

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)

Qoob occurs independently in the meaning 'crops, grains', e.g. sau qoob 'to harvest crops' (Bertrais), but loo seems to occur only in collocation with qoob. In some other Hmongic languages, however, cognates of loo occur as independent morphemes meaning 'earth' or 'field', for example

QoXiong lut [lu<sup>53</sup>] 'dry field' (as opposed to paddy field)

(Wang 1985:160; cf. Chang 1947:101, 1972: Chart 13; Purnell 1970, Appendix #314). (In terms of the reconstruction of