

## The Hmong Language

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For many centuries, the Hmong language was firmly an oral type of communication. There was no alphabet system, no written texts, and no cultural activation to need a literacy system. Cultural aspects and learning was passed on to the next generation from memory. Elders were the individuals who had the most knowledge and memories about the skills and abilities necessary for everyday living.

There have been many efforts to develop a writing system for the Hmong language with little success. In the early 1950s, a group of French American missionary-linguists developed a method of writing Hmong words that used the same letters as the English, German, and French language. Their impression was to develop a system that is simple, to be able to use on simple typewriters without many elaborate marks. This was the Romanized Popular Alphabet, or RPA. Within ten years, it became very popular, and remains to this day the most widely used writing system for the Hmong.

Hmong words have some unique characteristics. Each word is a single syllable, featured by an initial consonant (or cluster), a vowel, and a tone. If a word is said or pronounced at a higher pitch, that word has a different meaning than if it is said at a lower pitch. Tones are as much important as consonants and vowels.

<http://www.wpt.org/hmong/language.html>

Good basic Hmong language information including an explanation of the last consonants in a word as they relate to the tone. From Wisconsin Public Televisions "Being Hmong Means Being Free" program. Includes audio pronunciations.

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By Hmong Cultural Center

The Hmong language branches into two dialects: White Hmong and Blue (or Green) Hmong. The colors in these names represent the colors used in the traditional women's costumes of the different groups, reflecting somewhat different cultural heritages and residential distributions in distinct regions of China.

White and Green Hmong are mutually intelligible. The differences between White and Green Hmong are probably not much greater than those which distinguish British and American English. It is true, however, that some Hmong (especially White Hmong) claim to have occasional problems understanding the speakers of the other dialect.

Neither White nor Green Hmong has ever had any official status in Laos, Thailand, or China. Thus, there are no grounds for preferring one of the dialects over the other. In spite of this, White Hmong has been favored in many ways. The Hmong writing system most commonly used, the Romanized Practical

Alphabet, generally is closest to the White Hmong pronunciation. Most dictionaries of Hmong only present the White Hmong dialect. In Laos, the majority of the Hmong population with an education, probably spoke the White Hmong dialect. The English name "Hmong" as opposed to "Mong" represents the White Hmong pronunciation.

The Hmong language is one of a group of closely related languages of Southeast Asia and Southern China often referred to as the Miao-Yao languages. Besides being spoken by Hmong people in Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Vietnam, the Hmong language is widely spoken by the Miao minority in Southern China. The Hmong language is also related to the Yao languages which include Lu Mien, spoken in Laos and Thailand as well as China, and five other languages spoken by minority groups in the larger region.

The Hmong language shares a number of basic structural characteristics with several other languages of Asia, including Chinese. These include the following:

**A Preference for Monosyllabic Words** - Hmong is a predominantly monosyllabic language like Vietnamese and Chinese and in contrast to the multi-syllable character of English. Most Hmong words only consist of one syllable.

**Lexical Use of Tone:** In Hmong, a particular tone is associated with each syllable and the syllable must be pronounced with this tone. For example, in Hmong the word Ma has different meanings depending upon whether a high, mid or low tone is used when saying the word. In Hmong there are eight different tones (compared to 5 in Vietnamese and 6 in Laotian). The 8 different tones include the following - a high tone, a high falling tone, a mid-rising tone, a mid tone, a breathy mid low tone, a low tone, and low falling tone.

**Lack of Inflections.** In Hmong, words do not have any inflected forms such as those utilized in English to indicate the plural and possessive forms of nouns (i.e. boy boys, boy's), the different genders and cases of pronouns (i.e. he, his, him), or the present, past, gerund and participle of verbs (i.e. take, takes, took, taking, taken). Hmong words possess only one form. Number, case, tense etc. of Hmong words are made clear by the order of the words and by the combination in which they are used.

**Noun Classifiers:** Nouns in Hmong are divided into a sizable number of different classes, similar to genders in some European languages, but based on categories other than sex. In most cases, a Hmong noun is preceded by a classifying word that makes clear its class membership. For example, "tsev" (house) goes with the classifier "lub" as in "lub tsev" to make "the house". Sometimes a Hmong noun has different meanings depending upon the classifier used.

**Multiple Verb Construction:** A characteristic that Hmong shares with Chinese is its utilization of multiple verbs in sentences. Hmong sentences often use two main verbs in one clause without any connection such as the English "and" between them. For example, in Hmong the speaker says the equivalent of "I go arrive his house" whereas an English speaker would state "I go to his house."

Source: Handbook for Teaching Hmong-Speaking Students. Developed by Bruce Thowpaou Bliatout, Bruce T. Downing, Judy Lewis and Dao Yang. Folsom Cordova Unified School District, Southeast Asia Community Resource Center, 1988. pp. 48-59.