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THE RECIPROCAL MARKER *SIB/SIS* 'EACH OTHER'

Among the elements which can modify the meaning of a main verb is the pre-verbal modifier *sib*, which indicates reciprocal action and translates as 'Verb **each other**' in English. You are probably already familiar with this construction since it is found in the high-frequency leave-taking formulaic phrase *Sib ntsib dua*, as illustrated in (1):

1. *Sib ntsib dua*
 recip meet again
 'See you later/Goodbye/Bye—literally, meet each other again.'

The reciprocal action *sib* + Verb construction is further illustrated in the following excerpts from "*Tus Tsov thiab tus Qav*" 'The Tiger and the Frog' (2-3) and "*Dab Neeg Nab Qa Tsiav*" 'The School Lizard' (4):

2. *Puag thaum ub, muaj ib tug Qav thiab ib tug Tsov nkawd los sib ntsib.*
 a long time ago be one clf Frog and one clf Tiger they-two come recip meet
 'A long time ago, a Tiger met a Frog.'
 [A more literal translation would read '... a Frog and a Tiger met each other.']
3. *Tus Tsov thiaj hais rau tus Qav tias: "Qav, wb sib twv dhia."*
 clf Tiger so say to clf Frog that Frog we-two recip compete jump
 'So he said to the Frog, "Frog, let's have a jumping contest."'
4. *Thaum lawv sib qw sib qw, tus nab qa tsiav khiav tawm tim lub qhov rais mus lawm.*
 go perf
 'While they're all screaming at each other, the lizard runs out through the window.'

Since it has a high-level tone, *sib* can trigger a tone change in the following verb if this verb bears a *j*, *v*, *s*, *ø*, or *m* tone; see section on "Tone Change" for details and examples. As pointed out in that section as well, *sib* can also be pronounced *sis*, with no meaning difference between the two. The *sis* variant is frequently used by Hmong from Laos and does not trigger tone change in the following verb since it bears a low tone.

SPATIAL DEICTICS (Location Words)

Spatial deictics are words used to point or refer to different locations in space relative to the speaker and to the hearer (when present). Three of these types of words, the demonstratives *no* 'this (near me, the speaker),' *ko* 'that (near you, the hearer),' and *ntawd* 'that (nearby),' occur at the end of a noun phrase and are discussed in detail in the section on demonstratives. Other deictics function like location nouns or like prepositions (see I.B for details); the most common ones are discussed below.

I. COMMON SPATIAL DEICTICS

A. TRADITIONAL MEANINGS

The table below lists the most common spatial reference words along with their traditional meanings and some interpretative comments. Since the Hmong are by tradition mountain dwellers, it comes as no surprise that many of the deictics refer to locations along the vertical axis, and that they are used with reference to features of the native landscape such as mountains, slopes, and valleys. You should be aware that while the translations given are the best approximations we can come up with in English, deictics can only be characterized accurately with reference to real world speech situations and to three-dimensional topography. In addition, since the Hmong now living in Western hemisphere countries can no longer use their native topography as a reference point, a few of the deictics below have acquired new metaphorical extensions in these communities to accommodate new language needs; these changes are discussed in section II.

DEICTIC	TRANSLATION	COMMENTS
1. <i>pem</i>	'Uphill (from), above, on the uphill side, up'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used for the vertical dimension going upward with reference to the mountain; opposite of <i>nram</i> (see #2) • Has new metaphorical extensions in the U.S. (see section II)
2. <i>nram</i>	a) 'Downhill (from), down below, down, towards the valley' b) 'Below' (as in a text)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used for the vertical dimension going downward with reference to the valley; opposite of <i>pem</i> (see #1) • This metaphorical extension is on the rise in the U.S. (see section II); opposite of <i>saum</i> (see #6b)
3. <i>ntawm</i>	'Here/there (nearby)'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refers to a location relatively close to the speaker (the location being a point—in contrast with <i>hauv</i> 'in, inside, within,' where the location is a surface, area, stretch, expanse)

4. <i>tom</i>	'(Over) there, at a certain distance'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refers to a location farther than <i>ntawm</i> • Most frequently used default deictic
5. <i>tim</i>	'Opposite (from), on the other side, across from, facing'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stands in contrast with <i>tom</i> (see #4) • Used to refer to a location opposite the speaker, with reference to a feature of the landscape such as a mountain, river, road, boundary, obstacle, etc. — regardless of distance • Even though not just mountains are involved, <i>tim</i> seems to refer to a spatial relationship pertinent to mountain dwelling
6. <i>saum</i>	a) 'On, above, on top of' b) 'Above' (as in a text)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not used relative to mountains; contrasts with <i>hauv</i> (see #8) or <i>nraum</i> (see #7a), depending on the context • This metaphorical extension is on the rise in the U.S. (see section II); opposite of <i>nram</i> (see #2)
7. <i>nraum</i>	a) 'Outside' b) 'In back of, on the reverse/other side of, behind'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contrasts with <i>hauv</i> (see #8) or <i>nruab</i> (see #10) • Typically used in relation to the mountains
8. <i>hauv</i>	'In, inside, within'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contrasts with <i>nraum</i> (see #7a) or <i>saum</i> (see #6a), depending on the context
9. <i>qaum</i>	'Top part or top side of, upper side of, back of'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically used in phrases such as <i>qaum tes</i> 'back of the hand,' <i>qaum tau</i> 'top of the foot,' <i>qaum nplooj</i> 'upper side of a leaf,' <i>lub nraub qaum</i> 'the back (of a person),' etc.
10. <i>nruab</i>	'In the middle/midst/center of'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When <i>nruab</i> is followed by <i>nrab</i> '(one) half, mid (horizontal),' it can mean either '(in the) middle/midst/center' or 'between X and Y'

Some of the deictics listed above can be used in combination with other elements; the most common of these elements are:

a. *qab* 'under side of, at the bottom/base/foot of, lower side of':

hauv qab 'under, underneath'

tom qab 'behind, in the back'

nram qab 'down below'

- b. *ntej* 'in front of, before':

hauv ntej 'in front of, ahead of'

Nram ntej, however, is used in the time dimension since it means 'ago, previously, the period up till now' (see section III for details on the use of spatial deictics in the temporal dimension).

- c. *sab* 'side, direction':

sab tid 'on the opposite side'

sab nraud 'on the back side'

sab tim roob or *sab roob tid* 'on the side of the opposite mountain'

sab nraum roob or *sab roob nraud* 'on the back side of the mountain'

i. Intensification of the meaning of deictics

The meaning of some of the deictics discussed above can be intensified in the following ways:

- a. By adding *puag* before the deictic:

puag pem 'far up(hill), far up there, far up the mountain'

puag nram 'far down(hill), far down there, far down the valley'

puag tom 'far over there'

puag tim 'far over there across the valley'

- b. By adding *ub* after the deictic:

pem ub 'far up(hill), far up there, far up the mountain'

nram ub 'far down(hill), far down there, far down the valley'

tom ub 'far over there'

tim ub 'far over there across the valley'

- c. By using both *puag* and *ub* to express the greatest degree of intensification:

puag pem ub 'way up(hill), way up there, way up the mountain'

puag nram ub 'way down(hill), way down there, way down the valley'

puag tom ub 'way over there'

puag tim ub 'way over there across the valley'

B. GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONS

The deictics discussed above typically function as prepositions found at the head of a prepositional phrase describing a location. This is illustrated below:

1. *Muaj ib hnuv Npis mus tom vaj tsiaj.*
 be one day Bee go to garden animal
 'One day Bee went to the zoo.'

2. *Nkawd mus txog ntawm ib tug cav lojloj nyob tav kev.*
 they-two go arrive at one clf log big big be at across road
 'They of them went over to a big log which was lying across the path.'
3. *Ntshav tawm tawm hauv tus Qav lub qhov ncauj los.*
 blood come out come out within clf Frog clf mouth come
 'Blood was streaming out of the Frog's mouth.'
4. *Tus me nyuam dev nyiam nyiam zaum saum Npis lub taub hau.*
 clf child dog like like sit on top of Bee clf head
 'The puppy loves to sit on top of Bee's head.'

Sometimes the deictics are also used on their own as location nouns; when used as such they can be followed by the demonstrative *no* 'this (place)':

5. *Los ntawm no.*
 come here this
 'Come here.'
6. *Kuv nyob tom no os.*
 I be at there this prt
 'I'm over here.'

Also, recall from the section on demonstratives that when deictics #1-7 in the table above are used independently as demonstrative nouns at the end of a phrase, they bear the *-d* tone. The contrast between the prepositional function and the demonstrative noun function with the concomitant tone change is illustrated below:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| 7. a. <i>nyob pem roob</i> | b. <i>nyob ped</i> |
| be up mountain | be up there |
| 'up on the mountain' | 'up there' |

See "Functions of the Marginal *-d* Tone" for further details.

To summarize, deictics can function as prepositions heading prepositional phrases and as independent location or demonstrative nouns. Since strict part-of-speech categorization is difficult and elusive at best in Hmong (see section on flexible grammar for more on this), spending a lot of time wondering—let alone worrying about—to which Western-style part of speech an element belongs is counterproductive. Making a note of the various grammatical functions of a given element is enough. Your time will be better spent focusing on the meanings of deictics, moving beyond the limitations of two-dimensional pen and paper explanations, and studying them from a three-dimensional perspective, as well as developing a good understanding of their usage in real world speech situations.

II. METAPHORICAL USES OF *NRAM*, *PEM*, AND *TIM* IN THE UNITED STATES

Since some of the Hmong spatial deictics evolved from geographical features such as the mountains, slopes, valleys, and the uphill and downhill sides of things, it makes sense that these deictics would undergo a shift in meaning and be reinterpreted to accommodate new language needs now that the Hmong can no longer use the mountains as their main reference point. Preliminary research on this topic* has revealed new metaphorical extensions for *nram* 'downhill,' *pem* 'uphill,' and *tim* 'opposite'; the reinterpretations of the original meaning of these deictics is discussed below. Note that some of these metaphorical extensions seem to have their roots in Southeast Asia (see the second footnote below, for example) but have gained momentum in the Western hemisphere, and others seem to be entirely innovative.

A. *NRAM* 'DOWNHILL' HAS BEEN REINTERPRETED AS A) "SOUTH,"† AND B) "BELOW (IN TEXT)":

a. *Nram*—'downhill' as "south"

8. *Peb phauj Nkaj uas tuaj nyob nram Indiana muaj ib tus ntxhais.*
 our aunt Nkaj who come live downhill Indiana have one clf daughter
 'Our aunt Nkaj, who lives down in Indiana, has a daughter.' [speaker is north of Indiana]

b. *Nram*—'downhill' as "below (in text)"

9. *Daim ntawv muaj ntsiab lus raws li nram no.*
 clf paper have content word according to downhill this
 'On the paper were the words below.'

NOTE: This metaphorical extension of *nram* in a text seems to have started in Southeast Asia (Mottin has an example in his grammar), but its usage has become more widespread in the United States—no doubt correlating with a rise in usage of the written language.

* See Ratliff (1990) for details.

† Without using cardinal point nomenclature per se, north and south have traditionally been defined with respect to altitude. Since for the Hmong the north corresponds to the mountainous regions of Asia, it has been called "the high part of the country/the highlands," and since the south corresponds to the plains of the delta it has been referred to as "the low part of the country/the lowlands":

pem qaum teb uphill-top part-country = 'high part of the country/highlands'—i.e., 'north'

nram qab teb downhill-bottom part-country = 'low part of the country/lowlands'—i.e., 'south'

East and west, on the other hand, have traditionally been defined with respect to the rising and setting of the sun:

sab hnuab tawm side-sun-come out = 'side where the sun rises'—i.e., 'east'

sab hnuab poob side-sun-fall = 'side where the sun sets'—i.e., 'west.'

B. PEM 'UPHILL' HAS BEEN REINTERPRETED AS A) "NORTH", AND B) "HIGHER UP ON X, WHERE X IS NOT A MOUNTAIN":

a. *Pem*—'uphill' as "north"

10. *Hnub vas xaum, kuv nrog kuv tus txiv mus pem Chicago.*
 day Saturday I be with my clf husband go uphill Chicago
 'On Saturday my husband and I went up to Chicago.' [Chicago is located north of speaker.]
11. *Iraq txawm rau phab hnub poob sab ped.*
 Iraq then place side sun fall side uphill
 'And Iraq lies to the northwest.'

b. *Pem*—'uphill' as "higher up on X, where X is not a mountain"

12. *Nkawd rhais ruam los pem lub tsheb thiab tsav tsheb los tsev lawm.*
 they-two tuck up step return uphill clf car and drive car return home perf
 'The two of them got back into the car and drove home.'
13. *Nws muab ob lub ceg ris qaws txog pem qab hauv caug kom*
 he grasp two clf let pants roll arrive uphill back inside knee cause
txias zog tuaj.
 cold breeze come
 'He rolled up his pant legs up above the knee to stay cool.'

NOTE: *Pem* in (b) seems to be a novel usage in the United States.

C. TIM 'OPPOSITE (A NATURAL OBSTACLE SUCH AS A MOUNTAIN, RIVER, ROAD, ETC.)' HAS BEEN INTERPRETED AS "OPPOSITE" WITH NO FEATURE OF THE LANDSCAPE INVOLVED:

14. *Nplias ntsia nws tus duab tim daim iav.*
 Nplias regard herself clf image opposite clf glass
 'Nplias looked at herself in the mirror.'
15. *...koj thiab kuv tau ua ke tim ntsej tim muag.*
 you and I get together opposite ear opposite eye
 '...you and I get together face-to-face.'
16. *...thiab zaum lub sofa sab tid uas ntsia ntsoov Nplooj.*
 and sit clf sofa side opposite in order regard fixedly Nplooj
 '...and she sat on the other side of the sofa and looked intently at Nplooj.'

NOTE: This broadening of the meaning of *tim* seems also to have started in the United States.

Some observations are necessary:

- These findings regarding the meaning shifts of *nram*, *pem*, and *tim* are preliminary and should be considered tentative in light of their short history.

- Since these are incipient changes, you will encounter a high degree of uncertainty among native speakers when it comes to defining the exact meaning and usage of the deictics currently being reinterpreted. For example, the difference between *tim* and *tom* is extremely difficult to pin down now that the meaning of *tim* has broadened (see above). While it appears that *tom* is still the default deictic and *tim* the “opposite” deictic, actual usage reveals that the difference between the two is subtle and hard to characterize—akin to the difference between “there” and “over there” in English. The following explanations have been advanced by various native speakers to account for the difference between *tim* and *tom*:

TIM + LOCATION

- Location known and capable of being visualized
- Location definite, with clear boundaries
- Clear mental picture of location
- Vast and/or distant location
- Specific, familiar location

TOM + LOCATION

- vs. Location unknown and not visualized
- vs. Location indefinite, with fuzzy boundaries
- vs. Unclear mental picture of location
- vs. Location not as vast and/or distant
- vs. General, vague location

One person also suggested that the choice between the two was conditioned by the speaker’s position relative to what s/he was talking about, but was not more specific than that.

These explanations are helpful, but do not account for all actual usage cases since the meaning of *tim* is in a state of flux. Be prepared for native speaker uncertainty and for creative suggestions to account for the meaning shifts of the deictics discussed above; this is part of the fun of witnessing language change in progress!

- Idiomatic usage has begun to develop and will probably increase. For example, there are cases where *pem* means “on ground level” and even “down.”

III. USE OF SPATIAL DEICTICS IN THE TIME DIMENSION

Some of the spatial deictics discussed above can also be used in the time dimension (notice that this is also the case in other languages—e.g., in English “before” can mean before in either space or time; the same is true of “ahead”). These include:

Space dimension

nram ‘downhill’

saum ‘above/on top of’

nruab ‘in the middle/midst of’

Time dimension

→ ‘ago’

→ ‘from now’

→ ‘during’

as well as the following combinations:

- nram ntej* 'previously, the period up till now'
tom qab 1. 'in the past'; 2. 'in the future, later' (depending on the context)
tom ntej 1. 'before (in time)'; 2. 'in the future' (depending on the context)*

The usage of spatial deictics in the time dimension is illustrated in the examples below:

17. *Lawv twb mus tas nram ntej nram ntxov.*
 they already go finish downhill first downhill early
 'They already went a long time ago.'
18. *Ob peb hnuv saum no kuv nrog koj tham.*
 two three day above this I with you talk
 'I'll talk to you in a couple of days.'
19. *nruab hnuv*
 middle day
 'daytime, in the day, during the day'
20. *Lawv tsis paub nruab hnuv tsis paub hmo ntuj, lawv ua tsis tseg*
 they neg know daytime neg know nighttime they do neg abandon, leave
 'They don't know night from day; they work all the time.'

IV. CONCLUSION

The Hmong spatial deictic system is characterized by a high degree of specificity and precise detail with respect to the vertical dimension. In the United States and other parts of the Western hemisphere where the Hmong have resettled, this system is moving to a vaguer, more abstract one due to the loss of the native topography, the exposure to a different one, and the need to meet new linguistic needs. Independently of where in the world the Hmong are, however, spatial deictics are best studied from a three-dimensional perspective using concrete objects and features from your environment and relying on native speaker demonstrations. Also helpful are visualization and demonstration exercises using the spatial settings and changes found in stories such as "*Dab neeg nab qa tsiav*" 'The school lizard' and "*Tus Tsov thiab tus Qav*" 'The Tiger and the Frog.'

* If this seems confusing, it is. Context will help you distinguish between the two meanings, though. Time reference phrases have not been the object of systematic study in Hmong; hence for the time being you will have to start with the introductory material found in this book and in Mottin's grammar, and learn more about them as they come up in your Hmong studies. Also, see "*Tau + Time Phrase Constructions*" above for ways of expressing duration and past time reference.

COMPARATIVE AND SUPERLATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Comparative constructions are used for comparisons between two elements while superlative ones are used where more than two elements are involved. These constructions are discussed in turn below.

I. COMPARATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

A. The comparative construction equivalent to the English “adjective + **-er/more** + adjective + **than**” (as in “This book is cheaper/**more** expensive **than** that one”) is typically formed by adding *dua** after the “adjective”:[†]

1. *Tus noog no loj dua tus noog ntawd.*

clf bird this big comp clf bird that

‘This bird is bigger than that bird.’

2. *Lawv noj nrawm dua peb.*

they eat fast comp we

‘They eat faster than we do.’

3. *Qav, wb sib twv dhia hla tus cav no saib leej twg dhia tau deb dua.*

Frog we rec compete jump across clf log this see who jump can far comp

‘Frog, let’s jump over this log to see who can jump farther.’

B. The comparative construction equivalent to the English construction “**as** + adjective + **as**” (as in “This book is **as** expensive **as** that one”) is formed by adding either *cuag* ‘equal (to), same as’ or *luaj* ‘equal (to), same as, like’ after the stative verb in Hmong:

4a. *Tus noog no loj cuag tus noog ntawd.*

clf bird this big equal clf bird that

‘This bird is as big as that one.’

b. *Tus noog no loj luaj tus noog ntawd.*

clf bird this big equal clf bird that

‘This bird is as big as that one.’

* This *dua* is different from the *dua* which signals the repetition of an action at another point in time and typically translates as ‘again,’ as illustrated in the high-frequency leave-taking formulaic phrase *Sib ntsib dua* ‘See you later/Goodbye/Bye—literally, meet each other again.’ The *dua* used in comparative constructions is derived from a verb meaning “to (sur)pass, to go beyond, to top something.” To help you distinguish between the two, look at their distribution: the comparative *dua* typically follows stative verbs (see note below), whereas the “again” *dua* occurs after action verbs.

† Recall from the “Structure of the Noun Phrase” that English adjectives such as big, white, old, full, etc. are actually considered to be stative verbs (i.e., to be big, to be white, to be old, to be full, etc.) in Hmong, and hence are not preceded by *yog* ‘to be.’

When a noun rather than a stative verb is involved in the comparison of equals (e.g., **as much money as/as many children as**), Hmong uses *npaum (li)* 'equal (to), as much/as many as' after the noun:

5. *Lawv muaj me nyuam npaum (li) peb.*
 they have child equal we
 'They have as many children as we do.'

Npaum is also used for comparing multiple amounts in equality comparison constructions:

6. *Npis lub tsev loj plaub npaug peb lub.*
 Bee clf house big four equal our clf
 'Bee's house is four times as big as ours.'

II. SUPERLATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

The superlative construction equivalent to the English "the + adjective + **-est/the most** + adjective" (as in "This book is **the cheapest/the most expensive**") is typically formed by adding *tshaj* after the "adjective." *Tshaj* is actually a main verb which means "to surpass, to be surplus or more than enough, to be better" and translates as a superlative in English when it follows a stative verb in Hmong:

7. *Tus noog no loj tshaj.*
 clf bird this big surpass
 'This bird is the biggest.'
8. *Lub tsev ntawd zoo tshaj.*
 clf house that good surpass
 'That house is the best.'
9. *Npis me tshaj cov.*
 Bee small surpass group
 'Bee is the smallest (among them/in the group.)'

The construction "stative verb + *tshaj*" translates as a superlative when the entity being described is singled out in a group of similar entities, either implicitly as in (7-8) or explicitly as in (9). The same construction can also be used to compare two entities to each other, with the second element following *tshaj*, as seen in (10). In that case, the construction translates as a comparative and is equivalent to the "stative verb + *dua*" construction described above.

10. *Npis me tshaj kuv.*

Bee small surpass I

'Bee is smaller than me.'

Since *tshaj* is a main verb meaning "to surpass," it can also follow an action verb in a serial verb construction, which translates as a comparative construction in English as well:

11. *Npis kawm ntawv tshaj kuv ob xyoos.*

Bee study surpass I two year

'Bee studied two years more than I did.'

SENTENCE/DISCOURSE STRUCTURE; HALLMARKS OF HMONG STYLE

THE TOPIC MARKERS *MAS* AND *NE**

Many Hmong sentences have the same subject-predicate structure as English sentences do: *Npis pom ib tug noog* 'Bee saw a bird.' Others, however, have a sentence structure commonly found in Asian languages: instead of starting with a subject, they start with a topic. Topics are not the same as subjects. You can have both in a sentence, as in "Beans, I like" in the following interchange:

Jane to visiting cousin: Let's see; what vegetable should we have with dinner? I've got peas, spinach ... (voice trails off while she looks in freezer).

Cousin: I'm not too fond of spinach ...

Jane (breaks in): Oh, and I've got beans.

Cousin: Beans, I like. Let's have beans.

In the sentence "Beans, I like," "beans" is the topic, "I" is the subject, and "like" is the comment or new information conveyed about the topic of the sentence. This type of sentence structure occurs frequently in Hmong.

Two mid-sentence particles serve the function of marking the topic of the sentence—i.e., whatever comes before these particles is what the sentence is about. Whatever comes after these particles is the comment or new information—i.e., what is being asserted about the topic that precedes the particles. These particles are *mas* and *ne*.

If it helps, think of *mas* and *ne* as words that follow the language equivalent of a set up in volleyball. They "set up" the topic so that the rest of the sentence can get the message across the net. Or you may think of these particles as colons when they occur mid-sentence. Or, with some mental word order switching, you can translate them as "as to (topic)" or "as far as (topic) is/are concerned."

In general, *ne* seems to follow shorter topics than *mas*, as in the abbreviated question *Koj ne?* 'And (what/how about) you?' It also seems to be limited to the function of questioning the topic (what precedes) and might be translated as 'How about X?'

Mas is more complex in its usage. Here are some examples:

1. *Nyob Teb Chaws Nplog, lub caij hlawv teb no mas faj suab sawv laum ntuj heev.*
'In Laos, at the time of burning the fields [which we have been discussing], a smoke fills the skies [new information].'
2. *Mi tsiaj txhu, mi nas mi noog thiab mi kab mi ntsaum mas tuag tag li.*
'Little animals, little rats and birds, little bugs and ants, as for all these, they were dead.'

When *mas* occurs at the beginning of a sentence, the entire preceding sentence is considered the topic.

* For more information on *mas* and *ne*, see Fuller (1985).

EXPRESSIVES*

One of the hallmarks of Hmong style is the use of expressives. Expressives are two-word phrases which “capture the speaker’s perception of the essence of the thing described, not only its sound but also its movement, its persistence, its visibility, and other innate characteristics, through his/her determination of the resemblance between sound and meaning” (Ratliff 1992:139). Below are some typical examples.

<i>nkij nkawj</i>	of gnawing on bones
<i>mij mej</i>	of mosquitos or other insects flying around your ear
<i>vig vwg</i>	1. strong wind; 2. fast traffic; 3. small airplane motor
<i>nplhib nplheeb</i>	1. silverware or other metal rattling; 2. pin coming out of hand grenade
<i>dig dug</i>	boiling of thick liquid like corn mash (thick, ponderous bubbles)
<i>nkij nkuaj</i>	of bones cracking
<i>duj duam</i>	of walking as though one’s leg were broken
<i>cuj coos</i>	of movement of a sick chicken or of a mad person
<i>luj les</i>	sound of a vacuum cleaner, bees, or an airplane
<i>rhuj rhuav</i>	1. sound of cutting vegetation; 2. sound of a bird shuffling through leaves looking for insects
<i>pliv ploov</i>	1. of ducks diving underwater; 2. the sound of an empty bottle submerged in water filling up; 3. the sound of one’s stomach after one has had a lot to drink and then goes running
<i>zib zeb</i>	of a big pig fighting

To help you grasp the essence of expressives, think of them as descriptive capsule “sound pictures” of the passing scene—of things that are perceived by one of the five senses, such as sounds and movements. *They are real Hmong words and are used with great frequency in everyday language*, but they do not fit into any of the classic (Western) word classes, such as noun, verb, adjective, or adverb. Instead, they constitute a part of speech of their own which does not have a counterpart in English. Phrases such as razzle-dazzle, wishy-washy, namby-pamby, shilly-shally, ding-dong, and sing-song come closest to reflecting what expressives are, but these

* Ratliff (1992) has an entire chapter devoted to this topic as well as a twenty-page appendix that lists and gives associations for a large number of these two-word expressive phrases.

phrases do not constitute a separate part of speech like in Hmong, are considered colloquial, and have limited usage in English—contrary to Hmong, where expressives abound and are used frequently in both the spoken and the written language. Expressives are found in a few other Asian languages—e.g., Korean.

The majority of these two-word expressive phrases have a predictable shape:

1. The two words must begin with the same consonant;
2. The two words must have different vowels;
3. If the tones of the two words are the same, the vowel of the first word will be *i*; and
4. If the tones of the two words are different, the tone of the first word will be *j* and the vowel of the first word will be *u*.

The “meanings” of these expressive phrases are always hard to pin down. Rather than give you a “meaning,” a Hmong speaker will give you only a *situation* in which it would be appropriate to use the phrase (such as “You put a lizard in a jar and add a few drops of red pepper sauce”), but you can count on the fact that there will be many other appropriate situations for the phrase. While the meanings of expressives are elusive from a Western point of view, it is important to remember that from a Hmong perspective expressives have precise meanings which are shared by the community and do not vary significantly from one speaker to another.

Finally, some connections can be drawn between the tones, consonants, and vowels chosen to fill the six positions in these phrases ($C_1V_1T_1 - C_1V_2T_1$ or T_2) and the core meaning (which is often quite abstract). In other words, sound symbolism is involved. For example, $C_1ij-C_1V_2j$ expressives refer to energetic, fast, short sounds, and $C_1is-C_1V_2s$ expressives refer to flat, continuous, unending sights and sounds.

FOUR-WORD PHRASES
(Coordinative Constructions)

Another hallmark of Hmong style is the four-word phrase. Four-word phrases typically follow an ABAC pattern where the A's are identical (or synonymous), and where B and C are closely related in meaning—e.g., *npaj mov npaj zaub* 'prepare-rice-prepare-vegetables,' meaning "to prepare food." You will encounter many of these four-word phrases in both spoken and written Hmong. *They are not "fancy"*; they are part of the regular language. The goal is to feel so comfortable hearing and seeing these that one day you will find yourself using them.

Below are some examples of four-word phrases either found in this book or in common use in everyday language. Notice that there are a few four-word phrases in which one of the components no longer has a literal meaning in modern Hmong.

<u>Four-Word Phrase</u>	<u>Literal Translation</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
<i>npaj mov npaj zaub</i>	prepare-rice-prepare-vegetables	'to prepare food'
<i>npaj nqaij npaj mov</i>	prepare-meat-prepare-rice	'to prepare food'
<i>tu mov tu zaub</i>	look-after-rice-look-after-vegetables	'to prepare food'
<i>kev noj kev haus</i>	way-eat-way-drink	'subsistence'
<i>ua noj ua haus</i>	do-eat-do-drink	'earn a living'
<i>kev tshaib kev nqhis</i>	way-hunger-way-thirst	'famine'
<i>tuag tshaib tuag nqhis</i>	die-hunger-die-thirst	'die of famine'
<i>cua daj cua dub</i>	wind-yellow-wind-black	'storm, bad wind'
<i>tua nas tua noog</i>	kill-rodents-kill-birds	'to hunt small animals'
<i>siab loj siab dav</i>	liver-big-liver-wide	'generous, big-hearted'
<i>txaij liab txaij ntsuab</i>	striped-red-striped-green	'with red and green stripes'
<i>ya mus ya los</i>	fly-go-fly-come	'to fly around, to hover'
<i>tsis deb tsis ze</i>	not-far-not-close	'at a reasonable distance'
<i>ua ub ua no</i>	do-this-do-that	'to do this and that'
<i>yam ub yam no</i>	kind-this-kind-that	'of different kinds, various'
<i>ua liaj ua teb</i>	do-paddy-do-field	'to farm'

<i>tu vaj tu tsev</i>	look-after-garden-look-after-house	'to take care of one's home'
<i>tu liaj tu teb</i>	look-after-paddy-look-after-field	'to take care of the fields'
<i>tu tub tu kiv</i>	look-after-son-look-after-?	'to take care of the children'
<i>kev tsov kev rog</i>	way-?-way-war	'war, fighting'
<i>khiav tsov khiav rog</i>	run-?-run-war	'flee from war'
<i>txhia hnuv txhua hmo</i>	every-day-every-night	'every day and night'

CONCESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Concessive constructions are constructions made up of a subordinate clause beginning with conjunctions such as even if, even though, although, though, followed (or preceded) by a main clause—e.g., ‘Even if it rains, I’ll go’; ‘Although it’s expensive, I’ll buy it.’ In Hmong any of the following can be used as equivalents:

<i>Tab</i> <i>Tab yog</i> <i>Tab txawm (tias)</i> <i>Txawm yog</i>	+ subordinate clause + <i>los</i> + main clause
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Examples:

Txawm yog rab hneev me me xwb los, kuv tus tub kuj zoo siab kawg.

‘Although the crossbow is tiny, my son is very happy.’

Tab yog nws hu los, kuv tsis mus.

‘Even if s/he calls me, I’m not going.’

Tab yog kuv tuag los, kuv tsis hais.

‘Even if I were to die, I would not speak/say a word.’

Tab yog nws tuaj los, txhob hu kuv.

‘Even if s/he comes, don’t call me.’

Tab nag los los, kuv yuav mus.

‘Even if it rains, I’ll go.’

Tab yog ntuj los nag los, kuv mus.

‘Even though it’s raining, I’m going.’

SUBORDINATION AND PARATAXIS

When looking at Hmong sentences and texts, one is struck by the lack of coordinating and subordinating elements among words, phrases, and clauses. One is faced with a seemingly endless juxtaposition of grammatical units strung together without the use of any overt conjunction. This phenomenon is known as parataxis and is characteristic of Hmong at different levels of grammatical structure, as discussed in section II below. However, in light of our familiarity with subordination as a mechanism for creating hierarchy within sentences, let us start with an overview of the main subordinating conjunctions found in Hmong.

I. SUBORDINATION

A. THE COMPLEMENTIZER* (*HAI*S) *TIAS* 'THAT'

This complementizer is made up of *tias* preceded by the optional element (*hais*), which is historically derived from the still existing main verb of saying *hais* 'to say, to speak' but has been grammaticized over time to serve as an optional part of the conjunction. It comes as no surprise then that one of the functions of (*hais*) *tias* is quotative rather than subordinating: (*hais*) *tias* is used to introduce direct speech quotations following main verbs involving speech such as *hais* 'to say, to speak,' *dag* 'to lie,' *hu* 'to call,' *cem* 'to scold,' *nug* 'to ask,' *teb* 'to answer,' *xav* 'to think,' *qhia* 'to teach, to inform,' *nco* 'to remember,' etc. This quotative function of (*hais*) *tias* is illustrated below:

1. *Tus Tsov hais rau tus Qav (hais)tias: 'Qav, wb sib twv dhia.'*
 clf Tiger say to clf Frog quotative Frog we-two recip compete jump
 'The Tiger said to the Frog, "Frog, let's have a jumping contest."'

The other function of (*hais*) *tias* is a subordinating one: (*hais*) *tias* serves to introduce subordinate clauses reporting a proposition after main clause verbs involving perception such as *pom* 'to see,' *paub* 'to know,' *ntshai* 'to fear, to be afraid of,' *hnov* 'to hear,' *ntseeg* 'to believe,' *xav* 'to think,' *nco* 'to remember,' etc. (*Hais*) *tias* can also follow *hais* to report a direct speech quotation.[†] The subordinating function of (*hais*) *tias* 'that' is illustrated below:

2. *Npis tsis paub (hais)tias muaj dais xim dawb.*
 Bee neg know that exist bear color white
 'Bee didn't know that white bears existed.'

* I use "(subordinating) conjunction," "subordinator," and "complementizer" interchangeably to refer to words which introduce a subordinate/embedded clause (for example, that, when, so that, etc.)

† In a more marginal function (*hais*) *tias* can also optionally occur after *yog* 'to be' when *yog* introduces the equivalent of an English if-clause (see section on *yog* above) as well as after *vim* 'because.'

B. THE COMPLEMENTIZER KOM 'SO THAT, IN ORDER TO'

This complementizer is transparently related to the main verb *kom* 'to tell, to order (somebody to do something),' as in *Kuv kom Npis mus* 'I told/ordered Bee to go.' As a subordinator, *kom* is used to introduce embedded clauses expressing a desired action following volition verbs such as *xav* 'to want,' *nyiam* 'to like,' *thov* 'to ask, to beg,' *txwv* 'to forbid,' etc.:

3. *Tus Tsov tsis xav kom tus Qav rov qab noj dua nws ntxiv lawm.*
 clf Tiger neg want that clf Frog again eat again him more perf
 'The Tiger didn't want the Frog to eat more of him.'

Kom can also introduce subordinate clauses expressing a purpose or an intention:

4. *Zaum no tus Tsov sib sib zog dhia kom tus Qav dhia tsis yeej.*
 time this clf Tiger recip recip strength jump so that clf Frog jump neg possible
 'This time, the Tiger mustered all the strength he could to jump so that the Frog wouldn't beat him.'

C. THE RELATIVE MARKER UAS 'THAT, WHICH, WHO(M), WHOSE'

There is only one relative marker in Hmong, *uas*. It serves the grammatical function of introducing any type of relative clause:

5. *Nws nyiam noj cov khoom uas tsis ntsim txob.*
 she like eat group things that neg spicy pepper
 'She likes to eat things that are not spicy.'
6. *Niam xav muas cov tsho tiv no uas luv nqi lawm.*
 mother want buy group coat that lower price perf
 'Mother wants to buy coats that have been reduced in price (i.e., on sale).'
7. ... *cov hluas uas niam txiv muajmuaj nyiaj...*
 group young that parents have have silver
 '...young people whose parents are rich...'

D. CONCLUSION

Hmong has few words which function as subordinating conjunctions, and the ones it does have are restricted in usage. The use of (*hais*) *tias* as a subordinator is more limited than its English equivalent "that" and (*hais*) *tias* also has a separate, quotative function. *Kom*, which is used to indicate causation in its subordinating function, is still clearly related to the main verb *kom* 'to tell, to order (somebody to do something).'* As to the relative marker *uas*, there are many

* For more details on complementation, see Jaisser (1984a and 1984b).

cases where it is optional; it is used to narrow down the degree of specificity and/or definiteness of the head noun, and its occurrence is conditioned by discourse factors such as the speech context, pragmatic knowledge of the world, etc. so that one must look at entire chunks of discourse to understand its usage.*

II. PARATAXIS†

Verb serialization as discussed above is a form of parataxis: verbs are concatenated without any overt marking of coordination or subordination. Also as seen above, possessive noun phrases are formed by merely juxtaposing the relevant noun phrases: the possessor and the item possessed appear without any intervening element alluding to the hierarchy in the relationship.

There are several other forms of parataxis. The most basic involves stringing together two identical elements; this phenomenon is known as reduplication and is common with verbs and non-numeral quantifiers such as *ntau* 'much, many, a lot (of),' *coob* 'many, a lot (of),' and *tsawg* 'little, few' (see above for examples with these quantifiers). Reduplication is typically used for emphasis, as seen in (7) above and in (8) below:

8. *Rau rau siab kawm ntawv.*
put put liver study paper
 'Really put your heart into your studies.'

On a larger scale, entire clauses can be joined together paratactically, as illustrated in (9) below—a revealing example from Riddle 1991. The first clause, which ends with *los*, is directly attached to the next part of the sentence, which in turn is juxtaposed to the last part of the sentence starting with *tsis tau noj*. Sentences like these are typical.

9. *Leej twg txawj txuag tau me ntsis nyiaj los nws coj mus muas*
 someone can preserve get a little money come s/he take go buy
tsis tau noj tsis tau hnav.
 neg get eat neg get wear
 'If anyone manages to save a little money and goes to buy something, s/he won't get anything to eat or wear.'

Time clauses such as the one in (10) are another example of parataxis: they are typically translated as starting with "when" or "while" in English, but *thawn*—the word which introduces them in Hmong—is actually a noun meaning "time" so that there is no conjunction involved here either.

* For more details on the relative marker *uas*, see Riddle (1993).

† For more details on parataxis, see Riddle (1991).

10. *Thaum lawv sib qw sib qw, tus nab qa tsiav khiav tawm tim lub qhov rais*
 time they recip shout recip shout clf lizard run out loc clf door
mus lawm.

go perf

'While they're all screaming at each other, the lizard runs out through the window.'

This tendency to string together elements without any overt marking of coordination or subordination is reminiscent of another stylistic norm in Hmong—namely, the use of paratactically conjoined words that are either synonymous or related in meaning. The fixed four-word phrases discussed above are a case in point, in both casual and elegant speech. Without following the formula involved in four-word phrases, it is also a common rhetorical device to string together synonymous phrases. This is illustrated in (11) with *huv* 'all, altogether,' *tas* 'all, in its entirety,' *tib si* 'all, altogether,' and *puav leej* 'all, altogether'; using all of these may seem redundant and repetitive to us but is not in Hmong.

11. *Tas cov txiv neeb sawv daws puav leej tuaj tas huv tib si.*
 all group shaman every all, altogether one come all all all, altogether
 'All the shamans came (each and every one of them).'

All these paratactically conjoined structures present a decoding challenge when studying Hmong. Reading a lot to become familiar with them and asking a native speaker to explain the situations described are helpful strategies.

CONVERSATION PARTICLES

Hmong conversational exchanges are characterized by the presence of what dictionaries label "emphatic particles"—words such as *os*, *naj*, *los mas*, *as*, *lauj*, etc. These conversational particles are also found in other languages of Asia and Southeast Asia (for example, in Thai, Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, Japanese, etc.). They are a phenomenon of the spoken language and as such do not occur in written prose. They are, however, found in written dialogues since these emulate speech. Conversational particles typically occur at the end of utterances and are elusive in nature: they cannot be translated or elicited like other words can, and native speakers are at a loss to characterize them and explain their usage. Yet they are omnipresent in everyday conversation and not using them instantly reveals one as a non-native speaker—thus testifying to their crucial role in oiling the wheels of fluid and fluent conversation. These particles are the topic of my dissertation research, and some preliminary findings are listed below.

I. THE PARTICLE *nawb*

Analysis of a story largely made up of dialogue revealed that utterances ending with *nawb* appeared at the end of conversations when talk was winding down. Furthermore, *nawb* was used at the end of highly formulaic phrases such as expressions of gratitude and leave-taking:

1. *Ua tsaug ntau kawg nawb.*

give thanks a lot extremely prt

'Thank you so much.'

2. *Mus zoo koj nawb.*

go be well you prt

'(Good)bye, take care.'

When asked what *nawb* conjured up in his mind, a native speaker gave me the following example situation: two friends who have just been spending a little time together decide to go somewhere together (home, to a movie). One of them says to the other:

3. *Peb mus nawb.*

we go prt

'Come on, let's go.'

What the English translation fails to reveal is that *nawb* implies that the speaker is beckoning his interlocutor, and indeed he made a beckoning gesture while uttering (3). Using *nawb* adds a "please listen to what I'm saying" note to the utterance and requires a certain degree of intimacy between the two conversation partners. Hence, if *nawb* functions as a device for beckoning an interlocutor's attention, it comes as no surprise that it occurs 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 keep the channels of communication alive between the speaker and the hearer.

II. THE PARTICLE *POB*

Analysis of utterances ending with *pob* revealed that its presence implied that the speaker was not sure about the information s/he was conveying in response to a wh- question (what? where? how? how long? how far? when? etc.). This is illustrated in (4), which is said in response to "How long have you lived in this neighborhood?," and in (5), which is uttered in response to "What are you going to do over the summer break?" Note how the uncertainty built into *pob* is further reinforced by the presence of elements overtly conveying doubt, elements such as *kwv yees* 'probably, I guess,' *tejzau/md* 'maybe,' *ntshai* 'maybe, I'm afraid,' *xyov* 'I don't know,' etc.

4. *Peb nyob tau kwv yees ob xyoos no lawm pob.*

we live attain probably two years this perf prt

'We've lived here for probably two years.'

5. *Xyov, tejzaud ntshai tsuas yog kawm ntawv summer xwb pob.*

uncertainty maybe maybe only be the case study letters summer only prt

'I don't know; maybe I'm just going to go to summer school.'

There are also instances where this particle bears the high falling rather than the high level tone. The element of uncertainty is also present in these cases, but the utterances have the grammatical structure of yes-no questions rather than statements in answer to a wh-question. This seems to point to an intonational difference between *pob* and *poj*. The latter is illustrated below:

6. *Muaj zog me ntsis lawm poj?*

have strength a little perf prt

'Has your strength come back a little (I wonder)?'

III. OTHER PARTICLES

It is important to bear in mind that the information I have reported here on the particles *nawb* and *pob* represents preliminary findings and that additional research is needed to describe them fully. The same is true of the other conversation particles, the most important of which are as follows:

<i>as</i>	<i>ntag, ntad</i>
<i>lauj</i>	<i>oj, ov, os, og</i>
<i>maj, mas</i>	<i>sas, sad</i>
<i>los mas</i>	<i>sob, soj</i>
<i>nab, naj, nav, na, nas</i>	<i>yom</i>

It is interesting to note that the tones which involve more than changes in pitch play only a marginal role: the breathy tone is found in only two of the particles listed above and the *-m* tone in only one. Pending further research, I conclude by reiterating the vital role particles play in making conversational exchanges flow smoothly. They convey intonational differences as well as speaker/listener attitudes and feelings.

**“FLEXIBLE” GRAMMAR:
THE CASE AGAINST STRICT PART OF SPEECH CATEGORIZATION**

One of the interesting and challenging features of Hmong grammar is the fact that a given word can belong to more than one part of speech. *Rau* and *tuaj* are a good case in point: they can be interpreted in English as either verbs or prepositions. As a main verb *rau* means “to put, to place,” as seen in (1) and (3); as a preposition it means “to” in the benefactive sense, as seen in (2-3). As to *tuaj*, as a main verb it means “to come (to a place where one does not reside or belong),” as seen in (4-5), and as a preposition it means “from,” as illustrated in (5).

1. *Rau rau siab kawm ntawv.*
put put liver study paper
'Really put your heart into your studies.'
2. *Npis hais rau kuv tias....*
Bee say to me that
'Bee said to me/told me that...'
3. *Muab rau rau hauv.*
grasp place to inside
'Put it inside.'
4. *Koj tuaj los? Kuv tuaj os.*
you come prt I come prt
'So, you've come?' 'Yes, indeed, I have.'
5. *Kuv tuaj tim Michigan tuaj.*
I come loc Michigan from
'I come from Michigan.'

I have discussed other multiple word class membership cases elsewhere in this book. As seen above, the word *lawm* can function as a main verb meaning “to leave,” as a location word referring to a place a certain distance away from the speaker, and as a perfective marker signaling the completion of a given situation. The word *tsev* can be used as a noun meaning “house” and as a measure word after the numeral *ib* ‘one,’ yielding *ib tse* (t.c.) ‘a household’; additional words functioning in the same manner are found in “Special Functions of the Numeral *Ib* ‘One.’” In the section on deictics we saw that deictics can function as prepositions heading prepositional phrases and as independent location or demonstrative nouns. In the section on subordination we saw that *kom* can be a main verb and a complementizer.

Furthermore, words may not be in the same part of speech in English and in Hmong: for example, adjectives in English such as big, beautiful, tall, etc. are stative verbs in Hmong, and the English preposition “with” functions as a main verb in Hmong, as seen in (6):

6. *Kuv nrog kuv tus txiv mus tsev.*
I be with my clf husband go home
'I went home with my husband.'

When studying the Hmong language, one of the traps to avoid is strict part of speech categorization; it is simply counterproductive. The best strategy in becoming comfortable with multiple part of speech membership is to refrain from matching up Hmong and English parts of speech, and to focus on keeping track of the different functions a given Hmong word can have. Relax and let your mind expand to allow two or more functions to be associated with one word. Adopting a broader view based on the semantic thread that runs through the multiple usages of a word is far more revealing than fitting it into a word class.