

# Topicalized NPs with Expansion Pronouns in Hmong<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction.

In White Hmong, a Hmong-Mien language of southern China and northern Southeast Asia, the unmarked word order is SVO and the possessor precedes the noun possessed. At issue in this paper is a problematic construction consisting of a noun (usually a proper noun) followed by a pronoun, which, in one manifestation of the construction, may serve as the possessor of a noun which follows it. In each case, the first noun is singular and the pronoun following it is dual or plural. The pronoun is not a *resumptive* pronoun; rather it is an *expansion* of the referent of the first noun. Examples of some of the possible combinations appear below:

--Singular noun followed by dual pronoun which includes the referent of the noun:

- (1) *Nplias nkawd tab tom tawm plaws hauv school bus los*  
N            3pd    PROG emerge suddenly inside bus come

... **Nplias and her sister** were just stepping out of the school bus. (Chang 9)

--Singular noun followed by plural pronoun which includes the referent of the noun:

- (2) *hmo ntawd nws niam lawv twb mus pw tas lawm,*<sup>2</sup>  
evening that 3ps mother 3pp already go lie down PERF

... that evening **her mother and the rest of the family** had already gone to bed, ... (Chang 6)

--Singular noun followed by plural pronoun which includes the referent of the noun, followed by a noun which is possessed by the non-singular referent of the pronoun:

(3) *John lawv tsey*  
 J 3pp house

**John's family's house**

(SEASSI '88 notes)

The Hmong noun phrases discussed in this paper represent a small, language-specific problem. I will suggest, however, that their existence may have areal and typological significance.

## 2. The problem.

The construction is an oddity: is the pronoun possessed, which would involve reinterpretation of the pronoun as a noun, or is the first noun a topic within the noun phrase? Native speaker translations don't help; all three translation strategies below occur:

- a--translation without pronoun
- b--possessed (pro)noun translation
- c--topicalized noun phrase translation

For example, for the following clause

(4) *Thaum Nplooj los txog ntawm Nplias lawv tsey, . . .*  
 time when N come arrive at N 3pp house  
 (Chang 9)

I was given the following three translations in quick succession:

- a--When Nplooj arrived at Nplias's house, . . .
- b--When Nplooj arrived at Nplias's family's house, . . .
- c--When Nplooj arrived at Nplias -- their house, . . .

Since English does not have a construction like this, different strategies are used to translate Hmong into English. But of the two attempts, b and c, which more closely captures the structural reality of the Hmong construction? Is there any evidence that will allow us to make a choice?

## 3. The possessed (pro)noun analysis.

If pronouns cannot be possessed, this analysis will involve reanalysis of the pronouns in these constructions as nouns.

3.1 In support of this analysis are the following facts:

3.1.1. Interpretations of *lawv* as 'family', 'household' and *nkawd* as 'couple' are especially likely when the pronoun is not serving as a possessive itself:

(5) . . . *luag tau tuaj puav tua Vam Choj lawv*, . . .  
 others get come some attack VC 3pp

. . . some others came and attacked **Vam Choj's group**, . . .  
 (Vang, et al. 66)

Even when it is serving as a possessive itself (as in the third example of section 1 above), this reading is possible.

3.1.2. This example illustrates the secondary "gathering" function of what appears to be the possessive construction in Hmong. The referent becomes clear as one goes along: first the person named, then his/her group, then that bunch taken all together. The parallelism between the construction under consideration and what appears to be a regular possessive construction with a group noun in the position of the pronoun is obvious. Compare:

(5) . . . *luag tau tuaj puav tua Vam Choj lawv*, . . .  
 others get come some attack VC 3pp

. . . some others came and attacked **Vam Choj's group**, . . .  
 (Vang, et al. 66)

(6) . . . *Nyiaj Xauv Hawj tau coj Soob Lwj tsey neeg khiav tawm*  
 NXH get lead SL household run emerge  
*tuaj rau Vaj Pov tog* . . .  
 come at VP side

. . . Nyiaj Xauv Hawj had taken **Soob Lwj and his family** off  
 to join with Vaj Pov's side . . . (Vang, et al. 62)

3.1.3. Comparative evidence shows that two of the pronouns involved in these constructions have recently been grammaticalized from nouns:

*lawm* 'to leave' > *lawm* 'place there' [> *lawd* 'those gone over there'] > *lawv* 3-plural pronoun

*nkawm* 'a pair; classifier for pairs' > *nkawd* 3-dual pronoun  
[> *nkawv* 3-dual pronoun]

(Ratliff 1992, Chapter 3)

### 3.2. But there are problems with this analysis as well:

3.2.1. Against the analysis of these pronouns as nouns which have recently undergone grammaticalization, *peb* and *wb*, the first-person plural and dual pronouns, do not have a recoverable source in common nouns, yet can also be found in these constructions. For example,

(7) *Teb chaws ntawd mas teb pob kws zoo zoo*  
country that TOP land corn good-good

*qoob mas kuv niam thiab kuv txiv peb yug tau*  
crop TOP I mother and I father we raise get

*qaib tau npua coob coob.*  
chicken get pig many-many

The land in that country was very fruitful; **our family** was able to raise livestock easily there. (Muas 8)

(8) . . . *koj txiv wb mus ua teb lawm; . . .*  
**you father we-2 go make field PERF**

. . . (when) **your father and I** have gone to the fields; . . .  
(Johnson 449.5)

3.2.2. More persuasive is the fact that there are few embedded constructions in Hmong (see Riddle, this volume). Furthermore, in the unmarked case, the possessor precedes the noun *and* its classifier.<sup>3</sup> For example,

*John lub tsev*

J CLF house

John's house

But it is impossible to place a classifier between the first noun and the pronoun, which one would expect if *lawv* were functioning as a noun in this construction:

\*[[John CLF lawv] tsev]

J                    they house

John's family's house

#### 4. The topicalized NP analysis.

If the pronouns in these constructions are "expansion" pronouns, it would follow that the first noun is a topic within the scope of the noun phrase which first makes reference to one member of the group as more prominent or familiar.

4.1. In support of this analysis are the following facts:

4.1.1. Hmong is closer to a "topic-prominent language" than it is to a "subject-prominent language" in the familiar dichotomy introduced by Li and Thompson (1976). For example, it has the following topic-prominent structural features:

object topicalizations

left-dislocations (resumptive pronoun constructions)

double subject constructions

existence of topic markers

topic-controlled deletion

only a marginal passive construction

only marginal use of dummy subjects<sup>4</sup>

(Fuller 201-214)

4.1.2. Hmong is also a "serial noun" language. It makes heavy use of the following types of constructions in which nouns are strung together in quintessential paratactic fashion:

a) resumptives:

(9) *Thaum ub ov, pog Xeev Laus thiab yawg*

time far PRT grandmother XL and grandfather

*Xeev Laus nkawd yug tau ib tug ntxhais;*

XL            they-2    bear get 1 CLF daughter

Long ago, a couple named Mr. and Mrs. Xeev Laus gave birth to a daughter; (Johnson 449.1)

b) appositives:

(10) *lawv cov tub ntxhais*

they GRP son daughter

they, the children

(Mottin 45)

## c) expansion pronouns with appositives:

(11) *niam tais cem Soob Lwj nkawd ob niam txiv tias . .*  
 grandmother scold SL 2pd two wife husband say

the grandmother scolded Soob Lwj and his wife,  
 saying. . . (Vang, et al. 32)

## d) Great Strings:

(12) *yawg Txawj Muas cov niam txiv tub muab mov noj*  
 grandfather TM GRP mother father son take rice eat  
*tas.*  
 finish

Txawj Muas' family finished eating. (Muas 2)

(13) *Tsij tshu nyuj twm qaib npua los muaj txaus*  
 animal cow buffalo chicken pig then have enough

*siv txaus yoom.*  
 use enough spend

Livestock: cows, buffaloes, chickens, pigs --  
 there were enough. (Muas 9)

The relationship of the topic noun to the following pronoun or noun phrase is also a paratactic relationship.

4.1.3. The "possessive" constructions involving two nouns illustrated in section 3.1.2. above could be analyzed as topicalized NPs as well, thus simplifying our characterization of the possessive construction in Hmong.

In sentence (6), repeated below for reference,

(6) . . . *Nyiaj Xauv Hawj tau coj Soob Lwj tsev neeg khiav tawm*  
 NXH get lead SL household run emerge  
*tuaj rau Vaj Pov tog . .*  
 come at VP side

. . . Nyiaj Xauv Hawj had taken Soob Lwj and his family off  
 to join with Vaj Pov's side . . . (Vang, et al. 62)

if *Soob Lwj tsev neeg* were translated 'Soob Lwj's family', that is, as a conventional possessive phrase, it would be interpreted

as meaning that everyone in his family *except* Soob Lwj had been taken, whereas in fact it means that Soob Lwj *along with* his family had been taken. An analysis which takes 'Soob Lwj' as the topic of the noun phrase rather than the possessor of the following noun would account for this reading.

4.2. But there is a problem with this analysis as well. There is an overt topic marker in Hmong: *mas*. According to my consultant, the first NP cannot be followed by the topic marker *mas*:

(14) *Nplooj tsav tsheb mus nres ntawm ntug kev ze ntawm*  
 N drive car go stop at side road close at

*Nplias \*mas nkawd qhov rooj.*  
 N TOP they-2 door

Nplooj drove the car and parked it by the curb in front of  
 Nplias (and Yaj's) house. (Chang 6)

## 5. Conclusion.

Of these two possible analyses, the possessed pronoun analysis and the topicalized NP analysis, the topicalized NP analysis is preferable because it reflects the importance of surface syntax in this language -- one interprets Hmong sentences by redefining new ground as each word is added to the string in a series of local linkages.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it fits into a network of other topic-prominent features which characterize the language. The false possessive phrases of the type illustrated by sentence (6) are also better understood under the assumption that Hmong has topicalized NPs. The chief difficulty with the topicalized NP analysis, the ungrammaticality of sentences with the topic marker *mas* in the position after the first noun, may only involve a restriction of *mas* to sentence level or larger constructions.

Nonetheless, the flexible interpretation of the dual and plural pronouns as either conventional pronouns or as a group nouns depending on the context is harmonious with my earlier treatment of the group classifier *cov* as either a pluralizer or a classifier depending on the other elements of the NP (Ratliff 1991). In that paper, I argued that Hmong is a language in which the grammatical category of certain lexical items is determined by what position in the phrase needs to be filled

and by what positions are unavailable because already filled. The possessed (pro)noun analysis would represent another example of what I called "syntactic flexibility"<sup>6</sup> in that paper. It may be desirable to incorporate elements from both analyses into a final solution for this problem.

The function of this construction is also worthy of further study. My impression is that the first noun in these phrases often serves more of a stylistic purpose than a discourse purpose. It is not always needed to recall reference to a familiar figure in a situation of potential ambiguity. In the following passage, which is given only in translation with the relevant constructions translated literally and underlined, *Nplias nkawd* 'Nplias they-two' and *Nplias lawv* 'Nplias they' occur six times in a sequence of four sentences, where there are no other pairs of people with whom one might confuse the sisters:

When school was over, Nplooj drove quickly up to Nplias their school and searched for Nplias and Yaj. they-two. But his luck wasn't good as he was a little late and Nplias they-two had already left. He then drove straight over to Nplias their-two's house.

When Nplooj came to Nplias their house, Nplias they-two were just stepping out of the school bus.

(Chang 9)

The commonplace nature of the topicalized NP in Hmong is attested by its wide presence in many types of texts, from formal to informal. However, it is a construction not commonly described for other languages, including the languages of Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup> The closest analogs of the Hmong construction in Southeast Asia that I have been able to find are (1) proper noun-pluralizer constructions in Mien and Lahu and (2) a proper noun-pluralizer construction with a pronominal element in Tagalog:

Mien "pluralizer" -*buə*

(Court 108)

attaches to singular personal pronouns: *yia-buə* I + pl = we

attaches to proper nouns: *Kweih Tszoi-buə* Gway Dzoy's group

Lahu B<sub>n</sub> (bound morpheme) -*hɛ*

(Matisoff 65)



attaches to singular personal pronouns:  $\eta\grave{a}\text{-}h\ddot{z}$       I + pl = we  
 attaches to proper nouns:  $C\grave{a}\text{-}l\hat{o}\text{-}h\ddot{z}$       Jalaw and his friends

Tagalog      plural element *-na*

(Schachter and Otanes 113)

[personal noun marker + plural element *-na*] + proper noun

*Masasaya na sina Maria.*

Maria and the others are happy now.

The significance of the existence of this construction for Hmong lies in the fact that it places Hmong a few more degrees toward the topic end of the subject-topic scale as described by Fuller. Its significance for other languages is that we now have a new structural characteristic to look for in topic-prominent languages which has not been previously discussed in connection with the network of features presented in 4.1.1. above.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Charles Torr, Npoos Mas Yaj and Ntxhoo Lis for their judgments.

<sup>2</sup>I am indebted to Annie Jassier for calling my attention to this sentence which represents the less frequently encountered case in which the first noun is a common noun.

<sup>3</sup>There are, however, a few common expressions in which the classifier is not used in this position. See Mottin, pages 30 and 46.

<sup>4</sup>Fuller (1985) actually claims that there are no dummy subjects in Hmong. Since that time both existential and meteorological sentences using the third person singular pronoun *nws* have been found, but the dummy subject does not appear to be obligatory in these constructions.

<sup>5</sup>For example, phrase (3) in section 1 above is reminiscent of other pivotal constructions in Hmong in that the pronoun takes two arguments, one on either side: 'John's family -- their house':

*[John [lawv] tsev]*

Compare the following sentence from Riddle's paper, this volume:

[*Nws nyeem ntawv rau kuv [niam] mloog*].  
S/he read book to lps mother listen

S/he read to my mother.

Here *niam* 'mother' is simultaneously object of *rau* 'to/put' and subject of *mloog* 'listen'.

<sup>6</sup>In Eric Schiller's terms (1989), "syntactic polysemy".

<sup>7</sup>Several participants at the SEALS II meeting mentioned other languages, both in Southeast Asia and beyond, that have similar constructions to the one under discussion: for example, Robert Blust reported that 2nd personal dual-proper name compounds (in which the expansion pronoun precedes) are common in Oceanic languages; Eric Schiller reported the fact that topicalized NPs are commonplace in creole languages (*When Blong come Bli dem's house . . .*) and Jean Longmire allowed that the same was true for certain non-standard varieties of English; and Willem deReuse reported the construction *nous deux Marie* for 'Mary and I' in Southeast Belgian French.

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