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:

khwv iab khwv 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 quadrisyllables. 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 nca nuj nuas 'the monkey extends his
monkey extend (intensifier) long arms this way and
that'

nws nke nke saug zog luja luas
s/he tired tired weak (intensifier)
's/h e is lethargic and unsteady'

Foom uia 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'

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

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

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

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

QoXiong lut [lu₃] 'dry field' (as opposed to paddy field)