

Lexical and Phonological Sources
of Hmong Elaborate Expressions

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In this paper, we would like to detail the ways in which White Hmong elaborate expressions are built. These expressions are sometimes in the form of a four-morpheme array with particular semantic and phonological constraints for aesthetic heightening of language (that is, they are found to be prominent in poetry, but may certainly occur as a rhetorical device in ordinary conversation, as well). Typical examples are the following:

khv	lab	khv	daw	'arduous toil'
toil	bitter	toil	salty	
kav	teb	kav	chaw	'to rule a country'
rule	land	rule	place	
nab	nkhaus	niv	nkhaus	nom
snake	bent	(intensifier)	bent	(intensifier)
'le serpent fait des sinuosités' (Bertrais)				

There are two lexical sources in Hmong for quadrisyllabics. Hmong contains a large number of intensifiers, words describing the qualities of verbs. That is, these intensifiers function adverbially. Ratliff (1986a;1986c:Chapter IV and Appendix III) has examined the properties of these intensifiers in detail. The first noticeable feature is the alliteration, as in the following examples:

liab	ncav	nij	nuas	'the monkey extends his		
monkey	extend	(intensifier)		long arms this way and		
				that'		
nws	nkees	nkees	qaug zog	luj luas		
s/he	tired	tired	weak	(intensifier)		
's/he is lethargic and unsteady'						
Foom	ua	tib	tug	fee	duj das	xwb
Foom	make	single	CLF.	turn	(intensifier)	only
'Foom merely turned his head, shaking his head and						
shoulder "I don't know."						

These intensifiers also involve, to some extent, patterned tonal changes in the two parts of the intensifier. Ratliff found, for example, that it is possible to link meaning and

form with some of these pairings.

The elements of the intensifier can be made into an elaborate expression or quadrisyllabic by interpolation of other grammatical material, typically a verb like ua 'to do'. Thus, the expression used as an intensifier, dog dig 'badly, haphazardly', may be broken up so that the elements appear in the second and fourth slots of a four part expression:

ua dog dig 'to do badly, haphazardly'

ua dog ua dig idem

Quadrisyllabic expressions may also be formed from a combination of a lexical item and an intensifier. In such cases, it appears that the intensifier has the property of alliterating with the lexical item, and it seems to be thus formed to be paired with a particular word. Ratliff calls this "prosaic word incorporation" (Ratliff 1986c:section 2.1.1, pages 183-185). Examples include:

dig 'to be blind' ==> duj dig 'gropingly, feeling one's way like a blind person'

teev 'a drop' ==> tuj teev 'drop by drop'

e.g. dej nrog tuj teev 'the water drips drop by drop'
water drip

A slightly more complex example is the expression tej chwb chim tej ntwb ntu meaning 'sporadically', 'from time to time', e.g.

"Sib Fi Xov" lub neej ploj qab lawm
CLF. life, disappear has ...-ed
existence

tej	chwb	chim	tej	ntwb	ntu
PLURAL		period	PLURAL		period
		of time			of time

'Sib Fi Xov [a Hmong newsletter] has ceased publication from time to time', 'Sib Fi Xov has appeared only sporadically' (Sib Fi Xov 28:1:8)

Here chwb and ntwb seem to have no independent meaning but serve rather as alliterative intensification of the nouns chim and ntu.

We have not found so many of these examples; it would be good to have a larger corpus in order to find out whether these intensifiers are further constrained phonologically.

For example, is there a tendency to any vowel or tone patterning? Indeed, Ratliff reports six tonal patterns which seem to convey particular types of sound or movement (Ratliff 1986c:188ff and Appendix III):

- b/-b: high pitched, short sounds
- g/-g: low-pitched, echoic, hollow, airy sounds
- j/-j: energetic, fast, short sounds; surface contact as opposed to contact and penetration
- s/-s: flat, continuous, unending sights and sounds
- j/-s: suggests both aspects of -j/-v (back and forth) and -s/-s (level and steady); used for sounds, movements, and attitudes
- j/-v: a double orientation (back and forth, up and down, in and out); used for sounds, movements, and attitudes.

A great many quadrisyllabics involve lexically paired words. They do not alliterate or show any special phonological relationship but rather are from the same semantic field. Typical examples include those we have cited earlier:

- ... iab ... daw 'bitter and salty' = 'arduous'
 e.g. khwv iab khwv daw 'arduous toil'
 toil bitter toil salty
- ... teb ... chaw 'land and place' = 'country'
 e.g. kav teb kav chaw 'to rule a country'
 rule land rule place

Jean Mottin points out that such pairings are of different semantic types:

Certain paired words add to one another, in the sense that they amplify or slightly change the meaning, e.g. "noj" (to eat) + "haus" (to drink) = "to subsist". But others simply repeat without adding anything to the meaning -- e.g. "txhij" (complete) + "txhua" (complete) = "complete" -- so that in many cases one of the two words seems to have been created simply to form a pair and can not be used by itself: thus "ki" is used only in the expression "tub ki" = children.

(Mottin 1978:198; our translation from the French.)

Mottin is making two points here. First, he makes the

distinction between paired synonyms like txhij and txhua, where the meaning of the whole is the same as the meaning of either part, as opposed to pairings of semantically related but not synonymous words like noj and haus, where the meaning of the whole is different from the meaning of either part. Second, he calls attention to bound forms like ki, that occur only as part of paired words. We will return to Mottin's second point at the end of this paper.

Some paired words both alliterate and show a semantic relationship, as in Mottin's example of txhij and txhua, or in

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... daj ... dub 'yellow and black' = 'severe'
    e.g. cua    daj    cua    dub    'tempest'
         wind  yellow wind  black
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Another example is

ua yoj ua yees 'to quiver'
do swing from do quiver,
side to side, move back
wave, quiver and forth

e.g. ntuj ua yoj teb ua yees
sky do swing earth do quiver
'the earth trembles'

Are such examples essentially semantic pairings which only coincidentally alliterate, or are the semantics and the phonology reinforcing one another?

Of particular interest are non-alliterating pairs involving what we may call a bound form. Consider, for example, ... goob ... loo 'grains, crops' as in

ua qoob ua loo 'to raise crops' (Heimbach, Bertrais)
sau qoob sau loo 'to harvest crops' (Johnson, pp. 122,
123)

Wang 1979 this word would be Proto-Hmongic *ʔl-(32)-C.)

It seems likely, therefore, that an expression like sau goob sau loo originally meant literally 'to harvest the grains and harvest the fields'. Later, loo meaning 'dry field' was replaced by teb so that loo survived only in collocation with goob and its original meaning was forgotten.

Another example is ... tub ... kiv (or ki) 'child, offspring', which we met earlier in the quote from Mottin. (The variant form ki is an example of sandhi form promotion: see Ratliff 1986b:6-8, 1986c: Chapter II, section 4.1.) This expression occurs in such quadrisyllabics as

muaj tub muaj ki 'to have children'

tseg tub tseg ki 'bereft of children'

luag tub luag kiv 'other people's children'

Tub occurs independently meaning 'son' as in this example from Yaj Txooj Tsawb's "Outline of Marriage":

Yus	muaj	ib	tug	tub.	Luag	tom	ub	muaj
one	have	one	CLF.	son	others	at	yonder	have
		ib	tug	ntxhais.				
		one	CLF.	daughter				

'Suppose that you have a son, and say that those other people over there have a daughter.'

(Yaj 1974:1, 1977:3:114, 1978:3:114, 1986:102-103.) In White Hmong and Green Mong and closely related languages of China (that is, those belonging to the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan subgroup of the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan group of Hmongic), kiv seems to occur only in collocation with tub, but in the more distantly related Mhu language of southeastern Guizhou there is a form

jid [tai³⁵]

which appears to be cognate and which means 'son-in-law'. * (Lyman 1974, s.v. /tu/; Xiong, Xiong, and Xiong 1983, s.vv. ki, tub; Hmongb-Shuad Jianming Cidian 1958, s.v. dob gid; Hmub-Diel Jianming Cidian 1958, s.v. jid; Wang 1985:173.) It is possible, therefore, that ... tub ... kiv originally meant 'sons and sons-in-law'. If this is true, then the shift in meaning to 'sons and daughters' may tell us something about the history of Hmong gender roles and social structure.

*In terms of the reconstruction of Wang 1979 this word would be Proto-Hmongic *k-(1)-B. For the palatalization in Mhu, compare 'medicine', 'gold', 'needle'.

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