

Hmong linguistics resources

An (in-progress) annotated bibliography, with emphasis on syntax and semantics

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This bibliography includes academic sources that discuss the syntax and semantics of White Hmong and Green Mong. Most reference materials for Hmong are, at least in theory, specific to either White Hmong or Green Mong. However, there is enough grammatical similarity between the two varieties that most of the sources named here are likely equally applicable to both varieties. But please be aware that there may be some differences!

For anyone interested in Hmong phonetics/phonology, historical linguistics, or sociolinguistics, I suggest that you consult the Oxford Bibliographies page on Hmong-Mien linguistics ([LINK](#), [PDF](#)) maintained by David Mortensen (Mortensen 2014), which offers a number of useful sources.

Please keep in mind: the annotations here represent my own thoughts, and are not necessarily authoritative! Please also note that this list is a work in progress. More sources will be added as I am able.

Feel free to contact me (via my web site) with questions about anything pertaining to Hmong linguistics.

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Grammars and Overviews

Unfortunately there are no recent, book-length grammars of Hmong—but there are still excellent references available. General reference works are listed here; more focused works are sorted by subject matter in the following sections.

The two most recent sources mentioned here, [Jarkey 2015](#) and [Mortensen 2019](#), are generally in agreement with one another, but have slight differences in their terminology and analyses. I recommend reading both of these sources, even if you only intend to study one variety of Hmong.

Eléments de Grammaire Hmong Blanc
(Mottin [1978](#))

Mottin’s *Eléments de grammaire hmong blanc* is the most widely cited description of the Hmong language available, and perhaps the most thorough. However, it’s written in French—though with some knowledge of French and/or an online translator, this is an excellent resource.

“Hmong (Mong Leng)”
(Mortensen [2019](#))

This is a chapter-length description of Green Mong grammar, from an anthology covering numerous Southeast Asian languages. It is necessarily brief, but gives concise descriptions of most fundamental topics.

Serial Verbs in White Hmong
(Jarkey [2015](#))

The first chapter of this book is an overview of White Hmong grammar, briefly covering most fundamental topics. (It is the first chapter of a book focusing on serial verb constructions in White Hmong. More information on the book’s main subject matter is given [below](#).)

Verbs and the verbal domain

1 Serial verb constructions

Serial Verbs in White Hmong

(Jarkey 2015)

The most thorough reference on serial verb constructions in Hmong. Jarkey establishes a typology of four main types, and discusses their properties in detail. Jarkey also discusses several superficially-similar constructions involving juxtaposition of verbs, arguing that they should not be treated as SVCs. (Includes an excellent chapter-length description of the fundamentals of White Hmong grammar.)

“Cotemporal Serial Verb Constructions in White Hmong”

(Jarkey 2010)

The contents of this chapter are incorporated into [Jarkey 2015](#) (see Chapter 3, Section 1).

Serial Verb Constructions in Hmong: Resultatives and Consequential

(Cooper-Leavitt and Lonsdale 2006)

A conference presentation, offering a somewhat simplified view of serial verb constructions in White Hmong. From the abstract, discussion appears limited to two types of serial verb construction, those called ‘Cause-Effect’ and ‘Disposal’ by [Jarkey 2015](#) (which are herein called ‘resultative’ and ‘consequential’, respectively). I do not know whether this presentation was eventually published as a paper.

“Serialization in Mainland Southeast Asia”

(Clark 1992c)

Clark uses the term ‘serialization’ in a nonstandard way, to refer to any instance of coordination, subordination, or successive modification that is not signaled by an overt conjunction/complementizer. Under this definition, the verbal, nominal, and clausal domains might all be said to exhibit ‘serialization’. The data presented by Clark is certainly evidence of a morphological trend, though the syntax of these constructions is likely not uniform. (Data from White Hmong.)

“Verb Concatenation in Hmong Njua: A Syntactic Description and Its Treatment in Natural Language Processing”

(Harriehausen-Muhlbauer 1992)

Data is limited to one subclass of serial verb construction, those called ‘Cotemporal Motion’ by Jarkey (2015)—and this paper does not appear to describe the full complexity of that construction. Discusses the implications of these constructions for natural language processing. (Data from Green Mong.)

“Serial Verb Constructions in White Hmong: A Functional Approach”

(Jarkey 1991)

Updated and published in book form as Jarkey 2015.

“Serial Verbs and Propositions in White Hmong”

(Riddle 1989)

Discusses several classes of serial verb construction in White Hmong (including ‘instrumental’ constructions) and argues that fine-grained semantic/pragmatic distinctions between certain verbs (e.g. *muab* ‘take’ vs. *xuas* ‘grasp’ vs. *siv* ‘use’ vs. *tuav* ‘hold’) determine whether a construction describes a single proposition or multiple propositions. (Comparison with Jarkey (2015) suggests that Riddle is comparing different classes of serial verb constructions. The semantic/pragmatic contrasts Riddle discusses may simply disambiguate between different possible syntactic structures.)

2 Voice

“Passive and Passive-like Constructions in Hmong”

(Creswell and Snyder 2000)

Describes two passive(-like) constructions in Hmong, those formed with *raug* ‘hit’ or *mag* ‘trap’ and those formed with *yog* ‘to be’. These differ from each other in several ways, but both are unusual for passive constructions cross-linguistically: an overt (demoted) agent is required with *yog* and preferred with *raug/mag*. (Data from White Hmong.)

3 Tense and Aspect

“The Aspectual System of Hmong”
(Li 1991)

Gives a detailed examination of several aspectual markers in Mong Leng (Green Mong), including *tau* (telic or ‘attainment’ marker), *lawm* (PERFECT or ‘completive’ marker), and *taabtom* (PROGRESSIVE). Li argues decisively that these should be considered aspect markers (early descriptions of Hmong often call these tense markers instead). Some of these markers have multiple grammatical uses, between which Li makes fine-grained (and insightful) distinctions. Li also discusses *yuav* (IRREALIS or FUTURE).

“Non-Spatial Setting in White Hmong”
(White 2014)

A broad overview of tense and aspect marking, modality, certainty markers, and related adverbs. While White’s descriptions appear generally correct, his analyses diverge from those of other authors—and his data in some cases differs from the judgments of Hmong consultants that I’ve worked with. If you use White’s data/conclusions in your own research, I suggest that you verify them with Hmong speakers, if possible.

Nouns and the nominal domain

4 Classifiers

“Shape and Function in Hmong Classifier Choices”
(Sakuragi and Fuller 2013)

A study examining the factors that affect Hmong speakers’ choice of classifiers. The results suggest that classifiers are associated with both particular shapes and particular functions. (E.g., *tus* and *txoj* can both be used for nouns that describe long, thin objects, but *tus* is preferred over *txoj* when the normal use of that noun involves grasping it.) In some cases, Hmong speakers can be led to prefer different classifiers for the same noun, depending on whether they focus on the shape of the noun in question, or on its function.

“Classifiers, Quantifiers and Class Nouns in Hmong”
(Bisang [1993](#))

Bisang uses syntactic and semantic tests to show that what are usually called ‘classifiers’ in Hmong are in fact a mixed bag of true classifiers, quantifiers, measure words, and class nouns. This is a fine-grained description, which offers an alternative view of the ‘double classifier constraint’ discussed by [Ratliff \(1991\)](#) and an explanation for the ‘referential salience’ analysis of Riddle (1989).

“*Cov*, the Underspecified Noun, and Syntactic Flexibility in Hmong”
(Ratliff [1991](#))

Discusses cases of ‘double classifiers’ in Hmong. These usually involve the plural classifier *cov* being added to a classifier-noun pair, but require the noun to be semantically underspecified (e.g. *cov* + *phau ntawv*, ‘the books’). Ratliff argues that the second classifier acts as a noun in these cases, forming the first part of a compound word, and relates this to a broader pattern of syntactic flexibility in Hmong. (Data from White Hmong.)

5 Demonstratives

“Hmong-Mien Demonstratives and Pattern Persistence”
(Ratliff [1997](#))

Discusses the White Hmong demonstrative *ko* ‘that (near you)’, which has often been missed in other accounts. Ratliff situates *ko* with respect to the full person-based demonstrative system of White Hmong. This type of system is unusual among Southeast Asian languages, and the historical development of this system is discussed.

6 Pronouns and Binding

“Two Types of Variable Elements in Hmong Anaphora”
(Mortensen [2004](#))

Discusses A and A’ binding, including anaphoric binding into proper names, full pronominals (e.g. *nwg*, 3SG), kinship pronominals (e.g. *yawg*, ‘male relative’), null *pro*, and *tug kheej* ‘self’ forms. Describes an apparent ‘competition’ between these forms. (Data from Green Mong.)

“Topicalized NPs with Expansion Pronouns in Hmong”
(Ratliff 1992)

Provides data on so-called ‘expansion pronouns’ in White Hmong. These forms combine an NP with a pronoun, in order to describe a larger group containing the noun. For example, *Nplias nkawd* (= Nplias 2DU) describes a group of two people, of whom Nplias is one. Ratliff explores two possible analyses.

Clause and sentence structure

7 Conjunction and Complementation

“Complement Clause Types and Complementation Strategy in White Hmong”
(Jarkey 2006)

Explores complementation in Hmong. Several distinct types of complement clause are discussed (as well as the verbs that introduce them). The relationship between clause type and choice of complementizer (which include *(hais) tias*, *kom*, *tias kom*, and the null complementizer) is described in detail.

“Conjunctions as Topicalizers: More on Southeast Asian Languages”
(Clark 1992b)

Expands on the data presented in Clark 1988, placing White Hmong *los* alongside similar conjunctions in Vietnamese and Black Tai, but does not significantly expand the analysis. (See Clark 1992a for further development of this idea, as it pertains to Vietnamese.)

“The Origin and Function of Switch Reference in Green Mong”
(Li 1989)

Argues that the Green Mong clausal conjunctions *huas* and *hab* function as switch-reference markers. *Huas*, which generally conveys a weak contrast, is used in different-subject contexts, and the semantically-neutral *hab* is used in same-subject contexts. Discusses historical factors that may have given rise to this pattern of behavior.

“An Inchoative Conjunction in Hmong: Extra-Sentential Topic Marker?”
(Clark 1988)

Argues that the White Hmong conjunction *los* has an inchoative meaning, and that inchoative meanings generally allow conjunctions to function as topicalizers. This analysis is not fleshed out in detail. Clark also touches on other clause linkers: *mas*, *ho*, *ces*, and *thiab*. (See also Clark 1992a, Clark 1992b.)

8 Topic Prominence and Topicalization

“Topicalized NPs with Expansion Pronouns in Hmong”
(Ratliff 1992)

See [full entry](#) above.

“Conjunctions as Topicalizers: More on Southeast Asian Languages”
(Clark 1992b)

See [full entry](#) above.

“An Inchoative Conjunction in Hmong: Extra-Sentential Topic Marker?”
(Clark 1988)

See [full entry](#) above.

9 Relative Clauses

“The Relative Marker *Uas* in Hmong”
(Riddle 1993)

A short paper presenting data on the relative clause marker *uas*, which is argued to have a discourse function of specifying or restricting the reference of the relative clause. Does not discuss the related use of *uas* as a complementizer. (Data from White Hmong.)

“Relativization, Parataxis and Underspecification in White Hmong”
(Riddle [1992](#))

A short paper presenting similar observations to those discussed in [Riddle 1993](#). (Data from White Hmong.)

10 Questions

“Asking Questions in Hmong and Other Southeast Asian Languages”
(Clark [1985](#))

Discusses the ‘V-not-V’ strategy used to form yes-no questions in many Southeast Asian languages. (In Hmong, for example, *koj mus (los) tsis mus* can mean “Are you going?”) Ten languages with similar (but not identical) behavior are studied. Among these languages, Hmong shows two uncommon features: it makes heavier use of ‘V-not-V’ questions than the other languages, and unusually, the question word *puas* precedes the verb in yes-no questions.

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