THAI WRITTEN DISCOURSE: A CHANGE TOWARD A MORE AUTONOMOUS STYLE?

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In his convincing article, "Language Evolution and Speech Style" (1985), Paul Kay advanced two hypotheses.

The first is that languages evolve in the direction of autonomous, context-free systems as symbols. The second hypothesis concerns the proposed evolutionary mechanism, which is adaptation to an increasingly complex and diversified speech community whose members collectively control a body of knowledge beyond that which any one speaker can control.

What is meant by "autonomous style of language" is that the language packs all the information needed for communication into the linguistic channel and leaves very little for the receiver of the message to interpret on his own. That is, factors like background information, gestures, and the like have very little role in this type of language. It is supposed to be the more precise and logically explicit style of language. It can convey the message of the sender without reliance upon tone of voice, facial expression, and requires no prior understanding between the sender and receiver of the message. It is suited to the communication of exact, emotionally neutral information to an unfamiliar audience.

For Thai, I suggest below that one vital mechanism of change is borrowing. This is in accordance with Thai society which has actively imported technologies and cultural aspects from the West. Through borrowing, the Thai vocabulary has enlarged enormously while new grammatical constructions have also been added to the language. This has enabled Thai speakers to make fine lexical distinctions and different expressions and relations that would not be expressed without borrowed elements or the donor language’s influence. However, the change is not acquired by all speakers in the same society. Only those who have been exposed to the influence of western languages have access to such a change, in the same manner that only some members of Thai society get to live in an "elaborated" style of life, i.e., the western style. To be more specific, the change is found only in the written language of educated members of Thai society. It is new and unique to the group. It is not totally understood by members of other groups. The "elaborated group", however, uses the more "restricted" style in their language as well.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first is an attempt to illustrate that present day Thai written by academicians, especially those educated in the West, has characteristics of the more autonomous style as characterized by Kay (1985) when compared to other written discourse, both older and contemporary. The second part involves the mechanism of change toward a more autonomous style, identified as translation and analogy.
THE MORE AUTONOMOUS DISCOURSE

In the discussion below, I shall attempt to identify five important characteristics of the more autonomous style of language. They are the uses of new and technical words, passive voice, embedded prepositionals, [kaan] and [kwam], and [dooy] constructions.

In academic circles, Thai people recognize at least two styles of writing. One is easier to follow because it is written in the way it would be spoken. The other is difficult, for some people, to follow and has a "butter smell", i.e. the western style. The typical comment one hears about the latter is, "I have to translate this into English first before I can understand it". The comment also implies that such language possesses some characteristics of the English language and that one has to have some knowledge of English to understand it. Also, there is a noticeable difference between the written and the spoken language. Those who do not know English find such writing more difficult to understand because of its different vocabulary and structures. However, this kind of language is widely used in Thai society by educated Thais, especially those educated in the West. It is the language that is used to write texts in all new fields and professional journals. It is the language that has the most influence upon students, especially those at the university level. It is also the language used by the mass media when presenting translated international news. And it is this type of language that has the more autonomous style, henceforth this will be called "the more autonomous style".

The more autonomous style of language, as mentioned earlier, in present day Thai society is used mostly in academic circles in all fields. This statement, however, is not meant to make a claim that all academicians use only this type of language in their writing. The following excerpt from a university textbook on Human Relations, might serve as a good start to look at this type of language.

1 khwaam têek-tâˆn rá?-wâng pâw-prasông khâông bük-khon lé? khâông
difference between goals of individual and of
?on-kaan máy cam-pen wêa cău-tông pen sinh máy phần praat-tha-nâu
organization not necessary that must be thing not wanted

Differences between individual and organizational goals need not be unwanted.

2 ?ee-kêt-tâ?-bük-khon phât-tha-naa dooy phân kaan-pha-cheen
an individual develop by past facing
pan-tâa lé? kaan-thâa-thaay tân-tân
problems and challenges various

An individual develops by facing various problems and challenges.

3 dâñ-nân khwaam-têek-tâˆn sâa-mâat kôc hây kêt khâam-sâo-sân
therefore difference can create creativity
mîi sük-kha-phêap thân-cît-ta-wît-tha-yaa lé? thaap-sân-khôm
health psychology and social

Therefore the difference can create creativity, psychological and social health.
Reasonable differences and reaction to the differences in a constructive way bring forth individual and organizational benefits.

Sometimes ideas about the conflict between individuals and organization are interpreted in term of reference and arguments in order to support organizational termination.

Such interpretation is not the right thing.
Both Whyte and Argyris did not propose or support people going back and living in the manner of ancient civilization without any organization.

Existing conflicts should be looked upon as the challenge of problems which need better solutions, for the benefit of individuals with the help of the organization.

(From Human Relations by Assistant Professor Yothin Sansanayut, 1982, page 20.)

The language used in writing the above passage is typical of the more autonomous style in many ways. In term of vocabulary, this type of language often carries new and technical words, many of which would not be normally used in everyday language. This is also true with many expressions. Words like “psychological health” or “social health” are not used by Thais who have not been influenced by western language or thought. For them society and psychology are not something that can have health. “The challenge of the problem” is another example of “a butter smell” expression. For the more restricted Thai, problems can only be big or small but they never challenge. In sum, for vocabulary and expression, the more autonomous language has more words, both abstract and concrete, to make finer lexical distinctions to express ideas that have never occurred in the mind of the Thai speakers before and also to discuss new knowledge that has been imported from the west.

In the domain of syntax, various foreign constructions are frequently used. Only four new syntactic usages which give the more autonomous style “a butter smell” will be discussed in this paper. The first, the use of passive voice, is still a controversial issue in language use for many language teachers. It is now in use in this type of language. And it is used in the same way that it is used in English, i.e. the subject of the passive voice sentence can be inanimate as seen twice in the excerpt above, in sentences 5 and 8. Though some people still frown at the use of this type of sentence, its use is increasing steadily. It is used frequently in the writing of modern law. (See Janthanakorn 1988.) In fact, it is now used in speech as well. One often hears it in interviews on the radio. It is also used on television when foreign news is presented.

The second newly acquired syntactic construction is the prepositional phrase. In the more autonomous style of language sentences are often found to begin with a prepositional phrase such as the following:

\[
\text{nay kaan-\text{\text{wi}}?-khr\text{\text{g}}?\ pan-h\text{\text{\&a}}} \text{n}\text{\text{i}} \ \text{raw cam-pen} \ \text{\ldots}
\]

\[
\text{in analyzing problem this we necessary}
\]

In analyzing this problem, we ....