TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF A THAI POEM

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In approaching any new text, written or oral, in English or in a foreign language, we are confronted with a whole new series of relations to clarify before we can understand and appreciate that text. In a text, a primary consideration is the structure and how that structure highlights the thematic content. A second area of importance includes cultural references, values, and metaphors. These references and values, often referred to as prior texts, derive from themes and ideas important to the culture. For a native speaker, these references are generally clear and interpretation easy, although footnotes often become necessary to explicate older texts. For a foreign speaker, on the other hand, interpretation, if not understanding, may be jeopardized because of these same references. A third area of consideration is the relation between the creator of the text and the text itself. Within this area, the propositional content of the text and the presentation of that content are examined. A final relation is the one between the text and nonliterary events. More specifically, a clarification of this relation illustrates the references the text provides for the outside world.

The intent of this paper is to analyze a Thai poem and through this analysis learn to understand and appreciate it. The analysis will examine the following relations in the poem: (1) the relation of the textural units to each other within the text, for these units establish hierarchy and coherence in the work; (2) the relation of the textural units to other themes and ideas (prior texts) in the culture, for part of the text is derived from all previous themes in the culture; (3) the relation of the units of the text to the intention of the speaker; and (4) the relation of the text to nonliterary events (Becker 1979:212, 216).

Taken from the third or fourth reign of the Chakri dynasty (1824-68), the poem is an example of verbal repartee typical of the era:

1.	câw	chɔ̂ɔ		makɔ̀ɔk
	you	classifier, cluster		a type of fruit
2.	câw	dɔ̀ɔk		mafay
	you	classifier, flower		a type of flower
3.	câw	hěn	khǎw.	ŋaam
	you	see	he	beautiful
4.	câw	taam	khǎw	pay
	you	follow	he	go
5.	khǎw	tham	câw	yáp
	he	make	you	ruin
6.	câw	klàp	maa	yay
	you	return	come	question word, why
7.	khǎw	sîn		ʔaalay
	he	end, terminate		long for, think about
8.	câw	lɛ́ɛw	rɰ̌ɰ	ʔəəy
	you	already	question word	particle

You flirtatious flower!
You saw his beauty and pursued him.
Then he ruined you.
Why do you return?
He has exhausted your desire, hasn't he?

The Relation of the Textural Units To Each Other

The structural arrangement of the poem, the relation of the textural units to each other within the text, can be examined on at least three different levels: (1) the basic components of the poem, which include the *wák*, the *bàat*, the *bòt*, and the external rhyme; (2) the syntactic units within the *wák* and the *bàat*; and (3) the internal patterns among the syntactic units. Linked to one another, all of these structural levels produce a meaningful and aesthetically pleasing work.

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The basic arrangement of the poem is eight lines (*wâk*), with four syllables or monosyllabic words (*kham*) per *wâk*. Two *wâk* equal one *bàat*, and four *bàat* comprise one *bòt* or stanza. The external rhyme pattern, the rhyme between *bàat*, or between *wâk*, is also a part of the basic arrangement. In the following schematic representation, each circle represents one *kham*, each number-line one *wâk*, and each lettered group of lines one *bàat*. The solid line connecting the *kham* represents the external rhyme pattern. To save space, Thai books are generally printed with two *wâk* per printed line. This convention has been abandoned in figure 1 so that the basic structural arrangement can be seen more clearly.

FIGURE 1
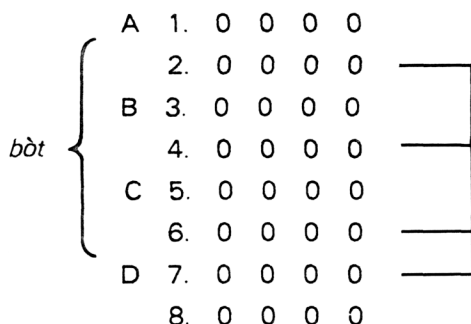
In most forms of Thai poetry, the number of *kham* per *wâk*, the number of *wâk* per *bàat*, the number of *bàat* per *bòt*, and the external rhyme pattern are specified in versification textbooks known as *chǎnthálák*. Generally these prescriptions are strictly followed, although the number of *bòt* is determined by each poet individually.

Examining the syntactic units in the poem in terms of the structural units described in the preceding paragraph provides further divisions.

1. câw   chɔ̂ɔ   makɔ̀ɔk
   you   classifier   a type of fruit
   Head   Classifier   Modifier

2. câw   dɔ̀ɔk   mafay
   you   classifier   a type of flower
   Head   Classifier   Modifier

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Wâk 1 and *wâk* 2 are structurally parallel because each *wâk* has four *kham*. These two *wâk* are further unified through parallel syntactic units. Both *wâk* consist of a vocative frame with the arrangement Head—Classifier—Modifier.

Repetition of lexical items and rhyme patterns adds still other forms of structural cohesion between the *wâk*. The second—person pronoun, *câw*, is repeated in the first *kham* position of both *wâk*, as is the syllable *ma—* in the third *kham* position. External rhyme, a requirement for all forms of Thai poetry, appears as the rhyme between *wâk*. In this case, the rhyming syllables are the fourth *kham* position in the first *wâk* and the second *kham* position in the second *wâk*, *kɔ̌ɔk* and *dɔ̌ɔk*, respectively. Identical tones on the rhyming syllables add another dimension to the rhyme.

All of these aspects of structural cohesion bind the two *wâk* aurally into a single tight unit of sound. This unit, moreover, emphasizes the semantic content of the two *wâk*, a vocative that succinctly describes the addressee. Because of the structural similarities and the semantic content, *wâk* 1 and *wâk* 2 form a subset within the poem.

Wâk 3 and wâk 4 comprise a second subset, unified by the same forms of structural cohesion found in *wâk* 1 and *wâk* 2:

3. | câw | hěn | khǎw | ŋaam |
|---|---|---|---|
| you | see | he | beautiful |
| Action Initiator | Action Word | Action Recipient | |

4. | câw | taam | khǎw | pay |
|---|---|---|---|
| you | follow | he | go |
| Action Initiator | Action Word | Action Recipient | |

Both *wâk* contain four *kham* and consist of the same syntactic arrangement: Action Initiator—Action Word—Action Recipient. As in the first subset, lexical repetition and rhyme patterns provide unity through sound. *Câw* is repeated in the first *kham* position and *khǎw* in the third. The same external rhyme pattern that appears in the first subset, the fourth *kham* position in the first *wâk* with the second in the second *wâk*, occurs in this second subset. Again, the two rhyming syllables, *ŋaam* and *taam*, have the same tone. These repetitions and rhymes, combined with the different syntactic patterns, create a second subset that is aurally distinct from the first. Thematically, this subset is also distinct, describing the actions of the addressee.

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The first and second subset are also unified through structural and thematic similarities. Structurally, the two subsets have the same number of *kham* per *wâk*, the same rhyme patterns between *wâk*, and the repetition of the same initial lexical item, *câw*, in each of the four *wâk*. The final structural linkage between the two subsets is the external rhyme between the final *kham* of each *bàat*:

A	1.	câw	chôɔ	makɔ̀ɔk	
	2.	câw	dɔ̀ɔk	mafay	⌐
B	3.	câw	hěn	khǎw	ŋaam
	4.	câw	taam	khǎw	pay ⌐

Thematically, the two subsets describe the addressee and the addressee's actions.

Wâk 5 forms the third subset of the poem:

5.	khǎw	tham	câw	yáp
	he	make	you	ruin
	Action Initiator	Action Word	Action Recipient	Action Word continued

In *wâk* 5, *câw*, the lexical item that fills the initial *kham* position in *wâk* 1–4, is shifted to the third *kham* position while *khǎw* is moved to the first. This lexical shift, accompanied by the corresponding tone changes, marks the *wâk* aurally as a very different subset, even though the syntactic units and the number of *kham* per *wâk* remain the same as those in *wâk* 3 and *wâk* 4. Thematically, *wâk* 5 describes the results of the addressee's actions.

Although *wâk* 5 is aurally distinct from *wâk* 1–4, it can be linked with the preceding two subsets both structurally and thematically. First, all three subsets have the same number of *kham*, the most general characteristic. Second, *wâk* 5 has the same syntactic units as *wâk* 3 and *wâk* 4. (*Wâk* 3 and *wâk* 4 are linked to *wâk* 1 and *wâk* 2 through the repetition of the same initial lexical item.) Finally, *wâk* 5 is the thematic climax: *wâk* 1–2 introduces the addressee, *wâk* 3–4 relates the addressee's actions, and *wâk* 5 describes the result of those actions. Thus, the three subsets form a single structural and thematic set.

Wâk 6, *wâk* 7, and *wâk* 8 complete the fourth and final subset in the poem:

6. câw · · · · · klàp · · · · · maa · · · · · yay
   you · · · · · return · · · · come · · · · why
   Action Initiator · Action Word · · · · · · Question Word

7. khǎw · · · · · sîn · · · · · ʔaalay
   he · · · · · · · end · · · · · long for
   Action Initiator · Action Word · Action Recipient

8. câw · · · lɛ́ɛw · · · rʉ̆ʉ · · · · · ʔəəy
   you · · · already · · Question Word · · Particle

The structural unity of this subset results primarily from the syntactic structure for questions: Action Initiator–Action Word–(Action Recipient)–Question Word. There are two questions in this subset: *wâk* 6, and *wâk* 7 with *wâk* 8 read together. Other structural unifiers include the four *kham* per *wâk* and the external rhyme between *yay* and *ʔaalay*. Because both of the questions deal with the addressee's actions, they form a comment that completes the theme of the poem. With separate structural and thematic characteristics, the final three *wâk* are a second set.

The first and second set unite to form the poem. Structurally, the two sets are linked in three different ways: (1) the four *kham* in each *wâk*; (2) the rhyme pattern between *wâk* 5 and *wâk* 6, *yàp* and *klàp*; and (3) the external rhyme pattern between the final *kham*. Thematically, set one describes the action and its result, while set two comments upon that action and result (see figure 2).

Structurally, the poem is a set of hierarchies. The minimal units required for a poem, the *khánáʔ*, form the lowest level of the hierarchy. These units include the number of *kham* per *wâk*, the number of *wâk* per *bàat*, the number of *bàat* per *bòt*, and the external rhyme pattern. All of these units are predetermined. The external rhyme patterns between *wâk* may also be predetermined, although the poet may or may not choose to use these patterns. The second hierarchical level results from the organization of the minimal units into parallel syntactic structures that also provide meaning in the poem. Based upon structural and thematic similarities, these syntactic structures are combined into a third level, the subsets. The

FIGURE 2

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        0      0     0  0
 1.    câw    chɔ̂ɔ  makɔ̂ɔk

        0      0     0  0
 2.    câw    dɔ̂ɔk  mafay

        0      0     0      0
 3.    câw    hěn   khǎw   ŋaam

        0      0     0      0
 4.    câw    taam  khǎw   pay

        0      0     0      0
 5.    khǎw   tham  câw    yáp

        0      0     0      0
 6.    câw    klàp  maa    yay

        0      0     0  0
 7.    khǎw   sîn   ʔaalay

        0      0     0      0
 8.    câw    lɛ́ɛw  rɤ̌ɤ   ʔəəy
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arrangement of the subsets into the two sets completes the fourth level. The final level of hierarchy is the poem itself, a combination of the two sets.

The Relation of the Textural Units to Prior Texts

As we discussed in the preceding section, the poem can be divided into three, distinct, syntactic units: (1) Head–Classifier–Modifier (*wâk* 1 and *wâk* 2); (2) Action Initiator–Action Word–Action Recipient (*wâk* 3, *wâk* 4, and *wâk* 5); and (3) Action Initiator–Action Word–Action Recipient–Question Word (*wâk* 6, *wâk* 7, and *wâk* 8). Examining the poem in terms of prior texts, we find that a different prior text can be associated with each of these syntactic units. In the use of these texts, the poet has assumed that the addressee will understand the themes and their implications.

Delineated in the first two *wâk*, the first prior text describes the addressee in the Head–Classifier–Modifier arrangement:

1. câw   chŝɔ   makɔ̀ɔk

2. câw   dɔ̀ɔk   mafay

With this initial fruit–and–flower reference, the poet is either flirting with the addressee or calling the addressee a flirt. The connotation of some aspect of flirting is suggested by the particular fruit and flower referred to in the expression. The fruit, a *makɔ̀ɔk*, is exceptionally sour and has the taste of a very bad mango. Similar suggestions of sourness derive from the reference to the *mafay* flower which blooms on a tree along with sour fruit. Used only when addressing a woman, these references to sourness imply that the woman is a flirt; moreover, there is the implication that through flirting the woman has violated the traditional role of a Thai woman. In other words, the woman has not remained quiet, delicate, unassuming, and passive. Whether the poet is flirting or accusing the woman of flirting becomes clear only with the second prior text in *wâk* 3–5.

The second prior text, which can be referred to as the Pursuit of the Lover text, further explicates the violation of the woman's traditional role:

3. câw   hěn   khǎw   ŋaam

4. câw   taam   khǎw   pay

5. khǎw   tham   câw   yáp

In this text, the man traditionally pursues the woman and may or may not be rejected. In the poem, however, the poet reverses the roles to conform with the woman's actions. The woman sees the man in *wâk* 3 and pursues him in *wâk* 4, the violation of the traditional role. Emphasizing this theme is the change in syntax. Rather than the static modification, as in *wâk* 1 and *wâk* 2, there is an Action Initiator followed by an Action Word. *Wâk* 5 completes the text, the acceptance or rejection of the pursuer. In this case the woman is rejected and abandoned after the man ruins her, *tham . . . yáp*. Again, the syntax emphasizes the theme. Through the description of the woman's actions, the poet clarifies that he is calling the woman a flirt, at the very least.

Toward an Understanding of a Thai Poem

Violation of any code of conduct demands a punishment, or at least a reprimand, both of which frequently include questions that chide or scold the guilty person. Because these questions rarely vary in form, usually inquiring why the person is returning or why the person violated the code in the first place, the guilty person immediately recognizes the intent of the questions. The intent, of course, is to reprimand and not necessarily to receive an answer. These questions form the third prior text, the chiding text. *Wâk* 6–8 complete the poem with this text in the form of actual questions (Action Initiator–Action Word–Action Recipient–Question Word):

6.   câw   klàp   maa   yay

7.   khǎw   sîn   ʔaalay

8.   câw   lɛ́ɛw   rɯ̌ɯ   ʔəəy

The Relation Between the Text and the Poet

The relation between the text and the poet determines the intended speech act. As a speech act the text represents a reprimand in poetic form. Typically, a reprimand may consist of the following sections: an accusation that some violation has occurred, a recounting or clarification of the violation; a scolding; and a punishment. For a reprimand to be effective, the speaker must establish himself in a superior role, a role that implies that the speaker has both the power and the right to reprimand. In some way the addressee usually acknowledges this power and right.

Wâk 1 and *wâk* 2, the vocative, form the first part of the speech act, the accusation, although the woman is as yet unsure of the implications of the references. In this section, the poet claims his superiority by addressing the woman with *câw*, the second–person singular pronoun used with subordinates and/or intimates. With the fruit–and–flower reference, the poet also assumes for some reason that he has the right to flirt or to call the woman a flirt.

In *wâk* 3–5, the poet clarifies his statements by recounting, in very direct terms, the violation committed by the woman. At this point, the fruit–and–flower reference becomes an accusation and not an invitation to flirt. If the poet had intended to flirt, the speech act would have consisted of a different set of sections, sections that

signal a very different speech act. Once the woman is assured that the speech act will be one of reprimand, she also knows that the poet has assumed the role of protector and preserver of a code of conduct. By recounting the woman's actions, the poet also attempts to convince her of the fact that she has violated a code. *Wâk* 5 completes the clarification section, telling the woman that she has gained only ruin by breaking the code.

The scolding section of the speech act, in the form of chiding questions in *wâk* 6–8, is the clearest section because it consists of the formulaic questions associated with a reprimand. In this case, the poet asks the woman why she has returned now that she has been rejected. By reprimanding the woman, the poet not only claims his superior role but also assumes that the woman has realized her error and has returned to him to be reprimanded or to be reinstated in her traditional woman's role. Whether or not these assumptions are valid is never clarified, for no record of the woman's reply exists. With no punishment section added, the chiding questions complete the reprimand.

The poet ends his reprimand and speech act with the final particle, ʔəəy, which is generally used at the end of an utterance to suggest endearment, intimacy, or affection. If the particle is used in this manner, then the reprimand is softened and the harshness of the clarification section tempered. The lack of a punishment section also seems to indicate that the reprimand is not particularly stern. On the other hand, the structure of this poem is a variation of the structure of a number of popular poems known as *phleeŋ*. As a structural requirement, these poems end a stanza with the particle ʔəəy. If the poet is merely fulfilling the structural requirements of the poem, there is no tempering of the reprimand. Since there is nothing further in the text to clarify the use of the particle, the poem remains an ambiguous speech act which the addressee is unable to interpret accurately.

Presenting the speech act in poetic form is also ambiguous. Addressing a poem to someone may suggest intimacy and understanding with that person. If so, the harshness and directness of the propositional content of the reprimand can be reduced and softened simply because of the form the reprimand takes. The ambiguity arises when the use of poetry as a means of satire and criticism is recognized. The poetic form, with its emphasis on brevity and correct choice of words, may be used specifically to make the

reprimand more direct. Because of these conflicting uses of the poetic form, the force of the reprimand is further clouded.

The Relation of the Text to Nonliterary Events

To the Thais, the ability to speak euphoniously, *phûut phayrɔ́ʔ*, has always been a highly valued social skill (Mosel 1961:3). The production of this melodious speech requires two general components: (1) the use of the appropriate word for the appropriate theme and situation: and (2) the appropriate arrangement of words so that the ear is not jarred. Presenting the reprimand in poetic form fulfills both requirements, for the prior texts succinctly explicate the theme and situation in an arrangement that cleverly employs syllable number, repetition, and rhyme. This poetic reprimand, then, represents an aesthetic model, one that demonstrates the aesthetics of sound so valued by both the intelligentsia and the common man.
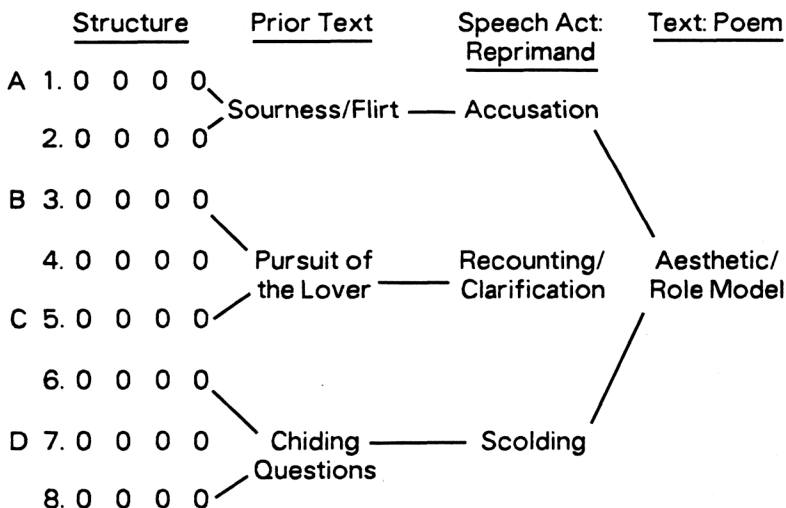
Besides serving as a model of clever repartee, the poem also may be read as a comment upon the proper roles of men and women in traditional society, particularly if the reader understands the historical context of the poem's composition. Seni Pramoj relates that the king composed this poem for the woman poet, Khun Phum, upon her return to the palace after an illicit love affair (Pramoj 1973:40). The fact that it is the king who reprimands the woman for violating the code of decorum strengthens the traditional concept of what a woman's role should be in traditional society. Through simple extension, readers may apply these same values, whether applicable or not, to modern society.

Conclusion

The understanding and appreciation of a text depend upon the interpretation of structural, cultural, intentional, and referential relations, for each relation adds information and meaning to the others as well as to the text as a whole. The text under discussion is an example of a tightly constructed unit that serves both as an aesthetic model and as a model of traditional roles. Unity results from the alignment of sections of a typical speech act with the

constrained sections of a poem and from the explication of those sections with themes from the culture. Figure 3 clearly exhibits these alignments.

FIGURE 3

Structure	Prior Text	Speech Act: Reprimand	Text: Poem

A 1. 0 0 0 0
               Sourness/Flirt —— Accusation
   2. 0 0 0 0

B 3. 0 0 0 0
   4. 0 0 0 0 Pursuit of   Recounting/   Aesthetic/
             the Lover —— Clarification   Role Model
C 5. 0 0 0 0

   6. 0 0 0 0
D 7. 0 0 0 0 Chiding —— Scolding
             Questions
   8. 0 0 0 0

The understanding of a text also depends upon how close in time and culture the addressee/reader is to that text. Thus, all the implications of the reprimand are readily apparent to Khun Phum, and their impact is heightened by the poetic structure with its repetition and rhyme. It seems reasonable to assume that any member of the court, aware of Khun Phum's activities, also understands. For an educated Thai, the implication of the fruit-and-flower reference and the propositional content of the reprimand are clear enough. What may not be apparent for the modern Thai is the historical context of the poem.

The more distant in time and culture the addressee/reader is, the more difficult the text becomes. For the foreign reader, nearly all aspects of the poem, with the possible exception of the propositional content of the reprimand, need explanation. The idiomatic expression in the first two *wâk*, the fruit-and-flower reference,

aptly demonstrates the difficulties. A simple translation of the name of the fruit and flower, the hog plum and the rambeh, respectively, produces no understanding. Even the translation, "You flirtatious flower," fails to convey the layers of meaning associated with the reference. Thus, for the foreign reader to begin to gain any understanding and appreciation, he must go back and forth among the relations many times. He must constantly be aware of the relations that exist within the text, for to ignore them invites misunderstanding.

References

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