



Hmong Language & Culture

As seen in the translation industry

Introduction

Our fourth edition of the Language & Culture series is about a language which is quite intriguing and has a fascinating and rich history, which hasn't always been hearts and flowers. We are showing you the language of the Hmong ethnic group. Speakers of the Hmong language are scattered around the world in China, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and a significant part of them in the USA.

It is quite an interesting and unusual language and the people that speak it are just as intriguing and colorful. In this ebook, we are going to lift the curtain of their language, traditions and culture and we hope you will enjoy it.

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(Global Marketing Manager)



Colors of Hmong

The two main dialects are Hmong Njua (Green Hmong) and Hmong Daw (White Hmong). They are mainly spoken by Hmong Americans. While the speakers of both dialects can understand each other, there are still differences between them. That is one of the reasons for our recommendation about being extra careful with Hmong translation. It's also referred to as Mong, Hmoob and Miao.

There is a folktale about Hmong saying that once upon a time there used to be a written form of the language but cows and rats ate the book and from there on the Hmong language was only passed by word of mouth. Nowadays it is using Latin alphabet but you will be in for a surprise, when you try to put written and spoken form together.

The Colors of Hmong – a centuries-old language

If you are a curious person, always searching for new, interesting facts and you happen to have a passion for languages and translation – then this article is for you! We've all heard that languages have various nuances and we are somehow used to this phrase. Today we'll take you on a tour with a language that has true colors and it is an interesting fact that its dialects are named after different colors. We are showing you the colors of Hmong.

Hmong is a dialect continuum of the Hmongic languages, spoken by almost 3 million people in Sichuan, Guangxi, Hainan, northern Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and the USA. When a language is referred to as a dialect continuum, it means that it has different dialects across different territories that might strongly differ in sound and vocabulary.

The history of Hmong people and their language

The Hmong language is a language that dates back to almost two centuries ago. It is complicated to trace back the exact time when the dialect originated as the Hmong people have made significant alterations to the language during the centuries.

Author Natalie Jill Smith wrote in her study[1] that the Qing Dynasty had caused a previous Hmong writing system to disappear by introducing a law that forbade the use of it in the late 1600s. There is an old Hmong folktale saying that after the law had been introduced, a lot of important information had been written down in Hmong in a treasured book. The book unfortunately got eaten by rats and cows and thus the Hmong language became an oral dialect from that point onwards.





In the 1950s, however, a Christian missionary created a new written Hmong language using the Romanized Alphabet.

The colors of Hmong

Hmong has a lot of dialects but the ones that are used by most Hmong are the Hmong Daw (White Hmong) and Mong Njua (Green Hmong). Their names are inspired by the colors of the traditional women's attire in these groups.

The difference between these dialects is not only in the colors they use to name them. Some say that the different vocabulary those languages have resembles the comparison between British and American English.

Hmong grammar and interesting facts

As we have already mentioned above since the 1950s Hmong people use the Romanized Alphabet. However, a common mistake when trying to read Hmong is trying to pronounce it according to English transcription. The letters really are the same but remember that Hmong is a separate language with its own rules:

– “Hello” would be Nyob zoo, which is pronounced as nyaw zhong.

Another detail about Hmong that usually surprises people is the fact that the language may sometimes use up to five verbs to describe a single action!

– Yam zoo tshaj plaws, nej yuav tsum mus nrhiav nug xyuas saib luag muaj kev pab hom dab tsi nyob ncig ib cheeb tsam ntawm nej – ‘The best thing you can do is to go seek, ask, examine, look (explore) your neighborhood and find out what services are available.’

Verbs in Hmong don't provide any information about the time an action takes place. Instead, Hmong uses adverbs to give details about when an event has happened:

– Nag hmo kuv mus tom khw. – “Yesterday I go local market”

How can this information benefit you?

At first glance, Hmong seems to be just a small exotic dialect. In reality, there are numerous people that speak Hmong as their second language all around the world. There are large Hmong societies in Vietnam, Laos, Minnesota, California, and Wisconsin.

You never know when you are going to find yourself at one of their Festivals or talking to a representative of the Hmong people!



Paj ntaub

Intricate embroidery is often found in traditional clothing like skirts, headdresses and many other parts of the clothing of Hmong people. They are very ornate, colorful and in geometric motifs, which vary from region and tribe. The paj ntaub or also known as “flowery cloth” is a unique example, which we have chosen to show you today.

It usually includes different techniques for stitching like applique, reverse applique, batik, cross stitch and others. It is also regarded as a way of salvaging the lost written form of the language by intertwining it into beautiful motifs. Today, we can only savor the designs, their words lost a long time ago. However, the richness they have still speaks a thousand words to those willing to take a look...



How patterns come to life?

Following the story of the Hmong traditional clothing and the beauty of it we are showing you how it all begins. The creation of a new design is a complicated process requiring imagination, patience and wisdom to put together the colors, the stitches and the patterns together.

Discovering Hmong: A language from a culturally and historically rich ethnic minority.

If you've been to the north of Thailand, Vietnam or the south of Laos, Myanmar, and China, you've probably seen someone from the Hmong ethnic group or heard them speaking the Hmong language. Hmong has a long history and a fascinating culture associated with it. In this article, we'll share some interesting facts about this ethnic group and their complex language.

What is Hmong and where is this language spoken today?

Hmong (pronounced mung) are a different racial group from originally from the Southwest of China, and their history spans over 2,000 years. They're an ethnic group that have never had a country of their own. Due to a long history of political and war treason, many Hmong people have migrated to Laos, Thailand, the USA, France, Australia, and some other parts of

the world. Not only are they racially distinct, their languages are also linguistically complex too!

The Hmong language

The language was developed among the Hmong people who are closely related to Miao in Southern China, as far back as two thousand years ago. It was derived from a western branch of the Hmong-yao language cluster.

Tonal and phonology

Hmong is a tonal language, in a similar way to Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese and Laothian. There are eight tones (though some say there are seven). There is a high tone, low tone, and even a low falling tone. Regardless of the tone of a word,





the final printed word will have an indication of which tone should be used when that word is to be spoken. Moreover, their phonology is quite complex. Although Hmong is written in Roman characters, the spelling and the pronunciation are not what you'd expect.

The 'color' dialects

In the same nature as British English and American English, the Hmong language has two main dialects: White (Hmong Daw) and Green (Mong Njua), which is widely known in Laos and the United States – especially in Minnesota where most US-based Hmong currently reside. Traditionally, these colors refer to how each group's colors and patterns are. For example, the White Hmong women would often wear a white skirt. In America, White Hmong is also known as Blue Hmong. In modern times, many Hmong don't limit their clothing to their dialects as was done historically.

It's interesting to note that there are also other 'colors' of Hmong, such as Red Hmong and Black Hmong. Among the many Hmong dialects in China, it's the Dananshan dialect that forms the basis of the standard language.

All in all, the Hmong language is one of the richest and fullest languages in the world, embracing over two thousand years of culture and values. Although it's highly complex and fragmented in certain ways, Hmong deserves to be discovered, preserved and continually developed. Nowadays, there are over 2 million Hmong speakers around the world and their numbers are growing. Who knows, they might be your business target one day if they haven't been already!

Hmong language: Infographic

HMONG LANGUAGE *facts*

SPEAKERS
There are **more than 4.6 million**
Hmong speakers around the world.

ALPHABET
The writing direction is from left to right,
using the **Romanized Popular Alphabet**.

NO SUFFIXES
There are **no suffixes** in Hmong.

STRUCTURE
Hmong sentence structure is similar to
English — **Subject-Verb-Object**. The
difference is that adjectives in Hmong
follow nouns, whereas in English they
precede them.

DIALECTS
Among the many Hmong dialects,
the two main ones are **Hmong Njua**
(Green Hmong) and **Hmong Daw**
(White Hmong).

VOWELS & DIPHTHONGS
There are **6 simple vowels**, **3 nasal vowels**, and **5 diphthongs**.

PHONEMES
There are **60 phonemes** in Blue Hmong and
58 phonemes in White Hmong. Many of these
phonemes have no English equivalents, such as
the retroflex /r/, which is made with the tongue
curled back — almost like in Chinese.

TONES
There are **8 tones**
in Hmong.



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EVERY WORD COUNTS



Shoua Moua, holding baby Bill, young Touvi and husband Dang Her in a 1977 photo.

Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Hmong people in the US

There are more than 300,000 descendants of the Hmong people in the USA nowadays and they are mostly emigrants from the late 1970s and their families. The largest of these are located in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

The language barrier for Hmong people in America is a difficult thing to cross, mainly because of the fact that for quite a long time the Hmong ethnic group had no writing system. What we know out of experience is that it is very hard to find the proper translators and interpreters when they are needed and one of our missions is to try and bridge that gap, when it comes to Hmong language.

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