

# LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL CHANGE

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## Preamble

Please allow me to preface my talk with a few explanatory and precautionary remarks. I know that I am addressing an assembly of English- language teachers, and my credentials may not quite fit in with the occasion: I served as Professor of German at Silpakorn University until my retirement, (although I may have taught English at certain points of my professional career.) But to seek leave to resort to an autobiographical approach is not necessarily a kind of self-indulgence, and you will soon find out how this relates to the topic of my address. Although I took a Ph.D. from a German University, it was the British who first taught me German. Most of the professors and lecturers in German at Cambridge University, where I studied for my first degree in Modern Languages, had served in the Second World War. They had fought the Germans. But I never heard a single nasty word about the Germans. On the contrary they were doing their best to convince their students of the value of studying German language, culture and literature. For me, I was convinced, and did not take long to make up my mind to cross over to Germany for my graduate studies. Conviction is the key word, and I consider it worthwhile to share that conviction with my colleagues in the field of English-language teaching in the hope that cross-cultural experiences of this kind are transferable. The present speech is an extension

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and an elaboration of an earlier paper in German, which I delivered at the Goethe-Institut in Munich on 9 May 2006, of which an English version is also available under the title “On the Power, Powerlessness and Omnipotence of Language: From Oral Culture through Written Culture to Media Domination”.<sup>1</sup> The paper has been distributed to the members of the audience, and I shall refer to it occasionally. It contains memorable quotations which I have found convincing and which I would like to share with you.

### Football as a Paradigm of Change

While dwelling on my British apprentice years, I recall my first reading of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and how I was flabbergasted by one particular passage from Act I, scene iv, when Kent, Lear’s loyal courtier, lashed out at Oswald, Goneril’s steward, for being disrespectful to Lear, by calling the latter : “You base football player!”. I did play football at school, and even in the late 1950s, football had already become a well-recognized international game. By chance I was at that time preparing for my university entrance at a tutorial college in Manchester, and the two football teams, which are both world-famous today, were already among the leading clubs of Europe. Football players were enjoying some kind of national status, far removed from their abject conditions in the Shakespearean age. Then came an event that heightened the status of football players even more: they moved from the status of sport heroes to tragic heroes. On their way back home from a match in Belgrade, the Manchester United team made a brief stopover in Munich, and their plane crashed

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<sup>1</sup> *Silpakorn University International Journal*, Vol.7, 2007, pp. 89-111.

on taking off from Munich Airport. Altogether 21 passengers perished, 7 of them were Manchester United players. Many players were severely injured. It looked as though the team would never rise again.

But that was not to be. The surviving players were determined to continue to play further matches. And a wonder happened. They reached the English final that year, and though they lost, they were celebrated as national heroes. Who would have believed that they should have come that far? The Mancunian legend has since impressed itself upon the memory of many people, including foreigners like myself. Manchester for us stands for honour, dignity and willpower. That tragic day was 6 February 1958, and that day has become a remembrance day, on which people would pay tribute to those heroes – both those who died and those who survived. One particular tribute is most touching: “I’m a grown man of nearly 70, but it still brings tears to my eyes when the 6<sup>th</sup> February comes round each year.”<sup>2</sup>

Even we outsiders should not hesitate to ask the question as to what has happened to international football in the meantime. Can we hold those involved in the football *business* (for it has become a business) in high esteem as we do with those heroes of 1958? Manchester is a good test case. In the age of globalization in which we can watch live matches on television any time and any place and in which football players can become millionaires who, alas, can be bought and sold like commodities, has Manchester lived up to its heroic stature of 1958? Has Manchester (in this case, Manchester City) not stooped so low as to consort with a foreign politician-cum-

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<sup>2</sup> “1958 : ‘This was the cream of our crop.’ ”

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/witness/february/6/newsid\\_2705000/27051...24/01/2007](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/witness/february/6/newsid_2705000/27051...24/01/2007)

tycoon with a dubious record? The immortal Shakespeare does not date, for we can amend the denunciation a little by saying : “You base football club owner!”

### The Confidence of the Artificial

The 1950s were also a landmark in sound technology. Recording as well as sound engineering had been making great advances, including stereophony and particularly “high fidelity”, which was becoming a household word for music-lovers. Hi-Fi technology was supportive of the promotion of classical music, for recorded music was considered to be highly *faithful* to the *original*, almost an equal of a live performance. There was an element of modesty inherent in this wonderful technology, for it recognized the primacy of the original, and its ambition was not to supplant the original. People with Hi-Fi equipment at home still went to live concerts and regarded recorded music as a supplement to, and an enhancement of, live performances. Things may have changed in the meantime. Our society has since become spoiled with all kinds of gadgetry and most of us have become just smug consumers. (I have, in another paper entitled “Music-Making versus the Commodification of Music: A Call to Enlightened Amateurs”, drawn attention to the danger of unproductive consumerism that has no more room for amateur music-making, which in the old days constituted the foundation of music, both from the performer’s and listener’s points of view.)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Chetana Nagavajara, “Music-Making versus the Commodification of Music: A Call to Enlightened Amateurs”. *Manusya : Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2008.

The changes have gone very far, and I have known people who refuse to go to a live concert or to enjoy a real performance, who do not even go to a football match anymore, but would rather sit in front of the television and feed themselves on the pleasure of second-hand experiences. In terms of music, their preference for recorded music is based on the belief that one hears better, and that all the details can be captured much more clearly than in a concert hall, (which may be or may not be true). The same applies to football matches : in a vast stadium one can hardly see the prowess of the individual players, whereas on television one can even spot the most subtle tricks by a player (including dirty tricks) that sometimes escape the watchful eye of the referee. In summary, the sense of the original has been lost. Many people do not care anymore about primary experiences. The age of virtual reality has come, and it is an age full of confidence, because one does not have to care anymore about originality, nor first-hand experience. We can create a new reality which can do away with real reality. The etymology of the word “virtual”, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is rather revelatory because originally “virtual” was also related to “virtue”. In that case, virtual reality is linked to something virtuous, and by and by it has usurped the primary human experience altogether. We live in a world in which it is no longer necessary to distinguish between direct experience and mediated experience. The media have overpowered us in such a way that we no longer attach much importance in real-life experience. Face-to-face contact has been replaced by telephone conversation, as it saves time, and most people do not think that there is any difference between an actual conversation and an mediated conversation. The implications for linguistic communication are immense.

Should we consider this a weakness in our everyday life as it diminishes real human contact? On the other hand, IT has helped us to bridge geographical and

cultural divides, but it has to be admitted the full potential and the constructive side of the media has yet to be fully exploited, for we often fall prey to propaganda in an age which consumerism and commercialism reign supreme. We like to see things move very fast, and speed is usually regarded as power and progress. Culture has changed with the new IT revolution. We value immediacy. We have high regard for simultaneity. In Thailand, telegraph service was terminated by the Thai Post Office some months ago, because it took too long for a telegram to be printed out and delivered to the addressee. When most people communicate via cellular phones, telegram has become anachronistic. Speed is all.

### **Speed *versus* Reflection**

In the Thai language, we have a word “Chuk-Kid” which cannot be translated exactly into a western language, but can approximately be expressed by the English term “to stop *and* think”, which, alas, has become a kind of luxury. You must be able to act on the spot. To think it over, to reflect, to ruminate deeply, belong in the realm of literature, poetry or philosophy. Our practical life must, of necessity, be governed by improvisation. The new kind of improvisation is rather different from our traditional oral culture, whereby a kind of verbal combat used to be staged in the form of verbal repartee, and one should not forget that that particular verbal game had to be done *in verse*. There was a wisdom inherent in our oral culture, for people had to discipline themselves by the use of verse. In our modern age, improvisation could mean quick action (without the benefit of a mental discipline) in a kind of free-for-all communicative community. A new loquacity has come into its place, and there is no denying that today people talk too much. The situation has worsened with the

advent of the mobile phone which we all possess (except me). It is worth noting when travelling on the skytrain or the underground in Bangkok that very few people these days while away their time when travelling by way of reading a newspaper or a book; they just pick up their mobile phones and talk to their friends. It is a new kind of pleasure. The content of these conversations is not meant to be something private, as the speaker has no qualms about other people listening in. Privacy used to be regarded in a civilized society as something precious. It is no longer so. In my paper referred to above, I quoted a very witty poem called "All Aboard" by the English poet Charles Tomlinson, that depicts a train journey which had no place for any private world, because the majority of the passengers were engaged in telephone conversations with their mobile phones. In a humorous way, the poet is trying to give us a warning that a new collective behaviour has already set in, which has serious cultural and implications. Nobody longer cares about the private world of others.<sup>4</sup>

### Informational *versus* Aesthetic Mode of Communication

When speed, concision and straightforwardness are the imperatives of our contemporary communicative community, to talk about the aesthetic quality of communication is an anachronism. Your message has to be short, precise and appropriate for transmission via SMS. There is no time or no need for linguistic embellishment. If you want to put a grain of emotions into your message, you can resort to signs which are known as "emoticons". That is the only aspect of today's communication which might be considered as (partially) aesthetic. Otherwise, you

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in my paper "On the Power, Powerlessness and Omnipotence of Language...", Op. cit, pp.109-110.

have to invent other codes which may be understandable to your own clique. You may also be able to rely on abbreviations. The prime consideration is that of *information*, pure and simple. There is no time to convince people by rhetorical means. Leave that to literature. And parliamentary debates, which, in some countries, used to be a paragon of linguistic prowess have now lost much of their aesthetic qualities. In Thailand which has a very short (and rather shaky) history of parliamentary democracy, the language used by our parliamentarians certainly does not belong to the aesthetic domain. One further feature of the change in language is the abandonment of the time-honoured written mode of communication. We dwell mostly on language of the level of spoken language or everyday conversation. These changes are reflected in the discipline of linguistics as well, which gives emphasis to everyday language, whereas literary language has been left to the study of stylistics or literary criticism practised by very few linguists.

Teachers as well as employers (who still need employees with mastery of the mother tongue) often complain that even people with university degrees can no longer write decent discursive prose. As a teacher of foreign languages, my sufferings in this respect may be more acute than my colleagues in the Thai Department, who do insist that I have underestimated the ailment under which they too are suffering. When students submitted to me their written works in German, naturally they faced difficulties which could easily be attributed to the difficulties in German language itself. Sometimes I was lenient enough to allow them to write literary essays on German literature in the Thai language, but they still had difficulties in expressing themselves in Thai. One day I asked a third-year student, when was the last time she wrote a full-length essay in Thai, and her answer simple made me

speechless. Her answer was, "In my fourth grade". During the ten intervening years, she never wrote a single full-length essay because all examinations were based on objective tests, and essay writing was often omitted, as it would have meant too much work for the teachers. The story is not meant to be funny at all.

The information age, therefore, has no place for literature and you can study for a degree in a particular language, especially a foreign language, with little or no exposure to literature at all. What results is a total absence of any notion of style. Young people these days have not been educated to appreciate the beauty of language. The original sin of putting too great an emphasis on the informational mode of linguistic communication has taken its toll.

If we look back into history, we shall soon discover that our traditional society was more sensitive to, and more conscious of, the aesthetic qualities of language. In Thailand, school primers for the Thai language used to be full of simple verses composed for language instruction. So, young primary school children acquired literacy at the same time as a taste for poetry. They could memorize long stretches of verses (which modern educators brand as rote memorization). An aesthetic sense of language imprinted itself upon the mind of a young pupil, and with a repertoire of memorized verses (however small), he or she would soon develop into a poet in his or her own right. Sensitivity to the tonal and rhythmic beauty of the mother tongue would in later life benefit that pupil when he or she had to use language in professional work. Anybody who has a certain facility to think in verse, to write poetry (however badly), would be in a position to express himself or herself in prose marked by aesthetic qualities. Of course, I am talking about by-gone days.

## The Evaluative / Prescriptive Model

Many linguists today would regard language change as a natural process, which is neither good nor bad. But in actual fact, people do pass value judgment on language and do speak about the degeneration of a language. They often go further in finding a correlation between socio-cultural decadence and language degeneration. May I be allowed to use an example from an interview in a popular magazine, in which a young classical musician was asked to give his opinion on present-day rock music? His answer was that although he was a classical musician, he listened to all kinds of music including Thai rock music. But what disturbed him about some of the songs being produced these days was its language. "This is the kind of language that I speak to my dog at home". What could be a more damning judgment on the language being used today? But can a judgment of this kind be proved right or wrong. It may be very difficult to give an answer which satisfies everybody. Come to think about it, a poet might be in a position to formulate the kind of language appropriate for talking to a dog in the form of poetry. We might extrapolate a little from what the musician said. Perhaps what he intended to say was that the language used in those rock songs was utterly artless and devoid of all aesthetic value. From the educational point of view – and I am using the word "education" in its broadest sense – it would be necessary to give specific examples of good language or to pinpoint the kind of acceptable standard of usage. We Thai were once very good at that. Let us think of those models of good poetry recorded on the Stone Inscriptions of Wat Pho. But we are talking here about written language. It is no longer easy to find such good models in our daily life, and as a teacher of languages, I can only think of newspaper editorials on certain days (because they

have their ups and downs.) As for spoken language, we shall have to turn to western examples. The Germans until today regard as the supreme model of how to speak German what they call the “Bühnensprache” (stage language), that is to say, the language spoken by trained actors and actresses in the theatre. The British used to be proud of their “BBC English”. But social change may have brought about linguistic change as well, as the BBC wants to rid itself of all trappings of elitism. The results have been damaging according to the critic Norman Lebrecht.

*BBC television turned its back on the high arts and dumbed down its language to a point where an average intelligent dolphin can now understand the six o'clock news*<sup>5</sup>

When talking about standard or standardization, we cannot help harking back to the model of the French Academy which was created as far back as 1635 to act as a safeguard of good French. One must not forget that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, France, and especially the royal court of Louis XIV, were looked upon as the paragon of culture and good taste, emulated by the whole of Europe. What is worth observing here is that the recognition of French culture was accompanied by the spread of the French language as the *lingua franca* of Europe. French was until a few decades ago the language of diplomacy, and a Thai passport used to carry only 2 languages, namely Thai and French. English was adopted only about 30 years ago. The hegemony of French was not attributable alone to its colonial expansion,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Lebrecht Weekly (6-Magazine)*, 24 January 2007

although it may be true that Francophone literature in countries outside France was a legacy of French imperialism. But the use of French was concomitant with the recognition of French culture. The hegemony of English is a different story, and I am not making an evaluative judgment here. The point I am making is that although we may want to be fair to all parties concerned, it is unavoidable that, in the opinion of many, there is good and bad language. The criteria for such judgment may vary from case to case and are often not scientifically grounded. After all, can an evaluation be completely objective?

### **The Media and New Possibilities**

We cannot deny that certain new media have enriched our culture with new art forms. Let us think of the cinema, for example, which has given us some great aesthetic experiences. The same could be said of video art, for the video no longer assumes the function of a mere medium, but can become a work of art. But these new possibilities are not necessarily to be explained in terms of linguistic enhancement. The radio, however, is a special case. During the war years and the years immediately after the Second World War, paper was very scarce in Europe, and in our part of the world as well, and the only way to communicate with a large public was through the radio. There were few books to read and my generation grew up with radio plays. As a genre, the radio play could serve to stimulate our imagination as well as a work of literature, which television cannot achieve. Just like the act of reading, we do not see real actions or real people, and every listener must form mental images of his own. What could have been a better intellectual education than conditioning people to think in the same way as theatre or film directors, who

have to visualize the entire action on the basis of a text? A literary piece of work is a text we can see and read, whereas a radio play is a text we can hear. Both provide rich materials for an education of the imagination. Radio plays can be said to initiate a "second oral culture" as distinct from the pre-literacy oral culture. And it is heartening to note that in some countries like Germany, this second oral culture is still very much alive, and leading writers continue to use the radio play as one of the art forms through which they can best express themselves. This happens in spite of the advances made by the cinema and of the good health still enjoyed by the stage play. Can we conclude that a country with a solid culture is often characterized by its high estimation of linguistic excellence?

We Thai have only recently become negligent with our own linguistic culture. Until recently, folk art which manifested itself in the form of folk theatre and verse repartee was still committed to the belief in the power of language. As with other civilized nations we did at one time realize that language could be moulded into a work of art which could give aesthetic pleasure to the people and could prove to be at the same time morally uplifting. I have elsewhere demonstrated that certain literary forms such as the parody signify an advanced stage in the development of a language, which is at the same time premised on high intellectual capacities.<sup>6</sup> In other words, linguistic power is often accompanied by intellectual prowess. We may have lost that enviable combination through the contemporary deluge of PR and advertisement, whose main purpose is to blunt our sensitivity, to stifle our sense of value, and to make us their captives.

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<sup>6</sup>Chetana Nagavajara, "Parody as Translation. A Thai Case Study" (1992). In: C.N. : Comparative Literature from a Thai Perspective, Bangkok : Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996, pp.247-263.

PR and advertisement thrive also on linguistic manipulations, and it is regrettable that so many highly intelligent people are engaged in this lucrative business. Persuasiveness is its chief instrument, and in this sense, it operates very much in the same way as the religious sermon. So, what is the difference between the rhetoric used in a sermon and that used in a beguiling advertisement? The answer is straightforward: A great religious sermon, or any laudable persuasive statement, is buttressed by truth. In the final analysis, language and morality enrich each other. It has been demonstrated that during the dictatorial regime in Germany between 1939 and 1945, the German language was used in a wholesale political propaganda and that the language did lose much of its power and conviction.<sup>7</sup> The same could be said about the fate of Thailand during the period 2001-2006 during which the country experienced almost a similar political nadir, whereby the ruling regime pursued a wholesale mendacious policy. The Thai language was being corrupted to serve ignorable ends, until a popular uprising restored the power of truth, which also substantiated the power of language, as I have demonstrated in the paper quoted above.<sup>8</sup> We are not here merely dealing with the correlation between language change and social change, but we are positing that the health of a language depends on its ability to uphold the truth.

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Klemperer, *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii): Notizbuch eines Philologen*, Leipzig : Reclam, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> See Note 1.

## Why English?

Lest I forget that this conference is supposed to be a gathering of mainly English-language teachers, I shall now return to the main theme of our conference. It may be a truism, but we should now and then remind ourselves that to learn a foreign language is also to submit ourselves to its originating culture. The hegemony of English is usually linked to British imperialism, but this is the only one aspect. I, for one, would tend to think that Hollywood, the computer, the internet and other forms of telecommunication have been the major forces in making English the world language of today. The statistics concerning the invasion of English are quite alarming. A study conducted by Amara Prasitratasin in 2004 reveals that within a period of 16 years, the use of English words in the Thai printed media has increased to 23 percent.<sup>9</sup> As foreign language teachers, should we not rejoice that English has been wielding such an immense influence? Surely, we should now have more customers and is it not a sign that we are doing our job well? But statistics on such linguistic infiltration do not in any way guarantee that the people in our country are using more English or that there has been an improvement in the standard of writing and speaking English. Our daily experience may even contradict such supposition. In the case of Thailand, we might be able to notice a greater fluency, but this fluency is not accompanied by accuracy in terms of English usage. The abandonment of grammar in favour of communicative skills has not produced positive results. English teaching in our educational institutions does not occur in a conducive environment. Coming out of

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Yuphaphann Hoonchamlong, "E-Thai: Thai Language in the New Millennium". Paper presented at the Ninth International Conference on Thai Studies, Northern Illinois University, 3-6 April 2005, pp.15-16 <[thai.hawaii.edu/tempdownload/ethai-2005-rev.pdf](http://thai.hawaii.edu/tempdownload/ethai-2005-rev.pdf)>

the class, our students do not have the opportunity to use the language in their everyday life. The teaching conditions also leave much to be desired because our curricula do not permit intensive teaching and learning. Besides, any language is always in a state of flux and a foreigner wanting to master a language must be able to cling to some reliable models, for otherwise he will be lost in the midst of these shifts and changes. At one time, we used to believe in the good model provided by literature. That faith has now been shaken by other competing forces, including rock lyrics!

Perhaps a musical analogy may help to bring home my point. Thai classical musicians learn a new work by adhering to what the composer has composed, (of course, without the system of notation practised in the West.) Once they have reached a certain level of the competence, they are encouraged to start improvising, that is to say, they are departing from the original composition in a creative way. So is it with the learning of a foreign language. You have to master what the native speakers have bequeathed to you. Then at a certain point, you begin to become yourself, using that foreign medium in your own creative way. A good musician is one who does not operate only through spontaneity, but is also adept in the basic theoretical principles of music. So a language learner must have something to adhere to. He or she must seek out good models provided by the native speaker, and must at the same time be able to rely upon certain basic principles. You can guess what I am aiming at. The basic question is : What's wrong with learning grammar?

## Concluding Remarks

You will have noticed that I have spoken very little on the technicalities of foreign-language teaching, but that I have been making a plea to my colleagues to be a little more ambitious in their language teaching. In a world plagued by cupidity, materialism, consumerism, and money-mindedness, even language teachers should equip themselves well to combat these social ills.

Language changes, culture changes. But if we look more deeply into the essence of any language, we shall soon become conscious of the power of language, which is also the power of the human spirit. It is not the prerogative of any particular language, but it is common to all languages. This power of language propped by the power of the human spirit can cut across all linguistic barriers and all cultural differences. To learn a foreign language is at the same time a cultural, an intellectual and a spiritual enrichment. If one foreign language can enrich your life in the way that I have described, why should we learn only one foreign language? It is true that with English being the *lingua franca* of the contemporary world, we cannot do without it. But we should not stop at that. The mastery of other languages will open up new horizons and new challenges to think and rethink old beliefs. So let us learn foreign languages, while at the same time using the mastery of foreign languages to give us a new consciousness of our own mother tongue. In the age of globalization, it is no longer sufficient to restrict ourselves to one mother tongue *plus* English. There are further challenges which can only be met by learning more than one foreign language.