WHITE HMONG UTTERANCE PARTICLES: AN INTRODUCTION[1]

Annie Christine Jaisser
PhD Candidate
Department of Linguistics
University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA
jaisser@garnet.berkeley.edu

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).[2] As an initial source of data I am using a story entitled *Hlub Niam Laus, Yuav Niam Hluas*[3] "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

---

[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.[4] I believe the main reason for this is that they have not been analysed beyond the conventional sentence level, namely from a conversational perspective.[5]

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 analyis, 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   COP[6] 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 xyoos 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
   no xwb POB.
   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 concommitant with the uncertainty built into POB there were overt elements conveying doubt in the utterances, elements such as *tejzaum* and *ntshai*[7] '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:]

---

[8] Although typically translated as "I don't know", *xyov* is not a main verb in Hmong; it fails the "verbhood" test, i.ê. 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.

7. *Hais tias yuav noj rau thaum   peb teev tav su dua*
   say   that   FUT eat ?   time   3   hour afternoon
   ntawd   no   POB.
   that   DEM
   "They said it's [the wedding] going to be celebrate[d]
   at 3 in the afternoon, I think."

[Context: Nplooj has just asked Yaj, the younge[r]
sister, what — if anything special — she was going to d[o]
over the summer break, to which she replies:]

8. *Xyov,   tej zaud ntshai[9] tsuas yog kawm   ntawv*
   uncertainty maybe   maybe   only COP study letter[s]
   summer xwb POB
   summer only
   "I don't know, maybe I'm just going to go to summer
   school."

[Context: On a visit to the sisters' house, Nplooj ask[s]
their mother <u>what</u> she'd been up to. After telling hi[m]
that she'd been up to the usual, she asks him:]

9. *Koj ne, phav ntawv lawm thiab los POJ?*
   you TOP vacation   PERF also Q
   "And you, are you on vacation yet too (I wonder)?"

[Context: At a subsequent date, the threesome is of[f]
roller skating. Yaj gets tired, and rests for awhile[.]
Later, Nplooj comes to ask her <u>how</u> she is feeling:]

10. *Muaj zog   me ntsis   lawm   POJ?*
    have strength a little   PERF
    "Has your strength come back a little (I wonder)?"

In the last two sample utterances, the final particl[e]
bears the high falling tone rather than the high leve[l]
tone. My informant told me that we were dealing wit[h]
one and the same particle, but that there was [a]
difference between the two variants akin to pronouncing[,]
for example, the English "Hello" with two differen[t]
intonational patterns. (He demonstrated this to me.[)]
Interestingly, a closer look at (1-8) vs. (9-10) reveal[s]
that while the element of uncertainty remains constant[,]

---

[9] Notice the sequence of three elements conveying uncertainty[.]
As pointed out by Riddle (1990), "lexical elaboration i[n]
paratactic form is a very common rhetorical device in Hmong," an[d]
is theorized by the author to reflect the fact that "Hmong can b[e]
described as having a paratactic surface target structure."

(9) and (10) have structures corresponding to yes/no questions rather than to responses to WH- questions. This could account for the intonational difference reflected in the tones between the two variants. Further research is, however, necessary to see whether this is indeed the conditioning factor for these (and other) "allo-particles".

II. The particle NAWB

As is the case with POB, this particle is not mentioned in the literature. I found eight instances of utterances ending with NAWB in the first chapter of our story. In six of them, NAWB occurs at the end of a phrase expressing gratitude, as seen below:

11. (a) *Ua tsaug   ntau   (kawg)   NAWB*   [2 instances]
        give thanks a lot (extremely)
        "Thank you so much."

    (b) *Wb   ua   koj tsaug uas koj tau   xa   wb*
        we-2 give you thanks REL you attain send us-2
        los   tsev   NAWB.
        come home
        "We're the ones who thank you for taking us home."

    (c) *Yog li   ua   tsaug   ntau   NAWB.*
        COP like this give thanks a lot
        "In that case, thank you very much."

    (d) *Ua   tsaug ntau NAWB ·uas koj siv   koj lub*
        give thanks a lot   REL you use   your CLF
        sij hawm ntev loo nrog kuv   tham
        time   long ?   with me   talk
        "Thank you so much for spending so much of your time talking with me."

    (e) *Ua   tsaug ntau uas   koj hu   tuaj nrog kuv*
        give thanks a lot REL   you call come with me
        tham thiab NAWB
        talk also
        "Thanks to you too for calling to talk to me."

In the remaining two cases, NAWB occurs at the end of leave-taking phrases, as seen below:

12. (a) *Mus zoo   koj NAWB*
        go be well you
        "Goodbye."
        (reminiscent in structure of English "Farewell")

(b) *Nyob   zoo   NAWB,   bye*
    stay well   be well   bye
    "Stay well, bye."

Noteworthy is the fact that utterances ending with NAWB typically frame a conversation at the end. In the first chapter of Boy Meets Sisters, two separate conversations take place between Nplooj and Nplias, and half of the utterances above occur at the end of the first conversation while the other half occurs at the end of the second conversation. In both instances, the conversation is winding down, and the protagonists are thanking each other for everything and taking leave of each other.

When I asked my informant to tell me what NAWB conjured up in his mind, he gave me the following example: two friends who've just been spending a little time together decide to go somewhere together (home, to a movie — wherever). One of them says to the other:

13. *Peb mus NAWB*
    we go
    "Come on, let's go"

What the English translation does not reveal is the fact that NAWB implies that the speaker is beckoning[10] his interlocutor; according to my informant, it adds a "please listen to what I am saying" note to the utterance, and is there for the listener's benefit. This raises an interesting issue discussed by Luke (1990:296-7), namely that linguistic research has largely been preoccupied with the speaker in the Speaker + Hearer = Communication equation. As Luke argues successfully, more prominence needs to be given to the listener as a motivating factor underlying linguistic structure and behavior. Linguistic theory could indeed greatly benefit from a shift of (quasi-exclusive) focus on the speaker to the hearer. The success of this approach in accounting for certain linguistic phenomena has already been demonstrated in several areas of the discipline (witness for example Ohala's research on the role played by the listener in sound change, see Ohala 1981.) With NAWB as a case in point, I wish to argue that research on utterance particles could also benefit from a healthy dose of attention on the hearer as a tool for analysis as well as a device for overcoming the

---

[10] I use "beckoning" purposefully as my informant included beckoning gestures while uttering (13).

limitations of speaker-oriented approaches such as speech act theory.

The need to look at both the speaker's and the hearer's perspectives is further reinforced by the fact that in the case of NAWB, a certain degree of intimacy between the two conversation partners seems to be required. Interestingly, the first "thank you" instance, which occurs early on in the initial verbal exchange between Nplooj and Nplias when they've barely met, is not modulated by NAWB. Furthermore, in the example given to me by my consultant, he specified that the context required two _friends_ talking to one another.

Finally, if NAWB functions as a device for beckoning one's interlocutor's attention, it comes as no surprise that it occurs where it does, namely at the end of highly formulaic phrases such as expressions of gratitude and leave-taking when the conversation is winding down: NAWB may serve to counteract the tendency on the listener's part to stop paying close attention to what is being said, and to maintain the channels of communication vibrating between the speaker and the hearer.

Close examination of the first chapter of a highly "verbal" story such as *Hlub Niam Laus, Yuav Niam Hluas* "Love the Elder Sister, Marry the Younger" has proven to be a fruitful exercise in beginning to characterize the particles POB and NAWB. I have started to investigate other particles besides these two, though with less success so far. I suspect that this is because, ultimately, particles have to be analyzed in the midst of their natural habitat: everyday conversation. My research will thus continue in that direction using transcripts of audio and video recordings of natural conversations as data. This will, I hope, lead to additional findings to report on at the upcoming Pan-Asiatic Linguistics Symposium.

REFERENCES

Bertrais, Y., R.P. (1979) **Dictionnaire Hmong-Français**. Bangkok: The Assumption Press. [Originally published as **Dictionnaire Méo Blanc-Français**. Vientiane: Mission Catholique, 1964.]

Chang Chou. (1986-7) 'Hlub Niam Laus Yuav Niam Hluas.' ['Love the Elder Sister, Marry the Younger.'] **Haiv Hmoob** 2.1-3.1 (first five chapters of serialized novel).

Chodchoey, S.W. (1986) 'Strategies in Thai Oral Discourse.' PhD dissertation, Pennsylvania State University.

Cooke, J. R. (1989) 'Thai sentence particles and other topics.' **Pacific Linguistics** Series A-80 Papers in South-East Asian Linguistics No.12.

Heimbach, E. E. (1979) **White Hmong-English Dictionary**. Southeast Asia Program Data Paper No. 75. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University. [Originally published as **White Meo-English Dictionary**, 1969.]

Li, C. (1990) 'Utterance-final particles in Green Hmong.' XXIII ICSTLL, University of Texas, Arlington.

Luke, K. K. (1990) **Utterance Particles in Cantonese Conversation**. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Mottin, J. (1978) **Eléments de Grammaire Hmong Blanc**. Bangkok: Don Bosco Press.

Nomura, N. (1988) 'Final particles in White Hmong.' Ms.

Ohala, J. J. (1981) 'The listener as a source of sound change.' In C. S. Masek, R. A. Hendrick, and M. F. Miller, Eds. **Papers from the Parasession on Language and Behavior**. Chicago Linguistic Society, 178-203.

Riddle, E. (1990) 'Parataxis as a target structure in Hmong.' XXIII ICSTLL, University of Texas, Arlington.

Smalley, W. A., Chia Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang. (1990) **Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script**. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.