

Hmong linguistics resources

An (in-progress) annotated bibliography, with emphasis on syntax and semantics

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This bibliography includes papers from the field of linguistics that discuss the grammar of Hmong. Most discuss either White Hmong or Green Mong—but as these two varieties have highly similar grammars, most observations here will likely be applicable to both varieties. (But please keep in mind that there may be some differences!) Sources from other related languages may also be included, if useful.

The studies collected here generally relate to the syntax and semantics of Hmong (the areas most relevant to my research). For anyone interested in Hmong phonetics/phonology, historical linguistics, or sociolinguistics, I suggest that you consult the Oxford Bibliographies page on Hmong-Mien linguistics ([LINK](#), [PDF](#)) maintained by David Mortensen.

This bibliography comes with two caveats: First, the annotations here represent my own thinking, which is not necessarily authoritative! Second, this list is a work in progress, and there are other sources that I have not yet read.

Contents

I	Grammars and Overviews	2
II	Verbs and the verb phrase	2
1	Serial verb constructions	2
2	Voice and valency	4
3	Tense, aspect, and mood	4
4	Studies of specific verbs	5
III	Nouns and the noun phrase	6
5	Classifiers	6
6	Demonstratives	7
7	Pronouns and Binding	7
IV	Clause and sentence structure	8
8	Conjunction and Complementation	8
9	Topic Prominence and Topicalization	9
10	Relative Clauses	9
11	Questions	10

Grammars and Overviews

Unfortunately there are no recent, book-length grammars of Hmong—but there are still good references available. The two most recent sources mentioned here, [Jarkey \(2015\)](#) and [Mortensen \(2019\)](#), are generally in agreement with one another, but have some slight differences. I recommend reading both of these sources even if you are only interested in one particular variety.

Éléments de Grammaire Hmong Blanc
(Mottin [1978](#))

The most widely cited description of the Hmong language available, and perhaps the most thorough. It gives brief overviews of many grammatical constructions (with many, many examples), and is an excellent resource despite being written in French.

“Hmong (Mong Leng)”
(Mortensen [2019](#))

A chapter-length description of Green Mong grammar, this is necessarily brief, but gives concise descriptions of most fundamental topics.

Serial Verbs in White Hmong
(Jarkey [2015](#))

The first chapter of this book is an overview of White Hmong grammar, briefly covering most fundamental topics. (More information on the book’s main subject matter is given [below](#).)

Verbs and the verb phrase

1 Serial verb constructions

Serial Verbs in White Hmong
(Jarkey [2015](#))

The most thorough reference on serial verb constructions in Hmong. Jarkey establishes a typology of four main types, discusses their properties in detail, and compares them with several superficially-similar constructions. (Includes an excellent chapter-length description of White Hmong grammar.)

“Cotemporal Serial Verb Constructions in White Hmong”
(Jarkey 2010)

Discusses serial verb constructions involving motion. The contents of this chapter are incorporated into Jarkey 2015 (see Chapter 3, Section 1).

Serial Verb Constructions in Hmong: Resultatives and Consequential
(Cooper-Leavitt and Lonsdale 2006)

A conference presentation, with data limited to only two types of serial verb construction (those called ‘Cause-Effect’ and ‘Disposal’ by Jarkey (2015), which are herein called ‘resultative’ and ‘consequential’, respectively). I do not know whether this presentation was eventually published as a paper.

“Conjunction as Topicalizer in Vietnamese”
(Clark 1992a)

Clark uses the term ‘serialization’ in a somewhat nonstandard way, to refer to any instance of coordination, subordination, or successive modification that is not signaled by an overt conjunction/complementizer. Under this definition, the verbal, nominal, and clausal domains might all be said to exhibit ‘serialization’. The data presented by Clark is certainly evidence of a morphological trend, though the syntax of these constructions is likely not uniform. (Data from White Hmong.)

“Verb Concatenation in Hmong Njua: A Syntactic Description and Its Treatment in Natural Language Processing”
(Harriehausen-Muhlbauer 1992)

Data is limited to one class of serial verb construction, called ‘Cotemporal Motion’ by Jarkey (2015)—and this paper does not describe the full complexity of that construction. Discusses the implications of serialization for natural language processing. (Data from Green Mong.)

“Serial Verb Constructions in White Hmong: A Functional Approach”
(Jarkey 1991)

A dissertation, substantially updated and published as Jarkey 2015.

“White Hmong Noun Classifiers and Referential Saliency”
(Riddle 1989)

Discusses several classes of serial verb construction in White Hmong (including so-called ‘instrumental’ constructions, which are not specifically discussed by other authors) and argues that fine-grained semantic/pragmatic distinctions between certain verbs (e.g. *muab* ‘take’ vs. *xuas* ‘grasp’ vs. *siv* ‘use’ vs. *tuav* ‘hold’) can determine whether a construction describes a single proposition or multiple propositions.

Comparison with Jarkey (2015) suggests that Riddle is comparing different classes of serial verb constructions. I suspect that the semantic/pragmatic contrasts Riddle discusses simply disambiguate between different possible syntactic structures.

2 Voice and valency

“Passive and Passive-like Constructions in Hmong”
(Creswell and Snyder 2000)

Describes two passive(-like) constructions in Hmong, those formed with *raug* ‘hit’ or *mag* ‘trap’, and those formed with *yog* ‘to be’. Neither construction results in the demotion of the agent as expected in canonical passive constructions. *Yog*-passives appear to be a copular construction, and *raug/mag*-passives appear to involve VP-embedding. (Data from White Hmong.)

3 Tense, aspect, and mood

“The Aspectual System of Hmong”
(Li 1991)

A detailed examination of several aspectual markers in Green Mong, including *tau* (telic or ‘attainment’ marker), *lawm* (PERFECT), and *taabtom* (PROGRESSIVE). Li argues that these should be considered aspect markers. Some of these have multiple grammatical uses, between which Li makes fine-grained distinctions. Li also discusses the role of *yuav* (IRREALIS).

Linguistic Epidemiology: Semantics and Grammar of Language Contact in Mainland Southeast Asia

(Enfield 2003)

Describes a common pattern in Southeast Asian languages, where a single word has all of the following uses: (1) a verb meaning ‘get, acquire, attain’, (2) an aspect marker associated with completion, (3) a possibility modal meaning ‘can, be able to’, and (4) an introducer of ‘descriptive complements’. In Hmong, this is *tau*. Due to the number of languages surveyed, the discussion of Hmong is somewhat brief. (More information on *tau* can be found in Li 1991 and Jarkey 2015.)

“Non-Spatial Setting in White Hmong”

(White 2014)

A good overview of the distribution and uses of various grammatical markers, including tense and aspect marking, aspectual verbs, mood/modality, and certainty markers, as well as adverbs related to those same functions. While White’s descriptions appear generally correct, they are often necessarily brief, and on some points his data or conclusions differ from those presented other sources (and from the judgments of Hmong consultants that I’ve worked with).

4 Studies of specific verbs

“On Two Venitive Verbs in Lan Hmyo”

(Taguchi 2019)

A study of two motion verbs in Lan Hmyo, a West Hmongic language, closely related to White Hmong/Green Mong. These verbs are *luB* ‘come (home)’ (\approx WH *los*/GM *lus*), which Taguchi claims grammatically encodes the notion of ‘home’, and *ǎaA* ‘come’ (\approx WH/GM *tuaj*) which Taguchi claims does not.

Nouns and the noun phrase

5 Classifiers

“Shape and Function in Hmong Classifier Choices”
(Sakuragi and Fuller 2013)

A study examining the factors that affect Hmong speakers’ choice of classifiers. The results suggest that classifiers are associated with both particular shapes and particular functions. (E.g., *tus* and *txoj* can both be used for nouns that describe long, thin objects, but *tus* is preferred over *txoj* when the normal use of that noun involves grasping it.) In some cases, Hmong speakers can be led to prefer different classifiers for the same noun, depending on whether they focus on the shape of the noun in question, or on its function.

“Classifiers, Quantifiers and Class Nouns in Hmong”
(Bisang 1993)

Bisang uses syntactic and semantic tests to show that what are usually called ‘classifiers’ in Hmong are in fact a mixed bag of true classifiers, quantifiers, measure words, and class nouns. This is a fine-grained description, which offers an alternative view of the ‘double classifier constraint’ discussed by Ratliff (1991) and an explanation for the ‘referential salience’ analysis of Riddle (1989).

“*Cov*, the Underspecified Noun, and Syntactic Flexibility in Hmong”
(Ratliff 1991)

Discusses cases of ‘double classifiers’ in Hmong. These usually involve the plural classifier *cov* being added to a classifier-noun pair, but require the noun to be semantically underspecified (e.g. *cov + phau ntawv*, ‘the books’). Ratliff argues that the second classifier acts as a noun in these cases, forming the first part of a compound word, and relates this to a broader pattern of syntactic flexibility in Hmong. (Data from White Hmong.)

6 Demonstratives

“Hmong-Mien Demonstratives and Pattern Persistence”
(Ratliff 1997)

Discusses the White Hmong demonstrative *ko* ‘that (near you)’, which has often been missed in other accounts. Ratliff situates *ko* with respect to the full person-based demonstrative system of White Hmong. This type of system is unusual among Southeast Asian languages, and the historical development of this system is discussed.

7 Pronouns and Binding

“Two Types of Variable Elements in Hmong Anaphora”
(Mortensen 2004)

Discusses A and A' binding, including anaphoric binding into proper names, full pronominals (e.g. *nwg*, 3SG), kinship pronominals (e.g. *yawg*, ‘male relative’), null *pro*, and *tug kheej* ‘self’ forms. Describes an apparent ‘competition’ between these forms. (Data from Green Mong.)

“Topicalized NPs with Expansion Pronouns in Hmong”
(Ratliff 1992)

Provides data on so-called ‘expansion pronouns’ in White Hmong. These forms combine an NP with a pronoun, in order to describe a larger group containing the noun. For example, *Nplias nkawd* (= *Nplias* 2DU) describes a group of two people, of whom *Nplias* is one. Ratliff explores two possible analyses.

Clause and sentence structure

8 Conjunction and Complementation

“Complement Clause Types and Complementation Strategy in White Hmong”
(Jarkey 2006)

Explores complementation in Hmong. Several distinct types of complement clause are discussed (as well as the verbs that introduce them). The relationship between clause type and choice of complementizer (which include *(hais) tias*, *kom*, *tias kom*, and the null complementizer) is described in detail.

“Serialization in Mainland Southeast Asia”
(Clark 1992c)

Expands on the data presented in Clark 1988, placing White Hmong *los* alongside similar conjunctions in Vietnamese and Black Tai, but does not significantly expand the analysis. (See Clark 1992b for further development of this idea, as it pertains to Vietnamese.)

“The Origin and Function of Switch Reference in Green Mong”
(Li 1989)

Argues that the Green Mong clausal conjunctions *huas* and *hab* function as switch-reference markers. *Huas*, which generally conveys a weak contrast, is used in different-subject contexts, and the semantically-neutral *hab* is used in same-subject contexts. Discusses historical factors that may have given rise to this pattern of behavior.

“An Inchoative Conjunction in Hmong: Extra-Sentential Topic Marker?”
(Clark 1988)

Argues that the White Hmong conjunction *los* has an inchoative meaning, and that inchoative meanings generally allow conjunctions to function as topicalizers. This analysis is not fleshed out in detail. Clark also touches on other clause linkers: *mas*, *ho*, *ces*, and *thiab*. (See also Clark 1992b, Clark 1992b.)

9 Topic Prominence and Topicalization

“Topicalized NPs with Expansion Pronouns in Hmong”
(Ratliff 1992)

See [full entry](#) above.

“Serialization in Mainland Southeast Asia”
(Clark 1992c)

See [full entry](#) above.

“An Inchoative Conjunction in Hmong: Extra-Sentential Topic Marker?”
(Clark 1988)

See [full entry](#) above.

10 Relative Clauses

“The Relative Marker *Uas* in Hmong”
(Riddle 1993)

A short paper presenting data on the relative clause marker *uas*, which is argued to have a discourse function of specifying or restricting the reference of the relative clause. Does not discuss the related use of *uas* as a complementizer. (Data from White Hmong.)

“Relativization, Parataxis and Underspecification in White Hmong”
(Riddle 1992)

A short paper presenting similar observations to those discussed in [Riddle 1993](#). (Data from White Hmong.)

11 Questions

“Asking Questions in Hmong and Other Southeast Asian Languages”
(Clark 1985)

Discusses the ‘V-not-V’ strategy used to form yes-no questions in many Southeast Asian languages. For example, in Hmong, *koj mus (los) tsis mus* (lit. “You go (or) not go?”) can mean “Are you going?” Ten languages are studied, and among these, Hmong shows two uncommon features: it makes heavier use of ‘V-not-V’ questions than the other languages, and in yes-no questions, the question word *puas* precedes the verb.

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