Delivering an Introduction to Psycho-collocations with SIAB in White Hmong

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Tus tīj laug mas siab kub
CLF older brother TOPIC liver hot

Tol, l'aîné, tu es méchant notoire

Tus tīj laug mus txua nruas dub
CLF older brother go make gong black

Tu vas faire un gong noir;

Tus tīj laug mas siab nkhaus
CLF older brother TOPIC liver crooked

Tol, l'aîné, qui a le cœur pervers

Tus tīj laug mus txua nruas hlau
CLF older brother go make gong iron

Tu vas te faire un gong de fer.

Tus kwv mas siab ncaj
CLF younger brother TOPIC liver straight

Tol, le cadet, qui a un cœur d'or

Tus kwv mus txua nruas daj\(^1\)
CLF younger brother go make gong yellow

Tu vas te faire un gong jaune or;

Tus kwv mas siab zoo
CLF younger brother TOPIC liver good

Tol, le cadet, qui a un cœur droit

Tus kwv mus txua nruas ntoo
CLF younger brother go make gong wood

Tu vas te faire un gong de bois.

(From Jean Mottin, *Contes et Légendes Hmong Blanc)*\(^2\)

In Western cultures the heart is typically considered to be the primary seat of the emotions; in contrast, in Hmong culture, LUB SIAB 'the liver' is viewed as the locus of choice (LUB being the classifier associated with SIAB

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\(^1\) DUB 'black' is a "bad" color in Hmong culture (cf. SIAB DUB 'liver black' = 'wicked, evil'). The status of DAJ 'yellow', however, is uncertain to me at this point. In this poem, it is a "good" color since it is associated with the younger brother. In CUA DAJ CUA DUB 'wind yellow wind black' = 'storm', on the other hand, it is associated with DUB 'black', and has negative connotations. More data are necessary before drawing conclusions on its interpretation. It may be that in the poem, DAJ 'yellow' was used to rhyme with NCAJ 'straight'.

\(^2\) I am indebted to Brenda Johns for pointing this poem out to me.
In this case; see below). The speaker in the beautifully-crafted poem above, a female spirit, characterizes two brothers: the older one has a "hot" and "crooked" liver, while the younger one has a "good" and "straight" liver. In other words, the former is hot-tempered and dishonest, and the latter is kind, gentle, and honest. This poem illustrates the usage of metaphorical expressions in Hmong involving the liver as the organ of choice rather than the heart: the younger brother is (literally) "good-livered" rather than "good-hearted".

These constructions involving the liver are by no means limited to poetry and to depicting personality traits, as exemplified in the verses above. They are used in everyday language, and (as we will see in this paper) form a rich collection which shows that the liver is the primary seat of the emotions, intellectual or mental processes, and physical sensations in the Hmong world-view. The central role played by the liver is also reflected in the fact that the language has a syntactic device for differentiating between the liver as physical organ and the liver as seat of the affections: using different classifiers. The classifier NPLOOJ, which is used with nouns referring to leaf-like entities\(^3\), is associated with SIAB when it refers to the physical organ (this, of course, makes good sense when one thinks of the lobes of the liver), and the classifier LUB, which is used with nouns referring to round and/or bulky things as well as with numerous abstract nouns, is associated with SIAB when it refers to the seat of the affections.

While it is true that "Western" languages abound with metaphorical expressions involving the heart (cf. English 'take heart', 'lose heart', 'a change of heart', 'to one's heart's content', 'big-hearted', 'cold-hearted', and French 'sans cœur', 'avoir un cœur d'or', 'ne pas porter quelqu'un dans son cœur', 'écœuré', etc.), they also typically treat the expression of mental activities, qualities of personality, or emotions as a covert class. There is nothing in the words 'understand, decide, patient, brave, satisfied, scared, etc.' which explicitly points to the locus where the implied psychological phenomena unfold, i.e. there is no word which explicitly means 'heart, liver, stomach, mind, spirit, etc.' In sharp contrast, Hmong — along with many of other East and Southeast Asian languages — tends to treat the expression of emotional and mental states or processes much more like an overt class via what Matschoff (1986) has termed "psycho-collocations." In his words, a psycho-collocation is "a polymorphic expression referring as a whole to a mental process, quality, or state, one of whose constituents is a 'psychological noun,' i.e. a noun with explicit psychological reference (translatable by English words like heart, mind, spirit, soul, temper, disposition, mood). The rest of the psycho-collocation contains morphemes (usually action verbs.

\(^3\) NPLOOJ is also used with NTSWS 'lung', for instance.
or adjectives) that complete the meaning. This element we call the 'psycho-mate'. (...) Thus:

\[ \text{Psycho-noun} + \text{Psycho-mate} = \text{Psycho-collocation}. \]

(Mattsoff 1986:4)

In this paper I wish to demonstrate that SIAB 'liver' is the psycho-noun of choice in Hmong via an analysis of the numerous psycho-collocations in which it occurs. The data have been arranged according to the metaphorical meanings conveyed by the psycho-collocations: meanings dealing with moral characteristics/personality traits, mental processes/states, and emotions ranging from anger to satisfaction, fear, confusion, and a few others. Along the way, I will also try to show that while the overt expression of these meanings differs in Hmong, there are similarities between Hmong and English on a conceptual level.

In light of our familiarity with the metaphorical role of the heart, however, I will begin the discussion by attempting to answer the following questions: does the heart play a metaphorical role in Hmong culture at all, and if so what is it? From the data gathered, the following conclusions can be drawn: by itself, PLAWV 'heart' can be used metaphorically as literal center, but not as seat of the emotions. However, in conjunction with SIAB 'liver', it can function as a locus for emotions, and in conjunction with PLAB 'stomach', it can serve as a locus for intellect. These three metaphorical extensions of PLAWV 'heart' are expanded on below.

(A) PLAWV 'heart' as literal center. Let us consider the following data:

1. PLAWV ZOOV
   
   heart jungle = 'the heart of the jungle'

2. PLAWV ZOS
   
   heart village = 'the middle of the village'

3. PLAWV KEV
   
   heart road = 'the middle of the road'

4. PLAWV TEB
   
   heart field = 'the middle of the field'

5. PLAWV NTUJ
   
   heart sky = 'the middle of the sky'

6. PLAWV NTOO
   
   heart tree = 'the heart of a tree'
7. PLAWV TSWAB
    heart   banana tree = 'the heart of a banana tree'

8. NTOO KHOOB PLAWV
    tree   empty   heart = 'a hollow tree' (literally 'a tree with
                     an empty heart')

These phrases show that PLAWV 'heart' is used metaphorically to refer to the literal center/core of words connoting spaces (#1-5) as well as trees (#6-8). The source domain of these metaphors is the heart, and the target domain is space. As pointed out by Matisoff (1986:15), "the metaphorical connection between the heart and the central/innermost part is found in both Eastern and Western languages" (cf. English 'the heart of a rose', the 'heart of Chinatown', etc., or French 'le cœur de la salade', 'au cœur de
l'été', 'au cœur de la ville', etc.) However, as far as I can tell, the metaphor only extends to the physical realm in Hmong, whereas it includes the abstract realm in familiar Western languages (cf. English 'the heart of the matter', or French 'le cœur du problème', etc.)

(B) PLAWV 'heart' as locus for emotions in elaborate expressions with SIAB 'liver'.

As said above, so far I have not found any psycho-collocations in which the heart by itself is used as the seat of the emotions. I have, however, come across a few elaborate expressions\(^4\) in which PLAWV is used as a locus for emotions, and this in conjunction with SIAB 'liver'. Elaborate (i.e. multi-morphemic) expressions may be viewed as a device that primarily monosyllabic languages such as Hmong use to give "weight" to otherwise "light" and short syllables, and are hence very common. PLAWV 'heart' is found in some elaborate expressions involving SIAB 'liver', as seen below:

1. IB LUB SIAB IB LUB PLAWV
   one CLF liver one CLF heart = 'united in the heart, of one
   and the same feeling'

2. LWJ SIAB LWJ PLAWV
   rotten (in) liver rotten (in) heart = 'to be all upset, in turmoil,
   disheartened'

\(^4\) The phrase "elaborate expression" was originally coined by M. R. Haas, and has been used extensively by linguists working on Southeast Asian languages (see Matisoff 1986 for more details.)