Hmong linguistics resources

An (incomplete) annotated bibliography, with emphasis on syntax and semantics

Collected by William Johnston

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This bibliography includes academic sources that discuss Hmong syntax, semantics, and morphology. These are roughly grouped by subject area. 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).

Please keep in mind that the annotations here represent my own thoughts, and are not necessarily authoritative! Also, please note that this list is (very) incomplete. More resources will be added as time permits, and though my goal is to eventually be as exhaustive as possible, it is still a work in progress.

For anyone unable to access any of the papers listed here, or with questions about anything pertaining to Hmong linguistics, I invite you to contact me directly via the email address listed on my web site.

Contents

Part I

Grammars and Overviews

There are no grammars of 'Hmong' as a whole, though grammars exist for both White Hmong and Green Mong. While there are certainly differences between the two varieties, they are similar enough in their grammar that most sources discussed in this bibliography are likely applicable to both varieties (possibly with small changes).

Unfortunately, there are no Hmong grammars available that are both recent and comprehensive. However, some excellent references do exist. 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 viewpoints and terminology. I would recommend reading both of these sources, even if you only intend to study one variety of the Hmong language.

More focused works are sorted by subject matter in the following sections.

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)

> This is a chapter-length overview of White Hmong grammar, covering most fundamental topics in the grammar though not in great depth. It is the first chapter of a book that describes in detail the 'serial verb constructions' found in White Hmong. More information on the book's main subject matter is given in the entry below.

Part II

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 especially Section 1 of Chapter 3).

"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'
  expressions) and explores certain fine-grained semantic/pragmatic distinctions between verbs
  (e.g. *muab* 'take' vs. *xuas* 'grasp' vs. *siv* 'use' vs. *tuav* 'hold'). Riddle argues that these
  semantic/pragmatic distinctions determe whether a serial verb construction describes a single
  proposition or multiple propositions.

  (Comparision with later authors, especially Jarkey (2015), suggests that Riddle makes com-
  parisons *across* classes of serial verb constructions rather than *within* them. The seman-
  tic/pragmatic contrasts discussed here may merely disambiguate between different possible
  syntactic structures.)

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2   Tense and Aspect

"Non-Spatial Setting in White Hmong"
(White 2014)

  A master's thesis that gives a broad overview of tense and aspect marking, modality, certainty
  markers, and related adverbs. It describes these within the "Non-spatial Setting" framework
  of Dixon (2012). The discussion of individual lexical items is necessarily brief, but it gives a
  good level of description for a wide range of items.

  This work is a great starting point, but it's not clear whether all descriptions presented are
  accurate for all Hmong speakers. Most of White's conclusions seem correct, but on a few points,
  he disagrees with other authors and with the judgments of Hmong speakers I've worked with.
  If you use data from White, I'd suggest taking caution and verifying any relevant data with
  Hmong speakers, if you can, or checking it against data from other authors.

Part III

Nouns and the nominal domain

3   Classifiers

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

> A psycholinguistic study examining the factors that affect Hmong speakers' choice of classifiers. The results suggest that, while some classifiers are strongly associated with nouns of specific shapes, this alone is not sufficient. The choice of classifier is also influenced by the *function* of the noun. (E.g., *tus* and *txoj* can both be used for nouns that describe long, thin objects, but *tus* is preferred 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 simple syntactic and semantic tests to show that not all lexical items that have been called 'classifiers' in Hmong pattern alike. Instead, some apparent 'classifiers' are treated as quantifiers, measure words, class nouns, or other similar functions. This is a more fine-grained description than offered by some previous authors. It also 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 in which two classifiers may co-occur with a single noun. These involve the plural classifier *cov* applying to a classifier-noun pair, but require the noun to be semantically underspecified (e.g. *cov phau ntawv*, 'the books', where *phau* is a classifier for 'bound piles' and *ntawv* literally means 'writing'). 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.)

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4   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.

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5   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.

Part IV

Clauses and sentence structure

6   Conjunction and Complementation

"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.)

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7   Topic Prominence and Topicalization

"Topicalized NPs with Expansion Pronouns in Hmong"
(Ratliff 1992)

See full entry below.

"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.

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8 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.)

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9 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 simply mean "Are you going?") Ten languages are examined, which show similar but not identical behavior. 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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