

UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL ENGLISH TEXTS THROUGH SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE METAFUNCTIONS IN CORPORATE BUSINESS DISCOURSE

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Abstract

English education in Thailand generally gives an importance to general English skills, and tends to overlook specific skills development in professional contexts. This study proposes an analysis of metafunctions, which is part of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory initiated by Halliday (1978, 1994). The study focuses on the language of annual reports in the Thai business context. An annual report is part of every established organization's documents. It has multiple audiences such as stockholders, local and foreign investors as well as interested individuals. In every annual report, "Message from the Chairman" always appears at the beginning. This type of message is generally written by the chairman who provides management's summary of the company's overall performance for the year. It is a way of reaching out to stockholders and investors to ensure them of the company's stability and credibility. This study looks at communication of 'corporate news' in time of crisis through the authority's language. It examines the corpus of 54 "Messages from the Chairman" in Thai annual reports written in English during Asia's economic crisis of 1997, and points out how metafunctions play an important role in underpinning the organization of this kind of corporate business text. Following the Hallidayan approach in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the three metafunctions (*ideational, interpersonal, textual*) are analysed. The findings reveal how these metafunctions are linguistically realised in this corporate public discourse in which the movement of thoughts needs to be presented logically and positively. The study has pedagogical implications for ESP teaching in Thai graduate classrooms in which the knowledge of metafunctions in structural and textual organizations is crucial for developing professional reading and writing skills among Thai students who need in-depth English education for academic and professional purposes.

Keywords: metafunctions; systemic functional linguistics; discourse analysis; ESP; Business English

1. INTRODUCTION

The global spread of English can be regarded as one of the most significant linguistic phenomena in the world. Two main factors for the present-day world status of English have been British colonialism and American economic supremacy. (Crystal 1997; Graddol 1997; Pennycook 1994; Phillipson 1992; Brumfit 1982) It is evident that the successive promotion of English by Britain and the United States through

political influence, economic power and technological superiority together with the global forces searching for a single *lingua franca* or common language for cross-cultural communication have strengthened the status of English as an international language. Perhaps the third factor that encourages the use of English in the 21st Century is economic globalisation. Graddol (1997: 28-35) describes a new order for the world economy in which English has become and will continue to be the major business *lingua franca* as it is used extensively by the world's 'Big Three' trading blocs – North America, the European Union and Japan, which dominate world trade.

1.1 English as the Language of International Business

How English has become the language of international business can be traced back to the colonial era when English was introduced to many colonial states not only for political purposes but also for business purposes. Kachru and Quirk (1981: xvi) state, 'The outstanding factor in extending the use of English has undoubtedly been the political power and influence of the English-speaking nations and the superiority they attained in various fields of commerce'. The status of English as the dominant medium for commerce has been strengthened over time by the boom of world trade which has led to the establishment of a large number of international economic organizations such as the European Union (EU), the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).

Nowadays, in the 'shrinking' world of advanced information technology, English also dominates as the means of modern communication; namely, the Internet, e-mail systems and various computer programming languages and information transfer protocols, which are of tremendous use in the local and international business worlds. The free trade and Information Technology Age have led to the so-called 'world without boundaries' where most nations are sharing one common language in their cross-cultural communication – the English language.

1.2 English in Thailand

It was during the colonial era in the nineteenth century that English was formally introduced in Thailand for diplomatic and business-related purposes. Initially, it was learned within a small, limited circle of diplomats, aristocrats and members of the royal family who were involved in national security and foreign affairs both

diplomatic and commercial. Later as English has gradually played an increasingly significant role as an international language especially for international business communication, English language teaching has become more widespread, especially after Thailand opened its doors to world trade, which has led to its rapid and continuous economic growth.

Foreign trade and investment have brought an increasing number of multinational corporations, foreign companies and joint ventures in Thailand. These organizations are economically beneficial because they create employment. It is common practice for the multinational corporations and foreign companies to recruit some employees overseas mainly from their own countries. These expatriates have encouraged the use of English in the workplace, and, as a result, have formed an English-speaking community. This social community, along with an influx of foreign tourists due to the boom of the Thai tourist industry, has enhanced the spread of English both inside and outside the workplace. As for the business environment, nowadays the majority of white-collar jobs require a good command of English. It comes with no surprise how corporations in Thailand often prepare their annual reports in two languages, both Thai and English.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The social functions or practices of language provide the primary dimension for characterizing and organizing communicative processes and products in a society; without understanding why a language is being used as it is, and the consequences of such use, it is impossible to understand its meaning in the context of social interaction. (Saville-Troike 1982: 14)

In her book “*The Ethnography of Communication*”, Saville-Troike (1982) gives an insightful overview of linguistic, sociolinguistic and communication theories. From the above saying, it can be inferred that research into language in use in any situated context can help us better theorize communication that occurs both at an individual level and at a societal level. In this regard, Systemic Functional Linguistic Theory is an effective starting point for the understanding of such language phenomenon.

2.1 Systemic Functional Linguistic Theory

Functional approaches to language analysis are the focal areas of study within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which, following Halliday (1978, 1994), emphasizes the metafunctions, or what Fairclough (2003: 26) calls ‘multi-functionality’ of texts. SFL is a linguistic theory with a focus on the functional

relationship between language and other social aspects especially the social character of texts. Halliday (1994) outlines three categories of metafunctions of language: the *ideational*, *interpersonal*, and *textual* functions. By calling this a Hallidayan approach, Bloor and Bloor (1995: 9) provide a comprehensive summary of Halliday's (1994) metafunctions:

The ways in which human beings use language are classified by Halliday into 3 broad categories:

1. Language is used to organize, understand and express our perceptions of the world and of our own consciousness. This function is known as the ideational function. The ideational function can be classified into two subfunctions: the experiential and the logical. The experiential function is largely concerned with content or ideas. The logical function is concerned with the relationship between ideas.
2. Language is used to enable us to participate in communicative acts with other people, to take on roles and to express and understand feelings, attitude and judgements. This function is known as the interpersonal function.
3. Language is used to relate what is said (or written) to the real world and to other linguistic events. This involves the use of language to organize the text itself. This is known as the textual function.

Halliday (1978, 1994) explains that texts represent aspects of the world, enact social relations among participants, and, as a whole, incorporate cohesion and coherence, both linguistically and contextually. His theory is in line with Saville-Troike who points out, 'At a societal level, language serves many functions. Language selection often relates to political goals, functioning to create or reinforce boundaries in order to unify speakers as members of a single speech community and to exclude outsiders from intragroup communication.' (ibid 1982: 12) Halliday successfully introduces the concept of context of situation. He points out that context is originally associated with register in terms of the three dimensions: *Field*, *Tenor*, and *Mode*, which together construe the context of situation in texts. 'A text in Halliday's terminology is a chunk of language that is actually spoken or written for the purposes of communication by real people in actual circumstances.' (Bloor & Bloor 1995:4) This definition of 'text' is equivalent to the term 'discourse' used in discourse analysis nowadays.

Fairclough (2003) seems to draw on Halliday's multifunctional approach to language when he elucidates that discourse contributes to the construction of (a) social identities; (b) social relations; and (c) systems of knowledge and meaning. Fairclough's (2003) critical discourse theory supports Halliday's (1994: xv)

dimensions of discourse analysis which consist of the *understanding* of the text (how, and why, the text means what it does), and the *evaluation* of the text (why the text is, or is not, an effective tool for its own purposes – in what respects it succeeds and in what respects it fails or is less successful). The latter requires ‘an interpretation not only of the text itself but also of its context (context of situation, context of culture), and of the systematic relationship between context and text’. (ibid: xv) To date, SFL is still active and a large number of researchers are pursuing research in this field.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper focuses on one type of professional business texts, that is, corporate annual reports. It analyses the authority’s language employed in communicating ‘corporate news’ during the economic crisis of 1997. The data include 54 chairman’s messages to shareholders published in 1997 (2540 B.E.) English corporate annual reports of different public companies listed on the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET). Following the Hallidayan approach in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the paper analyses the three metafunctions (*ideational, interpersonal, textual*) in the corpus, and further examines how positive meaning is made so as to maintain stockholders’ and investors’ confidence in time of crisis.

3.1 Research Questions

1. In what way can the three metafunctions be identified in the messages from the chairman?
2. How can each metafunction be linguistically realised, and contribute to the making of positive meaning?

3.2 Limitations of Research

Firstly, I had no control over the production of the annual report narratives, and the selection process of the annual reports was based on convenience sampling. Secondly, the sources of my corpus varied, so my data are not specific to any particular type of business, but represent a genre-specific analysis which considers the data from different sources within the public companies listed on the SET as a whole, regardless of their financial status. Thirdly, it is not possible to know whether the chairman writes the message himself/herself, or a PR expert is the real writer, but this is not a big issue because what matters is how the message is written rather than who writes it. Fourthly, I only focused on English version of the annual report, and did not compare it to the Thai version as I assumed that it passed through a professional

translation process either from Thai into English or vice versa. Finally, it is not always possible to know the relationship between the writer and the reader as the annual report normally has a multiple audience. Therefore, this paper does not discuss issues of power and status in detail.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The message from the chairman (MFTC) in annual reports tends to have a unique characteristic. It typically adopts the letter writing conventions, with salutations in the beginning and complimentary close at the end before the signature of the chairman. However, it somehow serves the purpose of a summary report rather than a letter. As Balata and Breton (2005: 5) put it, ‘This section is also like a microcosm of the whole report aiming to encapsulate in one page an image of the situation of the firm’. A heading is often used before the actual message. After the heading, there may or may not be the salutations, but complimentary close and the signature of the chairman are always present. The only salutation style, found in less than 50%, of my corpus is ‘Dear shareholders’. I do not pay attention to these features as they are like routine procedures which, though representing the interpersonal relationship between the writer and the reader, presumably carry no communicative value. Therefore, my focus is only on the body text of the message, and my analysis and discussions will be based on this narrative part.

The Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) groups its listed companies under 8 segments of industry. The corpus of MFTCs are from 54 annual reports of the listed companies which represent all the 8 segments of industry:

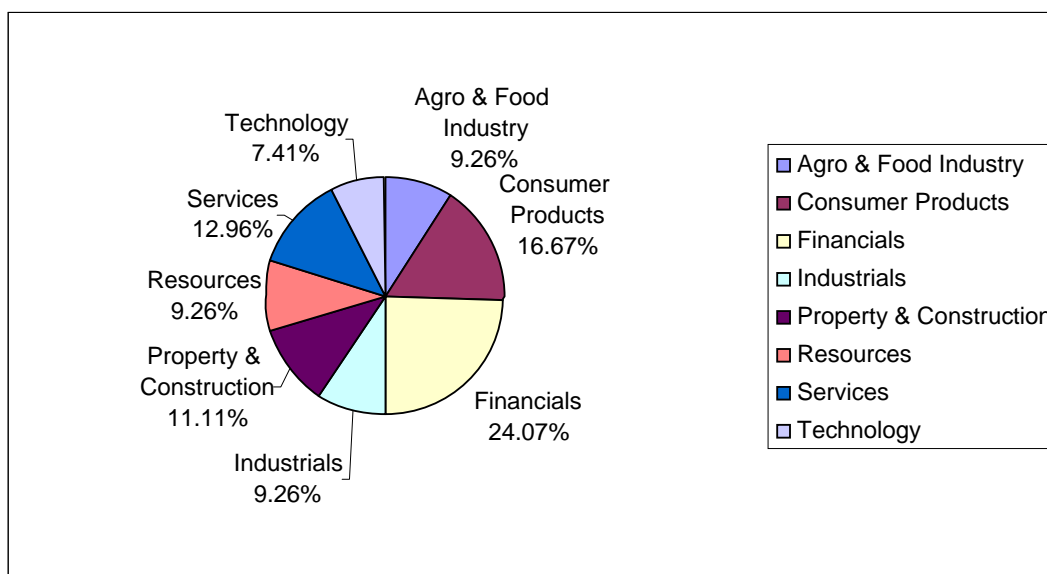


Figure 1: Data Classification in Industry Segments

Each MFTC is labelled in this paper by its company’s stock code, which is defined by the SET, mostly using the abbreviation of its company’s name (see the Appendix). It is arranged here in accordance to the industry segments to which it belongs. This arrangement is used just for systematic grouping, and will not have any effect on the analysis which, as mentioned earlier, focuses on the content of MFTCs as a whole. The preliminary observation of the MFTCs has been conducted through individual word count to find the average length of data. The results are as follows:

Table 1: Length of the MFTCs

Corpus	No. of Texts	Lengths of Texts: Range (in words)	Average Length of Texts (in words)	Total size of corpus (in words)
MFTC	54 messages	130 – 1,483	478.52	25,850

Table 1 demonstrates the lexical density of the MFTCs in the corpus, analysed with simple computer tools in Microsoft Word and Excel. The shortest MFTC is from Goldenland (GOLD) in Property & Construction Segment, which contains 130 words, while the longest one is from Electricity Generating (EGCO) in Resources Segment, which has 1,483 words. To sum up, the average density is 478.52. The majority (67%) of the MFTCs’ length is below average. As the basic nature of the corpus has been outlined, next is the analysis of metafunctions.

Following Halliday’s (1994) classification of language use in reality, which is known as the three metafunctions (*the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions*), I adopt his assumption that the language meanings are construed by the *ideational* function consisting of the ‘experiential’ and ‘logical’ sub-functions, and the *interpersonal* function. The *textual* function gives relevance to the first two, and altogether they are perceived as metafunctions which contribute to the interpretation of discourse in context. The MFTCs in the corpus can be analysed in terms of their metafunctions in this respect as they reflect a particular context of situation. To illustrate this further, a MFTC sample is provided below.

Sino-Thai Engineering and Construction Public Company Limited (STEC)

We all faced certain hardships in 1997, but I am pleased to say that STECON has weathered the storm well. While the problems that caused so many of our countries difficulties, such as the depreciation of the Baht and regional instability, were beyond STECON's control, we have striven to consolidate our position and maintain our strength in the market place.

'One Solution, One Answer, One Goal' is the methodology with which STECON is approaching the coming year. It emphasises the strengths of the company and provides a clear path towards a stronger, brighter future.

As part of that methodology, STECON believes in tackling problems head on. To combat the affects of the Baht flotation, we have taken decisive action. The risks involved with STECON's US\$ 80 million syndicated loan, due to associated foreign exchange rates have been greatly elevated. Yet, we continue to pursue arrangements for additional improvement.

In spite of the difficulties facing the construction business, we were still able to generate income worth 5,537 million Baht in 1997. Much of this success is due to STECON's willingness to make the hard decisions necessary to adjust to today's environment and to intensify efforts in both the private and public sectors. These combined efforts have resulted in a gross profit margin of 9.72 per cent.

1998 will be another hard year for all of us. Realistically, we expect an overall construction spending decrease of 27 per cent over the next two years. The reasons for this are threefold; private sector spending has dropped due to the economic crisis; the government budget has decreased, and there is lower investment due to higher interest rates. In addition, we can expect an increase in competition between existing construction companies due to fewer new contacts being available. However, STECON will continue to do everything it can to meet today's challenges head on, while at the same time working to build on our many strengths.

Finally, on behalf of the Board of Directors and the company's executives, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to STECON's shareholders, clients, business alliances and staff for making the achievements of the past possible and for helping to lay the foundations for a greater success in the future.

Table 2: MFTC Sample

According to Hermann (2007: 17), 'Narratives and stories in CEO's letters to stockholders project an active, subjective, internal locus of control for the corporate persona'. The following discussion is based on the use of metafunctions in my corpus as a whole.

4.1 The ideational function

This function rationalizes how the text constructs the world of experience. Thus it concerns the content of the MFTCs. As such, it is linked with the experiential sub-function which is largely concerned with content or ideas, as well as the logical sub-function, which is concerned with the relationship of ideas. By taking the structural organization into consideration, the ideational function can be justified in the content in which facts, ideas, and information are presented logically. For example, the very first part of most MFTCs provides an economic overview which mainly involves the

crisis and its effects on the company. This movement of thought then paves the way for the writer to admit corporate negative effect(s) caused by the crisis, which are often followed by redeeming corporate credentials. If we look at these two units of thoughts closely, we can also see the logical relationship of claim and justification. It is expressed with some adverbs of contrast, or conjunctions of contrast or concession, as underlined in the following examples.

Haad Thip, like every other business felt the effects. The diminishing purchasing power of the consumer directly effected the volume of business done by the company. Nevertheless, Haad Thip still managed to maintain its leadership position in southern Thailand's soft drink market, even in the face of intense marketing competition from our competitors. (HTC)

As a result many companies of varying business in Thailand have been greatly affected. Nam Seng, though also affected, has drawn upon its vast experience and strong foundation in administration and management of its business to consolidate during this period of crisis. (NSI)

When the Thai baht depreciated over 100% in a panic against the US currency, our company inevitably ran into unprecedented difficulties. The unrealized exchange loss alone reversed our operating performance from a profit of 205.89 million baht to a net loss of 459.62 million baht. Nonetheless, in spite of the overwhelming calamitous situation, we have succeeded in maintaining normal operations under soundly developed systems. (CWT)

We all faced certain hardships in 1997, but I am pleased to say that STECON has weathered the storm well. (STECON, see Table 2 above for full content)

The above-mentioned content also forms the basis for other movements of thought such as financial data summary and company's policies/strategies through contextual implications or pragmatic connections (e.g. crisis => losses in profits/dividends, and crisis => corporate reactions and/or future strategies) either with or without obvious linguistic links. Prasad and Mir (2002: 95) state, 'The successful use of these letters is dependent on their efficacy in engaging certain deeply held ideas and beliefs in their audiences' cultural common sense.'

4.2 The interpersonal function

This function observes how the message conveyed by the writer negotiates its intended meaning with the reader. It is perhaps useful to look at the type of relationship between the company and its shareholders. A remark from a recent study on stockholders' sensemaking is worth noting here:

Whatever the initial reason for investing, stockholders become owners of corporations. However, professional managers rather than stockholders run corporations. They are connected to organizations as owners but are simultaneously separate from the day-to-day management of organizations. As such, stockholders are loosely coupled with the rest of organizational system. (Hermann 2007: 16)

This justifies the need of a public corporation to publish the annual report, which is viewed as part of corporate public discourse, in order to communicate with its shareholders and the general public. In the organizational pattern of MFTCs, it is somewhat obvious that expressions of thanks, of positive future prospects, and of anticipation for cooperation contain a strong interpersonal function. In these parts, the writer directly addresses the reader with strategic communicative purposes. In terms of self-reference, the writer frequently uses the first-person perspective (i.e. 'I' or 'We') instead of using 'the company's name' which can be considered as the neutral third-person perspective. There is a recurrent use of the personal address ('you' or 'your' as in *your support, your dedication*).

On this occasion I would like to convey my sincere thanks to all our customers, brokers, and agents for your cooperation and confidence in the Company. I would also like to thank all the executive directors and every staff member for your joint efforts and dedication that have earned the Company steady progress and a good reputation among the public. (SAFE)

We have therefore been able to successfully overcome the economic obstacles felt on a national and regional scale and hope that we will continue to enjoy your continued support. (TF)

In the part of visualizing positive prospects, the writer tends to personally give an implied promise to the shareholders. The following examples help illustrate this point.

I am certain that with our strong business culture, unity, and common values, Thai Theparos Food Products will maintain our high performance record and improve product quality to the greater benefit of society as a whole. (SAUCE)

We certainly see 1998 as a challenging year and will do our best to make it a successful one for our company. (TTI)

The Board of Directors and I believe that the service quality, that we as a team have developed together, will be a good foundation on which we can move ahead confidently, especially in the time of increased economic volatility and uncertainty. (SMK)

The interpersonal function helps create a friendly tone, moving away from report-like narrative in the beginning to letter-like one at the end. It is more people-oriented which can lead to solidarity between the writer and the reader. As Jameson (2004: 529 cited in Hermann 2007: 17) remarks,

"Stockholder reports are frequently nonlinear, incorporate dramatic strategies with a number of narrators, and use multiple subgenres, while using both verbal and illustrative discourses in their texts. All these rhetorical processes create the necessary dialogical reader-writer identities, which mirror "human relationships even when the subject matter is impersonal and technical, as it often is in business contexts".

4.3 The Textual function

This function is found all through the MFTC corpus as it concerns structure and organization of the text. It is the linguistic means that gives relevance to the ideational and interpersonal functions. The identification of the structural pattern can exhibit the textual function. Like the sample shown Table 2, all MFTCs in the corpus shares similar movements of thought, starting from giving an overview of the economy, admitting corporate negative effects caused by the crisis, then redeeming the corporate credentials, providing financial data summary, giving information on the company's policies/strategies/actions, expressing thanks, signalling anticipation for continued support, and finally, visualizing positive prospects. These thought units are not compulsory and do not necessarily appear in a fixed order although somehow most of them are often found consecutively in the above manner. Altogether they help create the positive tone of the message in order to maintain the reader's confidence in the company's performance.

So far the three metafunctions have been identified in the corpus of 54 messages from the chairman in Thai annual reports of 1997. The linguistic realisation of each metafunction has been displayed and discussed using authentic extracts from the corpus. The contribution to the making of positive meaning includes the way the writer redeems corporate credentials (right after admitting the negative effects caused by the crisis), and the orientation towards collectivism as the writer regards the company and the society as one and shows solidarity-building and ethical concerns. This confirms Kelly and Zak's (1999) opinion that narrative complements argumentation in professional discourse by balancing the logical with the emotional, the technical with the aesthetic.

5. CONCLUSION

Organizations need to communicate to many different audiences. They communicate to impart information, They communicate to impart information, influence consumers/customers, reinforce brand awareness for products or services, position the business in a sector or market and ensure a favourable environment in which to operate. (Scammell 2006: 44)

From the data analysis and discussions, it is apparent that the metafunctions construe how the MFTCs are structured for actual use as part of the corporate public discourse which is related to the situational (crisis), cultural (Thailand), and social (corporate business activity) contexts. The findings reveal some kind of mapping of interwoven

language functions which leads to the understanding how professional texts create their meaning. In sum, the knowledge of metafunctions in structural organizations of different types of professional discourse is crucial for Thais as well as other non-native English speakers who need to develop professional reading and writing skills for their graduate studies and/or professional careers. This paper has shown the analysis of the language of annual reports in a particular context, which is only one type of business discourse. More research needs to be conducted along a similar line or from different perspectives (e.g. Chakorn 2007b), and also in a variety of professional genres (e.g. Chakorn 2007a, 2006, 2004, 2002) in order to establish a firm stance for this field of research.

(4,456 words including the abstract)

APPENDIX

Corpus of Messages from the Chairman from Listed Companies' Annual Reports

1.	Haad Thip Public Company Limited	HTC
2.	Thai President Foods Public Company Limited	TF
3.	Thai Theparos Food Products Public Company Limited	SAUCE
4.	Thai Union Frozen Food Products Public Company Limited	TUF
5.	Thai Vegetable Oil Public Company Limited	TVO
6.	Hantex Public Company Limited	HTX
7.	New Plus Knitting Public Company Limited	NPK
8.	Sawang Export Public Company Limited	SAWANG
9.	Thai Textile Industry Public Company Limited	TTI
10.	Thai Wacoal Public Company Limited	WACOAL
11.	Tuntex (Thailand) Public Company Limited	TUNTEX
12.	Compass East Industry (Thailand) Public Company Limited	CEI
13.	Modernform Group Public Company Limited	MODERN
14.	Ocean Glass Public Company Limited	OGC
15.	Bank of Asia Public Company Limited	BOA
16.	TISCO Finance Public Company Limited	TISCO
17.	Ayudhya Insurance Public Company Limited	AYUD
18.	Nam Seng Insurance Public Company Limited	NSI
19.	Siam Commercial Life Assurance Public Company Limited	SCLA
20.	Safety Insurance Public Company Limited	SAFE
21.	Syn Mun Kong Insurance Public Company Limited	SMK
22.	The Thai Setakij Insurance Public Company Limited	TSI
23.	Ayudhya Investment and Trust Public Company Limited	AITCO
24.	Bangkok First Investment & Trust Public Company Limited	BFIT
25.	First City Investment Public Company Limited	FCI
26.	Siam Panich Leasing Public Company Limited	SPL
27.	The Mutual Fund Public Company Limited	MFC
28.	Chai Watana Tannery Group Public Company Limited	CWT
29.	Furukawa Metal (Thailand) Public Company Limited	FMT
30.	Kulthorn Kirby Public Company Limited	KKC
31.	Thai Heat Exchange Public Company Limited	THECO
32.	The Thai Central Chemical Public Company Limited	TCCC
33.	Jalaprathan Cement Public Company Limited	JCC
34.	Bangkok Land Public Company Limited	BLAND
35.	Central Pattana Public Company Limited	CPN
36.	Goldenland Property Development Public Company Limited	GOLD
37.	Sino-Thai Engineering and Construction Public Company Limited	STEC
38.	Tanayong Public Company Limited	TYONG
39.	Banpu Public Company Limited	BANPU
40.	Electricity Generating Public Company Limited	EGCO
41.	Padaeng Industry Public Company Limited	PDI
42.	PTT Exploration and Production Public Company Limited	PTTEP
43.	Tongkah Harbour Public Company Limited	THL
44.	Robinson Department Store Public Company Limited	ROBINS
45.	Singer Thailand Public Company Limited	SINGER
46.	Ramkhamhaeng Hospital Public Company Limited	RAM
47.	BEC World Public Company Limited	BEC
48.	CVD Entertainment Public Company Limited	CVD
49.	GMM Grammy Public Company Limited	GRAMMY
50.	Jutha Maritime Public Company Limited	JUTHA
51.	Draco PCB Public Company Limited	DRACO
52.	Hana Microelectronics Public Company Limited	HANA
53.	Muramoto Electron (Thailand) Public Company Limited	METCO
54.	Sahaviriya OA Public Company Limited	SVOA

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