

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 Miáoyǔ 'Miao language' and Bùnǔyǔ 'Bunu language' according to whether the speakers are culturally Hmong (Miáozú) or Yao (Yáozú). 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 (Miáo yǔzhī)

- A. West Hunan group or QoXiong language (Miáoyǔ Xiāngxī fāngyán; Northern Hmongic)
- B. East Guizhou group or Mhu language (Miáoyǔ Qiándōng fāngyán; Eastern Hmongic)
- C. Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan group (Miáoyǔ Chuānqiándiān fāngyán plus Bùnǔyǔ Bù-Nǎo fāngyán; Western Hmongic; Purnell's Western and Central)
 1. Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan subgroup (Miáoyǔ Chuānqiándiān cìfāngyán; Purnell's West A); Green Mong, White Hmong, etc.
 2. Northeastern Yunnan subgroup (Miáoyǔ Diāndōngběi cìfāngyán) (A-Hmau)
 3. Guiyang subgroup (Miáoyǔ Guìyáng cìfāngyán) (Hmong)
 4. Huishui subgroup (Miáoyǔ Huìshuǐ cìfāngyán) (Mhong)
 5. Mashan subgroup (Miáoyǔ Mǎshān cìfāngyán) (Mang)
 6. Luobo River subgroup (Miáoyǔ Luóbó Hé cìfāngyán) (A-Hmyo)
 7. Eastern or Zhong'an River subgroup (Miáoyǔ Dōngbù cìfāngyán or Miáoyǔ Zhōng'ān Jiāng cìfāngyán) (Mhong)
 8. Pingtang subgroup (Miáoyǔ)
 9. Qianxi-Pingba-Qingzhen-Liuzhi subgroup (Miáoyǔ)
 10. Luodian Moyin subgroup (Miáoyǔ)

I. Hmongic, continued.

C. Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan group, continued.

11. Dushan subgroup (Miáoyǔ)
12. Luodian Pingyan subgroup (Miáoyǔ)
13. Ziyun-Zhenning subgroup (Miáoyǔ)
14. Wangmo subgroup (Miáoyǔ)
15. Wangmo-Luodian subgroup (Miáoyǔ) (Mhang)
16. Pu-Nao subgroup (Bùnyǔ Bù-Nǎo fāngyán)
 - a. Pu Nu (Tung Nu) (Bùnyǔ Dōngnǔ tǔyǔ)
 - b. Nu Nu (Bùnyǔ Nǔnǔ tǔyǔ)
 - c. Pu No (Bùnyǔ Bùnuò tǔyǔ)
 - d. Nao Klao (Bùnyǔ Nàogéláo tǔyǔ)
 - e. Nu Mhou (Bùnyǔ Nǔmào tǔyǔ)
- D. Pa Hng (Bùnyǔ Bāhēng fāngyán)
- E. Hm Nai (Bunǔyǔ Wúnài fāngyán)
- F. Kiong Nai (Bunǔyǔ Jiōngnài fāngyán)
- G. Yu Nuo (Bunǔyǔ Yōunuò fāngyán)

II. Ho Nte (Shēyǔ)

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

III. Mienic (Yáo yǔzhǐ Miǎnyǔ)

- A. Mien-Kim (Miǎn-Jīn fāngyán)
 1. Mien (Iu Mien) (Yōumiǎn tǔyǔ)
 2. Mun (Kim Mun) (Jīnmén tǔyǔ)
 3. Biao Mon (Biāomàn tǔyǔ)
- B. Biao-Chao (Biāo-Jiāo fāngyán)
 1. Biao Min (Biāomīn tǔyǔ)
 2. Chao Kong Meng (Jiāogōngmiǎn tǔyǔ)
- C. Dzao Min (Zǎomīn 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.

