

A STUDY OF VOCABULARY USED IN THREE HMONG GENERATIONS AT BANKHUNHUAIMAEPAO VILLAGE, PHAYAMENGRAI DISTRICT, CHIANGRAI PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

This ethno-sociolinguistic study examined the vocabulary use of the three generations Hmong in Bankhunhuai-maepao village, in Phayamengrai District, Chiangrai Province. The instrument used was a wordlist questionnaire which consisted of 415 words used in daily life which was classified into 18 main groups: signs, dealing with time, common descriptions, colors, common feeling, traveling, various locations, health problems medical specialists, vegetables, fruits, cereals and grains, clothes, house, people and jobs. Data were then collected from 30 informants from three different age groups which are the elderly, the adults and the adolescent generations.

The results revealed that there were three main patterns of language use which are: the use of Hmong words, the use of standard Thai words and a mixture of Hmong and standard Thai words. It was also found that the elderly or the first generation uses Hmong words the most whereas the third generation or the adolescents used Hmong words the least. The adolescent generation

use Standard Thai words more than the other two generations. Interestingly, the adult generation or the second generation tends to use words of a mixture of two languages, standard Thai and Hmong more than the other two generations. The study also indicated that the third generation's use of vocabulary demonstrated that there is a highly likely decreased use of Hmong words in their daily life and standard Thai had taken the space of the Hmong vocabulary and is on the rise among the Hmong adolescent generation.

The results also revealed that the closer the vocabulary is to the Hmong people's living style the Hmong vocabulary will remain, the further the vocabulary is to the Hmong's living styles the vocabulary will change. In other words, vocabulary starts changing from the outer core and gradually seeps into the inner core.

KEYWORDS:

Hmong Language, Generation, Vocabulary, Wordlist.

INTRODUCTION

The Hmong is a minority ethnic group who lives in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and some are reported to be living in the Western countries. They are the second most populous hill tribe group in Thailand after spreading over a wide area of the northern area and even central Thailand, but are most densely concentrated in Chiangrai and Chiang Mai.

Bankhunhuaimaepao village is a Hmong village in Chiangrai province. The village is settled in Phayamengrai district, Chiangrai province for over forty years. To be specific, they are the Green Hmong or Hmong Njua. Their village is located in a remote area surrounded by several mountain ranges. It is approximately 50 kilometers from Chiangrai city. This village has 325 households with the population of 2,114. (Source: Bankhunhuaimaepao village health clinic center, March, 2012) The major Hmong clans in Bankhunhuaimaepao village consisted of 6 clans which are Xiong, Hang, Yang, Ma, Vang and Thao. They are farmers and gardeners. Most of them have their own land and survive on the natural resources in the area. The main language for communication in the village is Hmong language.

Today the Hmong people in Bankhunhuaimaepao village have better educational opportunities than in the past. The effects and changes in Hmong communities came from

several factors; the most influential factor being education. The Hmong people who live in Bankhunhuaimaepao village prefer to speak Thai more than their ethnic Hmong language. They speak Thai in their daily life and have adopted Thai culture. They have also borrowed Thai words to use in the language. When those who work outside the village returns home, they speak Thai and Hmong to their parents and the elderly, but their parents do not understand what they say. Although they could not speak Thai clearly and fluently, they still use Thai in their daily lives due to the national language status. Various studies have shown that in many Hmong families, children experienced language shift and culture loss (Lee, 1999; 2002; Thao, 1995; Vang, 1998).

As language is a collection of experience of people's interaction with the environment around them, be it physical or cultural environment. If an ethnic group loses its language, people do not just lose the language but the wisdom, knowledge, and worldview also goes with the language. A language does not die or shift in a sudden manner but it gradually loses its vocabulary. When a language ceases to be spoken it generally starts from the younger generation who turns their backs on their ancestor's language and culture (Oupra, 2009). If they do not learn their native language, they will not be able to teach their children to speak Hmong. The future generations

Hmong people will lose their ability to communicate in their first language.

The researchers were interested in the variation of vocabulary used over different age groups because it does not only reveal a variety of the vocabulary used by people of different age groups, but also reveals a change in progress. The new generations are likely to speak their ethnic language less often, and will have it replaced by other languages which will result in language shift. The ethnic language will soon disappear and become an extinct language. For all these reasons, the researchers then incorporated age as an important variable in the study of Hmong vocabulary. The specific attention is on vocabulary variation and usage among various Hmong generations. Thus, it is of a great interest to the researchers to study the vocabulary use in the three Hmong generations at Bankhunhuaimaepao Hmong village in Chiangrai province.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aims to analyze the vocabulary use in Hmong adolescents, adults and the elderly who live in Bankhunhuaimaepao village, Phayamengrai district, Chiangrai province. This research aims to answer: What is the pattern of vocabulary use in the three Hmong generations?

METHODOLOGY

The study drew on qualitative research method, an Ethnography of Communication, a sociolinguistic approach which focuses on Hmong vocabulary in Bankhunhuaimaepao village, among different age groups. The researchers used a wordlist of 415 words which was divided into 18 groups which are: signs, dealing with time, common descriptions, colors, common feeling, traveling, various locations, health problems, medical specialists, vegetables, fruits, cereals and grains, clothes, house, people and jobs. The wordlist was designed to incorporate words that are used most often in daily life with the data being mainly considered and carefully selected from a published Hmong vocabulary and phrase book titled "*An English - Hmong Phrasebook with useful wordlist*", adapted and translated by Cheu Thao which was published in the year 1981. When the wordlist have been selected by the researchers it was given to two experts in Hmong language, who were Mr. Nitchai Pateepkeeree and Mr. Law Manom, to confirm and select the words including the words in the wordlist.

Data were collected from 30 informants. The informants were purposively sampled from three generations: first generation (the elderly over 55 years old), second generation (the adults from 35-50 years old) and third generation (the adolescents from 15-30 years old). The researcher fixed the range of five

years so as to prevent a narrow gap of age among the informants with the same level of expertise. Prior research in this category also used the range of five years (Liamprawat, 2011). Ten key-informants were selected from each group thus make 30 informants. The researchers observed and listened to how the people communicate using the Hmong language with the assistance of two Hmong translators. Moreover, the researcher spent 3 hours for one informant.

The criteria used in the selection of informants are: born and raised up the local area; use of Hmong Vocabulary in daily life; has clear articulation and have good eyesight and hearing.

During the observation, the researcher kept an observational field-note of language use in various settings. The researchers and team used the wordlist questionnaire which consisted of 415 words to ask the informants for their vocabulary use. The result of the wordlist questionnaire (and in many cases are interviews) were analyzed on the similarities and differences in the vocabulary used. The wordlist were analyzed for the percentage and mean of the use of Hmong, standard Thai and the mixture of standard Thai and Hmong vocabulary used.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The research result will be discussed in accordance to the research questions which will discuss in terms of the pattern of language use of each generation in the village followed by the findings on the wordlist.

The overall language use pattern of each generation is as follows:

The language use in Bankhun-huaimaepao Hmong village reveals that there are two main languages used in this village which are: Hmong and Standard Thai. The interesting point to be noted is that there is the use of a mixture of vocabulary use between the two languages: Hmong and Standard Thai which were reclassified the existing varieties as: Hmong, Standard Thai, and Hmong mixes with standard Thai. Table 1 below illustrates the percentage vocabulary use of the informants.

The result illustrated that the first generation used Hmong vocabulary 57.88% followed by a mixture of Hmong and Standard Thai vocabulary 28.99% and with Standard Thai being only 8.96%. The reason for the mixture of the two languages being high in the first generation may have been due to the need to communicate with the second and third generations from whom they get the Standard Thai vocabulary. Interestingly in the first generation or the elderly did not know 4.17% of the vocabulary. The

vocabulary they had no knowledge of were reported to be coined recently or were not appropriate to their environ-

mental or cultural context such as fire alarm, fire exit and wet paint.

Table 1. Percentage of the Usage of Hmong Vocabulary in G1 – G3.

Generations	Wordlist			
	Hmong	Standard Thai	Hmong& Standard Thai	Unknown words
1	57.88	8.96	28.99	4.17
2	9.20	16.10	74.70	-
3	6.34	28.55	65.11	-

G1= Generation 1; G2= Generation 2 ; G3= Generation 3

Source: Original Research

The second generation used a mixture of Hmong and Standard Thai vocabulary the highest with 74.70% followed by Standard Thai vocabulary with 16.10% leaving Hmong vocabulary ranked the third with 9.20%. The results of the third generation were as anticipated by the researchers.

The third generation used a mixture of Hmong and Standard Thai vocabulary at 65.11%, Standard Thai vocabulary at 28.55 % while Hmong vocabulary was least used at 6.34%. Interestingly, it is worth mentioning here that the second generation used Standard Thai vocabulary mixed with Hmong vocabulary at 74.70% which is reported to be higher than that is used in the third generation at 65.11%.

1. Hmong people who live in Bankhuhuaimeaepao village, Phayamengrai district, Chiangrai province, among different age groups used different vocabulary because age, culture, education, behavior and activities are important factors and influential in Hmong language. The details are as follows:

1.1. The elders used Hmong language the most, used Standard Thai language the least and some elders do not know some of the words. This is due to the elders mostly stayed at home, speak only Hmong and cannot speak Thai. Some of them did not go out to the city or other places so they do not need to know the words and it is not important for them. When they go to the public places, they go with their children who helped them with

communication. This result supports the idea that age, culture and education are influential factors for the first generation.

1.2. The adults used a mixture of Hmong language and Standard Thai language the most and used only Hmong language and Standard Thai language respectively. It may have been because the adults studied Thai in Thai schools, speak Thai when they go to the local and public places such as hospital, city councils and school or go to work. When they live with their family they speak Hmong with the elderly and speak Thai with their children, so they speak a mixture of Hmong and Thai with people who live in the village. This may have an influence on the selection of vocabulary used. This result supports the idea that age, education, culture and relationship are influential factors which affect the usage of Hmong vocabulary for the second generation.

1.3. The adolescents of the third generation used Standard Thai language the most, used Hmong language the least, and also used Hmong language mixed with Standard Thai language. Because the adolescents all had their schooling in Standard Thai, communicate in

Standard Thai with people who live in other villages and also at work in other cities. They can read, write and speak Standard Thai well. When they go to the local public places such as hospital, city councils and school they used Standard Thai because it is an official language. This result supports the idea that age and education are influential factors that affect the usage of Hmong vocabulary for the third generation.

Findings on the wordlist pattern reveal that:

1. The words in the wordlist were classified into 18 different categories. Table 2. below, illustrates the percentage of the vocabulary usage in accordance to the languages.

Table 2. illustrates that the words in the wordlist were used by all three generations especially Hmong was used in all generations. The result also shows that all three generations used a mixture of Hmong and Standard Thai with the range from 32.33% to 65.71%, and all three generations used Standard Thai with the range from 1.82 to 48.33%. On the other hand, all three generations have a low usage of Hmong language vocabulary which is used at 11.67 to 34.25%.

Table 2. Percentage of the usage of Hmong vocabulary divided into 18 Groups in G1 – G3.

Wordlist used for Hmong speakers (Generations 1 – 3)					
	Wordlist divided into 18 groups	Hmong	Std. Thai	Hmong & Std. Thai	Unknown words
1	The Family	34.25	1.82	63.93	-
2	Recognizing Signs	18.08	24.62	55.26	2.04
3	Dealing with time	23.25	22.83	53.33	0.59
4	Common Descriptions	30.97	3.33	65.70	-
5	Colors	26.67	13.66	59.67	-
6	Common Feeling	29.27	9.07	61.53	0.13
7	Traveling	13.89	38.61	41.94	5.56
8	Various Locations	14.91	45.44	35.26	4.39
9	Health Problems	21.67	25.71	47.38	5.24
10	Medical Specialists	11.67	48.33	32.33	7.67
11	Parts of the body	33.33	3.57	63.10	-
12	Food/Meats	32.86	1.43	65.71	-
13	Vegetables	27.50	10.17	62.33	-
14	Fruits	21.67	31.66	46.67	-
15	Cereals and Grains	30.00	20.00	50.00	-
16	Clothes	21.67	19.72	57.50	1.11
17	House	23.74	11.95	63.82	0.49
18	People and Jobs	16.49	35.26	44.74	3.51

Source: Original Research

This result supports the idea that age and education are influential factors that affect the usage of Hmong vocabulary. This could be because the second and third generations all had their schooling in Standard Thai, communicate in Standard Thai with people who live in other villages and also at work in other cities. They can read, write and speak Standard Thai well. When they go to the local public places such as hospital, city councils and school

they use Standard Thai, as it is an official language. For the first generation, they only stay at home and communicate with people who live in the village. They did not learn Standard Thai and some of them cannot speak, read and write and do not understand Standard Thai, when they go to the local public places such as hospital, city councils and school, they go with their children and their children helped them to translate into Standard Thai.

The second finding about the wordlist revealed that when observed closely, it was found that the family category and parts of body category, both have the vocabulary which use Hmong vocabulary the most. This may have been because they used these Hmong vocabulary in their daily life. Moreover, the wordlist in family category and parts of body category are close to their life and culture, thus, are easily realized. On the other hand, if the words are far from their life and cultural importance, they will not recognize the Hmong words and instead would have opted for a standard Thai word. Especially including various diseases, if the diseases are basic then they know the Hmong words, if the diseases have scientific names or the concepts are further and away from their lives and culture, they will not know the Hmong words. This could probably be because of the different medical system from their cultural medicine system.

From Figure 1, number 17 and 18 are the two categories mentioned above, the family and parts of body, in which the Hmong words are still in use and intact whereas the remain 16 categories

which encircled the two categories are beginning to lose the power and their attachment to the culture and to their daily lives as there is an evident use of the mixture of two languages in the vocabulary use of the other 16 categories. The Hmong vocabulary used in the outer circle starts showing signs of vocabulary shifts towards standard Thai among the third generation.

Discussion

Based on the findings, the Hmong in Ban Khunhuaimaepao village uses two languages which are: Hmong and Standard Thai. They use their vocabulary in two languages interchangeably or mix the two languages. The reason can be as follows:

1. The Hmong adolescents and adults can speak Standard Thai well when they communicate with Standard Thai people or when they go to school, hospital, city hall, market and public places. The Standard Thai is the language of the media and education also standard Thai is the official language of the country. Using standard Thai also brings positive attitude from outside community.

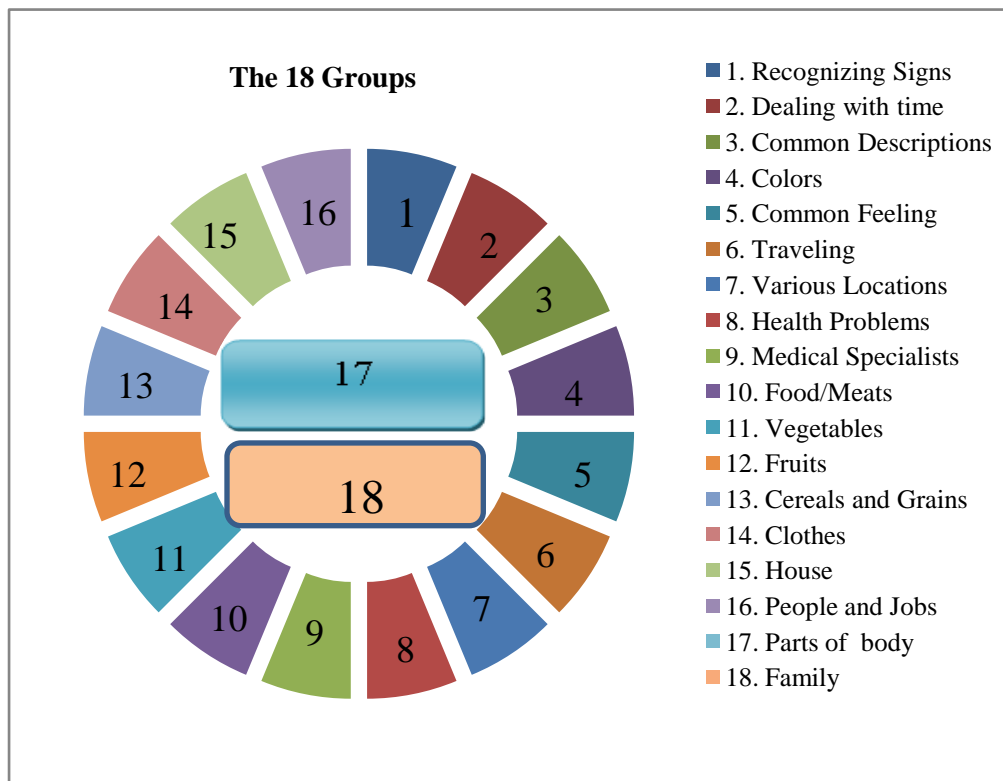


Figure 1. The words in the wordlist are divided into 18 groups.

2. All Hmong generations transliterate a number of Thai words into Hmong words. This may be due to not having the Hmong word for the Thai word, its concept may not exist in Hmong, as a result, the transliteration or the Thai word is used. For example, 48.33% used Standard Thai transliteration in Medical Specialists groups such as psychologist is *Kws paub txog siab neeg* in Hmong which transliterates as *professional – skill – helping word mind people* and pediatrician is *Neeg kho menyuam yaus* in Hmong which transliterates as *people – doctor – child – young*.

3. One of the reasons why Standard Thai words are used with the Hmong words may be due to social factors such as age, culture, education, behavior and activities which influence the mixture of the two languages in the use of vocabulary. For example, 65.71% used Standard Thai mixed with the Hmong language in Food/Meats (Nqauj) category such as shrimp is *Kung* in Thai and *Cws* in Hmong and fish is *Pla* in Thai and *Ntses* in Hmong.

4. The elders used Hmong language the most whereas the adolescents used Hmong language

the least. Because the elders did not learn Standard Thai and some of them also cannot speak, read and write and do not understand Standard Thai. So when they go to the local public places such as hospital, city councils and school, they go with their children and their children helped translate into Standard Thai.

5. The adults used Hmong language together with Standard Thai the most when compared to the third generation. This could be explained that the adults are the only generation in the middle that bridges the other two generations: the elderly and the young generation. When they bridge the two generations, they use the language that is heavily used by each generation so that they can communicate with the two generations. They use Hmong with the elderly while they use standard Thai with the young generation as this generation goes to school and had Thai schooling.

6. The results of this study reflect that the adolescents used Standard Thai instead of Hmong language. Moreover, they also try to mix Hmong with Standard Thai in order not to be seen as different. If the situation continues like this, the influence of Standard Thai will hinder Hmong language. If the people in this community do not preserve and develop their Hmong, the researchers anticipate that Hmong language will encounter a crisis within a few generations.

7. Vocabulary change is on the horizon. Today, the adults and

adolescents Hmong in Bankhunhuai-maepao village preferred to speak Thai over Hmong. Some of them want to speak a mixture of Hmong, Standard Thai and local northern Thai when they communicate with people from other villages that do not speak Hmong such as at the public market, hospital, school, city hall. When they spoke Hmong at public places, nobody understands what they said. They felt uncomfortable and were not confident at their language usage. Thus, when using Hmong outside of their village domain they do not feel comfortable as it sends out a symbol of ethnic identity.

8. The results of this study also show that the Hmong language is changing. Hmong is being used less and less in each generation. The first generation used Hmong 57.88%, the second generation used Hmong 9.20% whereas the third generation used Hmong 6.34%. There is a clear decline in Hmong vocabulary use in the later generations. The language decline in the later generations is also seen in other related research. Sirirat Moontuy's (2010) research on the "*Analysis of Linguistic Change in Yong Word Usage of Three Generations in Buak Khang Sub-District, San Kamphaeng District, Chiang Mai Province*" showed that the word usage of generation 1 (65-80 years old) had maintained the highest level of traditional word usage followed by that of generation 2 (40-55 years old). Generation 3 (15-30 years old) used the least traditional words. In addition,

Suwattana Liamprawat work in 2011 in “*The Lexical Variations between Three Generations of Tai Dam in Ratchaburi Province, Thailand*” revealed that the first generation used Tai Dam the most whereas the third generation used Thai more than the other generation groups.

The research shows clearly that Hmong language is changing. Thus, Hmong families should use Hmong language in the homes, by parents to children, as the home is surrounded by a community that speaks the language. This is where most of language learning, identity formation, and establishment of social bonds take place for children, early in life, through interactions with parents and grandparents and they should create favorable language activities for their children, such as telling Hmong story, writing Hmong language, singing Hmong song, folktale wisdom, so their children will maintain Hmong language well.

9. Language loss phenomenon. In Bankhunhuaimaepao village, we focus on only vocabulary loss where in real not only vocabulary is lost – the language itself will be at risk. The risk starts to be seen in the second and third generation where the second generation does not necessarily pass on their mother tongue to their children. Thus, the third generation grew up with some remains of the grandparents’ language, but, generally, they cannot converse in the

mother tongue and quite possibly do not understand it.

RECOMMENDATION FOR APPLICATION

The recommendations from this research to be applied at the village could be as follows:

1. To teach Hmong to the young generation in conjunction with the Standard Thai learned at school. It can be taught using bilingual teaching methods. As today, adolescent Hmong who were informants in this study were exposed to various problems, such as they used Standard Thai and mixed Hmong and Standard Thai more than using Hmong language. They spoke Hmong at the public places and not feeling comfortable then they switched to use Standard Thai. However, this depends on the consensus of the village.

2. School should play a major role in preserving Hmong language, such as Hmong clubs, Hmong Songs, Study Hmong language, Hmong stories and folktale wisdom by Hmong village philosophers.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER STUDY

The study excluded analyzes in terms of language variation of vocabulary used by people of the three Hmong generations in Bankhunhuaimaepao village, Chiang Rai Province. Thus, some of

recommendations for further research are as follows:

1. Further studies should emphasize specific topic and should explore more about phonological change, morphological change and phonetic features.

2. Further studies should be more about Hmong culture, Hmong language change and Hmong lexical variation.

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