Phonetics of the Hmong White Language

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Overview

- To describe the Hmong White Language in the Eau Claire area.
- To develop methods for Hmong White pronunciation and writing.
- Significance: To keep the Hmong Language alive by teaching the younger generation the language of Hmong White.
- Long term goal: To develop a Hmong White Language curriculum to teach the younger generation.

Method

- Interviewing the Hmong White speakers of the Eau Claire area using a list of words from a Hmong White dictionary; the words include a mixture of consonants, vowels, and endings.
- Asking questions about the participants' ability and perceptions of Hmong White.
- Using PRAAT to record and analyze pronunciations of each participant.
- Using ProsodyPro.praat to analyze the tones of one speaker.
- Note: Participants were divided into two groups. Ages 16 to 25 were considered youth while ages 26 and up were considered elders.

Survey Question Results

The younger participants were asked to comment on how confident they were when speaking in Hmong to an elder. Based on all participants, their comments about their confidence were confirmed by their knowledge of Hmong White vocabulary. For example, Participant 6 felt shy and embarrassed when it came to speaking in Hmong. Out of 109 words, P6 knew 36 words.

The elder participants mainly spoke Hmong to their family members when they were younger compared to today where they are now speaking both Hmong and English. One participant said that sometimes she would speak "Hmonglish", a combination of Hmong and English words. The same participant also commented that when the younger Hmong generation speaks, their words are not as clear anymore. The example she gave is the word meaning "also." When a child says, "I want to go too," the word for "too" is pronounced in two different ways; *"thiab"* and *"hiab"*.

On another note, the elders were asked to comment about pairs of words that have the same meaning. In the English language we would call those words synonyms. Even though this question seems to ask about synonyms, there is an interesting aspect to the "synonyms" of the Hmong White Language. Some words that the Hmong people use are borrowed from other languages. For example, the word for car in Hmong is *tseb,* but the other word they use comes from the Laotian word for car, *lu fais.* Both words are used by speakers of Hmong White. Another example comes from P5, however, this word is not borrowed from another language but another dialect of Hmong, Hmong Green. P5 commented that for the word "dog", there is a Hmong Green word for it, and for Hmong White, there is a word for dog also. He does not know which one is which since nowadays, both Hmong Green and Hmong White speakers are using both words when talking about a dog.

Consonant Chart

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Alveolar	Alveopalatal	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Uvular	Velar	Glottal
Stops										
Aspirated Voiceless	pʰ		tʰ			ʈʰ	cʰ	qʰ	kʰ	
Unaspirated Voiceless	p		t			ʈ	c	q	k	
Nasal										
Voiced	m		n				ɲ		ŋ	
Voiceless	m̥		n̥				ɲ̥			
Fricative										
Voiced		v			ʒ					
Voiceless		f	s		ʃ		ç			h
Lateral										
Voiced			l							
Voiceless			l̥							
Approximant										
Voiced							j			
Affricate										
Aspirated Voiced			tsʰ	tʃʰ						
Unaspirated Voiceless			ts	tʃ						

- This chart represents the consonants of the Hmong White Language. There are also some possible consonant clusters, for example, nq, ɳtʰ, and ŋk just to name a few, that are not on the chart.

Vowel Chart

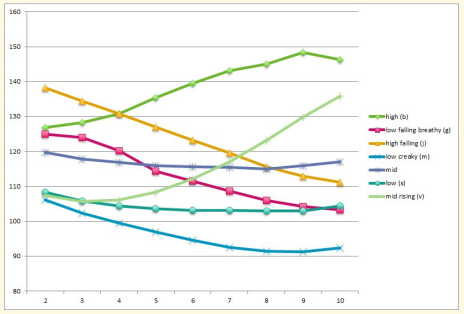
	Front Non-Nasal	Front Nasal	Cental	Back Non-Nasal	Back Nasal
High	i		ɨ	u	
Mid	e	ẽ		ɔ	ɔ̃
Low			a		

- This chart represents the vowels of the Hmong White language.

Falling	Raising
ai	ia
aɨ	
au	ua

- This chart also represents the vowels. However, this chart are the diphthongs of the Hmong White language.

Tones Chart



- This chart is the tones of one speaker of the White Hmong language.

Voiced & Voiceless Sonorants

Hmong White has four pairs of sonorants that can be voiced or voiceless. They are */m/* and */m̥/ [hm], /n/* and */n̥/ [hn], /ɲ/* and */ɲ̥/ [hny],* and */l/* and */l̥/ [hl]*. Some speakers replace some voiceless sonorants with voiced ones, for example instead of pronouncing the word *hma* as [m̥a] some speakers are pronouncing it as [ma]. An interesting discovery though the research shows that there is a variation of the voiced and voiceless sonorants among the speakers. P1 produced voiceless sonorants consistently while P4 replaced all the voiceless sonorants with a voiced sonorant. With this evidence, why is this happening?

Some participants mention about spending time with a Hmong Green speaker and Hmong Green speakers does not have voiceless sonorants. Is Hmong Green influencing the Hmong White speakers? Or is it English that is influencing the Hmong White language?

Synonyms

Synonyms are in most languages however in the Hmong White language, these "synonyms" tell more than that. As stated before, the Hmong White speakers had borrowed many words of other languages like the word for car. In Laotian, it is *lu fais,* however in Hmong, it is *tseb*. To what extent does the Hmong vocabulary help us investigate the history of the Hmong people?

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