

On the Power, Powerlessness and Omnipotence of Language: From Oral Culture through Written Culture to Media Domination

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Abstract

The inestimable treasures of Thailand's oral culture inevitably awaken a longing for "lost orality" (with obvious echoes of the "lost paradise"). But the awareness of the contrast and the mutual enrichment between the oral and the written traditions can give valuable insights into linguistic phenomena. Thailand provides an interesting case study, as its traditional written culture was a privilege enjoyed by a restricted, educated circle, and book culture, propped up by the art of printing, was not introduced until the 19th century. Without a firm footing in the written culture, it is not surprising that modern Thai society has been swamped by the new media.

The globalized and commercialized contemporary society revels in the magic of IT, whereby a new cellphone-based loquacity paradoxically heralds the impoverishment of the language, a symptom of a general spiritual and intellectual degeneration. A fragile written culture can hardly defend itself against the omnipotence of the media. Only a profound understanding of the time-honoured oral tradition, which fully recognised the power of language as an aesthetic experience, can show us a way out of this dilemma.

By a stroke of luck, the mass protests against the corrupt government in early 2006 have reawakened the potential of

language as a pillar of justice, freedom and morality. Oral and written traditions, manifested through speeches, pamphlets, poetry, songs and live performances, have conspired to function as an instrument of truth, a vindication of the real power of language.

When the people wake up, language too regains its strength.

Key Words: language and power; oral culture; written culture; media; morality

Preliminary remark: a case study from Thailand

I permit myself to begin this lecture with a sort of *précautions oratoires*. Please, don't expect of me a learned disquisition on global cultural phenomena! I shall rely mainly upon my own experience in a country of the Far East, with occasional excursions into Western cultures—I studied Comparative Literature. This lecture will assume the form of a case study from Thailand. Further, I should like to draw the attention of my respected audience to the fact that the three categories of oral culture, written culture and media domination will not be treated in a strict historical succession, for they often overlap.

The pleasure of hearing

I shall begin therefore autobiographically and tell you of my grandmother. What did my grandmother do? She was a story-teller; she told fairy tales, stories, Buddhist Jatakas and episodes from the “higher literature”, that is, masterpieces of classical literature that have been *written* down. I was her regular customer, sat on her lap and enjoyed the privilege of a live performance. My grandmother did not need to read from a book, since she had an extraordinarily good memory and could recite and sing verses for hours. If she had a lapse of memory, she didn't hesitate to fill these gaps with her own improvisations. The people of her generation did not have to be professional actors or singers in order to be able to improvise. Poetry was part of everyday life and they could almost

think in verse. My grandmother's repertoire was quite extensive. What she had inherited orally, she knew how to enrich through reading, that is, repeated reading. She represented both folk literature and classical literature; she was just as much at home in the oral as in the written culture. As a child who was not yet of school age, my early experience of literature was exclusively oral and I could then have been classified as one of the illiterates who usually constituted my grandmother's audience. When my grandmother visited relatives in the countryside, neighbouring farmers used to come to her regularly with the request that she recite stories for them.

I am indebted to this early contact with the oral tradition for my later decision to study literature. My first emotional response to literature was to the story of Prince Sang Thong of the Golden Conch, who had to leave his adoptive mother because he discovered that she was a giantess. Twenty years ago, Thai and German directors and actors met and organised a "Dialogue of Cultures", for which they fused the Thai play *Sang Thong* and Goethe's *Iphigenie*, a unique theatre experience. I vividly remember to this day the "performance" of my grandmother in the role of the mother before an audience of one single person. My personal *plaisir du texte* came much later. In the beginning was the pleasure of hearing. (Before the triumph of the internet, on every trip to a big city in the West, I went right after landing to the box office of the local theatre or opera! Today I already know weeks in advance which plays or operas I should like to see on my next visit abroad.)

The fine arts as upholders of oral culture

It is hardly any wonder that the fine arts were also of great importance for our culture and still are. I grew up in cultural surroundings in which there was no sharp boundary between oral and written culture. Popular theatres in the Bangkok of my childhood were mostly well attended and the audience was

composed of people from all social classes. It was, with respect to its own traditions, an “educated” public in the genuine sense of the word. In the most popular form of theatre, what is known as “Like”, all roles were performed exclusively by men. “Like” could be called a kind of music drama, since it was improvised in verse, sung and danced. Sometimes it happened that an actor got stuck because he could not find the end rhyme. The relevant help then came out of the back row of seats: a member of the audience spontaneously called out his or her own proposed rhyme, which the actor sometimes took up and sometimes disregarded. And just these back rows of old Thai Like theatres were normally occupied by the vendors from a nearby market; some of them were certainly illiterate. Linguistic ability, or more precisely poetic fluency, was thus not a privilege of a certain social group. These illiterates were quite “educated” in literature and could at any time have appeared on stage and taken over one of the roles. Bertolt Brecht, who aspired in his “theory of the didactic play” to an ideal theatre in which the dividing line between actors and audience would be abolished, was never able completely to realise his ideal in practice. Pity that he did not know the Thai popular theatre!

The people in popular theatre knew quite well that the exclusively orally passed down repertoire was all in all too restricted and were not afraid to draw on “higher” literature. In the dramatic genre of classical literature, the play *Inao* by King Rama II is looked upon as the acme of this art form, and the popular theatre occasionally offered its own adaptation of this masterpiece in which the classical text served only as the scenario and the performance relied upon improvisation. Thus in Thailand’s classical tradition, oral culture and written culture illuminated each.

Modern Western education in the past half century, and the development of the modern media, have pushed the oral culture which I have described to the side. Learning poetry by heart is now dismissed as an old-fashioned teaching method and the practice of composing verse has been banished as out-of-touch

from the cultural agenda. Only under the garb of “Creative Writing” does the latter enjoy asylum, yet prose is preferred. I was somewhat dismayed lately when I attended a performance of the “Lamtad”, a kind of singers’ contest between men and women, in the Bangkok Municipal Park. The performers were certainly “National Artists” of renown, but they were hardly able to improvise; moreover, their vocabulary was very limited. This can be explained by the fact that they no longer live in a poetic community and can also no longer draw any advantages from the contemporary written culture: if they read at all, then almost only sensationalist daily newspapers. They have all enjoyed training with the renowned “mistress of popular ballads”, but amidst today’s *prosaic* surroundings they can hardly maintain the already attained level of culture. I had the privilege of experiencing this Thai mistress of oral culture. Fifteen years ago she was honoured by the National Cultural Committee and on the day of the festivities the honoured lady was requested to demonstrate her art of improvisation. She told us she would take on any subject. This was by chance during the first Gulf War and so we proposed that explosive theme. During a good quarter of an hour, she gave a virtuoso solo performance about the conflict between Iraq and the U.S.A., which had a strong pro-American tendency and presented Saddam Hussein as the devil. She was an illiterate. Where did she have her information? From television, of course, she replied. Nearly all Thai television channels get their world and foreign news from CNN! In the mentioned context, it is instructive to note that it was less the content of the performance than the expressive power of the language of this illiterate, which was able to hold its own against all kinds of experiences and challenges. She was the last of her kind. Her death two years ago marks the end of an *epoch of art* (to borrow Heinrich Heine’s terminology).

Between permanence and impermanence

If we were to draw a preliminary conclusion with respect to Thai oral culture, we could say that it is not a matter of simply a literary phenomenon or a principle of art, but of an attitude to life, even perhaps of a kind of Asian philosophy of life. This oral culture transmits its riches through direct contact between people and through human experience, a process in which each generation is intent upon propagating and at the same time extending and enriching what it has inherited. On the other hand, it never regrets its losses: what has been said has been said; it cannot be concretely recovered. Only memory shows the way into the future. Inherent in this way of thinking is an unshakable confidence in the creative power of human beings as such, which is not therefore the property of a certain generation or a certain historical epoch. This does not mean, however, that this culture fails to acknowledge its predecessors. On the contrary! Thai artists are often criticised because of their excessive respect for their teachers. It is customary to begin every performance with a short “reverence to the master”, but gratitude does not mean uncritical obedience. Our idea would thus be akin to Goethe’s dictum in *Faust I*: “Acquire what you have inherited from your fathers, such that you may possess it” (*Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen*).

At this juncture I think it appropriate to raise a few short theoretical considerations. In a predominantly Buddhist society like Thailand, the principle of the impermanence is part of the general philosophy of life. Oral culture appears to correspond to this philosophy in that it hardly sets any great store by permanence. But then one is confronted with a contradiction within Buddhism itself: Buddha said that after his death, he should be represented by his teaching. Is that not a striving after permanence? His teaching was at first handed down orally and only 300 years later did the followers of Buddhism decide to set it down in writing. With this, written culture was victorious. Even

Thai people who otherwise adhere to oral culture are prepared to accept the idea of “Holy Writ”. Paradoxically, the Buddhist monks who spread Buddha’s teaching in the early centuries of the Buddhist era did their work so thoroughly that there arose a voluminous work which few people can ever have held in their hands. The “Holy Writ” of Buddhism is nothing for bed-time reading. We come to know Buddha’s teaching only through the sermons, commentaries and explanations of the monks. Even after the advent of printing, no normal Buddhist can master the entire opus in the course of his everyday life!

Buddhism, furthermore, puts the question of the creation to one side and essential ideas like “original source” and “original text” are foreign to us. As far as classical literature is concerned, the question of the original text or the original manuscript does not really interest us. A good work of literature is handed down through the centuries and nobody cares whether the current received version is the genuine, the only authentic one. Here one could refer to Goethe’s *Torquato Tasso* and interpret the famous sentence “Permitted is everything that pleases” (*Erlaubt ist, was gefällt*) as a pretext for all kinds of negligence with respect to copyright.

Still, one should not disregard the cultural roots. To this day, Thai classical musicians remain invincible advocates of oral culture. A German theatre director who was working in Thailand once had a practical occasion to collaborate with a master of classical Thai music and was quite amazed to discover that the latter possessed a repertoire of over 20,000 melodies and could vary or freshly compose off-the-cuff his musical accompaniment for every performance. “To compose” means here a combination of memory and fresh invention. It appears to me that the Western theory of *intertextuality* would be compatible with the practices of Thai culture. A similar freedom prevails in the field of literature. On the other hand, the whole set of concepts round “copyright” stem from a principle loaned, or dictated, by the West and has not

long been resident in Thailand. As a member of the international community, we have to admit that we have much to learn in this respect, particularly about intellectual property.

Memory and legacy: the alliance between oral and written culture

We learned to appreciate the value of written culture at a very high cost. In 1767, the Burmese burned down the old capital of Ayuthya and all its written works went up in flames. The following decades were dedicated to the restoration of the classical legacy. Yet the lost writings were lost only in the material sense: they were held fast in the memory of the survivors. If man survives, his culture lives on. In this case, oral culture came to assistance. Everything earthly may be demolished, but not language, not literature. Working collectives were called into being by the king; His Majesty himself assumed the chairmanship. In a few years the entire national epic *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the Indian *Ramayana*, had been restored. In the following decades, the entire classical repertoire was written down again. No document exists explaining the applied methods, but one may conjecture that criteria were agreed upon in order to reach a selection of the different versions which were individually preserved in and shaped by the memories of the co-workers. I permit myself to speculate one step further and suppose that the members of the working collectives themselves filled the gaps in their memories, similarly to my grandmother! The acknowledgement of the objective worth of written culture, however, went further. The popular literature, which had hitherto been handed down only orally, was now also written down. King Rama II, a versatile man who was equally at home in poetry, music, drama, choreography and sculpture, undertook himself the task of committing a series of popular plays to paper. These “courtly” versions of the popular plays did not detract from the popular tradition, for the king, before his father had ascended the throne, knew country life from his own

experience and lent these works a genuine popular spirit (not excluding a certain sauciness and coarseness). Since then, the newly composed plays have enjoyed a continuing popularity and are today staged for all social classes. Oral culture and written culture enrich one another and finally unite to bequeath a common cultural legacy. Without the terrible crisis brought about by the destruction of Ayuthya, we should perhaps never have achieved all this.

A democracy *avant la lettre*

Behind this process of restoration was a royal mission and the cultural self-assertion of the nation. Under King Rama III (1788 to 1851) this became especially evident. The approaching danger of Western colonisation could no longer be overlooked and the king grasped that all military resistance would be senseless. Only a solid education could awake the self-confidence of the people, and this education had to be accessible to all. The lesson of Ayuthya was plain: knowledge and wisdom could be conveyed best in writing. But how could this cultural legacy be preserved and made permanent? The answer was obvious: stone *inscriptions!* The countries of Southeast Asia had known stone inscriptions for 1000 years; they had served mainly to immortalise chronicles, particularly dynastic chronicles. Many, however, consisted only in hagiographies of kings. As a pious Buddhist, Rama III felt obliged to reject such excesses and vanities. Following the Buddhist teaching, which was alone worthy of being immortalised, Rama III thought to secure a permanent foundation for the collective knowledge and wisdom of his homeland. This monumental undertaking, known as *the Stone Inscriptions of Wat Pho*, can be looked upon as our first Open University.

The inscriptions comprise three main categories: first, didactic teachings; second, classic examples of poetic works; and third, medical prescriptions. It is not difficult to recognise the underlying Buddhist philosophy. A “good society”, according to

the Thai understanding, praises morality as its buttress, delights in works of literary art as the summit of creative powers, and cares for the physical well-being of its population. The final category, medical knowledge, had to be extracted from the old masters under compulsion, for they were accustomed to communicating their prescriptions only esoterically. A free, that is, a public access, was foreign to them. With Rama III dawned a new age. The king worked as a mediator: he drew on the knowledge of his people, organised it and wrote it down, and then gave it back to them. Knowledge and wisdom were no longer attached to great individuals and become instead common property. They became *public*; the king *published* them. This is already democracy, *avant la lettre*. And written culture functioned as the instrument of this democratising process.

The pro and the con of the introduction of printing

The introduction of printing, by American missionaries, in the last years of Rama III's reign about the middle of the 19th century proved to be a cultural revolution. The old, traditional Thai society attached great importance to direct human contact and the previously described "University in Stone" at Wat Pho could exercise only a limited influence. With the advent of printing, communication no longer went from mouth to mouth but was now conveyed by a powerful medium. It did not take literature long to exploit the new means of dissemination, but it cannot be denied that it was those works which were conceived from the beginning as entertainment that sold well. The transition from oral culture to written culture may be spoken of as a social "transfer" that penetrated into all sectors of society. A new word emerged out of this reading culture, *Niyai Phralom Lok*, literally "stories that entertain the (reading) world", a rather disparaging term that resembles the German word *Trivalliteratur* (light fiction). But the "pleasure of the text", the joy of reading, was genuine and people thronged to the printers (for proper publishers still did not exist) to

buy the next instalments. Literary history speaks here of the “books from Wat Ko”, because the printing shop stood near the temple of Wat Ko. (My grandmother must have been among its regular customers.) It is an interesting and characteristic phenomenon that with us printing and light fiction grew up together from the beginning, and today still many a weekly newspaper lives from serialised novels of doubtful literary merit.

But what happened with “higher literature”, for which a market hardly existed? A new tradition immediately rose up that is still cultivated today: At cremation ceremonies, every guest is given a book in which a sketch of the life of the deceased is printed together with a work of classical literature. The National Library, which owns the copyright, gives these works free of charge to the descendants so that in this way they remain alive. It is understandable that so serious an occasion as the death of a man or woman should be adorned and honoured in the highest measure by an equally serious (but not necessarily macabre) commemorative publication. But conversely, how paradoxical that funerals, of all occasions, should save the life of classical literature! Written culture is thus a liberal domain that has sufficient room for light fiction and higher literature alike.

Differently from the early reading culture of the elite, the general written culture fostered by printing further presented Thailand with a “public” medium that has exerted a continuing influence on society: the press. Shortly after the founding of our first newspaper *The Bangkok Recorder*, the press was obliged to defend the national interest. The affair concerned a scandal about tax fraud on the part of a European Consul-General in 1835, and the subsequent court trial under the then prevailing extraterritorial rights of the European powers bankrupted the Thai newspaper. That was the price for veracity and public service within the framework of written culture. What in the oral culture circulated only in the form of a rumour, was now exposed to the reading public, by means of the alphabet, as a demonstrable legal offence.

The struggle against lies, injustice, underhandedness, corruption and dictatorship continues to this day and recently, on April 5, 2006, the representatives of the press and the other media united in an official declaration of their solidarity against all forms of intimidation and repression on the part of the ruling regime, citing the events of 1835 and stressing their profession's honourable lineage in a written culture committed to truth.

In spite of this recent heroic act, it cannot be generally said that the history of the Thai press has been completely free from breaches of professional ethics. But in its best hours, the press has accepted every risk in order to defend freedom and justice. Last year we celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the novelist and journalist "Sri Burapha", who has been honoured by UNESCO for his opposition, in the 1960's, to the ruling dictatorship and who was obliged to pass the last years of his life in exile. The present regime began only recently to confiscate books and newspapers. I am a Brecht scholar and know quite well that book-burnings (the occasion that drove Brecht into exile) are an ominous sign for the fate of a country. Things have not yet gone so far, but we stand on the verge. Like all dictatorships, this one, too, is afraid of the power of the word as a conveyor of truth.

What I have just described points unavoidably to the fact that our written culture has learned something from the Western tradition. We must admit that, in several respects, we have proceeded uncritically. Instead of using the art of printing introduced by the West in the service of the dissemination and deepening of our indigenous knowledge, the preponderate part of the Thai elite was so fascinated by Western culture and the Western way of life that it voluntarily agreed to a self-imposed colonialisation. For these naive pioneers of modern Thailand, modernisation meant westernisation. The legacy of King Rama III was forgotten. Our modern education misjudges its roots, which were pragmatic through and through, and through which practice always incorporated all theoretical considerations; it contents

itself with borrowing the whole lot of Western knowledge. The other side of the Western educational system, the practice-oriented side, has simply been overlooked and, since a considerable part of Western knowledge is written down, it is suitable for a very easy “transfer”. In other words, Western written culture has led to a rather superficial adoption. Borrowing, imitation, or at most adaptation remain the common methods.

Detached from its cultural surroundings, the knowledge from the West has been neither understood rightly nor received critically. Scientific and technological subjects have gained a better foothold because they are neutral, universal and practice-oriented, whereas the humanities and social sciences remain book-oriented and better suited to imitation. The single notable case of progress in Thai research in the humanities and social sciences rests on a simple formula: “Thai raw data + Western methodology”! It appears to me as if the establishment of a written culture on foreign cultural soil needs a very long period of maturation.

Language in the age of information technology

In connection with the consideration of oral culture, I have observed that the *mutual illumination of the arts* is a particular characteristic of this culture, in which the fine arts bring word, music and dance in relation to each other. Our contemporary society, with the help of technology, has made the *mutual illumination of the media* the order of the day. The combination of word, sound and image, which has been raised by technological means to a hitherto unknown level, offers the public a new bewitchment. The performance of a musical today is a splendid technological phantasmagoria which leaves the old Wagnerian idea of the total work of art far behind.

In the meantime, the non-verbal art forms and the media have gained in confidence, and we are no longer in the position to speak of literary culture in the same high tones in which the English

literary scholar F.R. Leavis could half a century ago. As a scholar of European culture, I cannot help but think about the power of language and written culture which, in my view, is deeply rooted in the West. How else could theatre have survived in England and Germany in view of the omnipotent new media? That theatre, too, has recently gone bust is another problem. As far as the German theatre is concerned, I am captivated by the idea that stage German is looked upon as German standard pronunciation, whereas the Briton can no longer hold his BBC English in such high regard, as Richard Hoggart has noted in his book *Mass Media in a Mass Society* (2005). I was therefore very upset when I saw a performance of *Nathan der Weise* (i.e., Nathan the Wise) at the Berliner Ensemble three years ago in which the director deliberately had his actors drain all the poetry out of Lessing's verses. But can language itself really be made powerless?

If we return to Thailand, we must take note that the idea of a written culture committed to the idea of public opinion is only one and a half centuries old, although we have been able to master several aspects of this culture through, so to say, "intensive courses", as in the case of the national press. In spite of all this, the new media have enveloped us like a deluge and we have been simply inundated. Of course, the positive sides of the new media ought not to be overlooked: how effective they were during the Tsunami rescue operations! But unfortunately information technology all too often abolishes direct contact among people and we have been spoiled by its speed and its ubiquity. The age of information is becoming insensitive to the nuances of languages, for these are dismissed as superfluous decoration. Language is supposed to serve only as a means of communication, nothing more, nothing less, and certainly not as a repository of artistic potential.

But the age of information is also a single, universally embracing consumer society, whose gigantic, multinational enterprises do business across the globe. Strangely enough, language here is still used as an aesthetic mode in two different

areas, namely in political propaganda and in advertising. Highly intelligent people are hired to undertake these tasks. The public must be permanently persuaded, bewitched, its critical sense blunted. The venerable rhetoric that in more enlightened times came to the aid of sermons, parliamentary debate and public oratory has today been bent to ignoble ends. Those who feel no twinge of conscience would say “The end justifies the means”. Must we conclude from this that language can indeed fall into powerlessness when it is misused or entangled in unethical acts?

Language and morality

In this connection, I recall an early essay by the cultural and literary scholar George Steiner with the title “The Hollow Miracle” (1959). His theory about the decay of language, which he illustrates by means of the German language during the Second World War and the following decades, triggered a controversy and is disputed among scholars. Yet Victor Klemperer’s book *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii) : Notizbuch eines Philologen* (i.e., *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii): Notebooks of a Philologist*, 1957) would provide scholars with reliable reading in this respect. At any rate, Steiner’s work does not fail to hold the reader captive. Nearly 50 years later, on May 25, 2003, when Steiner received the Ludwig Börne Prize, the former Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic Joschka Fischer paid tribute to the critical merits of the laureate: “George Steiner believes in the living organism of language; he believes in its creative power. It is the most significant instance of human consciousness. It conveys morality and humanism, of whose necessity he is so convinced. At the same time, however, language can act destructively, can, when it is separated from morality and the life of feeling, be ‘dehumanised’”.

It is worth giving heed to Steiner’s own words:

Languages have great reserves of life. They can absorb masses of hysteria, illiteracy and cheapness (George Orwell showed

how English is doing so today). But there comes a breaking point. Use a language to conceive, organise, and justify Belsen; use it to make out specifications for gas ovens; use it to dehumanize man during twelve years of calculated bestiality. Something will happen to it. Make of words ... conveyors of terror and falsehood. Something will happen to the words. Something of the lies and sadism will settle in the marrow of the language. Imperceptibly at first, like the poisons of radiation sifting silently into the bone. But the cancer will begin, and the deep-set destruction. The language will no longer grow and freshen. It will no longer perform, quite as well as it used to, its two principal functions: the conveyance of humane order which we call law, and the communication of the quick of the human spirit which we call grace...

[George Steiner : *Language and Silence*. Harmondsworth: 1969 (a Pelican Book), p. 143]

As a scholar of German, I must do my best to think historically and place myself in the given historical situation. But as a Thai, I can hardly resist the temptation to transfer the picture Steiner sketches to contemporary Thailand. Certainly several details are not relevant to our present conditions, but I should have to exchange only a few words and a few names and the image would reflect "The Land of the Smiles" today. For we, too, live in a mendacious democracy, a highly innovative regime, driven by money, that in its present form does not so easily find its equal. And in such circumstances language becomes powerless.

Language between freedom and dictatorship

I spoke earlier of the exploitation of language by propaganda and advertising. The dictatorial regime is supported mainly by businessmen, together with their "professional" lackeys, whose sole goal in life is power and wealth. Buying and selling are prodded on by advertising and its verbal tricks, while the media intensify

still further the already goaded consumerism of the population. For example, purportedly in order to improve the quality of life, but in truth to increase the purchasing power of the country people, state money reserves and savings banks are emptied so as to offer loans at minimal conditions to the “poor”. Under the slogan “Fight Against Poverty”, this programme is very popular among the country people and ensures the absolute majority in parliament for the government party at every election. It is highly interesting to analyse the accompanying propaganda. Poverty is described in pathetic tones, while state aid appears as a blessing from heaven. The deliberate misrepresentation of the propaganda goes so far that many people believe this financial aid is a private gift from the Prime Minister! Instead of increasing productivity at the roots, this astronomically heightens the sales of mobile phones. Everybody on the street knows who has made billions in this business in recent decades.

The new age is thus an age of speech, of persuasion and of allowing oneself to be persuaded. PR and advertising are the instruments of consumerism and also of political tyranny; they are constantly endeavouring to bewitch us. How can we defend ourselves against these attacks? If language has become poisoned, then we must find the antidote in language. As a student of German and later as a teacher of German, I always approached this language with respect, and German grammar, as brain-racking as it can be, contains elements that its native speakers may look upon as a matter of course but strike us foreigners as something special. I mean, for instance, the usage of the first subjunctive form in indirect speech. Here is an antidote against lies, deception, propaganda and PR tricks. Let us take an example: “Sie sagten, Taksin Shinawat *sei* ein großer politischer Führer” (“They said Shinawat was a great political leader”). This sentence contains an inherent potential for its own criticism. We do not hear the author of this statement directly. An assertion is reported, and in indirect speech. The first subjunctive form compels us to

examine the credibility of the statement or, better, to form our own judgement. Yes, there is much wisdom in German grammar! Blessed are they who possess such mechanism in their mother tongue which protect them against pure gullibility. Bereft of such blessings, the rest of us must indefatigably cultivate a critical use of language, an effort which has already proven itself to be a Sisyphean task in the case of Thailand.

But George Steiner does not believe in the saving power of such mechanisms. It could be that the German dictator then was so clever that, from the start, he gave the people no access to the possibility of the first subjunctive form—for he spoke mainly directly to them, often over the radio. Direct speech can be an instrument of dictatorship. For the last five years, Taksin Shinawat has spoken to his followers every Saturday morning on Radio Thailand. Even when he is travelling abroad, he can have his addresses transmitted, thanks to the miracle of technology. Personally, I refuse to listen to him directly. If I wish to take note of his message, I read it in the newspaper. Although we have no first subjunctive form in the Thai language, *written culture* affords a certain critical distance. We have more time for reflection and, through this, gain in caution, forbearance and far-sightedness.

It ought to be stressed that this lecture, notwithstanding my initial panegyric on oral culture, by no means intends to underestimate written culture. The present political crisis in Thailand provides concrete proof that written culture can stand the test as a mainstay of freedom and justice. Most intellectuals were disappointed by our media because they became associated all-too-easily with commercial, and sometimes too political, exploitation. Our television channels are a cultural wasteland that nourishes itself almost exclusively from soap operas (that is, adaptations of light fiction) and game shows, while our radio stations live from advertising and rock music. I must again appeal to the authority of Richard Hoggart, who quite categorically maintains that television and radio are responsible

for the “dumbing down” of public taste in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Our press has not always conducted itself blamelessly, for it has not always been able to resist the temptation of delivering itself into the hands of commercial or political interests. Politics and business stand under the protection of one and the same multi-millionaire and his family. Media domination has become an instrument of oligarchy. But suddenly the press has begun to separate itself from the other media and it appears as if modern written culture, scarcely older than one and a half centuries, has fired the press’s sense of freedom. Literacy means not merely “being capable of reading, writing and arithmetic”, as the UNESCO propagates. Implicit is also the critical thinking that underlies the doctrine of free speech. The power of language is, in this case, identical with the power of the spirit.

The rebirth of language out of the spirit of opposition

What appears as critical discourse in the press, prevails as concrete language at the mass protest rallies that have been organised for the last three months mainly in the capital but also in several provinces of Thailand. These *peaceful* demonstrations are directed against corruption on the part of the government and the bureaucracy. Whereas political rhetoric in parliament has stagnated because of the government party’s overwhelming majority and the lack of culture of most of the members of parliament, eloquence flourishes in the protest movement. Ethics and morality figure as guiding principles at the rallies as in the press. Not for years now have we experienced such a combination of enlightened rationality, solid argument, passionate rhetoric and literary elegance. Poets appear at the rallies with political poems; composers and lyricists present new compositions that condemn the false path of the politicians and make a plea for moral honesty. Notwithstanding the seriousness of its purpose, the protest movement is not bereft of humour. A song in the popular vein with the title “The Square Face” is a true virtuoso piece, listing,

with absolute thoroughness and prosodic perfection, all the misdeeds of our political leader and all his accessories and hangers-on—a linguistic phenomenon of the first rank which, thanks to the new technology, can be downloaded by anyone or acquired free of charge as a VCD! On an open-air stage an amusing but caustic political satire is performed in instalments in the form of a Peking opera, a contribution by alumni of Thammasat University which is unmistakably distinguished by its literary merit.

Further, prominent speakers have joined the protest movement, including former top officials, ambassadors, directors of state enterprises, leading scholars and union leaders or, in other words, the bulk of the Thai intelligentsia. Among the “public”, which on some days consists of hundreds of thousands, are all the classes of the predominantly urban population, who have gathered together in an ideal brotherhood. Participation becomes concern and commitment. They speak the same language, namely that of the *nay-sayer* who does not shrink before a categorical imperative. The political leader, however, remains unperturbed. His response testified to an absolute self-confidence: “Those people out there will creep away with the summer heat!”. This remark is perhaps correct in both the literal and metaphorical sense. He knows that the other Thailand (that of the *yea-sayers*) stands firmly behind him, those for whom only the material side of life counts and who are always prepared to come to terms with moral relativism so as to be able to survive. And this political saviour has already blessed the poor people with generous loans and credits and money. With their numerous mobile phones they now indefatigably take part in a global, medial revolution. Virtual space has recently become accessible to them; an exciting *linguistic community*, which can apparently bridge every physical distance and absence, has opened itself to them. Far from home, they can now talk to their families. They are, in these circumstances, fascinated, even downright bewitched, by this purported telepathic progress.

Media domination and loquacity

This purely quantitative communicative readiness is a world phenomenon. Instead of direct human and inter-personal contact, the world of experience is perceived more and more as medially mediated one! People certainly talk today more than before, and on the telephone. From the social point of view, we have probably grown less sensitive to our social surroundings because the person we are talking to is often not present before us. Whether loquacity enhances the power of language is doubtful. What cannot be doubted is the loss of the private sphere, whose existence was once looked upon as a mark of the civilised world. The following poem describes the deplorable situation very aptly:

All Aboard

All aboard and then
 the entire train
 breaks into phone fever and
 intimacies of every kind
 blossom into relations, revelations
 as bosoms unburden themselves and stand
 stark in that no-man's-land of tattle
 confronting the traveller:
 I must exchange my seat and get
 into the phone-free hermitage where I
 can contemplate the self-sufficiency of trees,
 the passing landscape and the sky,
 but someone has anticipated me
 and is talking into the mouthpiece of his machine
 –the others are too well-mannered to intervene but I
 tap his shoulder, tap again to snip
 the unbreakable ticker-tape of his privacies
 which have not ceased and do not until I lean
 closer to indicate the to him invisible sign:
 he lurches up and awake and gripping
 his still unsheathed weapon makes

for the pollutable corridor. The others are silent—
 disappointed : clearly they had been trying to filter out
 the inessentials and impose their own storyline.
 I had frustrated them with that fastidiousness of mine.
 Too late for landscape now. I take out
 a book too ruffled to read it—
 close your eyes, there are no exceptional things
 to surprise them in the dark out there.
 I even fall asleep, then wake to the hiss of brakes,
 the shudder of resistance—we have arrived and so
 I stand and step down into Gloucestershire in a Scotch mist.

Charles Tomlinson

[*The Times Literary Supplement*, February 11, 2005]

The rebirth of a new oral culture in such a perverse form is surely not always desirable. Sometimes we cannot help ourselves when we long for direct human contact and cannot suppress the cry (to parody a little the young Georg Büchner): “Peace to the pubs! War against the mobiles!”.

Epilogue: language as existence

But our frustration is not at an end with this. When we speak of oral or written culture or the copious medial fluency of language, we know that we have touched only the surface of the “Power of Language”. In the end, we must go to school with the poet, and with that poet who did not lose his faith in the power of language even in the most extreme distress. I am speaking of Paul Celan.

Within reach, near and not lost amidst the losses, remains this one thing: language.

It, language, remains unlost, even in spite of everything. But it must now go through its own absence of answering, go through terrible silence... It must go through and may

then come to light again, “enriched” by all this.

In this language, in those years and the years thereafter, I attempted to write poems: so as to speak, so as to orient myself, so as to explore where I was and where I was being driven, so as to project for myself reality.

[Paul Celan : Address upon receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen (1958)]

Such a statement needs no commentary. Yet I should like to congratulate myself that I have learned enough German to be able to appreciate Celan’s moving message.*

* The original German version of the present paper was delivered at the Goethe Institute, Munich, on 9 May 2006, as part of the project “Die Macht der Sprache” (The Power of Language), jointly organized by the Goethe Institute and the University of Munich. The English translation is by Jonathan Uhlener. The author wishes to thank the organizers for permission to reprint this English version. He would also like to express his gratitude to the poet Charles Tomlinson for his permission to quote the poem “All Aboard”. The author has benefited from the preliminary work carried out as part of the research project “Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society”, supported by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). Friends and colleagues have come forth with valuable advice, especially Gert Pfafferodt (Munich) and Michael Pand (Vienna). It has been decided not to update the information related to the political events in Thailand, as the paper is meant to address the issue of “the power of language”, and what happened in Thailand in the early months of 2006 serves to illustrate that point.