

Metaphorically Speaking in White Hmong

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1. Introduction

There is only one known piece of research devoted to metaphor in White Hmong (henceforth “Hmong”), Jaisser’s (1990) study of psycho-collocations with *siab* ‘liver’ and other body parts, although Matisoff (1992) includes a brief mention of Hmong in his discussion of the widespread use of ‘mother’ as a morpheme indicating ‘origin’ or ‘source’. Indeed, beyond the pioneering work of Matisoff (e.g. 1978, 1986, 1992), little research has focused on metaphor in the lexicon within Southeast Asian languages generally. The few exceptions include work on psycho-collocations in Malay by Oey (1990) and in Lai by Van-Bik (1998), and Diller’s (1991) analysis of metaphors of linguistic action in Bahasa Indonesia.

Given the paucity of research on the role of metaphor within the lexicon in Hmong and other Southeast Asian languages, this paper is intended to provide an introductory overview of several sets of metaphors in White Hmong from two angles: a semantic field approach looking at the metaphorical uses to which related sets of words such as body parts, colors, and physical sensations are put, and a “metaphors the Hmong live by” approach (following Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) in which a coherent metaphor such as ‘life is a string’ is realized by varied lexical means. Along the latter lines, metaphors illustrating Hmong folk theories of life and death, beauty, moral rectitude, and several natural phenomena will be sketched.

The discussion does not distinguish between live and dead metaphors. No claim that present-day Hmong speakers consciously recognize all cases as metaphors is intended; rather the goal is to explore possible underlying conceptual relationships in the lexicon, either synchronic or historical.

Finally, for some of the examples examined here, it was not immediately obvious that one meaning was the more basic and another the more metaphorical, especially where historical information is unavailable. In these situations I have taken into account such properties as markedness, generality of application of the word, and abstractness, as well as the existence of similar associations in a variety of languages

where a metaphorical relationship has already been established to make a judgment.

2. Body part metaphors in Hmong

Hmong participates in what is probably a universal tendency to use body part terms metaphorically to denote other objects or concepts. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Johnson (1987), among others, have observed, this must stem from the centrality of the body as a form of human experience. Thus it is not surprising that Hmong should have numerous body part metaphors making use of many of the same physical bases and with many of the same meanings as found in English and other languages around the world. Others, however, may turn out to be less widespread. The examples below are divided into three categories: 1. basic body part terms which are themselves metaphorical (taken here to include metonymy and synecdoche) in whole or in part; 2. body part terms used to characterize other objects or concepts; 3. feces as a waste product of the body used to characterize other products or contaminants associated with the body as well as other objects and concepts.¹

2.1. Names of body parts metaphorical themselves in whole or part

hlab hluas [cord-string] ‘viscera’ (R 1987); *hnyuv dub* [intestine-black] large intestine; *hnyuv dawb* [intestine-white] small intestine; *noob qes* [seed-egg] ‘testicles’; *paj plhu* [flower cheek] ‘cheeks, face’; *paj hlwb* [flower marrow] ‘brain’ (B); *tsho me nyuam* [shirt-child] ‘placenta’; *tsev me nyuam* [house-child] uterus (B); *taub hau* [gourd-head] ‘head’ (cf. English “Use your gourd.”); *taub teg* (tone sandhi: <tes) [gourd (>head)-finger] ‘finger tip’; *taub ntswg* [gourd (>head)-nose] ‘tip of the nose’; *taub ntseg* [gourd (>head)-ear] ‘ear lobe’ (i.e. ‘tip of the ear’).

2.2. Body part terms used for other objects and concepts

a) Body

cev ‘body’ > ‘(by) oneself’; ‘body’ (objects, e.g. airplane) (B); ‘trunk’ (tree), ‘main frame’; ‘main section’ (e.g. baby carrier) (VL, 130); (*ib*) *ce* (t. s. < *cev*) ‘(one) CLF for a suit of clothes’.

b) Head

hau ‘head’ > ‘leader’, ‘top’ (mountain), ‘lid,’ *hle hau* [take off-head] ‘lose status’ (VL, 69) Related to *hauv* below (MR, p.c.).

hauv ‘the part which is above’ (B) *hauv toj hauv pes* [part above-hill-part above-mountain] ‘mountains, hills, summits’ (B); *lub hauv dej* [CLF-part above-water] ‘the source of a river/stream’; *hauv paus* ‘stump, base, basis, root, origin; *tom hauv ntej* [at-part above-before] ‘ahead’.

taub ‘head’ (< ‘gourd’; see above); *neeg qeg/qig taub* (t.s. < *qis/qes*) [person-low-head] ‘short person’; *to taub* [pierce-head] ‘understand’; *taub hnee* (t.s. < *hneev*) [head-crossbow] ‘body of crossbow’.

taub hau ‘head’ > ‘front/prow’ (vehicle) (B); *raus taub hau* [soak-head] ‘get involved in a situation’ (B); *taub hau tawv* [head-hard] ‘disobedient’ (B); *niag taub hau loj* [great-head-big] ‘an imbecile’ (B). The morpheme *niag* comes from *niam* ‘mother’. *Niag* is difficult to translate into English. It can pejoratively suggest an individual, either a human or an anthropomorphized animal such as a tiger, who is an undesirable character. In one folk tale, it is used as a term of address to a tiger, with a sense of familiarity.

c) Mouth

ncauj ‘mouth’ (also *qhov ncauj* [hole-mouth]) > ‘mouth’ (bottle, jar); ‘open end of a sleeve’ (B); *tso ncauj* [release-mouth] ‘permit’; *ncauj sai* [mouth-quick] ‘person who can’t keep secrets’ (B); *ncauj hlob* [mouth-proud] ‘prone to cursing’; *tsis qiv luag ncauj luag tes* [not-borrow-others-mouth-others-hand] ‘not ask others for help’ (B); *ncauj liab* [mouth-monkey] ‘glib talker’ (B); *ruam ncauj* [dumb-mouth] ‘not a good speaker,’ (B); *ncauj ntse ntsuav* [mouth-sharp-intensifier] ‘an intelligent person, good with words,’ (B); *qhov ncauj yaim cuag qhov ntswg, qhov quav yaim cuag xub pwg* [hole-mouth-lick-meet with-hole-nose-hole-feces (=anus)-lick-meet with-shoulder] ‘insatiable talker,’ (B); *tim ncauj ntsees tham* [at-mouth-straight-talk] ‘speak face-to-face’; *mus nrhiav ncauj* [go-look for-mouth] ‘look for something to eat,’ ‘look for a woman’; (improper)(B); *ncauj ke* (t.s. *ke* < *kev*) [mouth-path] ‘place where a road goes into a village,’ (B); *tsov nrwb ncauj* [tiger-see/hunt-mouth] ‘tiger seeks prey,’ (B); *ncauj nyas* [mouth-baby carrier] ‘top section of baby carrier,’ (VL, 130).

d) Cheek

plhu (cf. also *paj plhu* above) ‘cheek’ > *muaj plhu* [have-cheek] ‘have face, respect, honor’; *poob plhu* [fall (=lose)-cheek] ‘lose face’; *tawm plhu* [exit-cheek] ‘appear, be seen, show oneself/one’s face’ (B); *ua plhu luag/quaj* [do-cheek-laugh/cry] ‘laugh/cry’ (M); Proverb: *Saib dej ua ntu; Saib neeg ua plhu* [watch-water-do-section; watch-person-do-cheek] ‘Examine each stretch of the stream; supervise people without

favoritism' (VL, 72); *plhu mluas mlob* [cheek-sad/downcast] 'sad face' (VL, 77).

e) Tooth

hniav 'tooth' > 'cutting edge of a knife, sword'; 'teeth of a saw' (B); *zeb xob hniav* [rock-lightning (spirit)(=potash)-tooth] 'flint' (B); *pob kws ua hniav pos nyuj* [corn-do-tooth-gums-cow (>milk)] 'corn is beginning to form (small, milky) kernels' (B).

f) Leg

ceg 'leg' (*ces* also used for animals) > 'leg (pants, table) (B); 'wing' (of house) (B); 'limb/branch' (tree); 'branch' (of road, sea, heavens), 'arm' (river) (B).

g) Foot

taw 'foot' > *sawv taw mus* [arise-foot-go] 'start on a journey'; *piav taw tes* [tell story-foot-hand] 'to dance'; *txawj taw tes* [know how-foot-hand] 'be skilled in fighting' (B); *tuag tes tuag taw* [dead-hand-dead-foot] 'paralysed'; *khvw dawm tes ntsos* [bitter toil-stumble-foot-INT] 'toil/drudge' (B); *tsuj nthi ntawm taw tseg* [trample-at-foot-discard] 'to deliberately put a matter aside'; 'foot/base' (table, wall, column, mountain); 'stem' (e.g. of tobacco plant) (B); 'foot end' (of treadmill).

h) Hand

tes 'hand' (see also *taw* above) > *nkaum tes nkaum taw nyob* [hide (under)-hand-hide-foot-be-at] 'be immobile'; (B); *tsa tes hlo ua* [raise up-hand-suddenly-do] 'start doing immediately' (B); *tes tsis ncaj* [hand-not-straight] clumsy (B) *ti tes* [tightly pressed together-hand] 'urgent, imminent (B); *nqi tes* [price-hand] 'salary' (B); *tes nkhaus* [hand-crooked] 'thief'; (B); *tes tsho* [hand-shirt] 'sleeve' (B); *hnub teg hnub taws* (t.s. < *tes*) [sun-hand-sun-foot] rays of the sun' (B); *ib teg* (t.s.) [one hand] 'a handful'; 'a blow/hit' (B); *lub thoob teg* (t.s.) [CLF-bucket-hand] 'wooden bucket with handles' (B).

cau 'hand' (colloq.) > *khaus cau* [itch-hand (colloq.)] said of a person always up to mischief or evil (H,B).

i) Liver and other internal organs

In Hmong, as in a number of other languages of the region, the liver is viewed as the seat of emotions and mental processes (Matisoff 1986, Jaisser 1990, Oey 1990), and the morpheme *siab* 'liver' occurs in numerous psycho-collocations, much as a morpheme meaning 'heart' is found in a similar function in many other languages of East and Southeast Asia. Jaisser provides a substantial discussion of this phenomenon in Hmong, so only a small set of examples is given below:

siab 'liver'; *zoo siab* [good-liver] 'happy'; *siab loj* [liver-big] 'generous', 'brave' (J); *siab me* [liver-small] 'stingy', 'discouraged' (J); *siab huv* [liver-clean] 'upright and faultless' (J); *hloov siab* [change liver] 'to have a change of mind/heart'; *txiav (txim) siab* [cut-(judgment)-liver] 'decide'.

As Jaisser observes, in some cases another body part term such as *plab* 'stomach' (viewed as the locus of intellect) or *ntsws* 'lungs' is used in a psycho-collocation with or without *siab* 'liver'. This may result in a four-part elaborate expression (term from Haas 1964), also typical of the area (Matisoff 1986). *Plab* may also be used without another body part in a psycho-collocation.

plab loj [stomach-big] 'wise, intelligent' (J); *mob siab mob ntsws* [hurt-liver-hurt-lungs] 'broken-hearted'; *plab plawv loj* [stomach-heart-big] 'wise, intelligent' (J); *neeg plab plaw (t.s.<plawv) nthuav* [person-stomach-heart-open up, unfold] 'wise and intelligent person' (J).

Unlike in Thai and a number of other languages of East and Southeast Asia (but cf. Oey on Malay), the term for the physical heart tends to be used by itself metaphorically only in the sense of the 'center' of something, and not in reference to emotions unless it is collocated with *siab* 'liver' or *plab* 'stomach', possibly forming an elaborate expression (Jaisser 1990).

plawv 'heart' > center of physical objects (e.g. tree, village, field, road, baby carrier) (J, VL, 130); *mob siab mob plawv* [hurt-liver-hurt-heart] 'heartbroken, distressed' (J); *lwj siab lwj plawv* [rotten-liver-rotten-heart] 'to be all upset, in turmoil, disheartened' (J); See also the last two items in the example set immediately above.

There are also cases where body part terms typical in psycho-collocations do not have a specifically psychological interpretation:

tas siab tas ntsws [finish-liver-finish-lungs] 'very much' (cf. also section 5 on 'die' below).

2.3. Feces

Matisoff (1978, 1986) has pointed out the importance of the "shit" or "feces" metaphor in the lexicons of Tibeto-Burman and Tai languages. For example, Thai *khii* 'feces' occurs in a wide range of compounds, including *khiihũu* 'earwax', *khiiburũi* 'cigarette ash', *khiiifan* 'decaying food particles between teeth', *khiiipàag* 'gossip, idle talk' (colloq.), *khiiikòb* 'wood shavings', and so on (Thai data from Haas). Moreover, Matisoff has observed that in Tibeto-Burman, the 'feces' morpheme is etymologically related to a morpheme meaning 'crave' or

'be addicted to', and that the relationship occurs in Tai as well, through borrowing. In Hmong, the words for 'feces' and 'crave' or 'be addicted to' are identical: *quav*. Examples of the use of *quav* ranging from the literal to the metaphorical are given below.

txuas quav [spurt-feces] 'have diarrhea' (also 'to tell lies') (B); *cem quav* [retain-feces] 'constipation, be constipated'; *qhov quav* [hole-feces] 'anus'; *quav chiv* [feces-manure] 'manure'; *quav ntswg* [feces-nose] 'dry nose mucus' (B); *quav ntsej* [feces-ear] 'earwax'; *quav hniav* [GRP-feces-tooth] 'deposits on the teeth' (B); *ntxais quav hniav* [suck-feces-tooth] 'suck against the back of or through the teeth (indicates anger)'; *cuab dev noj quav* [call (animals)-dog-eat-feces] 'call a dog to eat the waste scraps of food' (B); *quav nas* [feces-rat] 'blight' (VL, 68); *plaub hau ua quav hma* [hair (=hair-head)-do-feces-jackal] 'hair is snarled' (B); *qaug lawv quav* [be taken in-they-feces] 'be taken in by their lies' (B); *yuav paim quav* [will-excrete (of (semi-)liquids)-feces] 'the evil will come out in due time'; *neeg qhov quav hnyav* [person-hole-feces (=anus) heavy] 'one who is slow to obey, clumsy, loutish' (B); *siab qhwv quav* [liver-wrap-feces] 'unable to think' (J).

Consider also the following: *quav* 'stalks (B has 'dry/hollow stalks'), grain stubble, straw'; *quav npleg* [feces-rice] 'rice straw'; *hlawv quav nroj* [burn-stalk-weed] 'burn dry weeds' (B); *nkawg quav yeeb* [hunt-stalk-poppay] 'look for poppies forgotten (i.e., in the fields)' (B).

I suggest that the 'straw/stubble' senses of *quav* are related to the 'feces' sense, since *quav* tends to refer stalks as waste products of food plants, which is why Bertrais explicitly notes that in the term *tus quav kws* [CLF-stalk-corn] it is "even" used for living stalks ("même vivante"). Moreover, *quav* as a stalk contrasts with the usual word for living stems of plants and trunks of trees, namely *kav*. Compare *kav nplej* 'rice stem' (B) with *quav npleg* [stalk-unhulled rice standing in field or cut (t.s. *npleg*<*nplej*)] 'rice straw'.

The following examples illustrate the 'crave' sense of *quav*: *quav* 'crave'; *quav yeeb/cawv* [crave opium/alcohol]; *quav ntsej* [crave-ear] 'listen to, care about, have an interest in' (B); *tsis quav ntsej tsis quav ntswg* [not-crave-ear-not-crave-nose] 'to disassociate oneself completely from', 'pay no heed to' (B); *tsis txhob quav ntswg* [not-not [IMP]-crave-nose] 'Don't concern yourself with that' (B).

3. Adjective pairs

Matisoff (1986) provides a substantial survey of adjective pairs (technically stative verbs in Hmong) which are used in similar metaphors in Southeast Asian languages. Here I discuss the corresponding

Hmong data for just two categories, the physical sensations of heat vs. coolness, and color terms, including the concepts of light vs. dark. Again, there are significant parallels with other Southeast Asian area languages.

3.1. Heat vs. coolness

Heat tends to be associated with intensity: *kub* ‘hot’; *ces tsov rog kub ntxhov heev* [then-tiger-war-hot-unsettled-very] ‘The war was becoming more intense’ (MLS, 28); *kub tes kub taw* [hot-hand-hot-foot] ‘busy doing many things at once’; *npau siab* [boil-liver] ‘to be angry’ (J); *npau taws* [boil burn] ‘to be very angry’. Heimbach translates *taws* as a restricted post-verbal intensifier, i.e., limited in what verbs it can be collocated with. Bertrais translates *taws* as ‘in abundance, in profusion’. I suggest that the quantity sense is a metaphorical extension from the ‘burn’ sense via the association of heat with intensity.

The word *txias* with a meaning ranging from ‘cool’ to ‘cold’ seems to be preferred to *no* ‘cold’ in metaphorical expressions. The coldness of *no* (used of weather, body) seems to be greater than that of *txias*.

txias ‘cool, cold’; *txias siab* [cool-liver] ‘coldness in the heart’ (B); *teb chaws txias lawm* [country-cool-PERF] ‘peace has returned to the country’ (B); *lub tsev txias txias* [CLF-house-cool-cool] ‘chilled atmosphere in the house’ (e.g., due to a dead body in the house).

3.2. Colors and light/dark contrast

Similar to many languages, although not universally so, the color white, light, clarity, and brightness are associated with positive attributes in many cases, and black and darkness with negative.

White

As in English, *dawb* ‘white’ is also associated with cleanliness. *Dawb* additionally has the meaning ‘free’ in the sense of ‘not requiring payment’, a semantic correlation also found in Chinese and considered a loan translation (M.R., p.c.).

dawb ‘white’; *dawb cuag txhuv* [white-equal-hulled rice] ‘as clean as hulled rice’ (VL, 91); *siab dawb siab huv* [liver-white-liver-clean] ‘pure heart,’ ‘good’ (B); *pom kev dawb lias* [see-way-white-obscurity] ‘begin to see a bit more clearly’ (B); *nyob dawb nyob huv* [live-white-live clean] ‘be happy,’ ‘live without cares’ (B); Proverb: *Cev dub noj dub; Cev dawb noj dawb* [give-black-eat-black-give-free/white-eat-free/white] ‘Eat only what is offered, no future obligation’ (said at meal served with settlement of dispute) (VL, 89).

However, in the context of whiteness being a contrast with the norm, it can be negative, as in the case of blanching, where blood

drains away from the face: *ua plhu liab dawb liab dawb* [do-cheek-red-white-red-white] ‘blush and blanch from shame’ (B). Here, the centrality of the body seems more important than other associations with colors.

Black

dub ‘black’; *siab dub* [liver-black] ‘bad’ (person) (J); *ntuj dub ntuj tib txig* [sky-black-sky-one completely black] ‘heaven is black’ (=no one can tell the future) (VL, 89); *dub muag txig mus* [black-face-completely black-go] ‘to go straight on without stopping (with black and determined face)’ (H); *ntsej dub muag doog* [ear-black-face-dark red] ‘furious’ (VL, 89); *zaum tej thooj dub lus* [sit-some-like-black-word] ‘sit quietly without talking’ (e.g., visitors) (B).

Light, clarity, and brightness vs. darkness and obscurity

tshav ‘light from sun or moon’; *tshav ntuj* [light-sky] ‘daylight, sunlight, daytime’; *tshav ntuj lawm* [sunlight-sky-PERF] ‘recovered (from illness)’; *kuv nco koj tshav ntuj* [I-remember-2SG sunlight] ‘I’ll remember your kindness’; *yeej tsis cuag nkauj tshav qaib nraug tshav noog* [win-aim-meet with-beautiful-bright-chicken-handsome-bright-bird] ‘marry the one you love’ (MLS, 144); *kaj* ‘bright, light’; *kaj siab* [bright-liver] ‘satisfied with things, heart refreshed’; *ntshiab* ‘clear, fresh’ *siab ntshiab* ‘clean/clear heart’; *tsaus* ‘dark’; *tsaus ntuj* [dark-sky] ‘night(time)’; *ntuj txias teb tsaus* [sky-cold-land-dark] ‘place of the dead’ (VL, 88); *qhov muag tsaus ntais* [hole-eye-dark-intensifier] ‘to faint, black out’.

Yellow

Jaisser (1990) speculates that *daj* ‘yellow’ may tend toward negative interpretations. This is supported by my data: *daj* ‘yellow’; *hniav daj* yellow teeth (has old, unattractive connotation); in folk tale copper yellow stars do not light up the road well, white stars do (VL, 16); *cua daj cua dub* [wind-yellow-wind-black] ‘storm’ (J); *dej dag* [water-yellow] ‘yellow, muddy water’ (may not literally be yellow in color; ‘high water’; *dej dag nyab* [water-yellow-flood] ‘flood,’ flooding water’.

Europeans are also sometimes referred to as being “yellow haired” regardless of the actual color of the hair, which could even be dark brown. (Wahn Her, p.c.) This is not necessarily pejorative, but does characterize Europeans as marked “others.”

4. Motion Verb

Matisoff (1986) provides a rich set of motion verbs with metaphorical meanings. Here I give just one, the verb *poob* ‘fall’, as indicative of how

Hmong behaves similarly to other languages of the area.

poob 'fall (physically)'; > 'fall morally'; 'of a place falling in war'; 'drop'; 'lose' (thing, person to death, value (B)); 'forget' (letters of alphabet, songs(B)); arrive (in a city, on a sandbar) (MLS); 'stay at another's house' (B); fail; 'unravel/come apart'; 'spill over (from being too full)'; *hnub poob* [sun-fall] 'sunset'; *poob siab* [fall-liver] 'be afraid' (J); *poob zog* [fall-strength] 'lose strength, be discouraged, lose heart'.

5. Die

Another areal feature is the extension of the verb for 'to die' to the meaning of completeness, not found in English or other European languages (Matisoff 1986).

tuag 'be dead, die'; > 'completely'; (M); *tuag nthi* [be dead/die-really] 'really dead, finalized, settled'; *tuag siab* [be dead/die liver] 'to be totally satisfied with'; (cf. also *tas siab tas ntsws* [finish-liver-finish-lungs] 'very much').

6. Nature

Below I sketch several areas of metaphorical language based on nature, including weather, flowers, and animals.

6.1. Weather phenomena

zaj 'dragon'; *zaj sawv* [dragon-arise] 'rainbow'; *zaj kab* [dragon-path] 'rainbow'; *zaj vij hnub* [dragon-surround-sun] 'rainbow/halo around the sun'; *lub pas zaj* [CLF-lake-dragon] 'lake'; *kev nplua quav zaj* [way-slippery-feces-dragon] 'the road is slippery with green mildew' (B).

According to Robert Blust (p.c.), the association of rainbows and water with a dragon or serpent is extremely widespread around the world, not just in Southeast Asia and China. It is certainly notable there, however, and dragon terminology and the association with weather is especially rich in Chinese (Carr 1990).

xob name of the lightning spirit >'lightning'; *xob laim* [lightning (spirit)-flash] 'for lightning to flash'.

6.2. Flower

The word *paj* 'flower' is used metaphorically to indicate both beauty and expansion. The latter includes a physical roundness or puffiness as in *paj* 'pompom' (also related to the beauty sense since pompoms are used decoratively on clothing and baby carriers) and *paj plhu* 'cheek', as well as the change of a wick into the more diffuse ash form, and finally, the increase of money.

paj ‘cotton’; ‘pompom’; *paj kws* [flower-corn] ‘popcorn’; *paj ntaub* [flower cloth] ‘embroidery/applique needlework’; *ua paj ntaub paj ntawv* [do-flower-cloth-flower-paper] do embroidery, make decorations’ (M); *paj lug/lus* [flower-word] (possible tone sandhi) ‘proverb’; *(tus) nkauj muag paj* [(CLF)-beautiful-face-flower] ‘prostitute’; *noj paj* [eat-flower] ‘make a profit’ (B) (cf. also Green Hmong *paaj* ‘flower’ > ‘interest on an investment’ (XXX)); *(cov) paj tshau* [(CLF)-flower-ash] ‘light ash from certain woods’ (B); *paj teeb* [flower-lamp] ‘carbon on tip of wick’ (B).

6.3. Animals

Two animals in particular seem to be represented figuratively, the tiger and the dog. In addition to the literal use of these words to refer to classes of related animals the way *cat* is used in English, the tiger and the dog show up in numerous metaphorical expressions as well as in proverbs. These animals are thus culturally salient motifs.

6.3.1. Tiger

tsov ‘tiger’ (R 19); used as morpheme in names of other (jungle) cats; *tsov si* ‘mythical animal with supernatural powers’ (B); *kev ua tsov ua rog* [way-do-tiger-do-war] ‘war’ (w/o *kev* = verb); *tsov tom!* (curse) ‘may a tiger bite (kill) you!’ (B); *niag tsov tom qua ntxi ntawd* [great-tiger-bite-open wide-that] (an insult) ‘that worthless person.’

There is also a proverb in which a likeness is suggested between the danger of encountering a tiger and the encountering of a public official:

Pom tsov yuav tuag; Pom nom yuav pluag [see-tiger-will be-dead; see-official-will-be poor] (said of paying heavy taxes) (VL, 68).

6.3.2. Dog

The examples below range from cases where there is a literal association with or a physical resemblance to dogs to highly metaphorical abstract expressions.

dev ‘dog’; *(tus) dev mub* [(CLF)-dog-flea] ‘flea’; *nab qa dev* [lizard-dog] ‘monitor lizard’ (B); *taum dev* ‘type of bean with prickly down’ (B); *hniav kaus dev* [tooth-fang-dog] ‘human canines and bicuspid’; *cau dev* [hand (colloq.)-dog] ‘hands’ (colloq.) (B); *tawv dev* [skin-dog] ‘clothes’ (colloq.) (B).

Zhang (1989) argues that English speakers tend to have positive connotations of the dog, while Chinese speakers tend towards the negative, and that this shows up in a wealth of expressions found in the two languages. For example, compare *zǒu gǒu* [run-dog] ‘running dogs’, an insulting appellation based on the idea that dogs blindly fol-

low their masters (recall the use of this expression by the Chinese government for the U.S. during the Vietnam war era), with the western European concept of the dog as a positive symbol of loyalty, as exemplified in the saying “A dog is a man’s best friend”.

In this regard, Hmong patterns similarly to Chinese: *lus dev* [word/language-dog] ‘bad language’; *tib neeg dev* [one-person-dog] ‘filthy, immoral person’; *dev loj leeb* ‘[dog-wander] ‘a wandering dog who has no master; outcast’ (GPGW); *tus dev dag loj leeb no* [CLF-dog-tell lie-wander-this] ‘that lying outcast of a dog’ (of a person) (GPGW); *dev mus nuam yaj* [dog-go-bend neck-look] ‘person totally dependant on another for survival, like a dog waiting for scraps while someone eats’ (GPGW); *hlau quav dev* [iron-feces-dog] ‘bad iron’ (B); *ua dev ua npua* [do-dog-do-pig] ‘behave badly’ (B); *pub dev noj dev vwm* [give-dog-eat-dog-crazy] ‘don’t give gifts to unworthy persons’ (B).

7. Metaphors the Hmong live by

Another way to examine metaphors is to consider the ways in which varied lexical items are organized around a single metaphorical theme. I suggest that the metaphor “life is a string” plays such a role in Hmong.

7.1. Life as a string

There are several ways in which life seems to be metaphorized as a string or thread in Hmong. First, the word *sia(v)* ‘life’,⁴ in the sense of existence or being alive, takes the classifier *ɲoj* (cf. *tag ɲoj sia(v)*) (possible t.s. *sia* < *siav*) [finish-CLF-life] ‘die’, which is used for string-like objects and, by metaphorical extension, things that come in lengths and which might be cut into divisions. These include the following: *hluas* ‘cord, string, rope’; *xov* ‘thread, wire’; *hmab* ‘vine’; *hnyuv* ‘intestines, sausage’; *ɲoj lus* [CLF-language] ‘a saying’, *kev* ‘path, way, road’.

It must be noted here that *ɲoj* is also generally used for abstractions, such as *hmoov* ‘fortune, destiny’ and *hauj lwm* ‘work’, although not for all abstract nouns. Thus it might be argued that the use of this classifier with *sia(v)* ‘life’ is predictable from its status as an abstraction, with no metaphorical connection to string. However, I suggest that the use of *ɲoj* with abstract nouns follows from its use with *kev* ‘path, road, way’ since *kev* itself has been metaphorically extended to use as a nominalizer (e.g. *ɲoj kev pluag* [CLF-NOM-poor] ‘poverty’)

via generalization of its meaning of 'way' as a path to 'way' as a practice (cf. *kev cai* [way-rule/law] 'custom, law, practice').

All nouns are subcategorized for particular classifiers in Hmong. However, although there is a large number of classifiers, the vast majority of nouns are associated with a small set of five or six, unlike many other languages of the area. For example, most inanimate objects take the classifier *lub* by virtue of their bulk. In light of the relatively restricted variety of common classifiers, the use of a special classifier for string-like objects and the grouping with it of abstractions with a sense of length is suggestive of the importance of the string-like conception of life, not unlike the Greek myth of the three Fates spinning, weaving, and cutting the thread of life.

A second piece of evidence is the fact that the verb *tu* 'part, break apart', which, according to Heimbach, is used of things like rope, thread, and other things that come in lengths, is used in expressions for birth and death: *tu me nyuam* [break apart-child]give birth'; *tshuab zaj qeej tu sia* [blow-CLF-pipes-break apart-life] 'play the "Life Stops" song on the keng (pipes)' (MLS, 18); *tu siav nrho* [break apart-life-completely] 1) die; 2) be highly offended.

The verb *txo*, which has a 'cut' sense in addition to others, also occurs in an expression for 'kill': *txo txoj sia* [release/cut-CLF-life] 'kill' (*txo* 'release,' 'relinquish,' 'cut' (central part of a tree to fell it, branches off a fallen tree)).

Finally, as in a number of other Southeast Asian cultures, the Hmong tie strings around the wrist as part of ceremonies requesting spirits for good health, fortune, etc. This is called *khi tes* [tie-hand] or *khi hluas* [tie-string].

7.2. The good, the bad, and the ugly

As is extremely common in a variety of languages, in Hmong as well, goodness is associated with beauty and badness with ugliness. This is especially clear in the case of the Hmong word *phem*, which has the senses of both 'bad' and 'ugly.' Context may distinguish these senses, but not necessarily. It seems reasonable to consider the 'bad' meaning as more basic since it is more general, and Wierzbicka (1996) considers it to be a universal semantic prime. Examples of the non-metaphorical uses are given below:

zoo 'good, well' (people, things, situations, etc.); *nyob zoo* [exist/be at-good] 'be well' (statement and greeting); *ua zoo neeg* [do-good-person] 'to be a good person'.

phem ‘bad (people, things, situations, etc.)/evil (also ‘ugly, see below); *noj tej yam phem phem* [eat-some-thing-bad-bad] ‘ate bad (unhealthy) food’ (MLS, 88).

tsis zoo [not-good] is another common expression for ‘bad’. When people come to see a new baby this is said of the baby to deceive and ward off evil spirits who might want to take it (make it sick or die).

7.2.1. Beauty as good, ugliness as bad

zoo nkauj [good-young woman-] ‘beautiful’ (H also has ‘admirable’); *zoo ncaug* [good-young man] ‘handsome’; *nkauj knub* [beautiful sun] ‘sun’ (B).

Consider also *nkauj* ‘song’; *hu nkauj* [call-song] ‘sing’.

It seems plausible to connect *nkauj* ‘song’ with the meaning ‘beautiful’, especially in light of the fact that the meaning ‘sing’ is expressed by a compound with the verb *hu*, which has the general sense of a verb of saying: e.g., *hu kom tuaj* [call-cause come] ‘to call (someone) to come’ (B); *hu ua* [do-call] ‘to be named’; *hu xov tooj* [call-telephone (=copper-wire)] ‘to call someone on the telephone; *hu plig* [call-spirit] a rite for calling upon spirits for help.

Moreover, traditional Hmong culture does not include songs as we know them, but rather poetry and ballads called out with conventionalized rhythmic patterns of pitch and length variations more like chanted speech or even rap music. It makes sense, then, to think of singing as ‘calling beautifully’ and the Hmong noun for ‘song’ to have derived from the use of *nkauj* in an adverbial sense modifying *hu* ‘call’.

As noted above, *phem* conventionally means ‘ugly’ as well as ‘bad’. Examples of phrases with *phem* in this sense include: *phem* ‘ugly’; *phem dab phem tuag* [ugly-spirit/ghost-ugly-completely (<dead)] ‘ugly’ (VL, p 87); *phem cuag liab* [ugly-equal-monkey] ‘as ugly as a monkey’.

7.2.2. Moral rectitude and appearance

As in English as well as in other Southeast Asian languages (Matisoff 1986, noted also by Jaisser 1990 for Hmong), moral/ethical behavior is associated with straightness and immoral/unethical behavior with crookedness. Probably there is a bodily basis for this association involving physical handicaps. Given the lack of scientific knowledge about the basis for many handicaps until relatively recently in human history, it seems possible that beliefs concerning evil spirits as causes of physical infirmities of various types could be involved here, as well as the fear and resultant dislike of the different, the “other.”

ncaj ‘straight’ > ‘morally upright, honest’; *siab ncaj* [live-straight] ‘honest/morally upright’ (J); *ua ncajncees* [do-straight-intensifier] ‘do fairly, justly’.

nkhaus ‘crooked’ > ‘dishonest’; *siab nkhaus* [liver-crooked] ‘dishonest (J)’; *tes nkhaus* [hand-crooked] ‘thief’; *neeg nplaig nkhaus* [person-tongue-crooked] ‘liar’ (B).

8. Conclusion

A number of the Hmong metaphors discussed are clearly widespread around the world, and possibly universal. In other cases, the Hmong data add to our understanding of the range of already identified Southeast Asian areal features (e.g. the use of the ‘feces’ morpheme), and others may turn out to be new candidates for areal features.

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Notes

¹The data is given in the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet. Final consonants or the lack thereof indicate the tones. The examples are from or were verified in Heimbach unless otherwise noted; translations from the French (Bertrais, Mottin) are my own. The other data sources are indicated by last name or title initial(s) in the text.

Abbreviations used in glosses: CLF – classifier; GRP – ‘group classifier/plural marker for nouns’; IMP – imperative, INT – intensifier; NOM – nominalizer; PERF – perfective; SG – singular; t.s. – tone sandhi; pej. – pejorative; colloq. – colloquial.

²I have departed from Matisoff’s gloss of this morpheme as ‘shit’ because in Hmong, at least, the word *quav* is less socially taboo in general than English *shit* is. However, as is so frequently the case with glossing, there is no English translation that perfectly captures the markedness and register of the Hmong term.

³Some Hmong actually have naturally blond hair, a trait which Savina (1924; cited in Quincey 1988) noted in Hmong in China, along

with blue eyes and a light skin. According to Quincey (14), “Modern anthropologists have also noted the presence of European traits in Hmong populations, though instead of light skin and hair they stress facial features such as the absence of an epicanthic eyelid fold, narrow faces, and aquiline noses.” However, blond hair is very uncommon among the Hmong and obviously highly unusual in Asia generally.

⁴ Bertrais has *ɲcoj sia*, based on fieldwork in Laos; Heimbach, who worked in Thailand, lists *txoj siav* first, noting that *ɲcoj sia* is also frequently heard.

There are other words for ‘life’ and ‘lifetime’, as illustrated below, which center more on the sense of how one lives and on time periods of life. In contrast, *sia(v)* relates more to the sense of one’s life force. This is not surprising given the fact that *sia(v)* ‘life’ is etymologically related to *siav* ‘breathe’.

(*lub*) *neej* ‘(CLF) life, a living’: (cf. *neeg* ‘person’ < *neej* ‘life’); *sim neej* [time/lifetime-life] ‘a lifetime’; *tas/tag sim neej* [finish-lifetime] ‘die’; *ua neej* ‘prosper, be well’ (H); ‘separate from one’s parents and set up one’s own life’ (B); *tsis zoo neej* [not-good-life] ‘not well off’; *ua neej ɲcog ib nta* [do-life-arrive-one-mid] ‘reach mid life’ (B).

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