

## The relative marker *uas* in Hmong\*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Relative clauses in Hmong<sup>1</sup> as in examples (1) and (2) are variably introduced by the nonpronominal marker *uas*. That is, *uas* is preferably omitted in some cases, optional in others, and strongly preferred or required in still others.

1. ...*tus neeg uas nej yuav nrog tham...*  
CLF person that you will with talk  
'the person (that) you want to talk with'  
(Thoj 1981:31)

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<sup>1</sup> The variety of Hmong discussed in this paper is the White Hmong spoken in Laos and Thailand. The examples are given in the standard Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA). The orthography in the examples from Lis (1985) has been adapted to the standard RPA. The syllable-final consonants (or lack thereof) represent tones, and in most cases, the morphemes of compounds are written separately, following standard orthography. *Uas* is glossed throughout as 'that' to indicate its invariability of form, but in some cases is translated as 'who' or 'whom' to produce more natural sounding English equivalents.

A variety of written texts and two transcribed oral narratives (Fuller and Vang et al.) have served as sources of examples. Two of the written texts (Community Health Care Center and Thoj) are translations from English, but the translations are very loose and I saw no particular influence of the English original on the form and frequency of the relative clauses in Hmong.

Although there was some slight variation in the interpretation of some of the data among my native Hmong speaking consultants, which is expectable in cases where subtle pragmatic factors are involved, the judgments were generally fairly consistent within and across speakers.

The following abbreviations are used:

ATT = Attainment marker  
CLF = Classifier  
GRP = Group marker  
PERF = Perfective  
PL = Plural  
PROG = Progressive  
RECIP = Reciprocal  
SG = Singular

2. ...*Lou Hiang, uas yog suav ib tug nom,*  
 Lou Hiang who be Chinese 1 CLF official  
 '...Lou Hiang, who was a Chinese official,'  
 (Dao 1987:8)

In this paper I will argue that *uas* not only serves the syntactic function of marking a clause as relative, but also has the semantic and discourse functions of increasing or focusing on the degree of specificity or definiteness expressed by a relative clause in a given context.<sup>2</sup>

I will first give a general overview of the syntax of Hmong relative clauses, and then will discuss the special conditions under which *uas* is used. The discussion will focus on restrictive relative clauses, but will include some remarks about nonrestrictives as well.

## 2. RELATIVE CLAUSE STRUCTURE

Hmong relative clauses are postnominal and the position relativized is represented within the relative clause as a gap. All positions on the Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan and Comrie 1977) can be relativized. Some examples are given in (3-8).

3. ...*ces nws mus nrog tus thab han uas zov ntug dej ntawm tham.*  
 then 3SG go with CLF soldier that watch edge water there talk  
 '...then he went to talk with a soldier that was watching the riverbank.'<sup>3</sup>  
 (Fuller 1985:230 [transcribed oral narrative])  
 [Subject position relativized]
4. *Ib qho uas tus kuv tij Hmoob Thaib tau piv...*  
 1 thing that CLF kinsman Hmong Thai ATT tell  
 'One thing that the Hmong kinsman from Thailand told [us]...'  
 (Neng 1987:37) [Direct object position]
5. *Tus poj niam uas kuv muab cov txhuv rau...*  
 CLF woman that 1SG give GRP rice to  
 'The woman that I gave the rice to...'  
 (Constructed) [Indirect object position]

<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will not discuss a different use of *uas* as a complementizer.

<sup>3</sup> The glosses and translations have been slightly modified from Fuller's originals in this example and in numbers 11 and 14.

6. ...*tus neeg uas nej yuav nrog sib tham*  
 CLF person that 2PL will with RECIPIENT talk  
 'the person with whom you want to talk'  
 (Thoj, 1981: 31) [**Oblique position**]
7. ...*cov hluas uas niam thiab txiv txom nyem...*  
 GRP young that mother and father poor  
 'young people whose parents are poor...'  
 (Thoj:62) [**Possessive position**]
8. *Tus txiv neeg uas kuv siab dua*  
 CLF man that I tall more-than  
 'The man that I am taller than'  
 (Constructed) [**Object of comparison position**]

Relative clauses are also formed on NPs serving an adverbial function, as in (9) and (10):

9. *Zaum no yog thawj zaug uas lawv tau pom nyob hauv*  
 time this be first time that 3PL ATT see be-at in  
  
*lawv lub neej.*  
 3PL CLF life  
 'This was the first time that they had seen [this] in their lives.'  
 (Lis:6)
10. ...*nyob ntawm ntug dej uas hla rau sab thaib teb yooj yim heev*  
 be-at at edge water that cross to side Thailand easy very  
 '...at the edge of the river where it's very easy to cross to the Thai side'  
 (Fuller 1985:228)

It is also possible in Hmong to relativize out of an indirect question, as in (11)—a construction which is problematical in English:

11. *Niam Kuam tau mus nqis ntawm ib qho chaw tos tsheb loj ntev*  
 Mrs. Kuam ATT go get-off there 1 station bus  
  
*uas nws tsis paub xyov nyob qhov twg*  
 that 3SG not know uncertain be-at where  
 'Mrs. Kuam got off at a bus station that she didn't know where it was.'  
 (Thoj:18)

According to Mottin (1978), resumptive pronouns can always be used in Hmong, particularly when the antecedent is human. This is true even in subject position, as shown in (12) and (13):

12. *Yog tus Xib Hwb uas nws nyob X.*  
 be CLF teacher that 3SG live X  
 'It's the teacher that lives at X.'  
 (lit.: ...that he lives at X)  
 (Mottin 1978:139; translation from French mine)
13. *Koj muaj ib tug hluas nkauf los ib tug hluas nraug*  
 2SG have 1 CLF young woman or 1 CLF young man
- uas neb tab tom yuav sib yuav.*  
 that 2DUAL PROG take RECIP take  
 'You have a young woman or a young man that you are marrying.'  
 (lit.: ...that you two are marrying each other)  
 (Thao:18)

Example (13) is particularly interesting because the resumptive pronoun *neb* 'you' is a dual form which has as its antecedents both the subject of the main clause—'you' in the singular—and the relativized NP—'a young woman or a young man'; the latter reference is what causes it to be resumptive.

The Hmong use of resumptive pronouns is unusual, since according to Keenan (1985), languages rarely allow resumptive pronouns in subject position. I suggest that the occurrence of subject resumptive pronouns in Hmong is connected to the fact that topic constructions, and especially the left dislocation type with a topic NP + pronoun subject, as in example (14), are very common in the language.

14. *Kuv tsev neeg thiab kuv peb nyob...*  
 1SG family and 1SG 1PL live  
 'My family and I, we lived...'  
 (Fuller:225)

A string composed of a head NP followed by a relative clause with a resumptive subject pronoun is similar in form and function to a topic-subject construction and thus fits a general syntactic pattern in the language.

### 3. CONDITIONS ON THE OCCURRENCE OF *UAS*

In this section I will discuss the conditions governing whether *uas* is included or omitted before a relative clause, starting with cases where omission of *uas* results in parsing ambiguity.

#### 3.1 Ambiguity

Mottin (1978) briefly notes that *uas* cannot be omitted if ambiguity would result. I have found that omission of *uas* can result in parsing ambiguity. Sometimes the resulting string is still acceptable, but in other cases, it is not. For example, as I show in Riddle (forthcoming), when *uas* is omitted, there may be no difference on the surface between a relative clause and an adjective, since both occur postnominally and adjectives are stative verbs in Hmong. An example is given in (15):

15. *Ib nqi uas tseem ceeb rau peb cov neeg thoj nam yog*  
 1 section that important for 1PL GRP refugees be

*nqi sau xyoo 1980...*

section write year 1980

'One section that is important for us refugees is the section written in 1980...'

(Thao 1985:17)

If *uas* is omitted in (15), the resulting sentence may be translated without a relative clause as 'One important section for us refugees is the section written in 1980...' with no change in acceptability or propositional meaning.

However, in other cases, omission of *uas* may result in a false start interpretation which must later be revised and which may convey false information, as in (16):

16. *Ib nrab ntawm cov neeg uas ua tsheb sib tsoo nyob rau*  
 1 half at GRP person that do car RECIP hit be-at to

*hawv kev loj yog haus cawv.*

in highway be drink alcohol

'Half of all people that have accidents on the highway are drunk.'

(Community Health Care Center:2)

If *uas* were omitted here, a reader might initially interpret the sentence falsely as meaning "Half of all people have accidents on the highway," a main clause

parsing (just as with the omission of *that* in English), and mistakenly interpret (via zero subject anaphora) "are drunk" as another main clause also referring to half of all drivers.

Another example is given in (17), where omission of **uas** leads to a contextually inappropriate interpretation of the relative clause as a main clause.

17. *Tus kwv tij uas tuaj xyuas peb Hmoob nyob Amelikas no*  
 CLF kinsman that come visit 1PL Hmong in America this  
  
*piav tias nws yog ib tug neeg tshaj yexus lub moo zoo.*  
 tell that 3SG be 1 CLF person spread Jesus CLF news good  
 'The kinsman who came to visit us Hmong in America told us that he  
 was a Christian preacher.'  
 (Neng 1987:36)

This would give a syntactically well-formed sequence of main clauses as shown in the translation in (18), given zero subject anaphora in the second clause.

18. 'The kinsman came to visit us Hmong in America. He told us that...'

The sentence does not result in a false statement, as in (16), but it is inappropriate at this point in the text for discourse reasons. The first main clause in (18) is phrased as new information, but it actually represents given information presented earlier in the text and repeated at this point so as to restrict the reference of an NP. Thus, since only the presence of **uas** indicates that the clause in question is to be taken as a relative clause, and any other interpretation would be incongruous in the given text, **uas** is required or strongly preferred here.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.2 The Semantics and Discourse Function of *Uas*

In this section I will show that in the absence of potential parsing problems as discussed above, the presence of **uas** serves either to focus on or to increase the degree of specificity or definiteness of the head NP of the relative clause. It is truly optional only in those cases where such an emphasis makes no practical difference to the interpretation of the utterance and does not conflict with a predetermined strongly specific or definite reading. In such optional cases native speakers tend to perceive the use of **uas** as more formal,

<sup>4</sup> See Riddle (forthcoming) for further discussion of the significance of parsing ambiguity for the grammar of Hmong.

and omission of **uas** as somewhat slangy or elliptical. But in other cases, the presence vs. absence of **uas** can signal a difference in interpretation according to degree of specificity or definiteness.

Consider example (19), where **uas** does not occur in the original text.

19. *Luag tsuas txais cov twb paub lus zoo lawm xwb.*  
 3PL only accept GRP really know language well PERF just  
 'They only accept those who already know the language well.'  
 (Thoj:84)

As is, the NP *cov twb paub lis zoo lawm* 'those who already know the language well' has a nonspecific reference. That is, the NP refers to any people at all who know English well. If **uas** were inserted before *twb* 'really', it could wrongly imply that a particular subset of the people who know the language well rather than that any who know the language well will be admitted. In other words, the writer would have in mind a set of specific individuals who know English well. Thus the inclusion of **uas** would give the sentence an inappropriate specific reference.

Another example where **uas** is not used to introduce a relative clause is given in (20):

20. *...Hmoob yog ib cov neeg tsis txawj ntawv...*  
 Hmong be 1 GRP person not able written-matter  
 '...the Hmong are a people who cannot read...'  
 (Dao 1985:14)

The context for this example is an article by a Hmong who is criticizing an American journalist for making the claim expressed in (20). Without **uas** the sentence suggests that no Hmong can read. That is, without **uas** the sentence seems to emphasize the idea that each and every Hmong person cannot read. If **uas** were used, the description would seem less inclusive and would not necessarily be taken as a claim about all Hmong, although it would still be a typical characteristic of the group, given the meaning of the head NP. That is, the Hmong taken as an ethnic group are generally preliterate, but it is not precluded that there are some individual Hmong who can read. Thus in this example, the absence of **uas** signals more general applicability of the description than when **uas** is used. With **uas**, the description seems to apply to a more restricted subset of individuals.

Contrast the above examples with (21), where **uas** occurs in the original text but can be omitted without a change in specificity or definiteness.

21. *Txhua tag kis, cov menyuam (uas) muaj 10 rau 15 xyoos yuav xa*  
 every morning PL child that have 10 to 15 year will send

*ntawv xov xwm rau qhov txhia chaw.*  
 newspaper to everywhere

'Every morning children from 10 to 15 years old deliver newspapers everywhere.'

(Thoj:43)

The head NP modified by the relative clause is very general in its reference. The sentence describes a general type of situation without reference to specific children. The adverb *qhov txhia chaw* 'everywhere' emphasizes the generality of the situation, and there are no particular children in mind. Any children who meet the description may be involved, but not necessarily all who meet the description. In other words, all those meeting the description are in the potential pool. Since there is a relevant sense of restriction, *uas* is acceptable, but the overall meaning of the sentence makes it clear that the clause may apply to anybody meeting this description; thus the sense of limitation does not need to be focused on by the inclusion of *uas*. Since pragmatically we know that not all children are 10-15 years old, and since the adverb *txhua tag kis* 'every morning' would not make sense as a modifier of 'children are 10-15 years of age' as a main clause, *uas* is not required to avoid ambiguity either. Finally, the age range given is not meant to be definitional, or to specify an absolute age restriction, but is rather just a rough description. Thus, both pragmatic knowledge and the whole content of the sentence are crucial in interpreting the intended degree of restriction or specificity of the NP in question.

In (22), *uas* occurs in the original, and if it is omitted, the degree of specificity and definiteness changes.

22. *...cov niam-txiv poj niam tub-se uas tseem nyob lwm*  
 GRP mother-father wife children that still be-at other

*teb chaws...*  
 country

'...family that are still in another country...'

(Thoj:3)

With *uas*, there is an assumption that the reader does in fact have family members in other countries. In other words, their existence is presupposed and presented as mutually known. The NP therefore has a specific and definite reference. Without *uas*, the NP refers to any family members who might be in



other countries, and their existence is not presupposed, a nonspecific indefinite reading.

Consider also example (23):

23. *Thaum ua daim ntauv thov tas, luag yuav muab ib daim*  
 when do CLF application finish 3PL will give 1 CLF

*ntawv pov thawj se laus uas muaj 9 tug leb rau nej.*  
 paper guarantee card that has 9 CLF numbers to 2PL  
 'When you're done with the application, they will give you a Social  
 Security card that has 9 numbers on it.'  
 (Tho:51)

*Uas* is needed here to indicate that a particular kind of card is being described; otherwise it would imply that all papers from the Social Security office have nine numbers on them. It would not be clear to the intended Hmong reader that the numbers give the card its identity and that the card comes printed with the numbers already on it. Thus the presence of *uas* serves to indicate the very specific nature of the card, even though the NP refers to a type rather than a specific token. Similarly, in (24) removal of *uas* changes the connotation of specificity to a lack thereof, which is inappropriate for the context. For this reason, *uas* is necessary here:

24. *Nej yuav tau haujlwm los tsis tau nyob ntawm —tej haujlwm uas*  
 2PL will get job or not get be-at there GRP job that

*muaj nyob hauv nej lub zos.*  
*have be-at in 2PL CLF town*  
 'Finding a job will depend on—the jobs that are available in your town.'  
 (Tho:60)

With *uas* the sense is that there are particular kinds of jobs specific to the given area, which is the point of the passage. The reference is specific and definite. Without *uas* the sentence would simply refer to the existence of jobs in one's town, but would not imply that the kinds of jobs are dependent on the location.

An example of a context where *uas* is obligatory is given in (25):

25. *Pawg thawj coj muaj tus thawj kav teb chaws uas yog pej xeem*  
 group leader have CLF president that be population

*xaiw tsa los.*

elect

'The first branch has a president that is elected by the people.'

(Tho:14)

The preceding context explains that there are three branches of government in the U.S. In this sentence reference is made to a category of person, i.e. the holder of the office of president of the United States, although no actual individual is identified and the reference is nonspecific. Nevertheless, **uas** is required because there is only one president of the United States as a result of a given election. In other words, the individual changes with elections but is unique for a particular election. The use of **uas** highlights this sense of uniqueness.

Consider also some examples of nonrestrictive relative clauses, as in example (2) above and (26) and (27) below:

26. ...*peb cov Hmoob, uas Suav tseem hu ua "Miao"...*

1PL GRP Hmong that Chinese still call Miao

'...we Hmong, whom the Chinese still call "Miao",...'

(Dao 1987:10)

27. ...*ces nws ob tug tij laug uas yog Kuam Yaj thiab Txiaj Tswb*

then 3SG 2 CLF older-brother that be Koua Yang and Chia Chue

*Yaj...*

Yang

'...then his two older brothers, who were Koua Yang and Chia Chue

Yang,....'

(Vang et al 1990:18)

In each of these examples **uas** introduces a nonrestrictive relative clause which adds extra information about the head NP. **Uas** is required because in each case the head NP is independently specific and definite. Omitting **uas** would suggest a conflicting lesser degree of specificity and definiteness. In addition, **uas** is needed to show that the information conveyed in the nonrestrictive clause is subordinate to the information in the main clause. This signals that it is background material, rather than information belonging to the foreground which is necessary to restrict reference.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that *uas* is an unusual relative marker in that it not only identifies a string as a relative clause, but also adds to or focuses on the degree of specificity and/or definiteness. Moreover, the actual level of specificity and/or definiteness contributed by *uas* is variable, depending on the other content of the sentence, on the speech context, and on pragmatic knowledge about the plausible alternatives to a particular interpretation.

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