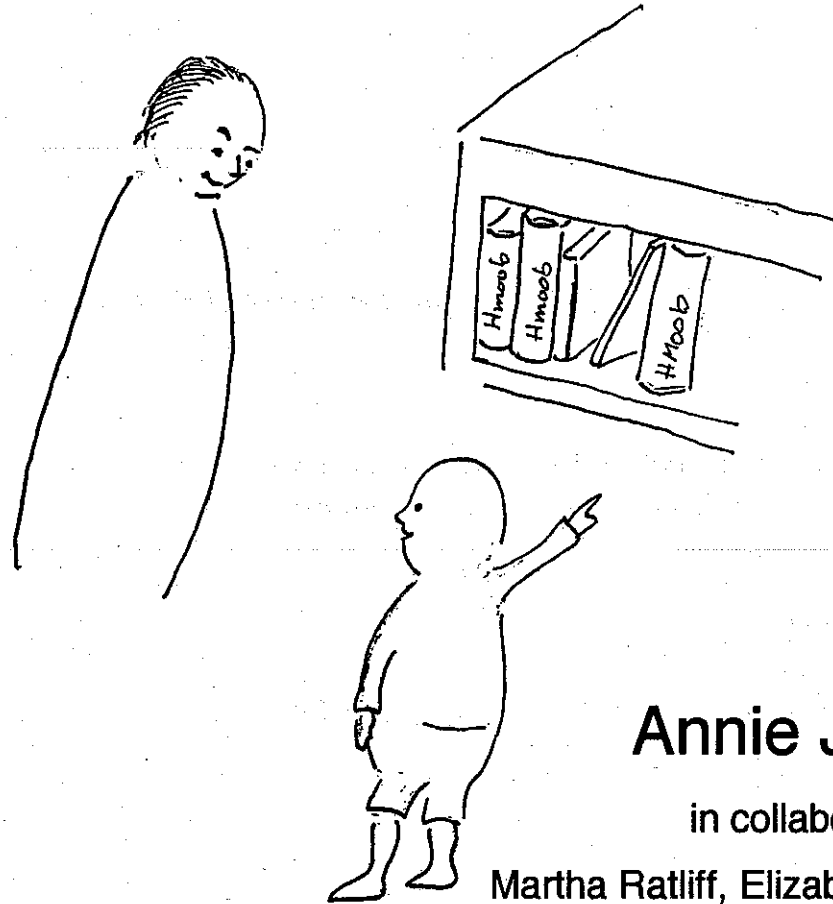


# HMONG FOR BEGINNERS



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**Appendices 1 and 2** provide answer keys to the exercises as well as translations of the stories in the oral comprehension and reading sections. These are provided primarily for private instruction with a tutor so students can verify their answers and double-check their understanding. They should be consulted only as a last resort.

**Appendix 3** is the transcript of an audiotape which provides listening practice in the content areas found elsewhere in the book. The transcript should not be looked at while listening to the tape, at least not at first. A good strategy would be to first listen to a section of the tape several times, and then to transcribe it, using the transcript to verify comprehension and spelling.

**Appendix 4** discusses the major differences between the White and Green Hmong dialects (see below) so the book may be used by students interested in learning either or both.

**The bibliography** lists the resources used in the compilation of this book—including ordering information for several of them.

**The glossary** includes all the Hmong words contained in the textbook as well as other common words beginners might find helpful in interacting with Hmong people or reading simple texts.

## ABOUT THE HMONG LANGUAGE

Hmong belongs to the Hmong-Mien (a.k.a. Miao-Yao) language family. This language family is quite large and diverse, the Hmongic branch of it being as complex as the Germanic branch of Indo-European and the Mienic branch being somewhat less complex. There is controversy among linguists as to the wider genetic affiliation of the Hmong-Mien family: some include it in the Sino-Tibetan language family while others place it within the Austro-Tai family.

The two major dialects of Hmong spoken in Thailand and Laos—and hence in the Western countries where Hmong refugees have relocated—are:

1. Hmong Daw, typically referred to in English as White Hmong
2. Mong Leng, also referred to in English as Green or Blue\* Hmong/Mong†

For simplicity's sake I will refer to the two dialects as White and Green Hmong in this book. However, since there is variation within the Hmong community itself as to naming preferences, care should be taken to ask the Hmong with whom one comes in contact what they wish to be called. Linguistically speaking, the differences between the two dialects are relatively minor and the two varieties are mutually intelligible. This mutual intelligibility is enhanced by the fact that White and Green Hmong speakers live either together or in close proximity and consider themselves closely related enough to intermarry. A helpful analogy in characterizing the differences between the two dialects is to think of them as being farther apart than American and British English, but not as far apart as Spanish and Portuguese. Since most linguists who started

\* *Ntsuab* in Hmong, which translates as either green or blue (i.e., the anthropologist's "grue") since it refers to the greenish blue or bluish green portion of the color spectrum.

† The "hm" sound does not occur in Green Hmong; hence the frequently occurring "Mong" spelling for the name of this dialect (see Appendix 4 for details).

to analyze Hmong in the United States happened to rely on White Hmong speakers as language consultants for their research, White Hmong is the more investigated dialect, and hence the one used in this book. However, the major differences between the two varieties are discussed in the “Pronunciation Guide to the RPA” and in Appendix 4; a literate Green Hmong instructor/tutor will be able to make the necessary adjustments to use the book as a teaching tool, and a student interested in learning basic Green Hmong will be able to do the same.

Hmong is presented in the **Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA)**, the practical orthography developed by missionaries in the early 1950s (see p. 4 for details). Words in Hmong are usually **monosyllabic** (for example, *qaib* ‘chicken,’ *tsev* ‘house,’ etc.), but there are a number of high-frequency words which are disyllabic compounds (for example, *me nyuam* ‘child,’ *to taub* ‘to understand,’ *hauj lwm* ‘work,’ etc.). These compounds are spelled as two words by some Hmong and as single words by others (i.e., the examples just given would be spelled *menyuam*, *totaub*, and *haujlwm*). For lack of standardization and for consistency’s sake, everything is written in monosyllables in this book. This choice was further motivated by the fact that tone is easier to deal with in monosyllables in the initial language learning stages. Finally, it is the preferred spelling convention of the main Hmong contributor, Lopao Vang.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE SOUND SYSTEM OF HMONG

The purpose of this section is for you to become familiar with the general sound structure of Hmong (White and Green).

### SYLLABLE STRUCTURE

Hmong is largely a monosyllabic language, meaning that most words appear in the shape of a single syllable (but see section on compound nouns for two-syllable words, some of which are used frequently in everyday speech). Each syllable is made up of an initial consonant or consonant cluster, a vowel or a diphthong, and a *simultaneous* tone. There are no final consonants, except for *ng* [ŋ], as in English *sing*, which occurs only as part of the pronunciation of the nasalized vowels of Hmong and hence is not considered a full-fledged final consonant (see section on vowels below).

### TONES

Hmong—like hundreds of languages in Asia (e.g., Lao, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, etc.), Africa, and the Americas—is a tone language. This means that each syllable is pronounced with its own distinctive tone.

There are different types of tones; the most common makes use of normal voice quality and changes in pitch (e.g., low vs. high pitch, falling pitch, rising pitch). English—like other European languages with which you may be familiar—is not a tone language, but it does make use of pitch changes at the level of intonation (i.e., the melody/music of a phrase or sentence). For instance, expressions such as *Yes! Great!* have a falling pitch and are interpreted as statements expressing enthusiasm, whereas those such as *Yes? Great?* have a rising pitch and are interpreted as questions. Pitch changes do not result in different words with different meanings; rather, they indicate that a word is used as a statement, a question, and/or to express speaker attitude (e.g., enthusiasm, surprise, hesitation, etc.). By contrast, in Hmong, pitch changes do affect the meaning of the word: *dej* with a falling pitch means ‘water’; *dev* with a rising pitch means ‘dog.’

To summarize, in Hmong, pitch changes are part of a phenomenon called tone and form an intrinsic part of the syllable; in English, pitch changes are part of a phenomenon called intonation and are superimposed on the syllable. Hence, even though pitch changes are used at a different level of linguistic structure and for different purposes in the two languages, you do know how to modulate your voice to produce different pitch patterns, and are thus already capable of producing some of the Hmong tones without being aware of it. This should help you relax and give you confidence—Hmong is less “exotic” than you think. Hmong has six such simple tones characterized by normal voice quality and changes in pitch:

- High level
- High falling
- Mid rising
- Mid level
- Low level with slight fall
- Low rising, long