Chapter 8

Summary and Concluding Remarks

8.1. Summary

8.1.1. Purpose of the Study and Method of Analysis

This study set out to examine if it is possible to trace a relationship between Thai language and Thai culture that could be used to support the theory of an interdependence between language and culture as it was first formulated by the 19th century German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, was then taken up by what has become famous as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and most recently has been reformulated as the theory of linguistic construction of reality by G. W. Grace. According to this tradition of thought, different languages are not just different sets of sounds and signs - as is suggested by mainstream linguistics founded by de Saussure - but different ways to perceive and understand the world. It should, therefore, be possible to gain insight into a culture's specific world view through an analysis of its language.

The approach of discourse analysis seemed to be best suited for the undertaking of my study since discourse analysis tries to establish a holistic outlook at language and to leave behind the somewhat limited scope of structural linguistics. According to discourse analysis, a language is categorized into many types of texts discernible from each other by non-linguistic factors such as the writer/speaker and his intentions and the reader/hearer and his expectations among others.

For any kind of study like the present one, it is necessary to decide which kind of text will be used as data material. First of all, I restricted myself to the domain of written

language because it is not possible to gather authentic material of spoken language that allows representative conclusions. No voice recording will ever catch the indispensable non-linguistic elements of a situation of direct verbal communication. Spoken language also consists of many individual idiosyncrasies which may be misleading the researcher. Finally, in view of the great linguistic diversity of Thailand, it was necessary to concentrate on what is accepted as the common standard version of the language.

Standard Thai, as any standard version of any language, is the language taught at schools, used in the administration and in the mass media. Although it is often spoken, it is principally *written* language and it is in this form that there is a basic common understanding of the rules and the proper use of the language. I have, therefore, decided to select my data material from written standard Thai. Naturally, I have disregarded "historic" versions of the language. As for the type of text, I have opted for narrative texts because most of them are designed for a broad and general audience and can, therefore, be assumed to represent the standard spoken language. Among the vast amount of contemporary narratives, I have selected Kukrit Pramoj's novel "Si Phaendin" because it was intended to be and has been acknowledged to have succeeded in drawing a faithful picture of Thai culture by a masterly use of contemporary standard Thai. The conventionality of the use of the language in "Si Phaendin" - as opposed to, say, the experimental style of modern literature - has been a decisive factor in selecting the novel for the purpose of this study.

In the analytical part of the study I have concentrated on the ways in which standard Thai expresses the following four areas of human perception which are, quite naturally, also central features of narrative texts: time, causality, characterization of people and description of places. They may be conveniently be summarized by the four question words: *when*? *why*? *who*? and *where*?

8.1.2. Time Structure and Time-Marking

A well-known feature of Thai - and of all analytical languages - is the absence of morphological time-marking. This is not simply a matter of form or structure but means the absence of *obligatory* time-marking in general. While speakers of Western languages are

forced to choose at least between the past and the present and its different aspects (most of these languages do not have a morphological marking of the future), the speaker of Thai is free to leave out time-marking altogether. This leads to the dominance of the chronological order of events in narrative texts. More than that, the present time is established as the central point of reference while in Western languages the past tense may also become such a point of reference. The past in Thai is in very general terms everything that happened. Efforts to establish different time levels within the past, which can be done in Western languages by combining tense and aspect, are seldom undertaken.

8.1.3. Marking of Causality

The absence of obligatory time-marking and the dominance of the chronological order also have an impact on the expression of causality in Thai. Cause and effect are mentioned in their chronological order, first the cause, then the effect. The word ก็ (*so, and then*), which is used to connect clauses, clearly dominates the narrative discourse. It appears much more frequently than any other connective word. Since it is used for marking chronological succession as well as result clauses a clear distinction between those two functions of the word is not always possible. This contributes to the general impression that result clauses marked by ก็ appear to be the natural and preferred way of expressing causality. Specific marking of purpose - the intended result - appears at times but it is not obligatory. It may be omitted if the co-text gives enough evidence to suggest a purpose.

The conjunct เพราะ marks causal clauses in second position in the same way as the English *because*. It is frequently used but by far not as often as ก็. A causal clause in second position theoretically contradicts the chronological order because it puts the cause after the result. In reality, however, the marking of a cause by means of the conjunct เพราะ does not interfere with chronology because เพราะ is mostly used to mark a <u>qualification</u> and not an event as a cause. In a sentence like "*I cannot lift the bag because it is heavy*", the word "*heavy*" points to a specific quality of the bag and not to an event. Thus, the chronological order of events is not touched upon at all. In the few cases where the conjunct เพราะ does indeed point to an event, the time of these causing events overlaps

with the time of the main clause so that again, the chronological order is not violated. In a sentence like "*I know about this because I have read many books about it*" the process of reading and the acquisition of knowledge take place almost simultaneously. The chronological order of events is not an issue here. Another way to circumvent specific marking of causality and stay within the chronological order is to use causative verbs.

8.1.4. The Characterization of People

There are many linguistic means to characterize people. The variety of terms of address makes it impossible for the speaker **not** to categorize people within a hierarchical system. Only recently and under the influence of Americanization, the use of the first name or nickname only as a term of address has taken on in a few cases the meaning of equality. Usually, it still denotes superiority.

Besides being categorized through terms of address, people are characterized by their action and not by descriptions of their physical features. No attempts are made to relate individual physical appearance to certain features of individual character or to paint a realistic portrait of a character by analyzing emotions. These findings make sense in light of the linguistic material: there are no adjectives because of the strict postpositive structure of Thai. Thus, verbs are used to characterize people.

8.1.5. Description of Places and Spatial Relations

In "Si Phaendin", great importance is placed on the accurate description of location - as opposed to the rather vague conveyance of time. The frequent use of the verbs ไป (*to go*) and มา (*to come*) to indicate the "pastness" of events in relation to the present time suggests an elaborate spatial concept of time. The frequent use of proper place names and the many detailed descriptions of places emphasize the importance of location. Exact descriptions of places have an important metaphorical value. High-ranking people live high up in places, low-ranking people stay downstairs. Moral implications are not to be missed. If high-ranking people prefer to stay at places below those befitting their status, it will often point at some kind of bad or unbecoming behavior - a "lowness" of character so to speak.

8.1.6. Cultural Characteristics Reflected in the Findings of the Linguistic Analysis

In the last chapter of the study I tried to relate the findings of the analysis of the linguistic material to certain Thai cultural characteristics. I put the emphasis on those cultural characteristics that stem from religious beliefs because I see them as the essence of a culture and the root of the world view of the people. There would be no culture without religion. To concentrate on the religious features of a world view also protects the researcher from mistaking superficial trends and fashions for cultural characteristics.

I came to the conclusion that the perception of time with the present time as the focal point of reference and a rather vague presentation of past events suits the Buddhist concept of อนิจจัง (*impermanence*) very well. The awareness of the impermanence of everything and everyone one feels for or is attached to gives rise to the effort to lessen one's attachment to things and people. Since events of the past are viewed from the present time as events that are gone and non-existent anymore, there is no reasonable argument for reconstructing these events accurately. It does not matter at what time exactly things happened. What matters is only that they happened. The same holds true for the concept of causality. To put it bluntly, what is the point of asking why? The answer to the question does not alter what happened. To be aware of the law of impermanence is all that matters. At this point, another quintessential Buddhist concept plays an important role, the law of Karma. Karma forbids to draw easy conclusions as to why things happen. Karmic reasons may go back to former lives and are not perceptible for the ordinary person.

The perception of both the karmic nature and the impermanent character of everything stands in contrast to the Christian world view of the West in which impermanence can finally be turned into eternity and direct causal links exist between what one does in this life and what one will receive in the next (hopefully eternal) life.

The importance of what one does and the prevalence of verb structures in Thai can also be related to the karmic world view of Buddhism. Karma is generated by action. It is, therefore, very important to pay close attention to what one does and avoid to do anything that triggers negative actions. Words and verbal communication is or should be of a formal and conventional character in order to avoid negative reactions through one's words. People are ultimately judged by what they do. There is no need for lengthy discussions and

to keep quiet is certainly better than to say things and not act accordingly. In Western culture, verbal communication is viewed differently. Avoiding negative reactions and repercussions is not a value in itself and the upholding of social harmony is only one aspect of verbal communication. As in any monotheistic religion, talking has a lot to do with preaching the truth and it goes without saying that this is not meant to be pleasant for everyone. Until today, to say the painful truth is regarded as virtuous and it definitely is something that should be said while in Buddhism it has to be found out by oneself alone.

The linguistic perception of society - and indeed the world - as a hierarchy is also in accordance with the Buddhist world view. Other than in Christianity, where at least in the face of God everyone is equal, the Buddhist world has a rich hierarchical structure which is also represented by linguistic means.

8.2. Concluding Remarks

That there is a relationship between language and culture has never been denied. What has been questioned, however is, that this relationship can be examined in any satisfactory and conclusive way. The fascination of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis lies in the fact that it assumes that inferences can be drawn from a language to the world view of its speakers. Since its first appearance, this hypothesis has sparked controversy among linguists and many have discarded it as mere speculation. Without trying to add anything to the theoretical background of this hypothesis, I think, the present study on *Features of Contemporary Thai Narrative Texts and Their Relation to Thai Cultural Characteristics* confirms that indeed some aspects of a people's world view are incorporated in their language.   Naturally, not every cultural phenomenon can be decoded through an examination of the language. But certainly some essential ways to perceive the world are enshrined in and influenced by language.

The principal methodological problem of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is that it is too radical. There is no doubt that linguistic features point to cultural characteristics. It is, however, not possible to say that certain linguistic phenomena force the speaker of a language to perceive the world in a certain way and make it impossible for him to see it in

any other way. The answer to this methodological problem, however, is not to conduct only studies of isolated linguistic phenomena. One should not lose sight of the relationship between language and culture. The discipline of semiology offers new possibilities to consider and to account for the complex relationship between language and culture. Perhaps it is here that further implications Whorf's fascinating and provocative hypothesis can be discovered: in the field of the interaction of the system of linguistic symbols with other cultural systems of symbols.

8. 3. Recommendations for Further Studies

The present study is interdisciplinary in nature, written in the interdisciplinary field of Thai studies. It is based on the assumption that language should not be treated as an isolated field of studies but in its many relations to other areas of the humanities such as history, cultural studies, ethnology, anthropology, mass communication and literature. Ideally, the study of languages should be at the center of the discipline of semiology which embraces and rearranges the traditional subjects of the humanities. The study of language can be most fascinating because of its interrelation with other systems of signs and communication and further studies of the Thai language that consider such interdisciplinary aspects is necessary. Language itself is the essence of a distinctive culture and it must be treasured and maintained. Unfortunately, a public Thai language institute that would not only conduct and sponsor linguistic research but also teach Thai systematically up to a high level does not exist. There is also a need, as far as I can see, for an exhaustive linguistic description of the Thai language.

The advantages of discourse analysis do not discredit the study of specific linguistic phenomena that have been carried out by traditional structural linguistics. My own study is a case in point. Since I am a not a linguist, I have treated my linguistic data rather superficially. Additional studies certainly need to be done. The use of the conjunction เพราะ, for instance, and the general practice of marking causality are in need of further in-depth study. Such an analysis should be complemented by semiological research on the different categories of causality such as events, qualifications or situations. It could also be

interesting to find out with what kind of verbs the conjunction เพราะ is used. The concept of space in Thai and its relation to the concept of time would be another rewarding field of research. It would be very interesting to compare the results of such studies with the findings of studies of similar phenomena in other languages.

The absence of adjectives opens a Pandora's box of questions that could be the subject of further studies. How do Thai narrative texts describe people, situations, emotions, the past? What kind of word are used? What are the criteria to classify verbs as "qualifying" verbs? How are they used?

On the philosophical side it could be interesting to examine what influence the many distinctive characteristics of the Thai language have on the acquisition of knowledge in general. What kind of Thai is used in textbooks, in classroom communication, in university lectures? How is historical knowledge acquired and communicated by means of language?

From an anthropological point of view, historical language studies on how changes of a language are accompanied by changes of a people's world view and other cultural phenomena could yield some fascinating results.

The implications of the relationship between language and culture with regard to the teaching of foreign languages should also be studied thoroughly. In my opinion, the many difficulties encountered in teaching a foreign language stem from being unaware of the different cultural background carried by the language. Foreign teachers have the additional problem that they have to adjust their teaching methods to the cultural "point of departure" of their students. The many problems encountered by foreigners who teach their Western languages in Thailand could be addressed much more effectively if teachers and students would realize that different languages are not just different sets of sounds and signs that are freely interchangeable but carry different cultural concepts that everyone needs to be aware of if he wants to understand another language - and his own for that respect.