

Ok! Ok! Number One!

Thai Protest Language, Lateral Movements, and #ifpoliticswasgood

Jakkrit Sangkhamanee (Chulalongkorn University, Thailand; jakkrit.sa@chula.ac.th) & *Casper Bruun Jensen* (Independent scholar, Cambodia; cbruunjensen@gmail.com)

Other Terms, Other Conditions: A NatureCulture Blog Series

This blog post engages the possibilities of working “on other terms” by examining ongoing democracy protests in Thailand.¹ As we shall see, these events have given rise to many interesting words, which, far from lying “dormant in other languages” (Law and Mol 2020: 264) live very busy lives. At street level, one encounters a range of phrases, which “address pertinent issues” (273) and practically literalize an interest in “evocative forms of resistance” (277). (For a complementary example see Ureta’s lively discussion of Chilean street level discourse on community dogs in a later post).



Figure 1: Yellow ducks, like their counterparts in Hong Kong and elsewhere, appeared in the midst of the Bangkok protest scene (Courtesy of เสาวชนพลเดช, Free Youth; <https://www.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth>)

At first glance, the protest language seems to work by inversion of familiar dichotomies. In contrast with stylized, formal modes of expression, it is “subsidiary.” Known as “mob-language (*pasa-mob*; ภาษาฝ้อบ),” it instantiates low rather than high culture. Far from serious, it is joking. But these “other terms” are also *lateral*. Some, like minions and jukes, arrive via films and video games. Others liken riot police to black coffee (*o-lieng*; โอเลี้ยง), and apprentice monks to baby carrots (also เมบี่แครอท). And what we might call “material terms”, like the giant inflatable rubber ducks appearing at many demonstrations, take inspiration from Hong Kong protests, which became increasingly indirect in response to the prohibition of terms and actions by the authorities. So, in brief, this mongrel language is lateral in having emerged horizontally, *out of* incongruent material and semiotic mobilizations, and *in response to* multiple emergencies and quickly changing conditions.

These lateral movements furthermore raise the intriguing possibility that “other terms” could also be activated within STS or anthropology. But at the same time, they hint at the speculative and pragmatic limitations of conceiving the importance of such other terms mainly in relation to their possible movement into English. Because what we encounter in Thailand and elsewhere (for example in Japan; see Jensen and Morita 2017) are words that can do a lot of work *because* they come from elsewhere, for example from English. Rather than *centering* on the enrichment of English by other terms, we are thus interested in *decentered, multi-directional pathways*.

What can be done with a mongrel mob-language? Quite a lot of things! But we will have to limit ourselves to a few illustrations. First, *curry* (Kaeng; แกง). In regular Thai, curry can be a noun for a curry dish or a verb for cooking it. Mob language introduces different combinations. Among many spicy dishes, there is curry with black-ear catfish (Tepo, เทโพ). *Kaeng Tepo* (แกงเทโพ). But kaeng also means teasing or causing irritation. Te is also to *dump* (เท). And po (โพ) is short for *police*. In this constellation, curry, or to curry, means to trick or cheat; in particular, to trick or cheat the police (also known as *mocha* due to their brown uniforms).



Figure 2: A photo banner was posted on the Free Youth Facebook page depicting a giant curry being placed in the middle of a riot police force. (Courtesy of ชาวชนปลดแอก, Free Youth; <https://www.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth>)

Currying has turned into an elaborate and efficient protest tactics. Most prominently, it involves confusing the police or military about the location of upcoming demonstrations. By placing false hints online, protestors curry the authorities to waste time and resources. Government offices have been closed, barriers constructed, public transport stopped, and units deployed, only to find at the last moment that an entirely different plan is being carried out. Despite the embedded reference to the police, however, others can also be curried. Protestors themselves, if they are not quick enough. *Minions* or *CIA* might also be caught off guard.

Minions? A derogatory English term used to describe servile underlings. As you may know, it is also the name of a popular animation movie from 2015, which features small yellow creatures that mindlessly follow an evil master. In Thailand, facing the youthful pro-democracy mob, is a royalist mob whose yellow shirts represent the monarchy. From the perspective of pro-democracy protesters, these yellow underlings to an unpopular master are minions.

If we look closer at the minions there is more to see. Because they are not all regular civilians. In fact, the yellow ideology is not as popular as it has been. To make the royalist counter-mob look bigger and more imposing, military personnel have secretly swapped their uniforms for yellow shirts. However, they cannot so easily hide their military skinheads. So, even in civilian clothes, those whom the

protestors see as the *real* minions are still identifiable. A lateral movement in two steps. First, minions enter Thai politics via American animation. Second, minions distinguish civilians and soldiers. Their heads offer bald testimony to where their sympathies lie.



Figure 3: Human Minions (Courtesy of เขาชนพลคอก, Free Youth; <https://www.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth>)

And then there is the CIA. Contrary to *mocha* and minions, which do not immediately evoke the threatening authorities they actually name, CIA has nothing to do with national security despite the term. Instead, it refers to street vendors who drive mobile food stalls from place to place. It became popular on account of their uncanny ability to arrive at protest sites at lightning speed; much quicker than the authorities and sometimes before the protestors themselves. *As if* they had access to secret intelligence. This term laterally shifts reference from a group actually invested with covert power and operational capacities supported by high-tech gadgets to another characterized by precarity, omnipresence in the urban landscape, and reliance on simple technologies. But according to street vendors, what allows them to rapidly identify protest sites *is* actually intelligence work. If they are often able to be on-site before everybody else, it is because they minutely scrutinize LINE,

Facebook, Telegram, and Twitter for veiled hints about location. Even so, CIA can also occasionally be carried.



Figure 4: The CIA is leading the mob from the Victory Monument to Government House (Courtesy of เขวชนปลดแอก —Free Youth; <https://www.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth>)

As should be clear, mob terms do a lot of different work. Short but carrying loads of *diffuse* meaning, they have proven effective for phone-based social media communication and quick organization. Embodying the culture of meming, they often contain multi-layered puns, which infuses the movement with *fun* as an integral dimension. And thus, it has become possible to make curry out of the authorities, who finds it difficult to *keep up with* the proliferation of cross-referencing terms seemingly moving in all directions at once.

As John Law and Annemarie Mol (2020: 273) wrote “you may not know what these words stand for...but that is the whole point.” Only: in this case the ‘you’ refers to the authorities. The whole point is that you—authorities—can’t understand the terms of communication because they are meant only for those who inhabit the protest assemblage.

A quick step to the side. Michael Taussig (2008: 1) cites a colonial description of Bengali villagers making indigo: “I am puzzled to tell you what precise colour it really has... for being like the sea, exposed to the sky, in like way its quantity and the state of the weather influence its appearance.” A doubled ambiguity. On the one hand, the elusive power of the phenomenon to exceed the term that describes it. On the other hand, the elusive power of the word to evoke *something* in a way that prolongs its effects into a nebulous future. In the streets of Bangkok, such amorphousness becomes an asset. Our “other terms” *attach to events* that continue to overflow them. At the same time, *playing with opacity* is operationalized as a tactics of elusion.

In a gloss on the indeterminate relation between words and worlds, Taussig (2008: 3) writes that certain images “come out of nowhere, it seems, as if by chance, making the present more present...welling up within us as something alive...Yet...the gap between the old and the new can never be closed.” To all appearances, our “other terms” make the present vividly present for those who adapt and adopt them. But their implications are elusive and open-ended in ways that extend beyond those uses. To make sense of the “gap between the old and the new,” we briefly survey some discussions relating to what the protests obliquely aim for. This is the topic of #ifpoliticswasgood (#ถ้าการเมืองดี).

Tyrell Haberkorn (2020) has written that “to dream of democracy in Thailand is to imagine a new, different future. To do so against the backdrop of years dominated by dictatorship and feudalism is an act at once daring, urgent, and hopeful.” While protests continue in the streets of Bangkok, another vocabulary, neither detached nor similar, has emerged with the hashtag #ifpoliticswasgood. Not quite detached: because the protests respond to a collective feeling that politics is indeed not very good. But not the same either: because while the protest mob language is parodic and punning, #ifpoliticswasgood is searching and uncertain; something like a speculative clamor for ways of life that have no clear form.³

With reference to the significance of Twitter for political mobilization, the political scientist Aim Sinpeng (2021) describes the

youth movement as engaged in “hashtag activism.” Since the beginning, #ifpoliticwasgood has been tweeted over 2 million times. The hashtag has made it possible for a heterogeneous collective to share ideas and *add their own terms* to discussions about Thailand’s political future. Not so surprisingly, those terms and concerns are very diverse. For some, the education system would improve #ifpoliticwasgood. For others, wages would be better, the air would be cleaner, human rights would be respected, ecologies would be protected, or state welfare would be more inclusive.

We can flag only a few points. One: #ifpoliticwasgood has created something like a speculative niche where people can explore hopes and fears, expectations and possibilities, with more or less anonymous others *who bring other terms to the table*. Two: digital connectivity has shaped this future-oriented collective, which gains political agency through the *lateral movements of many actors and the terms they share and invent*. Three: this means that #ifpoliticwasgood can be seen *as daring acts of political imagination*, which complement the daring acts of street protests in a different medium, and *with an orientation to the less immediate future*.

Asked by a journalist about her situation, a middle-aged woman market vendor working at the Pathumwan intersection—site of protests and government crackdown—replied with evident frustration that her stall had been closed for days.² Since the protests went on until 3AM, she hadn’t slept. Her relatives want her to leave the area. So far, so bad. The reporter then asks what she thinks about more demonstrations. The answer seems clear in advance, but out of the blue her mood and posture change as she vigorously endorses the struggle for democracy (in English): Ok! Ok! Number one!

Soon the exclamation became a meme, and it is not hard to see why. It combines a totally unanticipated switch in perspective with a distinctive and quite funny turn of phrase. Ok! Ok! Number one! signals strong agreement, but we think the more general import of the meme lies in its articulation of the relation between the immediate trouble spelled by street protests and the future of Thai politics as ambiguous and supportive *at once*.

How might the relations between our ‘other terms,’ speculative futures, and the conceptual vocabularies of STS or anthropology be conceived? From one side, our descriptions are obviously infused with a sensibility that sees heterogeneous actors assemble and perform technologies, infrastructures, and socio-political formations. This enabled us to see *kaeng tepo*, minions, and CIA as emerging through lateral movements across street protests and social media. Since tweets thrive on short, striking, and often punning delivery, while effective mob-language relies on the possibilities for activating half-hidden meanings in political mobilization, there is a point of intersection. Other terms now run wild in all directions. It is possible to encounter baby carrots and minions on Sukhumvit road and read baffling sentences like “black coffee was curried because they weren’t as quick as the CIA” online.

But what about the lateral aspiration that motivated the exploration of other terms to begin? In our case that would be the movement of Thai protest terms *into* STS? Perhaps it is merely silly to try to articulate *kaeng* or minions as specific STS terms, although—who knows what might come of it? But would it be so pointless to search for analogous terms? After all, the field’s long search for respectability has come with certain costs. While important topics continue to proliferate, the recycling of quasi-canonical but by now also rather shopworn ideas is arguably a warning sign of a certain stagnation. So perhaps experimenting with *protest vocabularies* that pack a parodic punch or make the unsayable sayable might support an ambition to rethink *STS itself on other terms*.

For such a speculative, lateral movement there is also something else to learn from mob language and #ifpoliticswasgood. Which is that the point of subversion should not be to fill vacant spots on the thrones of theory. Just as mob-language does not hope to become the new normal, formal Thai, refreshing *other terms* that would help keep STS lively and everyone on their toes would not aspire to authority. They would be quite happy to remain minor.

Notes

¹ The ongoing Thai protests began as a youth mobilization in high schools and universities in early 2020. They grew into a pro-democracy platform against the military junta-cum-elected government led by Prime Minister and former head of

the National Council for Peace and Order General Prayuth Chan-ocha, with demands for sociopolitical and monarchical reforms (see Lertchoosakul 2021, Sangkhamanee 2021, Sinpeng 2021). Many successful street protests and public occupations have been organized by the movement in Bangkok and other major cities. Protests have recently been met with harsh repression from authorities, and many leading activists have been apprehended, legally harassed, and sentenced harshly. This has heightened public dissatisfaction not only with the government and monarchy, but also with the legal system.

² For contrast, see Dányi's (2020) discussion of the equally searching but apparently far world-wearier *búskomor* politics.

³ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyFQMePPzr0&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed on March 21, 2021).

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