WHITE HMONG UTTERANCE PARTICLES: AN INTRODUCTION

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This paper represents the beginning of my dissertation research, the ultimate goal of which is to offer an account of the White Hmong utterance particle system (or — probably more realistically — subparts thereof). As an initial source of data I am using a story entitled *Hlub Niam Laus, Yuav Niam Hluas* "Love the Elder Sister, Marry the Younger", a Hmong variation on the Boy Meets Girl theme involving two sisters. This story appeared as a serialized novel in *Haiv Hmoob*, a magazine published out of Minneapolis, Minnesota. While I am aware of the limitations of using a written text rather than natural conversation data to analyze particles, which are by essence a phenomenon of spoken language, I am using this Hmong Boy Meets Hmong Sisters story as a starting point for my research for the following reasons.

First, the text is largely made up of dialogue and abounds in particles. Before deciding to use it, I ascertained with native speakers that the dialogues were natural and representative of the type of spoken

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1 I wish to thank Hauv Toj Lisfoom who served as my primary language consultant for this paper. He was not only exceptionally patient with me, but also made many insightful and helpful comments in the course of our work together.

2 An initial cursory survey based on the current literature had me estimate the number of particles to be in the vicinity of a dozen. However, I now think that this was a very conservative figure as I seem to be discovering more and more of these objects of wonder — witness the two discussed in this paper.

3 The data are presented in the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), whose most salient feature is the use of final consonant letters to represent tone. The eight phonetic tones of the language are symbolized as follows: -b for the high level tone, -j for the high falling tone, -ø (no mark) for the mid level tone, -s for the low level tone, -m for the checked, short low falling tone, -g for the breathy falling tone, -v for the mid rising tone, and -d for the low rising tone (an allotone of the checked tone). For an excellent characterization of the RPA see Smalley et al. 1990.
language that would be used in the situations depicted in the story. Comments (unsolicited) as I was going over the text with my primary language consultant included "Oh, that's exactly how Hmong people speak, this is precisely what boys and girls say to each other, etc." He also added that the story would be highly suitable as a script for a play or a movie.

Second, besides being natural and canonical, the dialogues offer the advantage of laying out the particles in a meaningful conversational context, thus giving the linguist a better chance at analysis. The particle characterizations currently available in the literature (Bertrais 1979, Heimbach 1979, Mottin 1978, Nomura 1988) are vague and redundant. I believe the main reason for this is that they have not been analysed beyond the conventional sentence level, namely from a conversational perspective.

Third, using a story with conversational data as a starting point for analysis and adding to the linguist's insights a perusal with a native speaker is a helpful and enlightening exercise to see what kinds of results can be obtained from it, and to formulate hypotheses for future research. It is a well-known fact that utterance particles defy conventional linguistic analysis, that they cannot be elicited from native speakers in the manner other data can, that native speakers' intuitions and judgments on this topic are not as helpful as in other areas of language analysis, that these objects of wonder cannot be glossed in the conventional way (hence no glosses are given in the sample utterances), etc. Nevertheless there is no reason to believe that they are any less systematic in nature and behavior than other aspects of linguistic structure, provided they are investigated in the environment they thrive in and with tools which go beyond the conventional ones.

The most gratifying result of this investigation is not only the discovery of the existence of two utterance final particles hitherto unmentioned in the literature, but also the discovery that they could be described with a degree of satisfaction uncharacteristic of the system.

4 The whole system seems to be reduced to a list of entities which are all "emphatic".
5 The first (and, to my knowledge, only) attempt at characterizing Hmong particles using actual conversation data is found in Li 1990 where the author sketches the functions of four particles in Green Hmong (Hmoob Ntsuab), a dialect closely related to White Hmong (Hmoob Dawb).
as a whole. The particles in question are POB and NAWB, and are discussed in turn below.

I. The particle POB

I found four instances of utterances ending with the particle POB in the first chapter. They are:

1. Saib, tejzaum tsuas yog ob peb blocks xwb POB. ? maybe only COP6 two three blocks only "Maybe it's just a couple blocks away." (According to my informant, saib implies that the accuracy of the information has to be checked.)

2. Peb nyob tau kwv yees ob xyooos no lawm POB. we live attain probably two year DEM PERF "We've been living over here for probably two years."

3. Peb nyuam qhuav los nyob tau ib tog xyoo we recent past come live attain one CLF year DEM only "We've just been here for somewhere close to a year."

4. Thov txim ntau, ntshai kuv nrog koj tham ntev hwv apologize much maybe I with you talk long too lawm POB? PERF "I'm so sorry, I'm afraid/maybe I've been talking with you too long."

My informant told me that the presence of POB in all these utterances implies that the speaker was not sure about the exact quantity mentioned in the utterance — distance in (1), and length of time in (2-4). I was struck by the fact that concomitant with the uncertainty built into POB there were overt elements conveying doubt in the utterances, elements such as tejzaum and ntshai7 'maybe, perhaps' as well as kwv yees 'probably, I guess'. In addition, a close investigation of the contexts in which these utterances occurred revealed that they were used in response to Wh- types of

6 Abbreviations go as follows: CLF = classifier, CON = connective, COP = copula, DEM = near demonstrative, FUT = future marker, LOC = location marker, PERF = perfective marker, Q = question marker, REL = relativizer, TOP = topic marker.
7 As a main verb ntshai means "to fear, to be afraid", but it is also used adverbially to mean "maybe" (with or without an element of fear built in).
questions: (1) is uttered as part of a discussion on where Boy and Sisters live, and — more importantly — how far from each other; (2) and (3) are responses to questions dealing with how long our protagonists have lived in (what turned out to be) the same neighborhood, and (4) is a commentary on the speaker wondering about how long he's been chatting with his love interest.

Hence, I decided to take a closer look at all the utterances ending in POB in four additional chapters of the story to check whether the element of uncertainty and the element "response to Wh-question" were present in all of them. This turned out to be the case, as illustrated below:

[Context: Nplooj wants to ask Nplias's mother for permission to take her to the movies, but the mother is nowhere in sight. So he asks Nplias where she is, to which she replies:]

5. Xyov?⁸ Tej zaud nyob tom tsev mov POB.
uncertainty maybe be-at LOC kitchen
"I don't know/I wonder. Maybe she's in the kitchen."

[Context: After asking Nplooj which movie theater they're planning on going to, she asks him how many people were included in the party, to which he replies:]

6. Yog koj kam no ces ntshai tsuas yog Nplias
if you agree DEM CON maybe only COP Nplias
wb xwb los POB.
we-2 only come
"If it's ok with you, can it perhaps be just the two of us?"

[Context: After a movie date followed by a date at a local park, Nplooj wants to take Nplias to a relative's wedding, and once again asks her mother for permission to do so. In response to her wondering at what time on Saturday the wedding was to take place, he utters the following:]

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⁸ Although typically translated as "I don't know", xyov is not a main verb in Hmong; it fails the "verbhood" test, i.e. cannot be preceded by the negative marker tsis. In his dictionary (p.416), Heimbach refers to it as "a particle indicating uncertainty". Interestingly, it seems to occur exclusively in utterance-initial position, and may ultimately be included in the particle system as part of a handful of particles which can modulate an utterance in a progressive rather than regressive fashion, but more research is necessary to verify this hypothesis.