

# Metaphorically Speaking in White Hmong

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## 1. Introduction

There is only one known piece of research devoted to metaphor in White Hmong (henceforth "Hmong"), Jaisser's (1990) study of psycho-collocations with *siab* 'liver' and other body parts, although Matisoff (1992) includes a brief mention of Hmong in his discussion of the widespread use of 'mother' as a morpheme indicating 'origin' or 'source'. Indeed, beyond the pioneering work of Matisoff (e.g. 1978, 1986, 1992), little research has focused on metaphor in the lexicon within Southeast Asian languages generally. The few exceptions include work on psycho-collocations in Malay by Oey (1990) and in Lai by Van-Bik (1998), and Diller's (1991) analysis of metaphors of linguistic action in Bahasa Indonesia.

Given the paucity of research on the role of metaphor within the lexicon in Hmong and other Southeast Asian languages, this paper is intended to provide an introductory overview of several sets of metaphors in White Hmong from two angles: a semantic field approach looking at the metaphorical uses to which related sets of words such as body parts, colors, and physical sensations are put, and a "metaphors the Hmong live by" approach (following Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) in which a coherent metaphor such as 'life is a string' is realized by varied lexical means. Along the latter lines, metaphors illustrating Hmong folk theories of life and death, beauty, moral rectitude, and several natural phenomena will be sketched.

The discussion does not distinguish between live and dead metaphors. No claim that present-day Hmong speakers consciously recognize all cases as metaphors is intended; rather the goal is to explore possible underlying conceptual relationships in the lexicon, either synchronic or historical.

Finally, for some of the examples examined here, it was not immediately obvious that one meaning was the more basic and another the more metaphorical, especially where historical information is unavailable. In these situations I have taken into account such properties as markedness, generality of application of the word, and abstractness, as well as the existence of similar associations in a variety of languages

where a metaphorical relationship has already been established to make a judgment.

## 2. Body part metaphors in Hmong

Hmong participates in what is probably a universal tendency to use body part terms metaphorically to denote other objects or concepts. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Johnson (1987), among others, have observed, this must stem from the centrality of the body as a form of human experience. Thus it is not surprising that Hmong should have numerous body part metaphors making use of many of the same physical bases and with many of the same meanings as found in English and other languages around the world. Others, however, may turn out to be less widespread. The examples below are divided into three categories: 1. basic body part terms which are themselves metaphorical (taken here to include metonymy and synecdoche) in whole or in part; 2. body part terms used to characterize other objects or concepts; 3. feces as a waste product of the body used to characterize other products or contaminants associated with the body as well as other objects and concepts.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Names of body parts metaphorical themselves in whole or part

*hlab hluas* [cord-string] 'viscera' (R 1987); *hnyuv dub* [intestine-black] large intestine; *hnyuv dawb* [intestine-white] small intestine; *noob qes* [seed-egg] 'testicles'; *paj plhu* [flower cheek] 'cheeks, face'; *paj hlwb* [flower marrow] 'brain' (B); *tsho me nyuam* [shirt-child] 'placenta'; *tsev me nyuam* [house-child] uterus (B); *taub hau* [gourd-head] 'head' (cf. English "Use your gourd."); *taub teg* (tone sandhi: <tes) [gourd (>head)-finger] 'finger tip'; *taub ntswg* [gourd (>head)-nose] 'tip of the nose'; *taub ntseg* [gourd (>head)-ear] 'ear lobe' (i.e. 'tip of the ear').

### 2.2. Body part terms used for other objects and concepts

#### a) Body

*cev* 'body' > ' (by) oneself'; 'body' (objects, e.g. airplane) (B); 'trunk' (tree), 'main frame'; 'main section' (e.g. baby carrier) (VL, 130); (*ib*) *ce* (t. s. < *cev*) '(one) CLF for a suit of clothes'.

#### b) Head

*hau* 'head' > 'leader', 'top' (mountain), 'lid,' *hle hau* [take off-head] 'lose status' (VL, 69) Related to *hauv* below (MR, p.c.).

*hauv* 'the part which is above' (B) *hauv toj hauv pes* [part above-hill-part above-mountain] 'mountains, hills, summits' (B); *lub hauv dej* [CLF-part above-water] 'the source of a river/stream'; *hauv paus* 'stump, base, basis, root, origin'; *tom hauv ntej* [at-part above-before] 'ahead'.

*taub* 'head' (< 'gourd'; see above); *neeg qeg/qig taub* (t.s. < *qis/qes*) [person-low-head] 'short person'; *to taub* [pierce-head] 'understand'; *taub hnee* (t.s. < *hneev*) [head-crossbow] 'body of crossbow'.

*taub hau* 'head' > 'front/prow' (vehicle) (B); *raus taub hau* [soak-head] 'get involved in a situation' (B); *taub hau tawv* [head-hard] 'disobedient' (B); *niag taub hau loj* [great-head-big] 'an imbecile' (B). The morpheme *niag* comes from *niam* 'mother'. *Niag* is difficult to translate into English. It can pejoratively suggest an individual, either a human or an anthropomorphized animal such as a tiger, who is an undesirable character. In one folk tale, it is used as a term of address to a tiger, with a sense of familiarity.

### c) Mouth

*ncauj* 'mouth' (also *qhov ncauj* [hole-mouth]) > 'mouth' (bottle, jar); 'open end of a sleeve' (B); *tso ncauj* [release-mouth] 'permit'; *ncauj sai* [mouth-quick] 'person who can't keep secrets' (B); *ncauj hlob* [mouth-proud] 'prone to cursing'; *tsis qiv luag ncauj luag tes* [not-borrow-others-mouth-others-hand] 'not ask others for help' (B); *ncauj liab* [mouth-monkey] 'glib talker' (B); *ruam ncauj* [dumb-mouth] 'not a good speaker' (B); *ncauj ntse ntsuav* [mouth-sharp-intensifier] 'an intelligent person, good with words' (B); *qhov ncauj yaim cuag qhov ntswg, qhov quav yaim cuag xub pwg* [hole-mouth-lick-meet with-hole-nose-hole-feces (=anus)-lick-meet with-shoulder] 'insatiable talker' (B); *tim ncauj ntsees tham* [at-mouth-straight-talk] 'speak face-to-face'; *mus nrhiav ncauj* [go-look for-mouth] 'look for something to eat', 'look for a woman'; (improper)(B); *ncauj ke* (t.s. *ke* < *kev*) [mouth-path] 'place where a road goes into a village' (B); *tsov nrwb ncauj* [tiger-seek/hunt-mouth] 'tiger seeks prey' (B); *ncauj nyas* [mouth-baby carrier] 'top section of baby carrier' (VL, 130).

### d) Cheek

*plhu* (cf. also *paj plhu* above) 'cheek' > *muaj plhu* [have-cheek] 'have face, respect, honor'; *poob plhu* [fall (=lose)-cheek] 'lose face'; *tawm plhu* [exit-cheek] 'appear, be seen, show oneself/one's face' (B); *ua plhu luag/quaj* [do-cheek-laugh/cry] 'laugh/cry' (M); Proverb: *Saib dej ua ntu; Saib neeg ua plhu* [watch-water-do-section; watch-person-do-cheek] 'Examine each stretch of the stream; supervise people without

favoritism' (VL, 72); *plhu mluas mlob* [cheek-sad/downcast] 'sad face' (VL, 77).

### e) Tooth

*hniav* 'tooth' > 'cutting edge of a knife, sword'; 'teeth of a saw' (B); *zeb xob hniav* [rock-lightning (spirit)(=potash)-tooth] 'flint' (B); *pob kws ua hniav pos nyuj* [corn-do-tooth-gums-cow (>milk)] 'corn is beginning to form (small, milky) kernels' (B).

### f) Leg

*ceg* 'leg' (*ces* also used for animals) > 'leg (pants, table)' (B); 'wing' (of house) (B); 'limb/branch' (tree); 'branch' (of road, sea, heavens), 'arm' (river) (B).

### g) Foot

*taw* 'foot' > *sawv taw mus* [arise-foot-go] 'start on a journey'; *piav taw tes* [tell story-foot-hand] 'to dance'; *txawj taw tes* [know how-foot-hand] 'be skilled in fighting' (B); *tuag tes tuag taw* [dead-hand-dead-foot] 'paralysed'; *khww dawm tes ntsos* [bitter toil-stumble-foot-INT] 'toil/drudge' (B); *tsuj nthi ntawm taw tseg* [trample-at-foot-discard] 'to deliberately put a matter aside'; 'foot/base' (table, wall, column, mountain); 'stem' (e.g. of tobacco plant) (B); 'foot end' (of treadmill).

### h) Hand

*tes* 'hand' (see also *taw* above) > *nkaum tes nkaum taw nyob* [hide (under)-hand-hide-foot-be-at] 'be immobile'; (B); *tsa tes hlo ua* [raise up-hand-suddenly-do] 'start doing immediately' (B); *tes tsis ncaj* [hand-not-straight] clumsy (B) *ti tes* [tightly pressed together-hand] 'urgent, imminent' (B); *nqi tes* [price-hand] 'salary' (B); *tes nkhaus* [hand-crooked] 'thief'; (B); *tes tsho* [hand-shirt] 'sleeve' (B); *hnub teg hnub taws* (t.s. < *tes*) [sun-hand-sun-foot] rays of the sun' (B); *ib teg* (t.s.) [one hand] 'a handful'; 'a blow/hit' (B); *lub thoob teg* (t.s.) [CLF-bucket-hand] 'wooden bucket with handles' (B).

*cau* 'hand' (colloq.) > *khaus cau* [itch-hand (colloq.)] said of a person always up to mischief or evil (H,B).

### i) Liver and other internal organs

In Hmong, as in a number of other languages of the region, the liver is viewed as the seat of emotions and mental processes (Matisoff 1986, Jaisser 1990, Oey 1990), and the morpheme *siab* 'liver' occurs in numerous psycho-collocations, much as a morpheme meaning 'heart' is found in a similar function in many other languages of East and Southeast Asia. Jaisser provides a substantial discussion of this phenomenon in Hmong, so only a small set of examples is given below: