The Hmong-Mien Languages

David Strecker

The Hmong-Mien family, which is also called the Miao-Yao family, is one of the major language stocks of Southeast Asia. Most of the languages of the family are spoken in southwestern China, but several languages are spoken in the northern portions of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma.

A detailed understanding of the family first became available to linguists as a result of the dialect surveys and descriptive linguistic work undertaken in China after the liberation. More recently, the Indochinese war forced thousands of speakers of Hmong-Mien languages from Laos to resettle in Australia, Europe, and the Americas, so that a number of linguists outside of China and Southeast Asia have now become active Hmong-Mienists. The present collection includes the work of several of these scholars.

Even today some linguists who are not specialists in these languages tend to think of Hmong-Mien as a small and obscure group, comprising just two languages, "Miao" and "Yao". In fact, Hmong-Mien comprises some two dozen major subgroups which are sufficiently different from one another to be mutually unintelligible. Within several of these subgroups there exist further subdivisions showing marked differences in vocabulary and phonology and considered by their speakers to be separate languages, despite some degree of mutual intelligibility. It is probably closer to the mark to say that there are between 30 and 40 Hmong-Mien languages.

The various subgroups of Hmong-Mien can be grouped in three major branches:

Hmongic
Ho Nte
Mienic

Mienic, also called Yao, is a fairly close-knit group comprising six languages as shown in figure 2. Mun and Mien are widely spoken in China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The other four languages are confined to a relatively limited region within China.

Ho Nte, also called She, is a single language spoken in four districts near Hong Kong (figure 1).
By contrast, Hmongic, also called Miao, is extremely diverse. I have tried to give a rough idea of the diversity of Hmongic languages and their approximate geographic distribution in Figure 1. In Chinese publications, Hmongic languages are subdivided into Miáoyú 'Miao language' and Bùnùyù 'Bunu language' according to whether the speakers are culturally Hmong (Miáozú) or Yao (Yàozú). This distinction is cultural rather than linguistic.

The Na-e language of Vietnam, also called Pateng, seems in most respects to be simply a southern outlier of the Pa Hng subgroup of Hmongic, as was first pointed out by André Haudricourt. Recently, however, Paul Benedict has argued that Na-e actually constitutes a fourth branch of Hmong-Mien. This suggestion needs further study.

A more detailed breakdown of Hmong-Mien languages is as follows:

I. Hmongic (Miáoyú yǔzhī)

A. West Hunan group or QoXiong language (Miáoyú Xiāngxī fāngyán; Northern Hmongic)

B. East Guizhou group or Mhu language (Miáoyú Qiándōng fāngyán; Eastern Hmongic)

C. Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan group (Miáoyú Chuāngqiándiān fāngyán plus Bùnùyù Bù-Nǎo fāngyán; Western Hmongic; Purnell's Western and Central)
   1. Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan subgroup (Miáoyú Chuāngqiándiān cǐfāngyán; Purnell's West A): Green Mong, White Hmong, etc.
   2. Northeastern Yunnan subgroup (Miáoyú Diāndōngběi cǐfāngyán)(A-Hmau)
   3. Guiyang subgroup (Miáoyú Guǐyáng cǐfāngyán)
      (Hmong)
   4. Huishui subgroup (Miáoyú Hulshuǐ cǐfāngyán)
      (Hmong)
   5. Mashan subgroup (Miáoyú Māshān cǐfāngyán)(Mang)
   6. Luobo River subgroup (Miáoyú Luóbó Hé cǐfāngyán)
      (A-Hmyo)
   7. Eastern or Zhōng'ān River subgroup (Miáoyú Dongbù cǐfāngyán or Miáoyú Zhōng'ān Jiāng cǐ-
      fāngyán)(Mhong)
   8. Pingtang subgroup (Miáoyú)
   9. Qianxi-Pingba-Qingzhen-Liuzhi subgroup (Miáoyú)
   10. Luodian Moyin subgroup (Miáoyú)
I. Hmongic, continued.

C. Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan group, continued.

11. Dushan subgroup (Míaoyǔ)
12. Luodian Pingyan subgroup (Míaoyǔ)
13. Ziyun-Zhenning subgroup (Míaoyǔ)
14. Wangmo subgroup (Míaoyǔ)
15. Wangmo-Luodian subgroup (Míaoyǔ) (Mhang)
16. Pu-Nao subgroup (Bùnyǔ Bù-Nào fāngyán)
   a. Pu Nu (Tung Nu) (Bùnyǔ Dōngnǔ tūyǔ)
   b. Nu Nu (Bùnyǔ Nǔnǔ tūyǔ)
   c. Pu No (Bùnyǔ Bùnuò tūyǔ)
   d. Nao Kla (Bùnyǔ Nàogéláo tūyǔ)
   e. Nu Mhou (Bùnyǔ Nǎmào tūyǔ)

D. Pa Hng (Bùnyǔ Bāhēng fāngyán)
E. Hm Nai (Bùnyǔ Wùnàì fāngyán)
F. Kiong Nai (Bùnyǔ Jiōngnài fāngyán)
G. Yu Nuo (Bùnyǔ Yǒunù fāngyán)

II. Ho Nte (Shèyǔ)

A. Western or Lianhua dialect (Liánhuā fāngyán)
B. Eastern or Luofu dialect (Luófǔ fāngyán)

III. Mienic (Yáo yúzhī Miányuǔ)

A. Mien-Kim (Miǎn-Jǐn fāngyán)
   1. Mien (Lù Mien) (Yǒumǐān tūyǔ)
   2. Mùn (Kim Mùn) (Jǐnmǐān tūyǔ)
   3. Biaò Món (Biàomǐān tūyǔ)
B. Biaò-Cháo (Biàò-Jiào fāngyán)
   1. Biaò Mǐn (Biàomǐn tūyǔ)
   2. Cháo Kong Meng (Jīǎogōngmiǎn tūyǔ)
C. Dzao Mǐn (Zàomǐn fāngyán)

IV. Classification uncertain: Na-e (Pateng)

Note that the articles on Hmong in this collection all deal with White Hmong of Thailand and Laos, which belongs to the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan subgroup of the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan group of Hmongic.
Figure 1: Hmongic, Na-e, and Ho Nte.

1. Qoxiong or West Hunan group (also speech islands in or near the Tung Nu speaking area)
2. Mhu or East Guizhou group (also speech islands in south central and SW Guizhou and in NW Guangxi)
3. A-Hmau or Northeastern Yunnan subgroup of Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan group
16. Zhong'an River Mhong (speech islands within Mhu area)
17. Nu Nu
18. Pu No
19. Nao Klao
20. Nu Mhou
21. Pa Hng
22. Hm Nai
23. Kiong Nai
24. Yu Nuo

- Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan subgroup: Green Mong, White Hmong, etc.
- Tung Nu (Pu Nu)
- Na-e
- Ho Nte
Figure 2: Mieneic

1. Mien
2. Mun
3. Biao Mon
4. Biao Mon
5. Chao Kung Meng
6. Dao Min

Regions:
- Hunan
- Guangdong
- Guangxi
- Yunnan
- Vietnam
- Laos
- Thailand
- Hainan
White Hmong Orthography and IPA Equivalents
(Broad Transcription)

1. Final consonant letters denote tones, not consonants.
2. Doubling a vowel denotes final [ŋ].

Thus the name of the language is spelled *Hmoob [mɔŋ]55*.

**Initials**

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For d and dh see Jarkey's paper in this collection.
### Finals

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### Tones

- **-b [55]** high level
- **-j [52]** high falling
- **-v [24]** rising
- **-s [22]** mid-low level
- **-ø [33]** mid level
- **-g [42]** falling, whisply voiced
- **-m [21]** low falling, creaky voiced
- **-d [13], [213]** low rising, or falling-rising (a syntactically determined variant of -m)
Bibliography

Huffman's bibliography provides a very complete listing of sources on Hmong-Mien languages up to 1983 or early 1984. Here we give a small update of Huffman, listing works which do not appear in his bibliography or which he lists as conference presentations and which have since been published.


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