

The relative marker *uas* in Hmong*

Elizabeth M. Riddle
Ball State University

1. INTRODUCTION

Relative clauses in Hmong¹ 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)

* An earlier version of this paper was read at the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute Conference, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1989. This research was partially supported by a Ball State University Academic Year Research Grant and by a Ball State University Summer Research Grant. I am very grateful to my Hmong teachers and consultants Pheng Thao, Neng Heu, Leng Xiong, Lee Thao, and Lopao Vang for their assistance with the language. All errors are my own responsibility.

¹ 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.²

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.'³
 (Fuller 1985:230 [transcribed oral narrative])
[Subject position relativized]
4. *Ib qho uas tus kuv tij Hmoob Thaib tau plov ...*
 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]**

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

³ 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 RECIP 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.