

# SOME THOUGHTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND WORLD VIEW WITH REFERENCE TO THAI LANGUAGE AND CULTURE <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: The Study of Language as a Study of Culture

One of the most important reasons to learn another language is to get acquainted with another culture. This may be for reasons of necessity such as immigration or studies in a foreign country or for reasons of personal interest, for instance, in the literature, the customs or the religion of a different country. Language is the medium of description and communication of religious, indigenous and ideological beliefs and, therefore, functions as a means of conservation and transmission of such beliefs. It yields a wealth of information on culture and also chronicles culture's changes. Most people would agree that language is one of the most important sources of cultural information. Metaphors, idiomatic expressions and proverbs obviously refer to conditions of everyday life, religion, tradition and history. But features of the language itself, its grammar, its structure and its lexicon, also reflect cultural characteristics. The variety of Thai personal pronouns for instance reflects the

Thai perception of the world as a hierarchy. It is also a linguistic representation of the different status of men and women and the importance of the principle of seniority. "In a striking way it [the Thai pronominal system] mirrors some of the more important features of Thai culture; and at the same time it provides considerable scope for the expression of individual attitudes and personality." (Cooke 1968:68)

In my thesis (Schalbruch 1997), I have examined some features of the Thai language with regard to their capacity as being expressions of Thai cultural characteristics. Cultural characteristics are understood here as aspects of a world view whose distinctive character has developed from religion. Although statements on cultural characteristics are never of an absolute nature, because culture (like language) changes constantly, cultural characteristics do not change randomly. They are embedded in concepts of a world view that are less susceptible to change than other elements of a culture.

As source-material for information about a culture, language has two advantages. Firstly, as a living language, it is presently used and many of its basic features are familiar to every member of the language

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised excerpt taken from my M.A. thesis (Schalbruch 1997)

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community who can speak. Language is, therefore, easily accessible, unlike, for instance, historical evidence which, especially in the case of Thailand, is rare, scattered and fragmented. Secondly, language is a set of signs and rules whose meanings are based on the common understanding of its users. Words or other linguistic devices can only be used to transport meanings and concepts if their users have the same basic understanding of these meanings and concepts and the words and linguistic devices attached to them. Language is a system of communication that binds people together.<sup>3</sup> Statements on culture deduced from language can, therefore, claim a certain overall consent among all the speakers of a language.

There is a long linguistic tradition of examining a language with regard to its capacity for expressing cultural phenomena; still, this tradition is not as well-known as, for example, the structuralist approach to language. I will, therefore, in the following, give an overview of the main tenets of those linguists who in their works emphasize the links between language and culture.

## The Relationship between Language and Culture in Linguistic Studies

In order to assess the relationship between language and culture, the linguist George W. Grace, in his book "The Linguistic

Construction of Reality," takes up the tradition of the philosophy of language founded by Wilhelm von Humboldt. Humboldt uses the word *Weltansicht* (Humboldt 1963:20)<sup>4</sup>, a German equivalent of the term *world view*, in his essays and lectures on language as early as 1820 and argues that cultural concepts are acquired and transmitted through the medium of language. Learning a language really means learning a culture and not just a set of arbitrary signs and rules. Such a statement seems to be self-evident but linguists often shy away from linking their studies to aspects of culture, mainly because linguistics is a very systematic science while culture eludes the grip of systematic analysis. Many linguists have long excluded the domain of culture from their studies and tried to treat language as objectively as a natural science.<sup>5</sup>

The tendency to conduct linguistic studies in isolation from the many other areas of human studies that are related to language can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern

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<sup>4</sup> *Weltansicht* is a compound word consisting of two nouns: *Welt* (*world*) and *Ansicht* (*view*). "Weltansicht" is not necessarily the same as "Weltanschauung" which has much stronger philosophical connotations. "Weltanschauung" refers to one's personal convictions and ideologies concerning the state of affairs of the world.

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, attempts to develop theoretical concepts covering the domain of language and culture have developed out of structuralism. The science of semiology understands the whole domain of the humanities as a multitude of interdependent systems of signs and tries to establish common scientific ground for the disparate efforts of linguistic studies and cultural studies.

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<sup>3</sup> Because of this binding quality, language plays an important role in the development of the nation-state



linguistics. Saussure did not deny the complex relationship between language and culture: "Language in its entirety has many different and disparate aspects. It lies astride the boundaries separating various domains. It is at the same time physical, physiological and psychological. It belongs both to the individual and to society." (Lodge 1988:3) But at the same time, Saussure was convinced that "no classification of human phenomena provides any single place for it [language, M.S.], because language as such has no discernible unity." (ibid.) He concluded that only the structure of a language could be scientifically examined. "*The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it.* Indeed, amid so many dualities, linguistic structure seems to be the one thing that is independently definable and provides something our minds can satisfactorily grasp." (ibid.) For Saussure, language as a structured system was "both a self-contained whole and a principle of classification." (Lodge 1988:3-4) He was consequently convinced that "a science which studies linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language, but is *possible only* [my emphasis] if those other elements are kept separate." (Lodge 1988:7-8) With this statement, linguists all over the world have justified their self-contained studies of linguistic structure and discarded the question of how language and culture are interrelated.

The culmination of these self-contained studies of linguistic structure was Noam Chomsky's model of a generative-transformational grammar. Chomsky--at least in the early stage of his linguistic

research--was not interested in sentences as part of a textual or cultural context. He could justify his position with reference to Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langage*, *langue* and *parole*. Chomsky was concerned with *langage*, the universal human phenomenon of language, and *langue*, a particular language system such as English or Thai, but not with *parole*, a particular language *in use*.<sup>6</sup> Chomsky had an overwhelming impact on modern linguistics. "The new grammarians routinely invented their own sample sentences about John and Mary, the ideal, abstract pair whose star-crossed exploits provided the content of linguistic samples for years to come." (Beaugrande, 1985:43)

## The Philosophical Concept of the *World View of Language*

### Introduction and Historical Overview

The success of Saussure's distinction between *language as a structured system* and *language in use* has overshadowed the fact that there has always been a different, albeit not quite as influential approach to the study of languages. Its main assumption is that a language is much more than just a set of arbitrary signs. These signs are carriers of cultural concepts which cannot be communicated in any

<sup>6</sup> For details on Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue*, *langage* and *parole* see Ferdinand de Saussure: "Cours de linguistique generale". Paris, 1915. The English translation by Roy Harris which is quoted by Lodge (1988:1-14), equates *langue* with 'language', *langage* with 'a language' and *parole* with 'speech'.



other way than through the very language they are attached to. More than that, the ordering principles of the grammar underlying these signs have an determining impact on the perception of the world. Hence, a language controls the perception and the conceptualization of the world of its speaker. A separation of *language as a system* and *language in use* is therefore not possible.

This assessment of the general nature of language transcends the borders of structural linguistic studies and aims right at central questions in the fields of philosophy, anthropology and ethnology. It may conveniently be called the *world view of language*. It has also become known as the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*.

The analysis of languages with regard to their inherent world views is a predominantly German tradition. In the first half of the 20th century, the German linguist Leo Weisgerber developed his theory of a linguistic *acquisition* of the world.<sup>7</sup> He referred to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the Prussian statesman, philosopher and founder of the University of Berlin. His philosophy of language can rightly be regarded as the foundation of the *world view of language*

approach in linguistic studies. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), the well-known American proponent of the *world view of language* theory, never mentions Humboldt and claims instead the ancestry of the rather obscure French dramatist and philologist Fabre d'Olivet, (1786-1825). (Whorf 1973:8,74) But Whorf actually did come in contact with Humboldt's ideas through his teacher Edward Sapir (1884-1939), the disciple of Franz Boas (1858-1942) who had brought Humboldt's ideas from Germany to the United States.

Humboldt himself must be seen within a philosophical tradition that begins in the Age of Enlightenment. The French philosopher Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-1780) and the German scholars Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) were his forerunners. (Schlesinger, 1991:7-44)

## Wilhelm von Humboldt

Wilhelm von Humboldt set out to look at languages with the purpose to determine the national characteristics of a people. His essays on language were written between 1820 and 1835, his most important one being *The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*<sup>8</sup> on which he worked from 1830 until his death. Humboldt's efforts have to be understood in the context of the geo-political situation of Germany at his time. Before the

<sup>7</sup> Leo Weissgerber's work has not met with much appreciation because there is the tendency in his writings to use his theory to justify his belief in the superiority of the German language. His books have not been translated into English. Still, the similarity between the title of his book "Die sprachliche Erschliessung der Welt," (Düsseldorf, 1962) approximately translatable as "The Linguistic Acquisition of the World," and the title of George W. Grace's essay "The Linguistic Construction of Reality" is striking.

<sup>8</sup> The title of the German original is "Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts" (Humboldt 1963:368)



foundation of the (second) German Empire in 1871, Germany consisted of a multitude of mostly very small principalities, its largest and most dominant being Prussia. Nevertheless, these politically and geographically separate principalities felt they belonged together on account of their common language. Humboldt was interested in the question of how a language was linked to those characteristics of a culture that would create such a strong feeling of togetherness and the wish to form a political entity. Furthermore, he wanted to find out what the study of language would reveal about these cultural, or, in Humboldtian terms, *national* characteristics. The general understanding of the term 'nation' in Humboldt's time had not yet acquired the fatal meaning of national supremacy. It was simply understood as the political organization of a people with distinctive cultural characteristics.

Humboldt's studies were strictly separated from his political interests and mainly directed at Non-Indo-European languages, such as Basque in Europe, many languages of Asia (for instance Chinese, Japanese, the Malayian Languages, Kavi, Burmese, but, regrettably, not Siamese<sup>9</sup>) and the languages of native Americans. Hence the interest the German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas and his student,

the American anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir, took in Humboldt's studies.

Humboldt's premise is that "language is the formative organ of *thought*. *Intellectual activity*, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes, through *sound*, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. But the former is also intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a union with the verbal sound; thought cannot otherwise achieve clarity, nor the idea become a concept." (Humboldt 1988:54-55)<sup>10</sup> In the light of these convictions, it follows that for Humboldt the differences between the languages are not differences between sounds and signs but differences between world views.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The German original reads "Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ der Gedanken. Die intellektuelle Thätigkeit, durchaus geistig, durchaus innerlich und gewissermassen spurlos vorübergehend, wird durch den Laut in der Rede äusserlich und wahrnehmbar für die Sinne. Sie und die Sprache sind daher Eins und unzertrennlich von einander. Sie ist aber auch in sich an die Nothwendigkeit geknüpft, eine Verbindung mit dem Sprachlaute einzugehen; das Denken kann sonst nicht zur Deutlichkeit gelangen, die Vorstellung nicht zum Begriff werden." (Humboldt 1963: 426)

<sup>11</sup> In his essay *The Comparative Study of Languages with Regard to the Different Stages of Language Development* [M.S.] ("Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung") of 1820, Humboldt writes: "Their [the languages', M.S.] differences are not differences of sounds and signs but differences of their respective world views." ("Ihre [der Sprachen, M.S.] Verschiedenheit ist nicht eine von Schällen

<sup>9</sup> In a footnote, which is not entirely translated in Humboldt, 1988, Humboldt mentions favorably the writings of a certain Low on Siamese (and a certain Burnouf's review of it), but objects that Low says too little about grammar and only gives an unsystematical array of examples. Humboldt gives no reference for Low but mentions that the review of Burnouf had been published in *Nouv. Journ. Asiat.* IV. 210. (Humboldt 1963: footnote 707-8).



Some eminent 19th and 20th century philosophers have held views similar to those of Humboldt. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote that grammatical functions unconsciously rule and guide philosophical thinking.<sup>12</sup> Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) thought that the syntax of Indo-European languages made it "[...] natural to infer that every fact has a corresponding form [...]" (Russell 1956:331) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) brought the whole issue to the point: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." [transl. M.S.]<sup>13</sup>

## Benjamin Lee Whorf

Humboldt's ideas were brought to America by, among others, Franz Boas and Edward Sapir. Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) tried to apply them to the

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und Zeichen, sondern eine Verschiedenheit der Weltansichten selbst." (Humboldt 1963: 20)

<sup>12</sup> "Gerade, wo Sprach/Verwandtschaft [sic] vorliegt, ist es gar nicht zu vermeiden, daß, dank der gemeinsamen Philosophie der Grammatik - ich meine dank der unbewussten Herrschaft und Führung durch gleiche grammatische Funktionen - von vornherein alles für eine gleichartige Entwicklung und Reihenfolge der philosophischen Systeme vorbereitet liegt." (Nietzsche 1976: 30)  
[Especially in the case of the affinity between languages, it is unavoidable that from the beginning everything is prepared for a similar development and succession of philosophical systems - due to the common philosophy of grammar - I mean due to the unconscious rule and guidance through grammatical functions. (my translation)]

<sup>13</sup> "Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt." (Wittgenstein 1978:89)

languages of the Hopi and of other natives of America and his findings soon convinced him that languages create a way of thinking and of perceiving the world. "And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness." (Whorf 1973:252) A person's "thinking itself is in a language-- in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese." (ibid.) It is only logical to conclude that "A change in language can transform our appreciation of the Cosmos." (Whorf 1973:263)

Whorf's principal assumption of the inextricable relationship between language and culture has been conveniently called the *theory of linguistic relativity*, even better known as the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*. It was first developed in 1939 in an article called "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language". (Whorf 1973:134) It is prefaced by a quotation from Edward Sapir that ends with the words: "We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." (ibid.) Later, in his article "Linguistics as an Exact Science," Whorf explains that the linguistic relativity principle means "that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world." (Whorf 1973:221) In other



words, "all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated." (Whorf 1973:214) The consequences of this linguistic relativity principle are far-reaching "for it means that no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free. The person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems. As yet no linguist is in any such position." (ibid.)

It should be noted that Whorf explicitly speaks of *markedly* different grammars. In his opinion, the Western world view is relatively homogenous because of the unanimity of the major patterns of the leading modern European languages. They are, in fact, "Indo-European dialects cut to the same basic plan, being historically transmitted from what was long ago one speech community." (ibid.) Consequently, the dominance of the Western world view has to do with the dominance of languages like Spanish, English, French or German. This explains why Whorf's --like Humboldt's -- linguistic interests were focused on Non-Indo-European languages.

Many factors have contributed to Whorf's fame, among others his brilliant and provocative style of writing. But Whorf's research can only be fully understood against a political background. His writings amount to an attack against the claim of supremacy of the white immigrants who ruled over the native peoples in his country. He stresses the principal equality of all languages ("no language is 'primitive'," Whorf 1973:260) and claims that "by

comparison with many American languages, the formal systematization of ideas in English, German, French, or Italian seems poor and jejune." (Whorf 1973:85). Such a statement, written in 1936, could only be understood as a political provocation.

### George W. Grace: The Linguistic Construction of Reality

Only recently, the American linguist George W. Grace has taken up the earlier philosophical approach towards language and re-examined it from a perspective that owes a lot to one of the most recent philosophical theories, known under the name of "Autopoiesis" or "Radical Construction."<sup>14</sup> This is Grace's position: "The human species--and no other--possesses the one essential tool which makes a social construction of reality possible. That tool is language. Not only is language the means by which this kind of

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<sup>14</sup> According to Schmidt (1987), the theory of "Autopoiesis" or "Radical Construction" has its roots in cybernetics, psychology and biology. Its major proponents are the Chilean scientists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, the Austrian-American psychologist Paul Watzlawick and the German scientists Heinz von Foerster and Ernst von Glaserfeld. Maturana's and Varela's "Autopoiesis and Cognition" (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Boston:Reidel, 1979) is one of the pioneering studies on "Radical Construction". Ernst von Glaserfeld and John Richards wrote the essay "The Control of Perception and the Construction of Reality" (in: *Dialectica*, vol.33, no.1, 1979: 37-58). It is surprising that Grace makes no reference to these authors nor to the theory of "Radical Construction" as a whole, although his thoughts are quite obviously related to this school of thinking.



reality construction is accomplished, it is also the means by which the realities, once constructed, are preserved and transmitted from person to person and from generation to generation. Hence, it is entirely appropriate to refer more specifically to the *linguistic* construction of reality.” (Grace 1987:3) Construction of reality is the fundamental process underlying all acts of linguistic communication. It is the result of man’s naturally limited access to reality. The human eye cannot see the ‘whole picture’. It selects only small parts of it. In a second *screening process*, the brain, which receives information through all the five senses, selects from the multitude of these pieces of information. But even more important than that, the brain gives meaning to this data. In other words, it interprets and thus constructs a model of reality. “These models [...] are reflected in the language we speak.” (ibid.:6) Speaking and thinking depend entirely on the construction of models of reality that are plausible to the participants in a process of communication and are compatible with other experiences of reality. Grace challenges the purely structural approach of today’s mainstream linguistics, calling it the *mapping view of language*. “The basic epistemological assumption of the mapping view might be stated as follows: there is a common world out there and our languages are analogous to maps of this world. Thus, this common world is represented or ‘mapped’ (with greater or less distortion) by all languages.” (ibid.) Since there is only one common world “out there”, the different sets of signs and rules of the different languages are ultimately interchangeable. “[...] there is one key assumption [...] which may be thought of as containing in a nutshell the essence of the entire mapping view of language.

That is the assumption that ‘anything can be said in any language’ [...]. We may refer to this assumption as the *intertranslatability postulate*.” (ibid.:7) This postulate is the consequence of a linguistic concept that regards language purely as a structured system of arbitrary signs. These signs are assumed to exist independently of a culture or a world view -- otherwise they would not be arbitrary. It is this key assumption of structural linguistics that has led to the idea of *machine translation*. The failure of all the enormous projects to construct programs that make machine translation “work” may be regarded as an indication that the intertranslatability postulate may be wrong.

Grace contrasts the *mapping view* with the *reality-construction view* which he, like many others, derives from the assumptions “that no clear boundary in terms of their functions can be drawn between the ‘structure’ of a language and its vocabulary, and therefore that the grammars of different languages are no more functionally equivalent to one another than are the languages as wholes” and “that a language is shaped by its culture, and a culture is given expression in its language, to such an extent that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins, i.e. what belongs to language and what to culture.” (ibid.:10) For Grace, the major fault of today’s linguistic studies is that “our acknowledged science of language” is committed to the mapping view. “In fact, not only does this accepted view of language make it difficult to design and carry out research on the reality-constructing function of language, it makes it difficult even to acknowledge that such reality construction occurs at all.” (ibid.: 4)



It remains to be seen if George W. Grace's theory of a linguistic construction of reality opens a way towards a methodologically acceptable way to relate linguistic and cultural phenomena.

## Language, Cultural Characteristics and World View

World view simply means "the way a man in a particular society sees himself in relation to everything around him." (Pongsapich 1985:1) Clifford Geertz defines a people's world view as "their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society." (Geertz 1973:127) World view is composed of concepts originating from fundamental human needs. The material needs for housing, eating and clothing as well as the spiritual need for explanations of life come together to constitute a people's world view. A world view is a system that relates all these different aspects of life to each other and thus determines the way people perceive the world around them.

Cultural characteristics that become apparent in behavioral patterns, activities, habits or rituals, can be interpreted as symbolic representations of a people's world view. Language can be regarded as the physical shape that is indispensable to make a world view communicable and available. Especially spiritual explanations of the meaning of human existence and activities which are found in mythologies, folk beliefs and religions are communicated by means of language. They are the stabilizing ingredients of a world view

because they establish a system that relates all the different aspects of life to a common central meaning. It is, therefore, only natural that a religion is at the core of a people's world view. It provides a central meaning for all the disparate and seemingly unrelated aspects of life. Religious sets of beliefs and convictions are, therefore, not confined to religious ceremonies. They penetrate many aspects of life. "Religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience--intellectual, emotional, moral--can be given meaningful form." (Geertz 1973:123) Religious concepts transcend the realm of immediate material needs such as food, housing and clothing and provide the framework for rules on ethics and morality, for ideas and ideals and for the explanation of life itself.

Some of these rules and ideas may be adapted according to changing social and economic situations but fundamental religious concepts usually do not change easily. They contain essential religious truths like /bun/ (บุญ) 'merit' and /bab/ (บาป) 'demerit' in Buddhism or *guilt* and *redemption* in Christianity. In short, there is no way of knowing a culture without knowing its religion.

## The Thai World View and Buddhism

Thai children are brought up with the notion that Thai is Buddhism and Buddhism is Thai. (Wongwaisayawan 1987) None of the many ethnological and anthropological studies on Thailand fails to acknowledge the importance of Buddhism



(or, to be more precise, Thai Buddhism) in Thailand. "The history of Thai culture is so dominated by Buddhism that if we take away the Buddhist component, there is little to say about it." (Phodisita 1985:30) Lucien Hanks, in his famous study on "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order," sees the hierarchical world of the Buddhist scriptures as a model for the hierarchical Thai perception of society. "As good Buddhists, the Thai perceive that all living beings stand in a hierarchy of varying ability to make actions effective and of varying degrees of freedom from suffering." (Hanks 1962: 1247) Buddhism has penetrated Thai culture and the Thai world view far beyond religious practice. The Buddhist character of Thai culture is as self-evident as the Christian character of European culture.

The three essential truths taught by Buddhism are probably shared by most Thais and influence their world view. They are the truth of suffering /*khwamthuk*/ (ความทุกข์), the truth of impermanence /*anichang*/ (อนิจจัง) and the truth of non-self /*anatta*/ (อนัตตา). (Sivalaksa 1994: 326-327) In addition to these three essential truths, Chai Phodisita (1985) distinguishes five "worlds" in the life of the average Thai that reflect Buddhist values and concepts. They are the world of hierarchy, the world of merit /*bun*/ (บุญ) and demerit /*bab*/ (บาป), the world of /*bun khun*/ (บุญคุณ), the world of cool heart /*chai yen*/ (ใจเย็น) and the world of individualism. It is not difficult to find reflections of the three essential truths or the five "worlds" of everyday attitudes in the Thai language.

## **The Thai Language and the Thai World View**

Thai language is saturated with Buddhist terms and concepts. The terminology for every aspect of the metaphysical realm, including moral values, ethical conduct, ideals, virtues and the driving spiritual force of life, is a Buddhist terminology or, to be more precise, a religious terminology which is dominated by Buddhism but also contains elements of Hinduism, animism and folkloristic mythologies. Such concepts are inherent in the present-day Thai language, preserved and handed down from generation to generation. Just how tightly enshrined these concepts are in their linguistic form becomes clear in the process of translating them from Thai into another language. The translation of the word /*wat*/ วัด 'temple' into a Western language without any additional explanation is difficult, if not impossible, because of the cultural concept behind the word /*wat*/ วัด. Since this concept is enshrined in the language, it cannot be translated by simply using one word for another. Western languages with their Christian perspective have no concept of the Buddhist temple and consequently they do not have a corresponding word for it. The word *temple* which is usually used to translate /*wat*/ วัด is always attached to the concept of the ancient pre-Christian places of worship. It goes without saying that it is equally difficult to translate Christian terms like "bishop", "archbishop" or "diocese" into Thai without further explanation.

But religious concepts do not only underlie such "technical" terms. Many metaphors and expressions of everyday language refer to religious concepts. How can a Thai understand words like /*siin*/ ศีล 'moral' or /*weenkam*/ เวรกรรม 'bad karmic results' or an expression like /*deun thaang saay*



klaang/ เดินทางสายกลาง 'to walk the middle path' if not according to Buddhist concepts? The Thai word /chaat/ ชาติ for instance, mostly known in its meaning as *nation*, is derived from the Pali word *carita*, meaning *what one is by birth or nature*<sup>15</sup> --nationality being one of the things one is born with. The originally broad meaning of /chaat/ ชาติ is reflected in the male first name /chaatchai/ ชาติชาย (literally: *born as a man* or *being a man*) or in expressions like /chaat koon/ ชาติก่อน 'previous life'. /chaat/ ชาติ is a term opposite to /chetana/ เจตนา 'volition' (*what one is by one's own will as opposed to what one is by nature*<sup>16</sup>). These Buddhist concepts are inherent in these words and they are understood correctly even by Thai Muslims and Christian Thais in exactly this Buddhist sense. They will know the concept from their Buddhist friends, from school and from the mass media. It is, therefore, not only safe to assume that the concepts carried by Thai words are very often Buddhist concepts but also that these concepts are shared even by those Thais who do not practice Buddhism themselves.

### Examples of Some Features of Thai Narrative Texts and Their Relation to the Thai World View

In my thesis (Schalbruch 1997), I examined the linguistic marking and representation in the Thai language of four essential components of the perception of reality: *time, causality, characterization of people and places and space* and tried to

find out how they can be related to certain aspects of the world view of the Thai people. Whether this--in a Whorfian sense --amounts to a provisional analysis of the reality that is conditioned by the linguistic material remains to be seen. But the differences found between the Thai language and Thai culture, on the one hand, compared to Western languages and cultures, on the other hand, should serve as examples of the many possible ways of looking at and interpreting the world.

In the following chapters, two examples of the relationship between linguistic features and cultural characteristics will be given and explained. The first refers to the prominence of verbs and the absence of adjectives in Thai narrative texts while the second deals with the hierarchical structure of Thai terms of address.

### The Prominence of Verbs and Characterization Through Action and Behavior

According to the karmic world view, a person's position in life and his fortunes and misfortunes largely depend on his actions. A person is who he is because of what he has *done* and he will be able to exert a certain influence on his present or his future life by what he is doing. "Ultimately life is conditioned by the law of Karma [...]" (Mulder,1990:35) For the contemporary Thai, it is common knowledge "that to do good will improve one's karmic position and that to do evil worsens it." (ibid:34) In accordance with the literal meaning of the word /kam/ (better known as *Karma*) กรรม 'action', Nyanatiloka,1972:77) deeds are the crucial factor to determine one's position and fortunes in life. It is, therefore, perfectly

<sup>15</sup> see Nyanatiloka :1972, p. 38

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 39



plausible to characterize, evaluate and judge someone by what he does. A person reveals his true character in his deeds and his behavior.

The Thai language seems to reflect this attitude through the prominence of verbs and the absence of adjectives. Qualifying words are never used in pre-modifying position so that verbal expressions dominate the narrative discourse. In Western languages, characterization is done rather by the use of adjectives than by the use of verbs. Adjectives are employed to describe and characterize, for instance, emotions and the physical appearance of people or natural scenery.

The importance of one's deeds may also be held responsible for the often ritual use of spoken Thai language. Since the true personality reveals itself in what one does and not in what one says, words are to a large extent *downgraded* to an exchange of formalities. They are needed to convey politeness, show respect, to protect oneself from shame and embarrassment and to avoid conflict. They belong to the world of outward appearance like clothing and manners. As any Thai television soap opera will prove, the principle of saving face and the fear of rejection are stronger impulses than the impulse to reveal one's thoughts and emotions in spoken words. Revealing one's true character is not so much a matter of language but of action. Deeds will speak for themselves and do not have to be announced, commented upon, analyzed and evaluated. To brag about one's good deeds is in bad taste and to reveal one's mistakes is unskillful and useless.

One of the functions of the ritual use of spoken language is to counter the effects of wrongdoings. Saving face, apologizing, finding excuses, avoiding confrontation are all important speech acts of the Thai language. This may result in what is sometimes misunderstood as a discrepancy between one's true feelings and attitudes and one's words. Thais do not regard language as a means to confess and "talk it all out" but as a means to uphold social harmony and one's personal standing. When it comes to promises however, spoken language becomes devoid of its ritual character. Promises are a commitment to deeds and one has to be extremely careful in what one says because it has to be honored by one's actions sooner or later.

The use of language as a predominantly ritual means of communication may occasionally lead to the wrong assumption that one does not need to take one's own words too seriously. Discrepancy between words and deeds is quite common but ultimately one's social standing and reputation is eroded by words that are not honored and promises that remain unkept. Politicians serve as a good example of how people are looked down on upon who try to fool others by words. Some people acquire quite a reputation for their masterly use of words and their skillful avoidance to commit themselves but ultimately they are judged by what they do and not by what they say. In any case, it is prudent and advisable not to commit oneself too much by words.



## Terms of Address and Characterization Through Position in the Hierarchy

The hierarchical character of Thai society has often been pointed out by scholars of Thai Studies. "The primary direction of integration among people appears to be vertical." (Mulder 1990:108) A look at the Thai language shows that it is impossible to perceive and describe the world as non-hierarchical in Thai. The hierarchical character of the Thai language becomes evident in the terms of address. These terms are chosen according to the position in which the speaker sees himself in relation to the addressee. Equality or symmetrical relationships do exist but they are rare compared to hierarchical relationships. Equality is expressed by the reciprocal use of the first name only. It always denotes a lack of distance which carries both a negative and a positive aspect. The negative aspect is the absence of formal respect, the positive aspect is a high degree of intimacy as in close friendships or partnerships. Lack of formal respect and presence of intimacy as denoted by the use of the first name only also applies to the relationship between parents and children or boss and employee but in these cases first names cannot be used reciprocally. Children never call their parents by their first name.

The hierarchical differences between husband and wife, however, are decreasing in modern Thai society. More and more couples regard themselves as equal partners and address each other by first names only. (Tingsabath & Prasithrathsint 1989:142) This development may be indicative of a slow process towards the

equality of women in urban middle-class society.

## Conclusion

By studying a language with regard to aspects of the culture and the world view it communicates, valuable insight can be gained into the fundamental patterns, the development and the changes in the culture and the world view of a people. After all, language is man's tool to conceptualize the world and construct models of reality. It is the prerequisite for all of his intellectual activities. There is, as many fairy-tales and legends tell us, no way of knowing something without naming it. "Only what has a name can be shared. Communicable perception has to be coded in language. [...] These perceptions, fixed in language, become a kind of second nature." (Hodge & Kress 1993:5) An examination of language may, therefore, help to understand man's *second nature* better.

Cultural characteristics, world view and language change. But it is one of the important functions of language that it conserves those aspects of a world view that will be regarded as essential and distinctive.

The question of the nature of the relationship between language and culture is, therefore, not just a matter of academic interest. It has, among others, political implications that can easily be shown with regard to the role of the English language in today's world. The assumption of structural linguistics that a language consists of a set of arbitrary signs seems to be proven right by the successful establishment of English as the language of international communication. The keyword



here is *arbitrary*. If a language is nothing more than a set of arbitrary signs, it follows--as Grace (1987) has pointed out--that everything that can be said in one language can also be said in any other language. Thus, it can certainly be said in English. According to a philosophy of language based on Humboldt that cannot be true. Humboldt and the later proponents of a *world view of language* concept do not understand language as an arbitrary set of signs but as a manifestation of culture that serves as a means to communicate and conserve the essence of a culture. Every language and every culture, according to this approach, is deserving equal attention and respect. This philosophical understanding of language implies an attitude detrimental to the idea of a world language because a dominant world language means a dominant world culture. It leads to a deterioration of indigenous cultures. Phenomena like *globalization* and *information highway* are, for the same reason, viewed with great suspicion.

Benjamin Lee Whorf, one of the most prominent proponents of the *world view of language* approach, was aware of the political dimension of his theory. The following statement is an appeal for cultural and linguistic diversity and a warning against the domination of different cultures and languages by just one culture and its language: "I believe that those who envision a future world speaking only one tongue, [...], hold a misguided ideal and would do the evolution of the human mind the greatest disservice. Western culture has made, through language, a provisional analysis of reality and, without correctives, holds resolutely to that analysis as final. The only correctives lie in all those other tongues which by

aeons of independent evolution have arrived at different, but equally logical, provisional analyses." (Whorf 1973:244)

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