

# 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 [khwaam], and [dooy] constructions.

In academic circles, Thai people recognize at least two styles of writing. One is easier to follow because it is written the way it would be spoken. The other is difficult, for some people, to follow and has a "but-ter 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 tɛ̀ɛk-tàaŋ rá?-wàaŋ pàw-prasǒŋ khǒŋ bùk-khon lɛ̀? khǒŋ  
 difference between goals of individual and of  
 ?oŋ-kaan mây cam-pen wáa cà tǒŋ pen sǐŋ mây phǐŋ pràat-tha-nǎa  
 organization not necessary that must be thing not wanted

Differences between individual and organizational goals need not be unwanted.

- 2 ?ee-kàt-tà?-bùk-khon phát-tha-naa dooy phàan kaan-pha-chəən  
 an individual develop by past facing  
 pan-hǎa lɛ̀? kaan-tháa-thaay tàaŋ-tàaŋ  
 problems and challenges various

An individual develops by facing various problems and challenges.

- 3 daŋ-nán khwaam-tɛ̀ɛk-tàaŋ sǎa-màat kòo hây kèet khwaam-sàaŋ-sǎn  
 therefore difference can create creativity  
 mii sùk-kha-pháap thaaŋ-c'it-ta-wít-tha-yaa lɛ̀? thaang-saŋ-khom  
 health psychology and social

Therefore the difference can create creativity, psychological and social health.

4 khwaam-tèek-tàan thii mii hiet-phôn lè? kaan-mii kaan-pa-ti?-bàt

difference which have reason and having reaction

khwaam-tèek-tàan nay chœn sãn-sãn tham-hây kêt pra-yòot

difference in way constructive cause rise usefulness

tò ?ee-kàt-tà?-bùk-khon lè? tò ?on-kaan dây

to an individual and to organization

Reasonable differences and reaction to the differences in a constructive way bring forth individual and organizational benefits.

5 baan-khrân khwaam-khít kiaw-kàp kaan-khàt-yœn rá?-wàan

sometimes thought about conflicts between

?ee-kàt-tà?-bùk-khon lè? ?on-kaan thùuk tii-khwaam-măay

an individual and organization is interpreted

nay chœn khôo-?aan lè? khôo-tôo-yœn phâ sa-nàp-sa-nũn

in term of reference and argument in order to support

kaan-lóm-lêek ?on-kaan

termination organization

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

6 kaan-tii-khwaam-măay nay tham-nœn nîi pen kaan-kra-tham thii

interpretation in way this is action which

mây thùuk

not right

Such interpretation is not the right thing.

7 thán whyte lè? Argyris mây dây sa-nœe rîi sa-nàp-sa-nũn hây

both Whyte and Argyris not did propose or support for

phâu-khon kláp pay sùu ?aa-ra-yá?-tham boo-raan bèep yuù kan

people return-go to civilization ancient way live

dooy mây mii ?on-kaan

by no have organization

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

8 kaan-khàt-yéeng thîi mii-yùu khuan cà? thùuk mɔɔŋ nay ɲêe  
 conflict which exist should will be looked in way  
 khɔ̌ɔŋ kaan-tháa-thaay khɔ̌ɔŋ pan-hǎa thîi tɔ̌ŋ-kaan kham-tɔ̌ɔp  
 of challenge of problems which need answer  
 thîi dii-khɛn phǎa phɔ̌n-pra-yòot khɔ̌ɔŋ ʔee-kàt-tàʔ-bùk-khon  
 which better for benefit of an individual  
dooy ʔaa-sǎy ʔon-kaan  
 by depend 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 :

1 nay kaan-wíʔ-khrɔʔ pan-hǎa nîi raw cam-pen ....  
 in analyzing problem this we necessary  
 In analyzing this problem, we ....

2 phaay-tâay kaan-nam khǒŋ rát-tha-baan mây pra-thêet thay ....  
 under leadership of government new country Thai  
 Under the leadership of the new government, Thailand ....

Prepositional phrases are also used in the more restricted style of language but they are not found with embedded sentences as shown in the excerpt above. Another new usage which is not found in the more restricted style is the joining of two or more abstract nouns by a preposition. In the excerpt above [khǒŋ] "of" and [rá?waŋ] "between" occur in embedded sentences, 1, 5, and 8. Of all the prepositions, [khǒŋ] "of" and [nay] "in" seem to give out the greater "butter smell" when they join abstract nouns.

The third type of "battered" constructions in the more autonomous style is the use of embedded [kaan] and [khwaam] noun phrases. The words [kaan] and [khwaam] are certainly not from English but some of their extended syntactic usage in the language can be explained as translations from English phrases. The extensive use of embedded [kaan-(thii)] and [khwaam-(thii)] noun phrases has probably changed the look of the Thai written discourse enormously. A great deal has been written on the Thai zero noun phrase which is asserted to be a salient characteristic of Thai language which has itself been categorized as topic-oriented, discourse-oriented, and "cool" language. (See Bandhumedha 1976, Grima 1986, Bamroongraks 1987, Vongviphanon 1987). But in the more autonomous style of language, the use of zero noun phrases is much less frequent. Moreover, one finds long and complicated [kaan] and [khwaam] noun phrases in their places and very often these phrases occur in embedded sentences. As a consequence, sentences in the more autonomous style are longer, more complicated, and more abstract. (See also Khanittanan 1987a).

In the above excerpt, which is composed of eight long sentences, presented in the textbook in two paragraphs, ten [kaan] and six [khwaam] noun phrases are used. Of these nine [kaan] phrases and

five [khwaam] phrases are embedded sentences. With the use of these phrases the boundary of a sentence is easier to identify, for they are either in the subject or object position, since most of the time they are at the beginning and the end of the sentence. In the more restricted style it is much more difficult to identify sentence boundaries and subjects of sentences.

The last of the newly acquired syntactic constructions to be discussed in this paper is the adverbial phrase [dooy]. Its occurrence in the more autonomous style of language is high though it may be not as high as [kaan] and [khwaam] noun phrases. (See also Khanittanan 1987b). Like prepositional [kaan], and [khwaam] noun phrases, [dooy] phrases are also used in the more restricted style of language, but in the more autonomous style they occur in embedded sentences. In the above excerpt, [dooy] constructions occur three times, in sentences 2, 3, and 8.

The characteristics of the more autonomous style of language which I have attempted to identify are larger vocabulary, the uses of passive voice and embedded [kaan], [khwaam], [dooy], and prepositional phrases. With these newly acquired uses, the users of the language of this style can make finer lexical distinctions, discuss the content of new fields from the west, and express relations of abstract ideas that have never been expressed before, and the language leaves much less to the receivers of the message to make their own inferences. It is the language suited to the communication of people who have very little common background.

Compared to other styles of language which are closer to the spoken language, the one with the newly acquired uses can be termed autonomous according to Paul Kay's definition. At this point an example of a passage from a more restricted style might help us see the difference more clearly.

1 kaan-?aw khray maa pen hũa-nũa phák (0) (0) ?aw khray  
 take who come be leader party take who  
 maa-lon sa-màk phũu-theen (0) cà? tởn mây mớu wũa phrố?  
 come run for representative must not look that because  
 khắw mii nẻn (0) phrố? khắw mii hũa-kha-nẻn (0) phrố? khắw  
 he have money because he have canvasser because he  
 mii sa-màk-phák-phũak mảak  
 have friends many

In taking someone to be a party leader (or) candidate for a representative, (one) must not reason that it is because he is rich (or) because he has canvassers (or) because he has a lot of friends.

2 hầak-tẻẻ (0) tởn phít-ca-ra-naa thẳn khwaam-mỏ?-sỏm thỉi khắw  
 but must consider about suitability that he  
 cà? maa pen naa-yỏk-rát-mon-trii (0) (0) pen rá-t-tha-mon-trii dũa  
 will be prime minister be minister also

But (one) must consider his suitability for possibly becoming a prime minister (or) minister as well.

3 may-chẻn-nỏn (0) kỏo cà? dẫy ráp kaan-duu-khẻn  
 otherwise will get receive scorn  
 cầak pra-cha-chon thẳn-laay-thẳn-puạn  
 from people all

Otherwise, (one) will receive scorn from all the people.

( " Political Parties' New Role ", Ruang Ekaraat, Siam Rath newspaper, 30th July, 1988 ).

The above passage is taken from an article in a newspaper. The language used in writing the article is about the same as it would be spoken. It is the type of Thai language that has been analyzed by most linguists. Typical of this type of language is the use of zero anaphora and sentence connectors. ( See Grima 1986, Vongviphanon 1987. ) In fact, such usage has been in the Thai language for a very long time, at least since the time when Thai writing was created some 700 years ago. ( See Bamroongraks 1987. ) It is the main reason why Thai has been categorized as either a discourse - oriented <sup>1</sup> or a " cool " language. <sup>2</sup> It is different from the more autonomous style of language in many aspects, as discussed earlier. This type of language does not have " a butter smell " for it does not possess the characteristics which the

more autonomous one does, as described above. It is the type of language that people use in their everyday life, both in speaking and writing.

The more autonomous style is used among more educated people. However, these people are those who are responsible for most of the written type of message. Their language certainly has influence over a lot of people. At the least, more uses of embedded [ kaan ] and [ khwaam ] noun phrases are seen in the more restricted style now. They were not used at all in the writing of Sukhothai, <sup>3</sup> Ayuthaya <sup>4</sup> and early Ratanakosin <sup>5</sup> periods. <sup>6</sup> In fact the use of these embedded relative clauses is new. Earlier Thai mostly used adjoined relative clauses. This could explain why the subject of a sentence which is modified by a relative clause is felt to be far apart from its verb

and seems foreign to those who are not familiar with the autonomous style of language.

With the users of the more autonomous style of language as the main controllers of the mass media of the country, it can be expected that their "butter-smell" style of language will spread to other groups in Thai society.

## THE MECHANISM OF CHANGE

To a certain extent, borrowing through translation and analogy can be said to be the catalyst of the change to the present more autonomous style of language. Some changes can be shown to have originated in the process of trying to express English content in Thai. That translation is used in such efforts can be seen clearly from the use of new fixed phrases such as "vice versa" [náy tham nɔɔŋ klàp-kən], "in practice" [náy thàaŋ pà-tì?-bàt] or pronouns such as "the first", which is translated as [classifier + rɛ̌k], and "the latter", which is translated as [classifier + lǎŋ]. The same is true with passive voice. It is simply translated into Thai the way it is used and expressed in English. The result is an unfamiliar Thai sentence. The syntactic construction used in the translated passive sentences is not new. Only those who know English can tell that such a sentence is translated from English. Those who do not might simply think that it is not a familiar way of expressing ideas. However, with some effort, the sentence can still be understood by those who do not know English. The same is applied to all the new embedded constructions, [kaan], [khwaam], and [dooy]. Relative clauses are regularly used in the more restricted style of language. They are simply used in a different part of a sentence in the more autonomous style. Again, with some effort, they can be understood by those who do not know English.

However, not all uses of new elements in the language can be traced back to English. For many, English appears to be just the catalyst and the change has taken its own course in Thai. A lot of new uses of prepositions cannot be traced back to English. This can be seen clearly when compound nouns or the construction "adjective + noun" in English is translated into Thai, for example, compound words such as "job satisfaction" and "connotative meaning" have been translated as [khwaam-phoo-cay-na-y-

naan] and [khwaam-mǎay-dooy náy], with a preposition as a connector of the two nouns. Also, phrases like "social structure" and "biological needs" have been translated as [khrooŋ-sǎaŋ-thaŋ-sǎŋ-khom] and [khwaam-tôŋ-kaan-thaŋ rǎaŋ-kaay] or [khwaam-tôŋ-kaan-thaŋ-chii-wa-wít-tha-yaa] <sup>7</sup>.

These constructions contain a preposition in Thai which cannot be traced back to the English origin. The latter case, where English uses a derived adjective, such as anthropological, scientific, plus a noun, may be explained by analogy. The derived part of the adjective is taken to be analogous to a preposition, hence all the translations of such constructions have a preposition or a connector between the two nouns in Thai. Such use of analogy or the interpretation of syntactic elements has created various new constructions in Thai which cannot be traced back directly to English, though sometimes we know that such constructions have their origin in English.

## CONCLUSION

I have tried to demonstrate that there is a more autonomous style of language in written Thai, many characteristics of which can be said to have been borrowed from English. Such characteristics make it different from traditional and typical spoken Thai. It is used mostly by educated people or those who know English well and this style of language has been exerting its influence over other people in Thai society, for it is those educated people who control the written channel of communication. The new language might be more autonomous but for people out of the "elaborated" group or the group which does not know English it requires an effort to understand such written discourse. And who knows? Could this be an underlying problem of education today, especially at the university level where most of the texts are written in the more autonomous style of language?

In summary, the autonomous style of language discussed in this paper is not so much a complete displacement of old construction types by new ones, making a larger repertoire of possibilities. Rather, the more autonomous style might be considered a new dimension added to the various existing diglossic registers. (See also Diller 1985.)

## NOTES

1. Cholticha Bamroongraks ( 1987 ) classifies Sukhothai Thai as a discourse-oriented language in which topics and zero noun phrases are discourse notions.
2. Peansiri Vongviphanon ( 1987 ) classifies Present - Day Thai as a “ cool ” language because it uses zero noun phrases and zero connectors and a lot is left for the receiver of the message to make his own inferences.
3. The period between 1138 A.D. - 1338 A.D.
4. The period between 1350 A.D. - 1767 A.D.
5. The period between 1778 A.D. - 1828 A.D.
6. I am indebted to Dr. Anthony Diller for pointing out that [ kaan ] noun phrases were not used in Kosathibodi's language [ 1685 ] ( 1985 ). บันทึกกรายวันของออกพระวิสุทธรสุนทร ( โกษาปาน ) ราชทูตไทยไปฝรั่งเศสสมัยอยุธยา, กรมศิลปากร, พ.ศ. 2528.



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