Chapter 2

Cultural Characteristics, World View and the Study of Language

2.1. Introduction

The linguistic analysis of this study is done with the purpose to look into the relationship between features of the Thai language and characteristic elements of the Thai culture. The more theoretical aspects of the relationship between language and culture will be addressed before discussing issues of Thai cultural characteristics and the Thai world view. This will help to gain a better understanding of those aspects of Thai culture that will be linked to the findings of the linguistic analysis later.

Questions concerning the nature of the relationship between language and culture have fascinated linguists, philosophers and anthropologists alike for a long time. So far, no one has been able to provide methodologically satisfactory answers. In the following general overview over the treatment of the relationship between language and culture in the study of languages, structural linguistics founded by Saussure will be contrasted with the tradition of a philosophy of language founded by Humboldt who uses the word "Weltansicht" (HUMBOLDT, 1963: 20)[1], a German equivalent of the term "world view", in his essays and lectures on language as early as 1820. Naturally, the main emphasis lies on this concept of a "world view of language" since it has always considered interdisciplinary aspects as the main purpose of the study of language.

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[1] "Weltansicht" is a compound word consisting of two nouns: Welt (*world*) and Ansicht (*view*). "Weltansicht" is not necessarily the same as "Weltanschauung" which has a much stronger philosophical connotation. "Weltanschauung" refers to one's personal convictions and ideologies concerning the state of affairs of the world.

2.2. The Relationship between Language and Culture in Structural Linguistics and in the Tradition of a Philosophy of Language

In order to assess the relationship between language and culture, the linguist George W. Grace, in his book "The Linguistic Construction of Reality", takes up the tradition of a philosophy of language founded by Wilhelm von Humboldt and argues that cultural concepts are acquired and transmitted through the medium of language. Learning a language really means learning a culture and not just a set of arbitrary signs and rules. Such a statement seems to be self-evident but linguists do often shy away from linking their studies to aspects of culture, mainly because linguistics is a very systematic science while culture eludes the grip of systematic analysis. Many linguists have long excluded the domain of culture from their studies and tried to treat language as objectively as a natural sciences. "Historically, the concerns of language research were heavily determined by the context in which linguistics established its credentials as a science. Especially in America, the notion of 'science' is preempted by mathematics and the natural sciences, whose preoccupations are observation and measurement. Emulating that outlook, the human sciences, for example, linguistics, preferred to investigate artifacts, rather than the human processes that operate upon artefacts." (BEAUGRANDE, 1985: 41) Nevertheless, there have also been attempts to develop theoretical concepts covering the domain of language and culture. The entire school of structuralism deals with the problem of a scientific theory of culture. "Classical structuralism, based on Saussure's linguistics, held out the hope of achieving a 'scientific' account of culture by identifying the system that underlies the infinite manifestations of any form of cultural production." (LODGE, 1988: 107) The science of semiology which developed out of structuralism and understands the whole domain of the humanities as a multitude of interdependent systems of signs, tries to establish common scientific ground for the disparate efforts of linguistic studies and cultural studies. This shows that the validity of the question as to what a linguistic structure means with regard to culture has always been recognized, from Humboldt and his

philosophy of language to Whorf's controversial hypothesis, structuralism, semiology and Grace's concept of a linguistic construction of reality.

2.2.1. Saussure's Founding of Linguistics as a Science

The tendency to conduct linguistic studies in isolation from the many other areas of human studies that are related to language can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics. Saussure did not deny the complex relationship between language and culture. "Language in its entirety has many different and disparate aspects. It lies astride the boundaries separating various domains. It is at the same time physical, physiological and psychological. It belongs both to the individual and to society." (LODGE, 1988: 3) But at the same time, Saussure was convinced that "no classification of human phenomena provides any single place for it [language, M.S.], because language as such has no discernible unity." (ibid.) He concluded that only the structure of a language could be scientifically examined. *"The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it.* Indeed, amid so many dualities, linguistic structure seems to be the one thing that is independently definable and provides something our minds can satisfactorily grasp." (ibd.) For Saussure, language as a structured system was "both a self-contained whole and a principle of classification." (LODGE, 1988: 3-4) He was consequently convinced that "a science which studies linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language, but is possible only if those other elements are kept separate." (LODGE, 1988: 7-8) With this statement, linguists all over the world have justified their self-contained studies of linguistic structure and discarded the question of how language and culture are interrelated.

The culmination of these self-contained studies of linguistic structure was Noam Chomsky's model of a generative-transformational grammar. Chomsky claimed that the limited means of a language system enabled a speaker to theoretically produce an unlimited number of sentences and tried to discover the rules of formation and transformation which are at work in the process of generating the sentences of a language. "It is, first of all, quite clear that the set of paired phonetic and semantic

representations generated by the grammar will be infinite. [...]. The normal use of language relies in an essential way on this unboundedness, on the fact that language contains devices for generating sentences of arbitrary complexity, [...]." (CHOMSKY, 1972: 118) Chomsky was not interested in sentences as part of a textual or cultural context and he could justify his position with reference to Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langage, langue* and *parole*. Chomsky was concerned with *langage*, the universal human phenomenon of language, and *langue*, a particular language system such as English or Thai, but not with *parole*, a particular language *in use*.[2] Chomsky had an overwhelming impact on modern linguistics. "The new grammarians routinely invented their own sample sentences about John and Mary, the ideal, abstract pair whose star-crossed exploits provided the content of linguistic samples for years to come." (BEAUGRANDE, 1985: 43)

But the rather narrow perspective of structural linguistics is by no means the only result of Saussure's pioneering theories of language. The structuralist school of thinking also took a major interest in Saussure's notion that language is one system of signs among other systems and consequently tried to apply the structural approach towards these other systems in an effort to discover their underlying structure.

2.2.2. The Philosophical Concept of the "World View of Language"

2.2.2.1. Introduction and Historical Overview

The importance of Saussures's distinction between *language as a structured system* and *language in use* is undeniable but its success has overshadowed the fact that there has always been a different, albeit not quite as influential approach to the study of languages. Its main assumption is that a language is much more than just a set of arbitrary signs. These signs are carriers of cultural concepts which cannot be

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[2] For details on Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue, langage* and *parole* see Ferdinand de Saussure: "Cours de linguistique generale". Paris, 1915. The English translation by Roy Harris which is quoted by Lodge (1988: 1-14), equates *langue* with 'language', *langage* with 'a language' and *parole* with 'speech'.

communicated in any other way than through the very language they are attached to. More than that, the ordering principles of the grammar underlying these signs have an determining impact on the perception of the world. Hence, a language controls the perception and the conceptualization of the world of its speaker. A separation of *language as a system* and *language in use* is therefore not possible.

This assessment of the general nature of language transcends the borders of structural linguistic studies and aims right at central questions in the fields of philosophy, anthropology and ethnology. It may conveniently be called the "world view of language". It has also become known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. (see 2.3.3.1.)

The analysis of languages with regard to their inherent world views is a predominantly German tradition. In the first half of the 20th century, the German linguist Leo Weisgerber developed his theory of a linguistic "acquisition" of the world.[3] He referred to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the Prussian statesman, philosopher and founder of the University of Berlin. His philosophy of language can rightly be regarded as the foundation of the "world view of language" approach in linguistic studies. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), the well-known American proponent of the "world view of language" theory, never mentions Humboldt and claims instead the ancestry of the rather obscure French dramatist and philologist Fabre d'Olivet, (1786-1825). (WHORF 1973:8,74) But Whorf actually did get in contact with Humboldt's ideas through his teacher Edward Sapir (1884-1939), the disciple of Franz Boas (1858-1942) who had brought Humboldt's ideas from Germany to the United States.

Humboldt himself must be seen within a philosophical tradition that begins in the Age of Enlightenment. The French philosopher Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-1780) and the German scholars Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) were his forerunners. (SCHLESINGER, 1991:7-44)

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[3] Leo Weissgerber's work has not met with much appreciation because there is the tendency in his writings to use his theory to justify a superiority of the German language. His books have not been translated into English. Still, the similarity between the title of his book "Die sprachliche Erschliessung der Welt" (Düsseldorf, 1962), approximately translatable as "The Linguistic Acquisition of the World", and the title of George W. Grace's essay "The Linguistic Construction of Reality" is striking.

2.2.2.2. Wilhelm von Humboldt

Wilhelm von Humboldt set out to look at languages with the purpose to determine the national characteristics of a people. His essays on language were written between 1820 and 1835, his most important one being "Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts" (*On the structural differences of the human languages and their influence on the mental development of the human race* [my transl.]) on which he worked from 1830 until his death. Humboldt's efforts have to be understood in the context of the geo-political situation of Germany at his time. Before the foundation of the (second) German Empire in 1871, Germany consisted of a multitude of mostly very small principalities, its biggest and most dominant being Prussia. Nevertheless, these politically and geographically separated principalities felt they were belonging together on account of their common language. Humboldt was interested in the question of how a language was linked to those characteristics of a culture that would create such a strong feeling of togetherness and the wish to form a political entity. Furthermore, he wanted to find out what the study of language would reveal about these cultural, or, in Humboldtian terms, *national* characteristics. The general understanding of the term 'nation' at Humboldt's time had not yet acquired the fatal meaning of national supremacy. It was simply understood as the political organization of a people with distinctive cultural characteristics.

Humboldt's studies were strictly separated from his political interests and mainly directed at Non-Indo-European languages, such as Basque in Europe, many languages of Asia (for instance Chinese, Japanese, the Malayian Languages, Kavi, Burmese, but, regrettably, not Siamese[4]) and the languages of native Americans. Hence the interest

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[4] In a footnote, Humboldt mentions favorably the writings of a certain Low on Siamese (and a certain Burnouf's review of it), but objects that Low says to little about grammar and only gives an unsystematical array of examples. Humboldt gives no reference for Low but writes that the review of Burnouf has been published in *Nouv. Journ. Asiat. IV*. 210. (HUMBOLDT, 1963: footnote 707-8)

the German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas and his student, the American anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir, took in Humboldt's studies.

Humboldt's premise is that language is the medium that creates thought.[5] For him, intellectual activity is a mental and internal process which does not leave a trace if it does not become external and perceivable for the senses through the sound of speech. Intellectual activity and speech are, therefore, one and the same.[6] Apart from that, intellectual activity is, out of pure necessity, tied to language. Without language, thinking cannot be clear and ideas cannot become concepts.[7] In the light of these convictions, it is only logical that for Humboldt the differences between the languages are not differences between sounds and signs but differences between world views.[8]

Some eminent 19th and 20th century philosophers have hold views similar to those of Humboldt. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote that grammatical functions unconsciously rule and guide philosophical thinking.[9] Bertrand Russel (1872-1970) thought that the syntax of Indo-European languages made it "[...] natural to infer that every fact has a corresponding form [...]." (RUSSELL, 1956: 331) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) brought the whole issue to the point: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." [my translation][10]

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[5] "Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ der Gedanken." (HUMBOLDT, 1963: 426)

[6] "Die intellectuelle Thätigkeit, durchaus geistig, durchaus innerlich und gewissermassen spurlos vorübergehend, wird durch den Laut in der Rede äusserlich und wahrnehmbar für die Sinne. Sie und die Sprache sind daher Eins und unzertrennlich von einander." (HUMBOLDT, 1963: 426)

[7] "Sie [die intellectuelle Thätigkeit, M.S.] ist aber auch in sich an die Nothwendigkeit geknüpft, eine Verbindung mit dem Sprachlaute einzugehen; das Denken kann sonst nicht zur Deutlichkeit gelangen, die Vorstellung nicht zum Begriff werden." (HUMBOLDT, 1963: 426)

[8] "Ihre [der Sprachen, M.S.]Verschiedenheit ist nicht eine von Schällen und Zeichen, sondern eine Verschiedenheit der Weltansichten selbst." (HUMBOLDT, 1963: 20)

[9] "Gerade, wo Sprach/Verwandtschaft [sic] vorliegt, ist es gar nicht zu vermeiden, daß, dank der gemeinsamen Philosophie der Grammatik - ich meine dank der unbewussten Herrschaft und Führung durch gleiche grammatische Funktionen - von vornherein alles für eine gleichartige Entwicklung und Reihenfolge der philosophischen Systeme vorbereitet liegt." (NIETZSCHE, 1976: 30) [*Especially in the case of the affinity between languages, it is unavoidable that from the beginning everything is prepared for a similar development and succession of philosophical systems - due to the common philosophy of grammar - I mean due to the unconscious rule and guidance through grammatical functions. (my translation)*]

[10] "*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache* bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt." (WITTGENSTEIN, 1978:89)

2.2.2.3. Benjamin Lee Whorf

Humboldt's ideas were brought to America by, among others, Franz Boas and Edward Sapir. Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) tried to apply them to the language of the Hopi and of other natives of America and his studies soon convinced him that languages create a way of thinking and of perceiving the world. "And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness."(WHORF, 1973: 252) A person's "thinking itself is in a language - in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese." (ibid.) It is only logical to conclude that "A change in language can transform our appreciation of the Cosmos" (WHORF, 1973: 263)

Whorf's principal assumption of the inextricable relationship between language and culture has been conveniently called the "theory of linguistic relativity", even better known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It has been formulated for the first time in 1939 in an article called "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language". (WHORF, 1973: 134) It is prefaced by a quotation from Edward Sapir that ends with the words: "We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." (ibid.) Later, in his article "Linguistics as an Exact Science", Whorf explains that the linguistic relativity principle means "that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world." (WHORF, 1973: 221) In other words, "all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated." (WHORF, 1973: 214) The consequences of this linguistic relativity principle are far-reaching "for it means that no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free. The person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist

familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems. As yet no linguist is in any such position." (ibid.)

It should be noted that Whorf makes a point of making his statements about *markedly* different grammars. In his opinion, the Western world view is relatively homogenous because of the unanimity of the major patterns of the leading modern European languages. They are, in fact, "Indo-European dialects cut to the same basic plan, being historically transmitted from what was long ago one speech community." (ibid.) Consequently, the dominance of the Western world view has to do with the dominance of languages like Spanish, English, French or German. For exactly the same reason, Whorf's, like Humboldt's, linguistic interests were focused on Non-Indo European languages.

Many factors have contributed to Whorf's fame, among others his brilliant and provocative style of writing. But Whorf's research can only be fully understood against a political background. His writings amount to an attack against the claim of supremacy of the white immigrants who ruled over the native Indians in his country. He stresses the principal equality of all languages ("no language is 'primitive'", WHORF, 1973: 260) and claims that "by comparison with many American languages, the formal systematization of ideas in English, German, French, or Italian seems poor and jejune." (WHORF, 1973: 85). Such a statement, written in 1936, could only be understood as a political provocation.

2.2.2.4. George W. Grace: The Linguistic Construction of Reality

Only recently, the American linguist George W. Grace has taken up this philosophical approach towards language and re-examined it from a perspective that owes a lot to one of the most recent philosophical theories, known under the name of "Autopoiesis" or "Radical Construction".[11] This is Grace's position: "The human species

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[11] According to Schmidt (1987), the theory of "Autopoiesis" or "Radical Construction" has its roots in cybernetics, psychology and biology. Its major proponents are the Chilenean scientists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, the Austrian-American psychologist Paul

- and no other - possesses the one essential tool which makes a social construction of reality possible. That tool is language. Not only is language the means by which this kind of reality construction is accomplished, it is also the means by which the realities, once constructed, are preserved and transmitted from person to person and from generation to generation. Hence, it is entirely appropriate to refer more specifically to the *linguistic* construction of reality." (GRACE, 1987: 3) Construction of reality is the fundamental process underlying all acts of linguistic communication. It is the result of man's naturally limited access to reality. The human eye cannot see the 'whole picture'. It selects only small parts of it. In a second "screening process", the brain, which receives information through all the five senses, selects from the multitude of these informations. But even more important than that, the brain gives meaning to these informations. In other words, it interprets and thus constructs a model of reality. "These models [...] are reflected in the language we speak." (ibid.:6) Speaking and thinking depend entirely on the construction of models of reality that are plausible to the participants in a process of communication and are compatible with other experiences of reality. Grace challenges the purely structural approach of today's mainstream linguistics, calling it the *mapping view of language.* "The basic epistemological assumption of the mapping view might be stated as follows: there is a common world out there and our languages are analogous to maps of this world. Thus, this common world is represented or 'mapped' (with greater or less distortion) by all languages." (ibid.) Since there is only one common world "out there", the different sets of signs and rules of the different languages are ultimately interchangeable. "[...] there is one key assumption [...] which may be thought of as containing in a nutshell the essence of the entire mapping view of language. That is the

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Watzlawick and the German scientists Heinz von Foerster and Ernst von Glaserfeld. Maturana's and Varela's "Autopoiesis and Cognition" (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Boston:Reidel, 1979) is one of the pioneering studies on "Radical Construction". Ernst von Glaserfeld and John Richards wrote the essay "The Control of Perception and the Construction of Reality" (in: Dialectica, vol.33, no.1, 1979: 37-58).

It is surprising that Grace makes no reference to these authors nor to the theory of "Radical Construction" as a whole although his thoughts are quite obviously related to this school of thinking.

assumption that 'anything can be said in any language' [...]. We may refer to this assumption as the *intertranslatability postulate.*" (ibid.:7) This postulate is the consequence of a linguistic concept that regards language purely as a structured system of arbitrary signs. These signs are assumed to exist independently of a culture or a world view - otherwise they would not be arbitrary. It is this key assumption of structural linguistics that has led to the idea of *machine translation.* The failure of all the enormous projects to construct programs that make machine translation "work" may be regarded as proof that the intertranslatability postulate is wrong.

Grace contrasts the *mapping view* with the *reality-construction view* which he derives, among many others, from the assumptions "that no clear boundary in terms of their functions can be drawn between the 'structure' of a language and its vocabulary, and therefore that the grammars of different languages are no more functionally equivalent to one another than are the languages as wholes" and "that a language is shaped by its culture, and a culture is given expression in its language, to such an extent that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins, i.e. what belongs to language and what to culture." (ibid.: 10) The major fault of today's linguistic studies is that "our acknowledged science of language" is committed to the mapping view. "In fact, not only does this accepted view of language make it difficult to design and carry out research on the reality-constructing function of language, it makes it difficult even to acknowledge that such reality construction occurs at all." (ibid.: 4)

It remains to be seen if George W. Grace's theory of a linguistic construction of reality opens a way towards a methodologically acceptable way to relate linguistic and cultural phenomena.

Chart 1: <u>George W. Grace's Dichotomy of the Mapping View of Language and the Reality-Construction View of Language</u>

	<u>The Mapping View of Language</u>	<u>The Reality-Construction View of Language</u>
assumptions:	- There is one common, objective world "out there".	- There is no direct access to the outside world. - There are only data selected by our senses. They do not add up to an adequate picture of the world. - Attempts have to be made to interpret the data, to relate them to each other. In short: **Models of reality have to be constructed.**
function of language:	- provide a "map" of the outside world	- construct models of reality
consequences:	- Everything that can be said in one language can also be said in another language. - Language and culture can be separated. Elements of a language are studied in their relation to other elements of the language. - Language and thought can be separated. - One universal language would be of great benefit.	- **Not** everything that can be said in one language can also be said in another language. - Language cannot be separated from culture and can, therefore, not be studied independently from culture. - Language cannot be separated from thought. - One universal language would be the end of cultural diversity.

2.2.2.5. Political Implications of the "World View of Language" Concept

The "world view of language" approach in linguistic studies is not just an academic issue. It has important political implications that can easily be shown with regard to the English language. The assumption of structural linguistics that a language consists of a set of arbitrary signs seems to be proven right by the successful establishment of English as the language of international communication. Today, the "intertranslatability postulate" means that "everything that can be said in my language can also be said in English". That, of course, is not true. The "world view of language" approach in linguistic studies would help to resist the powerful impact phenomena like "globalization" and "information highway" have on indigenous cultures. Whorf himself was aware of the political dimension of his theory. The following statement is an appeal for cultural and linguistic diversity and a warning against the domination of different cultures and languages by just one culture and its language: "I believe that those who envision a future world speaking only one tongue, [...], hold a misguided ideal and would do the evolution of the human mind the greatest disservice. Western culture has made, through language, a provisional analysis of reality and, without correctives, holds resolutely to that analysis as final. The only correctives lie in all those other tongues which by aeons of independent evolution have arrived at different, but equally logical, provisional analyses." (WHORF, 1973: 244)

2.3. Language, Cultural Characteristics and World View

Before any attempt can be made to relate linguistic phenomena to cultural characteristics, it is necessary to specify what kind of cultural characteristics will be linked to language. The current debate on the subject of Thai identy is an illustration of the diversity of opinions concerning almost every aspect related to the broad field of culture.

In the following pragraphs, I will first give some examples of the controversies in these discussions. They will serve as an argument to look at cultural characteristics from the point of view of world view. Cultural characteristics can then be understood as symbolic representations of a world view and the question towards Thai cultural characteristics can be reformulated as *what is the Thai world view?* While religion is a major, if not the most important, component of a world view, language can be regarded as the physical shape that is indispensable to make a world view communicable and available. Examples of the reflection of Thai cultural characteristics of religious origin in the vocabulary of the Thai language serve as evidence for the intimate relationship between language and culture. It can be assumed that other features of the Thai language will also point to the religious roots of the Thai world view. The links between language and culture found in the more slowly changing area of religious concepts are of a more fundamental significance than the rapid linguistic changes that accompany the short-lived fashions found in the profane areas of everyday life.

2.3.1. Problems in Defining Thai Cultural Characteristics

What is Thai? and *What are Thai cultural characteristics?* are central questions of Thai Studies. To talk about Thai cultural characteristics can be quite a problematic undertaking because of the vagueness of the terms "Thai" and "Thai cultural characteristics" and the controversies attached to them. Cultural characteristics change constantly in a perpetual process of exchange with other external cultural elements. Like any other country, Thailand has, in the course of her history, absorbed many cultural influences. There is no, and never will be, a pure Thai culture contrary to what some nationalistically minded politicians would like the people to believe. Present-day Thailand is a conglomerate of Thai, Chinese, Khmer, Western and many other cultural elements. Precisely for this reason, Sulak Srivalak (1993: 48) persistently refuses to accept the

name *Thailand*. He thinks the word *Thai* suggests a cultural homogeneity which doesn't exist.

Opinions on what is typically Thai are often vague and contradictory. Kukrit Pramoj himself lists being a Buddhist, being loyal to the King, participating in Buddhist ceremonies and wearing amulets as some of the Thai cultural characteristics. But he also claims that a Thai "knows whether or not another person is a Thai or not, regardless of his skin or his religious belief." But is religion really negligible in order to determine Thai cultural characteristics? If not Buddhism, what then constitutes "Thainess" or the uniqueness of being Thai? Kukrit Pramoj's answer to this question is: the monarchy. (Beek, 1983: 203-205) Mattani Rutnin (1983: 276) also leaves out Buddhism and calls the monarchy and the family the nerve-centres of Thai life.

Matters are getting more complicated if one looks at the origin and the tradition of many of the so-called Thai cultural characteristics. The famous inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng, once regarded as the most important evidence of the historical and cultural identity of the Thai people, may very well have been a product of the 19th century. (CHAMBERLAIN, 1991) A look at present-day Thailand is not very helpful either. Are the formal Thai greeting สวัสดี (*Sawaddi*) or the ramwong dance (รำวง) Thai cultural characteristics? They have only been in use for about fifty years. Both are the outcome of the efforts of the Pibulsongkram regime to give Thailand a centralized cultural identity. (THAMSOOK, 1976:142, BARME,1993:176 footnote 97, DILLER, 1993:107) The Thai word for culture itself, วัฒนธรรม, was only coined in the beginning of the 1930s in a politically motivated attempt to strengthen Thai nationalism. (BARME, 1993:160) Discussions of Thai cultural characteristics, therefore, sometimes tend to smack of political chauvinism.

A more contemporary reason to "create" traditions that are regarded as part of Thai culture is the promotion of tourism. A case in point is the Loy Krathong festival in

Sukothai. There seems to be no historical evidence that Loy Krathong was ever celebrated during the Sukothai Period.[1]

Finally, Westernization and Globalization have, unavoidably, led to an influx and absorption of Western, mostly American, culture. The Western New Year was introduced to Thailand by Pibulsongkram and has been celebrated since 1940. (แถมสุข, 2519: 132) Pibulsongkram also firmly established a Western dress code in Thailand. Nowadays, Thai businessmen wear elegant suits and shake hands when they greet each other. Valentine Day and birthday celebrations have become very popular and nothing seems to be able to stop Christmas celebrations from following suit. Should these cultural elements of Western origin be called Thai because they have been well established and are generally accepted by now? Or should they be considered part of an international uniform culture of American origin that is an inevitable concomitant of globalization and tends to supersede indigenous cultural characteristics?

2.3.2. The Concept of World View and Cultural Characteristics

In order to gain some solid ground in the discussion of these questions and difficulties and in order to get more reliable categories to deal with cultural characteristics, it could be helpful to look at the concept of world view. World view simply means "the way a man in a particular society sees himself in relation to everything around him." (PONGSAPICH, 1985: 1) Clifford Geertz defines a people's world view as "their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society." (GEERTZ, 1973: 127) World view is composed of concepts originating from fundamental human needs. The material needs for housing, eating and clothing as well as the spiritual need for explanations of life come together to constitute a people's world

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[1] "The TAT claims the tradition [of celebrating Loy Krathong, M.S.] dates back to the city's [Sukothai's, M.S.] great days over 700 years ago. Such a claim, they [Professors from Silpakorn and Thammasat Universities, M.S.] charge, is a distortion of history, since no evidence exists to indicate that Loy Krathong was celebrated during the Sukothai period." (Sukphisit, 1996)

view. A world view is a system that relates all these different aspects of life to each other and thus determines the way people look at and perceive the world around them.

Cultural characteristics that become apparent in behavioral patterns, activities, habits or rituals, can be interpreted as symbolic representations of a people's world view. Some of them are related to the material issues of everyday life. Others, like religious ceremonies or the architecture of buildings for spiritual congegration, are related to the spiritual need to find a meaning in life. Spiritual explanations of the meaning of human existence and activities are also found in mythologies, folk beliefs and religions and are communicated by means of language. They are the stabilizing ingredients of a world view because they establish a system that relates all the different aspects of life to a common central meaning.

Cultural characteristics may change according to changing circumstances. Those related to purely material needs may change easily. Those cultural characteristics, however, that constitute the spiritual core of a world view are more resistant to change. The way Thai people dress, for instance, has changed dramatically over the last 60 years. Eating habits as well have undergone important changes. The concepts of บุญ (merit) and บาป (demerit), however, essential ingredients of the Thai world view, have not changed significantly.

2.3.3. World View and Religion

Religion is at the core of a people's world view because it provides a central meaning for all the disparate and seemingly unrelated aspects of life. Religious sets of beliefs and convictions are, therefore, not confined to religious ceremonies. They penetrate nearly every aspect of life. "Religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience - intellectual, emotional, moral - can be given meaningful form." (GEERTZ, 1973: 123) Religious concepts transcend the realm of immediate material

needs such as food, housing and clothing and provide the framework for rules on ethics and morality, for ideas and ideals and for the explanation of life itself. Some of these rules and ideas may be adapted according to changing social and economic situations but fundamental religious concepts usually do not change easily. They contain essential religious truths like บุญ (*merit*) and บาป (*demerit*) in Buddhism or *guilt* in Christianity. Such concepts can be re-interpreted but their principal necessity and value has to be acknowledged. Otherwise, a religion ceases to be the religion it used to be. Even in such a case, the concepts remain, albeit in a purely historical sense. Outward appearances may change like churches change from the Romanesque to the Gothic and finally to the Postmodern style but the concept of the church as "a building for the worship of God and the relating Christian ceremonies" will remain unaffected. Every speaker of English knows what a church is. In the same way, a speaker of Thai knows what a วัด (*Buddhist temple*) is. There is no way of knowing a culture without knowing its religion.

2.3.4. The Thai World View and Buddhism

Kukrit Pramoj or Mattani Rutnin would, of course, never deny that Buddhism is one of the important ingredients of Thai culture - despite Northern hilltribes of different beliefs, a small Thai Christian community and five Muslim dominated provinces in the South. After all, Thai children are brought up with the notion that Thai is Buddhism and Buddhism is Thai *(ไทยคือพุทธ พุทธคือไทย)*. (สุวรรณา, 2530: 1) None of the many ethnological and anthropological studies on Thailand fails to acknowledge the importance of Buddhism (or, to be more precise, Thai Buddhism) in Thailand. "The history of Thai culture is so dominated by Buddhism that if we take away the Buddhist component, there is little to say about it." (PHODISITA, 1985: 30) Lucien Hanks, in his famous study on "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order", sees the hierarchical world of the Buddhist scriptures as a model for the hierarchical Thai perception of society. "As good Buddhists,

the Thai perceive that all living beings stand in a hierarchy of varying ability to make actions effective and of varying degrees of freedom from suffering." (HANKS, 1962: 1247) Buddhism is such a prominent feature in the life of every Thai person - even of a Thai who believes in God and participates in Christian or Muslim ceremonies - that Kukrit Pramoj and Mattani Rutnin didn't even see the necessity to mention it expressly. Buddhism has penetrated Thai culture and the Thai world view far beyond religious practice. A Christian wedding ceremony does not conflict with Buddhism - and in this sense Kukrit and Mattani are right. Buddhism itself preaches tolerance and does not jealously exclude other beliefs as monotheistic religions do. The Buddhist character of Thai culture is as self-evident as the Christian character of European culture - no matter how many people do consciously participate in Buddhist or Christian activities.

The three essential truths taught by Buddhism are probably shared by most Thais and influence their world view. They are the truth of suffering (ความทุกข์), the truth of impermanence (อนิจจัง) and the truth of non-self (อนัตตา). (SIVARAKSA, 1994: 326-327) In addition to these three essential truths, Chai Phodisita (1985) distinguishes five "worlds" in the life of the average Thai that reflect Buddhist values and concepts. They are the world of hierarchy, the world of merit (บุญ) and demerit (บาป), the world of bun khun (บุญคุณ), the world of cool heart (ใจเย็น) and the world of individualism. It is not difficult to find reflections of the three essential truths or the five "worlds" of everyday attitudes in the Thai language.

2.3.5. The Thai Language and the Thai World View

The spiritual explanation of the meaning of human existence and activity is one of the functions of religion. It provides the basic structure of a world view to which all aspects of life can be related. Religious beliefs and convictions are conserved and communicated by language. All the languages of the world give testimony to the religion and the mythologies of their speakers. The Buddhist character of Thai culture manifests

itself in the language. Thai language is saturated with Buddhist terms and concepts. The terminology for every aspect of the metaphysical realm, including moral values, ethical conduct, ideals, virtues and the driving spiritual force of life, is a Buddhist terminology or, to be more precise, a religious terminology which is dominated by Buddhism but also contains elements of Hinduism, animism and folkloristic mythologies. Such concepts are inherent in the present-day Thai language, preserved and handed down from generation to generation. Just how tightly enshrined these concepts are in their linguistic form becomes clear in the process of translating them from Thai into another language. The translation of the word วัด into a Western language without any additional explanation is difficult, if not impossible, because of the cultural concept behind the word วัด. Since this concept is enshrined in the language, it cannot be translated by simply exchanging words. Western languages with their Christian perspective have no concept of the Buddhist temple and consequently they don't have a corresponding word for it. It is equally difficult to translate words like bishop, archbishop, priest or cardinal into Thai without any explanation.

But religious concepts are not only found in such "technical" terms. Many metaphors and expressions of everyday language refer to religious concepts. How can a Thai understand words like ศีล (*moral*) or เวรกรรม (*bad karmic results*) or an expression like เดินทางสายกลาง (*to walk the middle path*) if not according to Buddhist concepts? The Thai word ชาติ (chaat) for instance, mostly known in its meaning as *nation*, is derived from the Pali word *carita*, meaning *what one is by birth or nature*[2] - nationality being one of the things one is born with. The originally broad meaning of ชาติ is reflected in the male first name ชาติชาย (literally: *born as a man* or *being a man*) or in expressions like ชาติก่อน (*previous life*). ชาติ is an opposing term to เจตนา (*volition* or *what one is by one's own makings*[3] [and not by nature]). These Buddhist concepts are

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[2] see NYANATILOKA :1972, p. 38

[3] ibid. p. 39

inherent in these words and they are understood by Thai Muslims and Christian Thais in exactly this Buddhist sense. They will know the concept from their Buddhist friends, from school and from the mass media. It is, therefore, not only safe to assume that the concepts carried by Thai words are very often Buddhist concepts but also that these concepts are shared even by those Thais who do not practice Buddhism themselves.

The concepts conveyed by language, however, do not exclusively originate in religion, mythologies or folk beliefs. Large sections of the linguistic conceptualization of the world have their origin in the material conditions of everyday life. The climate is one of them. It is one of the most important factors to determine cultural characteristics since the economy, food and housing depend on it at least in pre-industrialization times. A house in Thailand is different from a house in Europe because of climatic factors. The concept behind บ้าน (*house*), therefore, is different from that of the English *house*.

Eating, of course, is another important cultural activity and often its specific characteristics are reflected in the language. Thais usually do not simply eat - they eat *rice* (กินข้าว). The standard Thai way of affectionate greeting with the question กินข้าว เหรือยัง (*have you eaten [rice] already*) is easily explicable in Thailand but it is completely out of place if, for instance, uttered in a Western country at breakfast time where certainly no rice will be served.

This random look at some Thai terms has made it clear that words are not merely arbitrary acoustic and graphic signs but that they convey cultural concepts. Questions concerning the *nature* of this relationship between language and culture have fascinated linguists, philosophers and anthropologists alike for a long time.

2.4. Conclusion

There can be no doubt about the merits of a systematic study of the structural elements of a language. But more of an effort should be made to relate the findings of

such studies to aspects of culture and world view. By doing this, valuable insight could be gained into the fundamental patterns, the development and the changes of the culture and the world view of a people. After all, language is man's tool to conceptualize the world and construct models of reality. It is the prerequisite for all of his intellectual activities. There is, as many fairy-tales and legends tell us, no way of knowing something without naming it. "Only what has a name can be shared. Communicable perception has to be coded in language. [...] These perceptions, fixed in language, become a kind of second nature." (HODGE & KRESS,1993: 5) An examination of the language may, therefore, help to understand men's "second nature" better.

Cultural characteristics, world view and language change. But it is one of the important functions of language that it conserves those aspects of a world view that will be regarded as essential and distinctive. It is in its linguistic form that a culture survives. Changes are normal in a living language. The only threat to a culture is giving up its language and thus its means to conserve and communicate the world view of its people.

In the following chapters, I will examine the linguistic marking and representation in the Thai language of four essential components of the perception of reality - *time*, *causality*, *characterization of people* and *places and space* - and try to see how they can be related to certain aspects of the world view of the Thai people. If this amounts to a provisional analysis of reality that is conditioned by the linguistic material remains to be seen, but the differences found in the Thai language and the Thai culture compared to Western languages and cultures should certainly be treasured as an example of the many equally unique ways of looking at and interpreting the world among which the Western world view is only one.