
THE WEIGHT OF WORDS

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The Romans used to have the following saying, "verba volant, scripta manent", which means "the oral words are blown away while the written ones remain". Is it always true? Of course history has given an obvious preference to written texts. We keep a collection of written documents on several kinds of materials in several parts of the world. Actually, some documents are quite ancient. For instance Hammurabi's Code dates back from the second millennium B.C.¹ Hieroglyphs in Egypt were also written at that time. But what about the spoken word? We have of course no collection as such. So we have no idea whatsoever on how languages were pronounced. For instance, was the letter "u" pronounced [u] or [y]? The same applies to the Chinese language. Do we know exactly how that language was pronounced under the Tang Dynasty (618-907)? The answer is not very clear. So we do not remember how the beautiful Tang poems were read aloud.² What we do know is that languages change in most fields. Therefore it is most likely that phonetically languages have experienced the same transformations as they have in the lexical, syntactic, and semantic fields.

Of course voice-taping is a new phenomenon. Tape recorders were only invented in this century.³ So finally, libraries. Most political speeches are now recorded and kept at such libraries. But unfortunately, past eloquence can only be read as the orators have long left this world.

¹Hammurabi, founder of the Babylonian Empire launched a new legal code and this code was written on a cylindrical stone which was discovered in 1902 and which is kept in the Louvre Museum in Paris.

²Tang poems are very interesting as they develop several themes such as parting, separation, importance of nature which constituted some of the main themes of the Romantic poets in Europe, 1,000 years later.

³New developments occur in this field at present, for instance at Carnegie Mellon Institute a new computer is being created which makes use of the voice instead of the traditional typing. New dictating machines are also being developed. So the spoken word is respected.

In this paper we intend to show that, while we cannot dismiss the written word which is part and parcel of our history, we have to analyse the spoken word and assess how important it is in our present society. Is the spoken word so flimsy, so light that we can forget it altogether once it is uttered? In the fields of business and law, written texts are overriding. Written contracts are binding while oral agreements are often dismissed. Is it always true? We are going to see that, at least in two areas, oral words are prominent. In the second part we will try to analyse the consequence of utterances and finally in the third part, we will make an attempt to unravel the links which exist and which may be established between the written and the oral words.

Two fields give prominence to the spoken word, i.e. religion and politics. But unfortunately as religion is a sensitive issue in this part of the world, we have to avoid considering it.⁴ So we have to limit ourselves to the political arena. Fortunately politicians like to talk; so their speeches constitute a very large source of information to tap from. We remember famous words or expressions because they have been uttered in the first place. Later they appear in the print form in newspapers and books. But political speeches, even if they are written first are meant to be pronounced aloud in front of a public or in a studio, which is more or less the same as they are meant to be heard.⁵ The importance of the spoken word in politics is not confined to one language only. It can be found in any given language.

Famous words and expressions can be remembered for their accuracy or for their specificity. For instance, we all know the expression "the iron curtain" which was created by Sir Winston Churchill in a speech made at Fulton, Missouri, in the US on 5th March 1946.⁶ This expression is quite present in our minds as we have witnessed last year not only the opening of the Berlin Wall, but also the collapse of the Iron Curtain which used to divide Europe.

⁴It is rather a shame as the oral word plays a very important part in religion. Prayers are usually said aloud, often in a group. Sermons pronounced in any sanctuary emphasise the spoken word and can be quite powerful.

⁵Here lies the first difference between the written and the oral word: a written word may never be read while an oral one is meant to be heard. A politician makes a speech to convince, persuade, generate support, create awareness, etc.

⁶This expression is widely known, not only in English but in translation in several languages. In French it is "Le rideau de fer", in Malay it is "Tembok Besi" and so on.....

Another interesting expression which is widely remembered, is in German. It is the sentence, "Ich been ein Berliner" and that sentence was pronounced in a public speech made by the late American President, John F. Kennedy at the Rudolph Wilde Platz in West Berlin in the presence of Willy Brandt who was at that time MP and Mayor of West Berlin, on 26th June 1963, i.e. five months before he was shot dead at Dallas. That simple and short sentence is fondly remembered by many Germans.⁷

Our third example, after an English expression, and a German sentence, is a French utterance made by Andre Malraux when he as Minister of Culture in Paris, in a speech made at the Pantheon for the ceremony of the transfer of the ashes of the famous Resistance leader, Jean Moulin on 19th December 1964. In that speech Malraux called the French who were fighting the German invaders, "le peuple de la nuit" (the night people).

This expression is quite accurate as the Resistants were always hiding and fighting the Germans within France.

So we tend to remember these expressions and sentences because they describe very precisely a situation at a certain time. Other expressions may be remembered for other reasons. Moreover, politicians tend to have their own peculiarities, specificity and style. For instance, in this part of the world a politician well known for his speeches is Soekarno.⁸ First, these speeches were rather long. In Cuba Fidel Castro often made speeches which could last two hours while General de Gaulle was famous for his short but carefully worded speeches. The speeches of the latter did not exceed ten minutes most of the time. Besides General de Gaulle always

⁷Incidentally a year earlier another political leader has taken West Germany by storm. It was General de Gaulle. But De Gaulle did more than Kennedy. He made whole speeches in Germany which were well received by his listeners.

⁸His works are recorded in the collection entitled *Di bawah Bendera Revolusi* (Under the flag of the revolution) published by *Panitia Penerbit*, in Jakarta in the early sixties in two volumes. The first one contains his articles while the second one represents a collection of twenty speeches. Curiously the name of the late president of Indonesia is not always spelt the same. The papers refer to him as Soekarno while the collection of speeches mention him as Sukarno. The name distinction also appears with regard to the present incumbent in Jakarta who is referred to as Suharto while the official spelling is Soeharto. Usually considered as an outstanding public orator, Soekarno has been criticised for such a skill. For instance, by Abdul Aziz A. Talib in the monthly magazine *Pelita Bahasa* published by the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* in Kuala Lumpur in the November 1989 issue.

made a point to memorize what he wanted to say, so he never read his speeches as most other politicians

In Soekarno's speeches one expression which comes often at the beginning of a sentence is "Alangkah" (How) and an adjective. For instance in *Di bawah Bendera Revolusi* (p.7) we can find the sentence: "Alangkah hebatnya tahun yang telah lalu itu...." (How great was passed)... kita hadapi...." (How great were the difficulties which we are facing...) Soekarno continues with the same expression employed with several adjectives such as "Alangkah baiknya" (How beautiful), or "Alangkah salah" (How wrong) (p. 35), "Alangkah beratnya" (How difficult) (p.52), "Alangkah mudahnya" (How easy) (p. 58), and so on. On the other hand, President Soekarno usually ended his speeches by the following sentences: "Hidup Republik Indonesia! Hidup demokrasi! (Long live the Republic of Indonesia! Long live democracy!) for instance in a speech made on 17th August 1947 in Jogjakarta to commemorate the anniversary of the independence of the country (p. 39).³⁷ Soekarno's speeches were very emphatic as we can notice a lot of exclamation marks. His aim was to obtain the consent of his fellow-countrymen and to urge them to strive for a better Indonesia. Regularly the term of "bangsa" appears in his speeches.³⁸ To address his fellow countrymen Soekarno used to choose the expression "Saudara-saudara rakyat Indonesia seluruhnya" (for instance p. 43) (All the people of Indonesia).

Another interesting orator of the Third World was the late Prime Minister of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. Like Soekarno he was known for his oratory skills. For instance, Bankole Timothy in his book writes the following sentence: "Nkrumah is at his best when addressing a political meeting" (p. 136). Most of Nkrumah's speeches were emotional. In Monrovia in January 1965, he coined the famous sentence "Africa for the Africans" In another speech delivered in the Gold Coast Legislative

³⁷Strangely, memorisation is not well practised around here. When poets and poetry fans meet, they usually read poems, they do not recite them. The same applied in the religious field as for instance, the Quran is read aloud and not recited at the annual competition held in Kuala Lumpur. So recitation does not seem to be considered important.

³⁸General de Gaulle used a similar formula to end his speeches. He used to say "Vive la Republique, vive la France!" (Long live the Republic, long live France!) with a slow intonation.

³⁹In Malay this term is rather ambiguous as it may mean "nation" and also "race" which are rather different concepts. Apparently language terminologists in Malaysia pay a lot of attention to the coining of new terms and standardisation of them but tend to forget syntactic and semantic standardisation which are often necessary.

⁴⁰*Kwame Nkrumah, His rise to power* London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1955.

Assembly on July 10, 1953 Nkrumah asked for the name of Gold Coast to be replaced by Ghana as the region from Timbuktu to Bamako was called by that name before the arrival of the European (p. 152).¹³

Political speeches can be successful but they can also fail to obtain the desired intention. For instance, on 24th May 1968, in the period often referred to as "The events of May",¹⁴ General de Gaulle made a short speech to announce a nation-wide referendum.¹⁵ That speech did not change at all the unrest that was prevailing in France at that time. Many political observers believe then that was the end of such a politician. Yet, barely six days later General de Gaulle, i.e. on May 30th, made another speech. In such a short time General de Gaulle had regained his strength and minutes after that speech was delivered, Parisians assembled on the Champs Elysees to start walking down that famous avenue in Paris to show their support for him. That day one million of them came out for that purpose. So if the first speech was a clear failure, the second one was a real triumph and the Gaullist party won by a landslide victory at the following elections.

General de Gaulle's speeches followed a regular pattern. They were most of the time delivered over the radio and television at 8 p.m. just before the news. They always ended with the playing of the national anthem. So there was something solemn about them. General de Gaulle, like most political leaders made public speeches. One which is rather famous in this part of the world is the one delivered at the National Stadium in Phnom Penh in 1966 regarding the situation of Cambodia at that time. That speech is still considered as historic and probably if General de Gaulle had been listened to, Cambodia would not be in the present situation.

Oral words can carry too much weight. They can be very powerful and actually be destructive or at least negative. In such respect three situations can appear. First, we may use the wrong words and obtain something we did not want in the first place; at times we may also speak too much and receive a different response from our listeners, finally, there are times when we do not speak enough and this also leads to unpleasant consequences.

¹³Many countries have discarded modern names for older ones. For instance, Ceylon became Sri Lanka which is an old name which can be found in the famous literary work, Ramayana.

¹⁴In Malaysia there are also the events of May, but they refer to the ethnic clashes which occur in that country following the May 1969 elections.

¹⁵Incidentally, General de Gaulle was defeated by a referendum conducted a year later and the first president of the Fifth Republic resigned.

Often in a conversation we may utter the following sentence, "It's not what I wanted to say" But it is rather too late. We cannot take back the words which have been pronounced (even if we say we wish to do so), for those words have been heard and understood. So the effect of these words has been done and nothing can erase it altogether. We can of course say something like: "forget it" or "I was joking" but the mind of the listener has heard those words and nothing can be changed. In politics we often notice denials by politicians. They deny having said such and such a statement or they say that the quotation was taken out of context. But when we study those denials, we realise that, most of the time the politicians did make such a statement. The so-called denials are only to reduce the impact of those words. Probably, the politician was not aware that by saying such words, he would receive such comments and response.

For instance, if you happen to utter sentences such as "I do not love you" or "you're ugly" to your spouse, the response may be quite strong. Of course you may add, "I did not mean it" or "it was a joke" or even "I just wanted to draw your attention" But it may be too late to apologise and the weight of those words will remain, maybe for ever. A mutual trust may be shattered. Why is it so? The reason is that oral words have been uttered, heard (or overheard) and understood. So words command a huge power. A few sounds and a good relationship may be over. Is it not frightening? Do we realize at all times the power of such simple statements when we utter them or is it beyond our control?

To explain our point let us take an example which received wide coverage in Malaysia. On February 6th, early this year at Kew Gardens in England, Prince Charles was addressing environmentalists and in the course of his talk he spoke of the "genocide of the Penans". That speech, or rather extracts of that speech were published in the Malaysian papers and Malaysians were not amused.¹⁶ They did not pay attention to what Prince Charles said, before or after that statement on the Penans but that short expression, uttered over 10,000 km away from Malaysia, became an issue in this country. UMNO Youth was appalled and this led to an official statement from the British. Prince Charles was speaking in his name and that his views did not represent those of the British government in London. So a kind of apology had to be issued to reduce the impact of Prince

¹⁶Here we can assess the power of the press. Newspapers decide what to publish and also what not to publish. In our present example, the press found it relevant to Malaysia. Without the press intervention no one in Malaysia would have reacted.

Gardens. Now we must ask ourselves, how can such a statement made by Prince Charles in London create such an uproar in Malaysia? The answer is probably the weight of the words used by the British heir to the throne. We all know that the word "genocide" is highly connoted. It is not a commonly used term. In history it has been used in several special cases. For instance, it has been mentioned in the case of the murders of Armenians in Turkey in 1915. The word came again in the case of policies of Nazi Germany and in the justice which followed. More recently it has been applied in the case of the horror practiced by the Khmers Rouges in Cambodia (1975-1979).¹⁷ So when such a highly connoted term is used, listeners and later, readers of that speech did react as it happened in Malaysia.

So words do carry a lot of weight and we should always be aware of that. Politicians who tend to speak a lot are more prone to unpleasant surprises and should expect a response different from what they might have forecast.

So if we use wrong words or terms, the consequences can be, if not fatal, at least unpleasant. At times we may also speak too much. And this may lead to another misunderstanding between two individuals. For instance, in the course of an ordinary conversation, if we say something we were not supposed to reveal, we may obtain a response of surprise from our listeners. So we have to try to apologise by saying something like "You did not know that" But, as we have seen earlier, words cannot be taken back. Once uttered, it is over. They have been pronounced, heard and understood and we have to live with that fact. Sometimes experience helps and to avoid a new misunderstanding we know we have to keep quiet. In a discussion, we may realise the moment we have to stop talking to avoid saying too much and thus leading to an argument. Even if we have at our disposal another set of points, we may give in, in order to avoid any trouble, any unexpected consequences of oral words. If someone asks us: "can you keep a secret?", we always reply positively and yet do we keep secrets? Most of the time we are tempted to reveal such secrets. Why? Because at times we speak too much.

¹⁷Incidentally one of the reasons for the Cambodian impasse at present may be because the concept of genocide which was applied to judge Nazi leaders at the end of World War Two has never been considered against Khmers Rouges leaders. If the latter had been brought to justice, their present strength in the country would be by now negligible and a real peace would have been easier to implement.

Finally, there may also be times when we do not speak enough and ill feelings can occur between two individuals. A few expressions can illustrate this absence of conversation: "a penny for your thoughts", or "What are you thinking of?" or "please say something". In short conversation is needed and the absence of it is feared. In our modern world we hear that communication does not happen all the time, that communication gaps exist in our societies. In this context we yearn for words, for conversation.

So once again words are really powerful. Therefore, speaking which may be considered as a very basic activity - we start speaking during our first years or slightly later is not that simple for either we use the wrong words, or we speak too much or we do not speak enough. Can we avoid these pitfalls? It is not so easy unfortunately. We say try our best but sometimes we fail.

Probably the best synthesis between the power of the oral words, without falling into its numerous dangers, as we have just seen, has been accomplished by poets. Poets have written oral words. To put it differently, poems are written words to be read aloud and read again. Sounds, intonation play an important part in poetry besides meaning and style. The French poet, Francis Ponge (1899-1988) in an interview published by *Le Magazine Littéraire* in December 1988 in Paris made an interesting statement. I am going to put it in French; and for those who are not familiar with this language, a translation of it is found in note 18: "L'expression de la pensée en acte, au moment même où elle se produit, c'est-à-dire l'improvisation orale est intéressante dans la mesure où elle provoque chez l'auditeur un intérêt justement pour cette activité proprement humaine qui consiste à s'exprimer, à chercher sa pensée et à la produire à l'état naissant." In such a comment, we can appreciate the links which exists between the oral and the written words.

In this part of the world, poetry reading is a frequent pastime. Poets come to read their verses or to read other poems and their fans come to listen to them. Sometimes a good poet is not a very good reader, or vice-versa. Actually the best readers of poems are actors. At times poets can be actors and the result is superb. In Malaysia, a few years ago, *Grup Teater Elit* used to be quite active. There were two poets who used to receive a very good response because they

¹⁸The expression of thought in an act, at the precise moment it is produced, i.e. the oral improvisation is interesting as long as it creates an interest in the listener for this activity which is purely human which consists of expressing oneself, to look for thoughts and to produce it.

were actors as well. Thus Dinsman and Sutung Umar RS used to know how to draw the attention of the public in different locations, such as the lounge of a hotel, *Balai Budaya* at the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, or even by the river side at the *Pasar Seni* of Kuala Lumpur.

More recently another famous poetry reading session was held, this time in Singapore. A few poets took part in it and the two most renowned were Usman Awang from Malaysia and Rendra from Indonesia.¹⁹ The latter held the thousand odd listeners spell-bound when he read his poem, entitled *Maria Zaiton*.²⁰ That moment was a real happening and the audience was under the charm of the poet and the poem reader.

We said earlier that poems could represent the link between the written and the oral word. Why is it so? Most of the time poems are first written and then read, silently or aloud or even recited.²¹ So they first belong to the written world. But once written and published, they are read, recited, memorised, listened to and soon. A novel is rarely read aloud. So, poems represent the link between the oral and the written words.

Another group can also be considered as a link between the written and the oral words. This group is made by politicians. Some of them are both speakers and writers. For instance, Winston Churchill was able to make beautiful speeches and at the same time he was a confirmed writer and was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1953. In France General de Gaulle was not only a famous but also a full-fledged writer as well.²²

We have just seen that far from being insignificant, oral words are powerful either on their own or associated with the written ones. Both play an important part in our lives and both should be recognised as such. There is often a process from the written to the oral words or vice-versa. For instance, as we have seen, poets write first and then read aloud their works.²⁴ Politicians do more or less the same but sometimes they have

¹⁹In *Malam Baca Puisi Perdana* which was held at the PUB Auditorium in Singapore, a few blocks away from Orchard Road on 17 March 1990.

²⁰This poem can be found in Rendra, *Ballads and Blues: Poems translated from Indonesian*. Bilingual Edition, Kuala Lumpur, OUP, 1974.

²¹This has been clearly explained by Rahman Shaari in his article in *Dewan Sastera*, April 1990, pp. 67-69.

²²This paper has often mentioned politicians: I hope the listeners will bear with me. Politicians are probably the most talkative group. So they deserve some attention.

²³Curiously de Gaulle's speech to be recorded by the BBC in London. So we do not have any copy of the original sound track.

²⁴In the past people were able to improvise and for instance to write poems off-hand as Malays did with their *pantuns*. But now everyone has to write first before being able to read or express oneself aloud.

somebody to write their speeches for them. But in the case of poems and in the case of political speeches, the intention is to be heard or read.

Sometimes the written word becomes the oral one. For instance, famous sentences are remembered and become part and parcel of the ethos of a society or a nation. Many British readers remember the first sentence of Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* (1938): "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again." On the other hand the French readers are also very familiar with one sentence. It is the first sentence of the novel *Salambo* (1862) written by Flaubert which goes like this: "C' était à Mégare, faubourg de Carthage dans les jardins d'Hamilcar" (It was at Megare, suburb of Carthage in the Hamilcar gardens). It could be asked why those two sentences are so famous. The answer is not obvious, but it is a known fact that among the millions of sentences in literature those two are often remembered.