Political Economy, Linguistics and Culture
European Heritage in Economics and the Social Sciences

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Political Economy, Linguistics and Culture: Crossing Bridges
Jürgen G. Backhaus
Political Economy, Linguistics and Culture
Crossing Bridges

edited by

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Introduction

During the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, the social sciences in general and economics in particular have undergone an enormous progress. This has led to something of an embarrassment of riches. While certain topics have been fully researched to the point where the marginal benefit from further research is approaching zero, others have remained largely underresearched or are being ignored altogether. It is this discrepancy which prompted the research paradigm of “Crossing Bridges.” This volume documents the efforts of ten authors who have joined forces in addressing this problem of underresearched topics.

Why could this situation occur? Five reasons come to mind. First, each social science has a history. In fact, the history of economic thought is much broader than the history of economic analysis, as Schumpeter had observed with the choice of the title of his classic.1 Due to path dependence, research topics have been developed and continued as research ideas and topics for books and scholarly papers. What had not been in the focus of earlier scholars may not readily enter the discourse of academics today. There is hence a barrier to entry as far as topic choice is concerned. Language plays a big role. Until about 1937, the primary language of the social sciences and economics in particular was German. Then, it switched to English. But the different language communities, due to the growth of the discipline, continued to maintain their own research paradigms. This is why in Japan the history of economic thought, so I am told, is taught in terms of German history of economic thought, British history of economic thought, French history of economic thought, and so on. Indeed, the choice of topics in the Spanish academic community as compared to the German academic community or the Italian academic community is starkly different. Hence, language is another dividing and differentiating factor, another entry barrier. In particular, most academic economists today, whose lingua franca is English, have no access to the heritage of their discipline that is locked into the German script.

The nineteenth century also saw in Europe the formation of national identities which defined research programs to an extent. Due to previously mentioned reasons, therefore, there tended to emerge further differences in national research programs. The University of Macerata has emphasized these aspects of economic theory and national identity2 and in particular different appointment
practices stimulate different research strategies by young academic scholars. This is, in particular, the case when universities have to follow particular guidelines that standardize their behaviour in a national area, be this because they are all state institutions or because they have to be accredited by a single or several similarly operating accrediting bodies.

The purpose of doing research may also play a role. The purpose can be, as in the case of basic research, simple scholarly curiosity, the best of motivations. But the purpose can also be defined externally. Think of the star wars economic research program funded during the Reagan years. The program was only a very small part of total money spent, but it changed the research landscape. This is true for other programs as well and actually has had the intended effect of those who sponsored the programs.

Finally, the science of state has now developed into a lot of different and differently operating disciplines with their own language, media of publications and research paradigms, to wit economics, business economics, management, marketing, transportation, personnel, finance, sociology, public administration, statistics, econometrics, and various others. Communication is not always a strong point between these disciplines. That is why some universities, such as Cornell, have excelled in developing interdisciplinary programs such as their western societies program.

The essays collected in this volume have been grouped in several parts. The first paper (by Leland Yeager) makes the reasonable and often overlooked point that if there were a lingua franca based on the major natural (not constructed) languages, communication and the protection and tradition of the international heritage of knowledge would be much facilitated. This essay bridges the gap between economics and linguistics. Peter Senn, the author of important studies exploring the influence of particular scholars, an influence that is more likely to be ignored the bigger it is, since insights and methods are then taken for granted, poses the question of what “influence” actually means in the history of, for example, economic thought. This paper actually presents us a multiriver bridge across the social sciences including the philosophy of sciences. The third essay by Jürgen Backhaus provides a bridge between art and economics in terms of discussing a painting by Courbet, L’Origine du Monde, which has been widely discussed in the literature, although it has only recently become available to the public. This is a paradox in itself. Next to the picture, there is a literature proposing a particular point of view on social policy. Gustave Courbet, an artist, achieved such an impact by painting a picture to be hidden from public view.

The second set of papers, all by Mark Blum, tries to bridge in various ways the divide between cultural history and the social sciences. The first paper offers an interesting take on the so-called “Methodenstreit” between first Schmoller
and Menger, the Weber brothers, and an undisclosed adversary. The underlying cultural premises were different, he argues. The following two papers continue this line in terms of documenting the changing metaparadigms.

The third set of papers is in the public choice tradition conceived by its originator, Gordon Tullock, as a multidisciplinary exercise in itself. These papers, all coauthored by Jim Couch, provide first, and in particular, a link to history, discussing the peculiar implementation of the New Deal totally overlooked in contemporary macroeconomic teaching, second, another link to ecology by pointing out that the enforcement and implementation of environmental policy have little to do with their stated purpose, and third, a link to population studies by providing a similar exercise: an analysis of the implementation of immigration policies.

The series of these meetings is to be continued, and the reader finds a call for papers at the end of this book.

Erfurt, May 2007

Jürgen G. Backhaus

NOTES


PART I
1. A Language Bridge between Peoples and Disciplines

Leland B. Yeager

Department of Economics

Abstract Interlingua is a means of communication among speakers of different native languages. If widely adopted for this purpose, it would have obvious economic advantages.

Keywords: Hayek, Ferguson, Interlingua, linguistics

JEL Codes: A19, B20, Z19

1. INTRODUCTION

I’ll describe Interlingua, which is a means of communication among speakers of different native languages. If widely adopted for this purpose, it would have obvious economic advantages.

Furthermore, Interlingua offers an approach to and insights into linguistics, which, along with economics, can plausibly claim to be a prototypical social science. Both disciplines investigate how people cooperate with one another and coordinate their activities. Both investigate instruments of communication (for markets, money, and prices do convey information, as well as incentives). It is no coincidence that several eminent economists, including Adam Smith (1985) and Ludwig von Mises (1983, esp. pp. 9–30), have written knowledgeably on language. F. A. Hayek has drawn several parallels between the two disciplines. Economic institutions and language alike, along with ethics and the common law, illustrate what Hayek, following Adam Ferguson, called “results of human action but not of human design” (1967, Chapter 6); both illustrate spontaneously evolved phenomena that are highly useful yet may be

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open to deliberate improvement. Language is material for cultural anthropology. Language affinities provide clues to homelands, migrations, technologies, and other features and events before history became written. Vernon Smith (1992) finds the emergence of speech and later of writing critically important to the acceleration of cultural and economic development that began roughly thirty thousand years ago.

Language illustrates the sense in which the individual is a product of his society. The example is relevant to questions of a suitable blend of individualism and communitarianism in the shaping of institutions and policies.

All the words and meaning and structure of a language existing at a given time were contributed by individuals, mostly members of earlier generations. Each person grew up “into” an already functioning language, which helped shape his thoughts, reasoning, values, and activities. Words convey moral appraisals. Each individual and perhaps each generation has been influenced more by language than he or it has influenced language. Yet it is the creation of individuals, past and present. (Cf. Henry Hazlitt, 1964, p. 167). Recognizing the individual as a social product in no way denies that happiness and misery, success and frustration, are experienced by individuals; there is no such thing as collective happiness distinct from and transcending the happiness of individuals. Recognizing how society shapes its members in no way imposes collectivist or communitarian rather than individualist thinking and policies.

Like economics and other sciences, linguistics seeks uniformities amidst diversities; it propounds hypotheses; it develops laws. Sir William Jones, a British judge in India, published in 1786 his discoveries of systematic resemblances among Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. He conjectured about a common ancestor of these languages and other language families and about processes of linguistic change. Subsequently, Grimm’s law described a whole series of sound changes that occurred as the Indo-European ancestor language evolved into Greek, Latin, and the Germanic languages and made those languages diverge from one another in systematic ways. Laws of the High German sound shift codify several systematic deviations between English and other Germanic languages on the one hand and modern standard German on the other. The individual Romance languages have diverged from their Latin ancestor in ways characteristic of each language. Their divergences exhibit systematic patterns and lawlike regularities.

Linguistics, like economics, employs methodological individualism: both try to trace their laws to the circumstances and actions of individuals. Linguistics seeks to explain changes in language by their physiological and psychological convenience for the individual speaker in the environment confronting him. This environment includes the sounds and other features of his language itself and various natural, technological, cultural, and political circumstances. The
linguist André Martinet devotes sections of one of his books (1972, Chapter 6) to the economics (or economy) of language and the costs of accomplishing its functions.

2. INTERLINGUA

What does all this have to do with Interlingua? For one thing, as a so-called artificial language (incorrectly so called, as I’ll explain), Interlingua provides a convenient entry to the issue of constructivism, which is a charge leveled by F. A. Hayek against attempts to deliberately shape institutions and practices that he thought better left to the processes of spontaneous evolution and natural selection. The charge of constructivism is valid, in my opinion, only if construed quite narrowly; that is a topic best left to discussion at the conference. Anyway, the charge does not properly apply to the founders and adherents of Interlingua.

By the very way that it was extracted from its source languages, Interlingua incorporates the already existing vocabulary of science and technology. It has aptly been called “modern Latin”. As such it illustrates Grimm’s law at work between itself and the Germanic and other language families. As such it is an as-if ancestor of its modern “descendants” or “dialects” – Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Rumanian, Catalan, and the minor Romance languages. These deviate from each other in systematic ways that Interlingua helps to illuminate. English is closely related to it as well, since, although basically a Germanic language, English has borrowed heavily from Greek, Latin, and French and other Romance languages. By bringing these similarities to the fore, Interlingua is a great aid for learning foreign languages beyond itself.

The vocabulary of Interlingua is already familiar to the hundreds of millions of speakers of Spanish and the other Romance languages and to a lesser but still large extent to speakers of English. Another great advantage is its grammar, which has been stripped of the complexities that any of its source languages gets along without. It thus lacks grammatical gender and the complicated declensions and conjugations and irregular verbs that plague an adult studying a foreign language. Another factor tending to relieve the inhibitions of a learner speaking or writing Interlingua is that it lacks any native speakers on whom an imperfect accent or other slips might especially grate.

The definitive Interlingua dictionary and grammar were published in 1951 by the research team of professional linguists of the International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA, 1951; Gode and Blair, 1951). IALA had been founded in 1924, and for its first decade or so it sought a widely acceptable choice among or compromise among the already existing projects
of international language. As this effort proved fruitless, the IALA researchers gradually turned toward creating a language of their own.

But “creating” is the wrong word. The researchers came to realize that what they sought already existed in latent form in the main Western languages: their task was to identify or extract this language by standardizing its vocabulary and activating it with a simple yet natural grammar.

IALA was funded partly by foundations but mainly by Mrs. Alice Vanderbilt Morris. Her death in 1950 left enough money to publish the dictionary and grammar but not enough for an adequate publicity campaign. A trust fund established by Mrs. Morris’s daughter, Alice Sturges, turned out to have had its purposes specified with inadequate precision; still, it funded Interlingua activity on a modest scale in the United States until recently. Most Interlingua activity has been volunteer activity, in Switzerland in the 1950s and notably, in recent decades, in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Brazil. Interest seems to be growing in the recently liberated countries of Eastern Europe. Union Mundial pro Interlingua embraces many national Interlingua societies as its “sections”. UMI’s website, www.interlingua.com, gives information about the language and about magazines and books printed in it and provides links to many other Internet sites dealing with Interlingua in one way or another.

3. ALTERNATIVES AND OBJECTIONS

Any mention of an international auxiliary language prompts a question about Esperanto. I regret that rather diversionary question, but it does routinely arise; so I’ll face it. I mean not to knock Esperanto or its author, whom I rather admire, but just to describe the project. First published in 1887 by Dr. Ludwig Zamenhof, a Warsaw oculist, Esperanto is the product of a single man.

Dr. Zamenhof plucked word roots rather arbitrarily from the many European languages that he happened to know, distorted them according to his own scheme, and activated them with an ingenious and simple yet bizarre grammar of his own invention. Esperanto, unlike Interlingua, cannot be understood by someone who has not studied it. To demonstrate the contrast, an appendix to this paper translates an Esperanto passage into Interlingua (another example, a passage from an Esperanto textbook translated into Interlingua, appears in my 1993, p. 135).

Another common question is: Why not English? It seems to be prevailing in any case. Partly for admittedly personal reasons, which include my affection for my native language, I find it charming that each nationality have a language distinctively its own that it does not share with all mankind. Language is a
A Language Bridge between Peoples and Disciplines

bearer of culture; and although I value our Anglo-American culture on the whole, I would hate to see it crush cultural diversity on a worldwide scale.

A related answer develops the case for neutrality: Unlike English, Interlingua does not favor a particular nationality and put native speakers of other languages at a relative disadvantage, even influencing what particular persons are chosen to take part in international negotiations and conferences. Unlike English, Interlingua is easy to learn and to speak and write passably well.

Still another objection asks whether Interlingua is not too parochial. (If this objection is justified, it applies a fortiori to English). Interlingua admittedly standardizes the Romance languages and English and their Greek-Latin heritage. Shouldn’t an international language give adequate representation to the peoples of Asia and Africa? One answer is that the vocabulary standardized in Interlingua is an international fact: many unrelated languages across the globe borrow from that vocabulary. (My paper of 1993 provides examples from Indonesian. The appendix below shows a few examples from Czech and Rumanian translations of Paul Heyne’s economics textbook). Besides words borrowed in their quasi-Interlingua form, the phenomenon of loan-translations or calques further supports the claim of objective internationality (Yeager 1991a provides examples from German and Russian and even Hungarian, a non-Indo-European language).

A second answer to the charge of parochialism is that a language giving supposedly due representation to miscellaneous languages all across the globe would necessarily require rather arbitrary choices of words and even of grammatical features. It would be an arbitrary construct lacking a coherent character and intelligible to no one without arduous study. The internationality of the Greek-Latin-RomanceEnglish vocabulary remains an objective fact to be ignored only at heavy cost. For speakers of Asian and African languages, Interlingua provides an excellent introduction to this international vocabulary. (Yeager 1991b faces the charges of parochialism in more detail).

4. NETWORK EFFECTS AND WHY THEY ARE NOT DECISIVE

Another set of doubts about Interlingua concerns network effects. (Here we see another overlap with economic theory). Why should anyone bother to learn Interlingua until a great many other people have learned it first? With whom would the isolated student use it?

The answer has several parts. The services of Interlingua do not presuppose a large population of fellow users. (Here is another contrast with Esperanto). As many experiences by me and other Interlinguists testify, one can successfully
communicate in speech and writing with native speakers of Romance languages who may never even have heard of Interlingua. Using Interlingua with such people may sometimes be a welcome gesture of avoiding Anglo-American parochialism.

Interlingua is of great value in studying linguistics. Systematic departures in the Romance languages from the Latin ancestor and thus from its Interlingua counterpart occur in large numbers. The consonant group -ct- simplifies itself in a characteristic way in each of the individual Romance languages. The order of the words that follow is Interlingua, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Catalan, and English or an English cognate: *nocte, notte, nuit, noche, noite, noapte, nit, nocturnal; lacte, latte, lait, leche, leite, lapte, llet, lactic.* An initial consonant + l, to mention another example of systematically related changes, undergoes characteristic simplifications in Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese: *plen, pieno, plein, lleno, cheio, plin, ple, plenty; flamma, fiamma, flamme, llama, chama, flacără, flama, flame.* (Yeager 1991a presents many more such examples).

Finally, Interlingua is a key to understanding word derivations and to vocabulary-building in English. The appendix provides examples. Paradoxically, or not so paradoxically, it is also an aid to avoiding an excessively Latinate style in writing English.

5. CONCLUSION

I can testify from personal experience that while Interlingua is much easier to learn than any national language, it functions as a complete language. I have read it and written in it since publication of its basic documents in 1951 (and even before, since I was acquainted with a few members of IALA’s research team and their preliminary versions of the language). I attended the biennial conferences of Union Mundial pro Interlingua in Europe from 1985 through 1997. At these conferences the participants live together for one week, speaking only (or almost only) Interlingua—in formal sessions (sometimes including heated spontaneous debates), in social sessions, in casual conversations, and on tourist excursions. It is reassuring to observe even relatively new recruits quickly developing conversational ability in the language.

Interlingua is indeed a bridge between peoples and disciplines. Any similar project—a simple language for international communication rooted in linguistic reality—would necessarily diverge from Interlingua in details too minor to impede understanding between speakers of the two. Interlingua is an objective reality, and effort spent on it will yield ample returns.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Specimen of Esperanto with translation into Interlingua

Contribution to the Internet newsgroup soc.culture.esperanto from anra@esperanto.nu, 2 July 1999, with a brief response from “Antonio.”

Marko Rauhamaa, “Lingvokverelo en EU”

Mi ĵus legis, ke Germanujo bojkotos kunvenon de EU-industriministroj en Oulu, Suomujo, ĉar Suomujo decidis ne uzi la germanan lingvon kiel neoficialan laborlingvon en la kunveno.
Germanujo minacas bojkoti ankaŭ plurajn aliajn laborkunvenojn. Mi aplu ŝadas la decidon de la suoma registaro, ĉar ŝi emfazas – kvankam ne solvas – la lingvan problemon de EU kaj la efektivan diskriminacion kontraŭ la tn malgrandaj lingvoj.

Mi 100%-e subtenas vin. Jam delonge EU spertas lingvan problemon. Onidire mi iam audis pri iniciato de EU parlamentanino, Ŝu Ema Bonino (Radikala partio), kiu iniciatis pri Esperanto kiel laborlingvo de EU. Bedaurine [Bedabreveurinde], mi ne posedas fontojn por konfirmi tion. – Antonio [Interlingua version:]

Marko Rauhamaa, “Disputa super linguas in le EU”

Io ha justo legite que Germania va boycottar le reunion del ministros de industria del UE in Oulu, Finlandia, proque Finlandia decideva non emplear le lingua german como lingua non official de labor in le reunion.

Germania menacia anque boycottar plure altere sessiones de labor.

Io applaude le decision del governamento finnese proque illo accentua–ben que non solve–le problema linguistic del UE e le discrimination effective contra le si-nominate parve [micre] linguas.

Io appoia vos 100%. Jam desde longe le UE ha experientia del problema linguistic. Io ali quandu ha audite un rumor del initiativa del parlamentaria del UE, Emma Bonino (Partito Radical), qui habera proponite le esperanto como lingua de labor in le UE. Regretablemente, io non possede fontes pro confirmar isto. –Antonio

THE INTERNATIONAL VOCABULARY IN EASTERN EUROPE

Czech, although a Slavic language, includes many Latin- and Greek-derived words. Here are several found in the Czech translation of Paul Heyne’s The Economic Way of Thinking: ekonomicka teorie, politicka ekonomie, technologicka efektivnost, substituty, cenová elasticita {as in Russian, cena = price}, administrativeni cena, metody cenove diskriminace, implicitni cenovy deflator, informace, spekulanti, spekulaci, konkurence, problem monopolu, antimonopolni politika v kapitalistickych ekonomikach, inflace, recese, destabilizujici faktory, stabilizace, centralni banka, bankovni rezervy, and many others.

Rumanian, the only national language in Eastern Europe that is a Romance language, provides many examples of its being a “dialect” of Interlingua. Here
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is a sentence from Heyne’s book in Rumanian translation (p. 383) and translated into Interlingua:

El [J. M. Keynes] a avut o carieră stră_ści_ri_toare ăi diversificată ca investitor, editor, profesor, scriitor, funcționar guvernamental și arhitect al sistemelor pentru reconstruirea finanțelor internaționale.

Ille ha habite un carriera brillante e diversificate como investitor, editor, professor, scriptor, functionario governamental e architecto de systemas pro le reconstruction del financias international.

Like English, Rumanian exhibits a curious duality. In English, many identical or related concepts are expressed both by native (Germanic) roots and by Greek-Latin-French roots (“kingly” and “regal,” for example). In Rumanian, similarly, many Slavic (or Turkish or other) roots occur in parallel with Romance roots. Here are a few examples, with the Interlingua in brackets: ban = moneta [moneta]; vreme = timp [tempore]; prieten = amic [amico]; folosi, întrebuința = utiliza [utilisar]; slab = debil [debile]; nevoie = necesitate [necessitate]; slobozenie = libertate [libertate]. Because of these parallelisms in the Rumanian vocabulary, monolingual Rumanian speakers should find Interlingua more understandable than the mere appearance of a Rumanian text might suggest.

THE INTERNATIONAL VOCABULARY IN ENGLISH

Basically, in its words most often used, English is a Germanic language. Most words in the dictionary, however, are borrowings or coinages from Classical Greek, Latin, and languages descended from Latin. Interlingua can well serve as a tool for clinching one’s grasp of this vast international component of English. Here are some examples of the many thousands of English words that, in effect, derive from Interlingua words (at the left, underlined).

- grege ‘flock’, ‘herd’, ‘crowd’: gregarious, segregate, integrate, aggregate, congregate, egregious;
- rader ‘scrape’: razor, radula, erase, abrade, abrasive;
- roder ‘gnaw’: erode, corrode, rodent;
- tener ‘hold’: tenable, retain, detain, abstain, pertain, tenant;
- vader ‘go’: evade, invade, pervasive, wade, waddle;
- carne ‘meat’ or ‘flesh’: carnal, carnivorous, carnival, incarnation, carnage, carnation;
- seder ‘sit’ and sede ‘seat’: see (as in Holy See), session, president, obsession, sedentary, sessile, sediment, residence, residue, assiduous, siege;
- premer ‘press’: print, imprint, pressure, impress, oppress, depress, repress, suppress;
moner ‘warn’, ‘advise’, ‘remind’: admonish, monitor, monitory, premonition, monument, demonstrate, summon;

grave ‘weighty’: gravity, gravid, aggravate, gravamen, grieve, grief, grievous;

sequer ‘follow’: second, sequel, sequence, consequent, persecute, prosecute, pursue, obsequious;

funder ‘melt’, ‘pour’: foundry, fuse, fusion, confound, diffuse, effusive, profusion, transfusion, funnel;

ducer ‘lead’ or ‘draw’: duke, conduct, conducive, ductile, educate, deduce, abduct, duct, aqueduct;

precio ‘price’: price, prize, precious, appreciate, depreciate, appraise;

flar ‘blow’: inflate, deflate, flatulent, afflatus;

pender ‘hang’: depend, append, pendulum, propensity, appendix, impending, independent, suspenders;

cader ‘fall’: cadence, case, accident, incident, decadent, casual, casualty, casuistry;

venir ‘come’: venue, Advent, circumvent, event, prevent, supervene, convene, revenue, eventually;

mitter ‘put’, ‘send’: mission, missionary, emissary, Mass, emit, remit, transmit, submit, promise, missile, message, committee;

scriber ‘write’: scribe, scribble, describe, inscribe, subscribe, circumscribe, prescribe, nondescript, manuscript, scripture, conscription, postscript;

leger ‘gather’, ‘choose’: select, collect, college, diligent, predilection, elect, elective, eligible, elite, intelligent;

leger ‘read’: lecture, lectern, lesson, legend, legible;

credir ‘believe’: creed, credible, credulous, credit, creditor, credential, discredit, miscreant;

batter ‘beat’, ‘strike’: batter, battery, battle, combat, debate, rebate, abattoir;

precir ‘pray’: precatory, precarious, imprecation, deprecate;

traher ‘pull’, ‘drag’: traction, tractor, extract, tract, tractable, contract, treaty, subtract, retraction, trail, trailer;

imperar ‘govern’, ‘command’: empire, emperor, imperial, imperative;

ponderar ‘ponder’, ‘weigh’: ponder, imponderable, ponderous, ponderosa, preponderate.

Many English words contain two Interlingua roots; for example:

aqua and ducer in aqueduct;

plen ‘full’ and poter ‘be able’ in plenipotentiary;

omne ‘all’ and poter in omnipotent;

melle ‘honey’ and fluer ‘flow’ in mellifluous;

carne ‘meat’ and vorar ‘devour’ in carnivorous;
ben ‘well’ and voler ‘wish’ in benevolent;
pisce ‘fish’ and coler ‘cultivate’ (or cultura ‘culture’) in pisciculture;
mano ‘hand’ and scriber ‘write’ in manuscript;
ex ‘out of’, ‘from’ and onere ‘burden’ in exonerate.

Examples occur in the lists above of how Interlingua roots often join with prepositions like ab, ad, con, ex, circum, super, trans, and others. Other examples are abstract, adhere, conference, execute, circumspect, superficial, transitory, and so on. Knowing Interlingua makes dead metaphors come alive. Interlingua pectore ‘chest’ indicates the literal meaning of “expectorate”, to get out of one’s chest. Pugno ‘fist’ brings to mind a pugnacious man, brandishing his fist; “impugn” originally meant to attack by raising one’s fist against. An “ebullient” personality is one that enthusiastically bubbles outward (from bullir ‘boil’). “Current” (from currer) means literally “running”.

2. The Theory and Measurement of Influence in the History of Economic Thought

Peter R. Senn

Abstract Despite the fact that the study of influence is the central task of the historian of economic thought, there is no generally accepted theory of influence either in the social sciences or in the history of economic thought. Foundational methodological issues such as influence on what and by what means and tracing and measuring influence are the subjects of this paper. The paper is both a commentary on the present understanding of influence in the history of economic thought and a prolegomenon to a more general theory of influence in the history of economic thought. It focuses on how the ideas that make up the corpus of economics are transmitted from one economist to the other. The conclusion is that no general theory of influence for the history of economic thought is possible at the present time. A general theory may never be possible because different scholars will probably continue to interpret the term “influence” differently.

Keywords: General theory of influence in the history of economic thought, influence, economic theory

JEL Codes: A000, B410

Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’
That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.
I don’t much care where—’ said Alice.
Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat.
—so long as I get somewhere,’ Alice added as an explanation.
Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, 71–72

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1. INTRODUCTION

The study of the development of ideas is the central task of the historian of economic thought. This study requires following the path of the expression of ideas in time – the ideas one person had – and how later people accepted, modified, or rejected those ideas. Understanding influence is a significant part of the study of the history of ideas, of which the history of economic thought is a part.

It is now generally accepted that there is no “systematic study of influence in the economics profession” (Leeson, 1997, p. 637). Leeson could have gone further. There is no generally accepted theory of influence in either the history of ideas or the history of economic thought. This is despite the fact that economists have written about it for centuries and the study of it is the stock in trade of historians of economic thought.

There are many reasons for this situation. Historians of economic thought define influence in different ways. Questions about what is influenced – ideas, economic techniques, policy – and by what means arise. There are often many problems in trying to trace influence. There has been virtually no progress in measuring influence. Another set of issues revolves about what a theory of influence might be. The net result is that strong and convincing measures of influence are sometimes very difficult to establish despite the fact that there are some obvious cases.

This paper is both a commentary on the present understanding of influence in the history of economic thought and a prolegomenon to a more general theory of influence in the history of economic thought. It focuses on how the ideas that make up the corpus of economics are transmitted from one economist to the other. One of the aims is to construct a bridge between the history of economic thought and the larger epistemological context in which it is embedded.

2. HOW INFLUENCE IS DEFINED IN SOME OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The concept of influence, like the related concepts with which it is associated – power, inspiration, and authority – has been used in very different ways in economics as well as in the other social sciences. It was not until after the Second World War that serious attention was paid to its meanings in the social sciences.

The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences has no entry in the index nor is there an article on the subject. The entry in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences reads as follows: “See Authority; Diffusion, article on Interpersonal Influence; Interest Groups; Lobbying; Persuasion; Power; Propaganda;
Public Relations; Suggestion” (Sills, 1968, Vol. 7, p. 301). The Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas edited by Philip P. Wiener has no entry in the index nor is there an article on the subject.

There is a useful article, “Influence,” by Henry W. Ehrman in the Dictionary edited by Julius Gould and William L. Kolb. It emphasizes the way the term is used in political science, psychology, and sociology.

Influence can be thought of as: (1) a property of a person, or position; (2) a relationship between two people, the one influencing and the other influenced; (3) a cause which results in changes in the person influenced; (4) a process involving at least two people; (5) a result of the exertion of influence and many variations and combinations of these logical forms.

Writing about the development of the concept “influence” in political science, in 1955, J. G. March noted that the formalization of the concept has proceeded in “an ad hoc fashion, with little communication either between the ‘theorists’ and the ‘empiricists’ or between the several practitioners within each class of that dichotomy” (p. 450). The same situation holds in the history of economics to this day.

Without a theory of influence, it is unlikely that attempts to measure what is difficult to define will get very far.

March felt that, in political science, statements about influence “can just as easily be formulated in terms of causality” (p. 437). According to Ehrman, “Psychologists, including social psychologists, generally do not go beyond describing influence as causal relation” (p. 332). For sociologists, “Influence is a term used by sociologists to refer to the role of intimate, interpersonal relations in the communication of information, influence and innovation” (Katz, 1968, Vol. 4, p. 178).

None of the common usages of the term influence in the other social sciences adequately captures its meaning for the history of economic thought. Arnold C. Harberger (b. 1924), a leader of the “Chicago School,” was asked, “Who do you point to as those you studied under who influenced you?” He replied, “I am the most blessed economist that I know. Really. I can’t exaggerate the amount of luck that I had in my economic education. My three most influential classroom teachers (in alphabetical order) were Milton Friedman, Jacob Marschak and T. W. Schultz” (Levy, 1999).

Harberger is referring specifically to the communication of economic ideas. He does not mean that his teachers exercised power over, or coerced, his thoughts. He does not mean that they caused what was in his later publications. Among the things he means by influence is that his teachers had a role in shaping his ways of thinking about economics.

It is clear that much attention must be given to the variety of meanings influence has in the history of economic thought.
The term *influence* is often a significant issue in arguments in economics, because, while many of the term’s denotations and connotations are the same, they often refer to different meanings. There is no agreement on one meaning. Usually the meaning of the term must come from the context in which it is used.

3. **WHAT IS A THEORY OF INFLUENCE IN THE HISTORY OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT?**

3.1. **What is a theory?**

The foundation of any systematic study of influence ought to be a theory. It is appropriate therefore to consider the important characteristics of a theory for the study of influence in the history of economic thought. This is especially necessary because the term *theory*, like *influence*, is used to mean many different things in the history of economic thought.

Theory always refers to ideas. The history of economic thought is also about ideas. It is easy to understand why there are so many different viewpoints. Any discussion of theory in the history of economic thought refers to ideas about ideas.

Theories can be about many different kinds of ideas. In the history of economic thought they include different value judgments, dissimilar ideas about conceptions of history, explanations, goals, policy, principles, and many other things. To ask for a general theory that covers all these things is asking too much at this time.

The sense in which the term *theory* is used here is that of a general statement that either explains or connects a group of other more specific statements.

A reasonable goal for a theory of influence in the history of economic thought is that it has explanatory power and has at least seven other specific qualities or properties:

1. It must be a statement from which other statements can be deduced or inferred.
2. The statement must employ clear and unambiguous concepts.
3. The main concepts of the theory must be either objective and empirical or operationally defined.
4. The propositions deduced or inferred from a statement should be applicable to some well-specified thing, process, state, person, or event.
5. The theory must be testable.
6. The theory should be logical.
7. The theory ought to be about important and meaningful subjects.