "eikaiwa as destination of life change" theme at best, and cannot be supported by the more diverse client base and localized marketing observed more generally (MacNaughton 2008). More significantly, we have yet to see the production of such outward imagery and its functional attachments to motivating ideologies in the workplace.

### **Constructing and Working with an Ideologyscape at Sunny Inc.**

Sunny Eikaiwa Inc.,<sup>4</sup> headquartered in Sapporo with offices/campuses there and in two other major cities in Hokkaido Prefecture, does not market its services nationally but it does position itself relative to these larger companies in its local campaigns. During the time of my ethnographic research at Sunny between 2004 and 2005, for example, Japanese frontline sales staff were instructed to draw attention to 24 categories for comparison of Sunny with two national chains (Geos and Nova) whenever they counseled potential new customers. These categories would place Sunny's program as the third-option in a three-column design

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<sup>4</sup> "Sunny Eikaiwa Inc." and "Sunny" are pseudonyms, as are the names given here of any individuals associated with the company. This is done to minimize the potential for personal or economic impact on employees as a result of this research.

that exposed the limitations of the national chains before listing Sunny’s strengths. Moving down and across the page with prospective new students, sales staff would stress the greater freedom of scheduling, greater emphasis on individual assessments, conversational approach (as opposed to textbooks), exclusively full-time foreign teaching staff, and guarantee of reaching a specific level of competency, as well as specifics on package lengths and prices (comparable, though slightly lower per-lesson fees at Sunny). In my discussions with adult students at Sunny these comparisons with Geos and Nova were remembered as truthful and often corroborated by experiences they had with these larger companies. Sunny’s position as a local “David” to the national “Goliaths” of Nova and Geos was presented as coinciding with the customer/student’s own potential to succeed in conversational English, as Sunny’s founder/president Mr. Sasaki had, with greater balance, determination and personal/regional authenticity than the Honshu-based interlopers could offer.

Mr. Sasaki was first exposed to English as a “living” language in the streets of Yokohama around the time he was studying for a degree in economics at Yokohama National University. He had overheard the conversations of American G.I.s in the downtown area and was inspired to take a part-time job on the US army base to make more opportunity for English communication practice. In his third year at university he passed the highest level English “*eiken*” test and used his English abilities to volunteer on the site of the Tokyo Olympics. Following graduation, he entered Yamaha Corporation as an international sales representative, visited over 60 countries, met his wife (a piano teacher at the time), and developed the idea of parlaying his international English and collection of language textbooks into a future business proposition. So it was that he founded Sunny Eikaiwa Inc. in 1973, dividing the company stock with his wife and young son, as well as with the managing director, Mr. Hasegawa. Mr. Sasaki and Mr. Hasegawa shared teaching duties in the company’s initial iteration before the enterprise could grow through several

subsequent stages to become the largest private language school north of Tokyo by 1989 (with 4,500 students and 97 employees). Foreign teachers were added to staff in 1985 as a means of distinguishing the company as an authentic English source—something that Mr. Sasaki had been intent on doing with his earliest offering of English debate and vocabulary testing. When this was found to be “too intimidating” for many students, other managers (and particularly Mrs. Sasaki as executive director) prevailed in shifting the focus to a communicative learning model with fewer written test requirements and the introduction of Japanese English teaching staff to help low level students and provide “character models” for the foreign teachers. Thus, by the late 1990’s, the company had in excess of 7,000 students and 225 employees (including 60 native English speakers), and the company’s narrative had come to resemble a social mission to open Hokkaido (and later—by implication—Japan) to a world of bilingual employment, recreation, and even retirement potential with character reform and communicative ability.

It is interesting to note that the introduction script for first encounters with potential students does not mention the president of Sunny Eikaiwa by name, but only by position, and only by way of introducing the company’s stress on accomplishment—both the company’s and the potential student’s. Following the first paragraph there is a section marked “*hayakuhanasu*” or “say quickly” in the margin: “The president of Sunny has great English skills and international knowledge—something you won’t find in the presidents of other eikaiwa schools. He has been praised by well-known people in the eikaiwa business.” This quick aside is the only mention of the president in the script of seven pages, most of which contain descriptions and testimonials to support the company’s approach or references to company sponsored community events and international services (“We did interpretation work for the Nagano Winter Olympics in 1998”). It is unclear how this sublimated section of praise found its way into the script but even more telling that frontline sales staff routinely excised it from their memorized versions in actual practice (usually

unsupervised). The fact that a sales talk provided a genuine quality—one that contained no personal boasts—was deemed more significant to the successful sale by the staff, customer, and (apparently, given the lack of consequences to staff) by managers at Sunny than was enforcing a strict reading.

This independent omission by sales staff could also be interpreted as resulting from an ideological dimension of the president’s company vision. MacNaughton (2008) details the evolution of company ideology, its engineered re-telling of the company narrative, and its schism with work practice at Sunny. The most salient aspect for foreign and Japanese staff as they go through hiring, training, and regular training-meetings is personal character modeling according to the company’s “five principles”: *egao* (smiling), *sunao* (openness), *sekininkan* (responsibility), *kenkyo* (modesty), and *hairyo* (consideration)—with the added importance of being “*genki*” (energetic) and possessing “*kokoro*” (heart). All of these are examples of an idealized Japanese persona to be “learned” in isolated training rooms and via the daily “guidance” from an even more intensively trained Japanese staff mate. While the presence of such ideological company mottos is not unusual in Japanese or other corporations (for example, Rohlen, 1974; Kondo, 1990; Noguchi, 1990; Graham, 2005) they formed more than a top-down indicator of “gerontocratic-rule” (Rohlen, 1974: 94) at Sunny and were instead the basis of an improvised language for worker resistance that often only happened to give the appearance of compliance with the traits expected by ideologue managers. In this way, the embarrassment felt by sales staff which caused them to omit mention of the president’s status was not meant as a display of *kenkyo* (modesty) but also could not constitute an infraction in the eyes of ideologues given the similarity and the successful outcome (also, based as it was on a genuine quality of personal appeal by staff to the new student).

In reports from Japanese and foreign staff who had been required to meet with either Mr. or Mrs. Sasaki (the latter only met with Japanese



teachers, frontline sales staff or other managers) the effect was always to discipline with reference to the five principles. There were no grounds for blaming a student for slow/lack of progress when it was the teacher's inability to fully grasp the character traits of an ideal teacher. Japanese staff weekly training journals are filled with emphatic red pen strokes at every designated point of significance—at Mrs. Sasaki's direction—to intensify such invectives as, “You must EAT the Five Principles!” or “be as bright as a million suns!” I had several opportunities to sit with Mr. Hasegawa for discussions during fieldwork but each was similarly quick to become a unidirectional exposition on character deficiencies and solutions under the company's ideology. The single chance that I was given (near the end of my 15-month stay) to meet with Mr. Sasaki covered a greater range of historical and aspired contributions that the company had made/could make to advancing the city and prefecture, but he made clear that this was entirely based upon the specific quality of professionalism instilled in teachers and staff by their ideological training.

Sunny has been putting a lot of effort into making our teaching methods better. Many people must have wondered why Sunny puts emphasis on humanity. Everyone must have wondered about that. [...] They came to Sunny to be teachers, so why do they need to look at humanity? This is what makes Sunny great. It's difficult to make people understand our belief. [...] This summer I wrote a strong letter to the director of a university in Hakodate. Some foreigners at the university had tried to lure teachers from Sunny to work. They wanted to steal Sunny teachers because they knew that Sunny teachers are well trained. I stopped them by writing a 5-page letter. I asked them, ‘do you know why we are teaching English?’ I told them that we think a great deal of *kokoro*. Not knowing the value of *kokoro*, it is difficult to value our business. It has nothing to do with your

educational backgrounds or experiences. What we are doing is not easy at all. I told them to come to me in person if they really want to get teachers from Sunny. As a human being, you have to always remember the importance of *kokoro*. You’ll realize this from time to time even if you leave Sunny.<sup>5</sup>

References to this indigenous definition of professionalism and its lasting value if fully internalized were constantly made in company communication with foreign and Japanese staff at Sunny. Given the fact that the work of teachers was already technically challenging—slowing speech, identifying and modeling language for dialogue practice, proper positioning of body and teaching accessories (whiteboard, pen, lesson sheets, props)—the ideological bias in defining the optimal performance of work created a conceptual puzzle for most staff members. How could the president, managing director, or executive director say that Sunny’s teachers were more professional than teachers in the public or university sectors and in the same breath say that education was not a factor? In fact, many teachers had opportunities to compare working conditions and motivating factors in either off-duty associations with other company or school teachers, or via their own part-time placements in the role of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in public schools. Many knew of a “fortunate” JET who enjoyed a comparatively higher wage with fewer class hours and greater respect from peers, or a respected Japanese public sector educator with increasing hours and rising student disobedience in classes, and even a “language prostitute” in fully commercialized form with “professional” union representation at one of the larger national chains. On balance, Sunny’s distinction could be attributed to the intensity of its ideological training, precisely as indicated by the ideologues

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<sup>5</sup> From a personal communication with Sunny Eikaiwa Inc. President, Mr. Sasaki (November, 2005).

themselves, but this made the distinction no easier to grasp in rational terms. With so much significance in the definition of employment professionalism wrapped in terms of personal character enhancements through *kokoro* and the five principles, it appeared to more rational observers within and outside the company as a pseudo-religion, or as one former senior Japanese front line sales worker cautiously described it, “it’s like a cult.” Even here, though, we find that just as workers can be inclined to isolate the ideology as a negative aspect of control at Sunny, many can quietly tolerate the lectures of ideologues by enhancing their own ascribed work purpose with reference to the larger ideologyscape.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It is in this ability to sustain a teacher’s personal work ethic while at the same time enabling a message to filter through to managers in the guise of ideology that the ideologyscape reveals the same sort of dualistic nature which Das (2004) posits for the magic of the state. Purposes assigned to the teaching of English, of course, vary throughout this highly heterogeneous industry. But where these purposes coalesce around similar representations of what studying English might bring to the student or larger society, we find an area of charged—yet ambiguous—potential.

There may also be discrete symbolic elements of language at play in this space, and while I have acknowledged the transformative nature of many language school advertisements (see especially Bailey 2006), I have not chosen to associate language—alone and of itself—with the findings here. It is certain that the English language in this context of Japanese EFL has been commodified by private enterprise and supports the ideologies deployed for international longing, but this support is by no means fixed or static, nor is language the sole ingredient in this commodification. Yuki Imoto (2011), for example, presents an ethnographic account of an international preschool in Japan, and the significant place of English language in the internationalization of its Japanese students. But as with

the ideologyscape, English for Imoto is subjected to competing meanings which also convey symbolic value to producers and consumers apart. For Imoto, however, the preschool itself is the process of internationalization, as an area in which the full capacity of the language to internationalize is continuously negotiated by parents, staff, and students. Defining a non-physical area of ideologyscape, as this paper proposes, to focus research on a non-physical process of negotiating meanings may avoid the awkwardness of imagining a fixed physical space to do the same.

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