CHAPTER 1

Introduction to White Hmong Language

1.1 About the Language Family and the Locations of its Speakers

The language investigated in this study is White Hmong [mww].\(^1\) The autonym used by the speakers consulted—[mɔ̃ŋ˦ dɐ̆˦]—is transcribed as *Hmoob Dawb* in the orthography used here, known as the Roman Popular Alphabet (RPA). Speakers of White Hmong and other closely related dialects live in the mountainous regions of south-west China (Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan provinces and Guangxi Autonomous Region) and also in the northern parts of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. As the result of displacement from Laos since the mid-1970s in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Laotian Civil War’ (also often referred to as the ‘Secret War’), many speakers also now live in diasporic communities outside China and Southeast Asia. By far the greatest number are in the United States, with smaller communities in Canada, France, Germany, Australia, French Guiana, and Argentina. The data used for this study are from speakers or writers who live in Laos or whose origins are in Laos. The principal language consultants live in Luang Prabang province, or were born in Xieng Khouang province and now live in Australia.

In China and Southeast Asia, some groups of speakers of the White Hmong language/dialect use a different autonym (such as the ‘Striped (Armband) Hmong’ in Laos and Thailand).\(^2\) Quite a number of other groups speak a language/dialect sufficiently similar to White Hmong to be mutually intelligible to at least some extent (including the Hmong Sua (*suav* ‘Chinese, other’) [hmz] in Southwest China (Tapp, 2002) and the Hmong Dô [hmv] in Vietnam (Lewis et al., 2013)).\(^3\)

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1 A three-letter code given in square brackets after a language name is an ISO-639 code. These codes are created by the Ethnologue (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2013) in cooperation with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to uniquely identify languages.
2 Autonyms are [mɔ̃ŋ˦ qɷ̆ qmb˦], written *Hmoob Quas Npab* in RPA orthography, or [mŋ˦ tɁtɁ (mb˦)], *Hmoob Txaij (Npab)*, both of which mean ‘striped (arm) Hmong’.
3 The situation regarding which groups speak which language/dialect is quite difficult to clarify, particularly in China, Vietnam, and Myanmar. Often, groups speaking the same dialects use different autonyms, related to non-linguistic differences such as costume. This is the case with the Striped (Armband) Hmong, who speak White Hmong, but whose self-designation refers to the distinct blue and black stripes on the arms of the women’s clothing. Alternatively, those speaking different dialects may use the same autonym. There is a group in Myanmar,
Outside Asia, the best known of these mutually intelligible dialects is Mong Njua [hnj], translated as either ‘Green Mong’ or ‘Blue Mong’, and also often referred to as Mong Leng. While there are some lexical and grammatical differences, the major differences between White Hmong and Mong Njua are phonological, relating to certain vowel and tonal distinctions as well as to some consonants, including the loss of the distinction between voiced and voiceless initial nasals in Mong Njua. The name of the language/dialect group is thus variously written in English as ‘Hmong/Mong’, ‘(H)mong’, or ‘HMong’, in an attempt to acknowledge the differing pronunciations of the initial bilabial nasal by these two dialect groups. In this work, when the term ‘Hmong’ is used without a modifier, the reference is to the whole language/dialect group; ‘White Hmong’ is used to refer to the specific dialect investigated here, and ‘Mong Njua’ is used in preference to either ‘Green Mong’, ‘Blue Mong’, or ‘Mong Leng’.

Groups that speak dialects mutually intelligible with White Hmong differ further with regard to marriage and funeral customs, household architecture, clothing and headdress. As with many other dialects and languages of the Southeast Asian region, the autonyms of Hmong sub-groups often clearly make reference to some prominent aspect of traditional costume. The name White Hmong may refer to the white or undyed skirt worn by women (in most regions now only on ceremonial occasions). However, Tapp (2002) suggests that there may be other possible origins for this autonym.

Hmong belongs to the language family called ‘Hmong-Mien’ by most Western linguists, but widely referred to as the ‘Miao-Yao’ language family by...