Implications for Reforming the Mong/Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) System

Paoze Thao, Ph.D.
Professor of Linguistics and Education
California State University Monterey Bay

Agenda

Welcome and Introduction

- Welcome and Introduction (Part I)

I. Historical Development of the Mong/Hmong Orthography in Context

II. Past RPA Reform ~ Phonemic-Based & Implications

III. English Phonology to understand Basic Elements of the Mong/Hmong Language

IV. Recommendations for Topics to Develop for Implementation

No change to the RPA System in place now

Part II in October

V. Research on the Importance of Teaching & Learning Mong/Hmong
VI. Issue of Monosyllabic, Disyllabic, and Polysyllabic Words
VII. Word Coinage (How new words can enter the language)
VIII. Curriculum Development ~ Scope, Sequence & Courses of Studies for College, HS, & Elementary Schools
IX. Lesson Planning & Design ~ Suggest Model in 3 Columns: Bidialectal & English ~ Mong, Hmong, and English ~ See Samples for WLC 197, WLC 295 & WLC 397 Advanced Level
X. Pedagogies on How to Teach Mong/Hmong Students
XI. Suggestions for Future Directions in Mong/Hmong Studies
XII. Conclusion

Disclaimer (Cont.)

- I will be using two spellings: "***Mong***" and "***Hmong,***" "Mong Leng," and "Hmong Daw" to reflect our two dialects in our community for inclusive purposes.

Remind about Evaluation Form

- The last page of this handout is the **Evaluation Form**. Please spend a few minutes filling it out at the conclusion of my presentation.

- Notes: Please be advised that transferring the Tables back and forth should not mess up the consonantal phonemes, the vowels, as well as the diacritics. In that is not the case, please refer to Table 7.5 Mong/Hmong consonantal phonemes (Thao, 2023, p. 132 & Thao, 1997, pp. 12-11

Introduction to the Mong/Hmong

- A close-knit minority hilltribe people, having a country of their own, living in China, SEA, & currently in the U.S., Canada, France, French Guiana, Australia, & with a small population in Germany, Cuba, & Argentina
- Total estimated population of 9-10 million worldwide.

Background for the Reform of the RPA System in MN

- Several reforms have been done in 1972, 1978, 1982, and & 2025 since the inception of the Romanized Popular Alphabets

- In 2025, State Senator **Foung Hawj**, Dist. 6 in MN, oversees the Clean Water Land Legacy Amendment of the MN Legislature, which provided funding of $600K to MN Zejzog, Inc., a not-for-profit organization.

Background for the Reform of the RPA System in MN (cont.)

- Purpose: To standardize the Hmong RPA writing language in MN in collaboration with PreK-Higher Education & Community experts to reform the RPA system, and the final report will be published in 2026.

- The author was asked to serve as a Consultant to this RPA system.

I. Historical Development of the Mong/Hmong Orthography (Romanized Popular Alphabet System)

- **In China:**
- No historical evidence suggesting that the Mong/Hmong had a writing system before 1909.

- In 1909, after **30,000 Ahmao** (Flowery Miao) were converted to Christianity, **Rev. Samuel Pollard**, a British missionary of the Bible Christian Mission (United Methodist Church) developed **the Pollard Script** (Pollard, 1919, p. 173; Hudspeth, 1939, p. 173) to translate the Bible in Ahmao, but he passed away. Then, **Rev. William H. Hudspeth** completed the translation of the New Testament in 1917 (Hudspeth, 1939, p. 173) (See Bible Translation in China).

In Laos

- **In 1947**, **Rev. Ted & Ruth Andrianoff**, an American missionary of the C&MA went to spread the Gospel in Xieng Khouang, Laos

- In the 1950s, **5,000 Mong/Hmong and 2,000 Khmu** were converted to Christianity.

- Two (2) American missionary linguists

(1) **Barney** (1957) known as "***Thanh Mong***" acknowledged that, in June 1951, he went to **Xieng Khouang**, Laos, to "set the task of reducing the Mong language to writing" (p. 68).

(2) **Smalley** confirmed his mission with Barney that he "went to **Luang Prabang** to study Khmu (W. A. Smalley, Handout of presentation on the history of the development of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) to the Mhong Language Council, University of Minnesota, August 12, 1982).

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In Laos (cont.)

- **Father Yves Bertrais**, Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) missionary of the Catholic Church, was living with the Hmong Daw in Gaurs Mountain, Luang Prabang, Laos, and developed Hmong Daw dialect into a writing system.

- Both Barney and Bertrais faced challenges in placing the tones for the RPA System. After **Dr. William A. Smalley** completed the analysis of the Khmu writing system, he **assisted them with Mong/Hmong orthography**, particularly with the tone markers. That completed the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system in 1953.

Three Co-Founders of RPA System

- Therefore, Dr. G. Linwood Barney (referred to as "*Thanh Mong*"), Dr. William A. Smalley, and Father Yves Bertrais (*Txivplig Nyiaj Pov*) together are the co-founders of the Mong/Hmong RPA system in Laos in the 1950s.

Submission of the RPA to the Royal Lao Government in 1954

The RPA was submitted to the Royal Lao government for approval, but **the Royal Lao government decreed that no minority language was to be written in any script, but Lao** (Smalley, personal communication, 21 August 1997).

As a result, the RPA system was put on hold in Laos until 1967, when a Missionary from the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) **Doris Whitelock ("*Paj Mim*")** **&** **Gillian Orpin (Maiv Yeeb)** went to Laos to assist the Lao Evangelical Church in using the **Lao script** to translate the Bible into the Lao script

Past Reforms of the RPA Spelling

- **1968** Conference in Long Cheng, Laos, **a**greed to adopt the RPA System

- 1972 Event Father Yves Bertrais was concerned that the RPA system would be barred from the Royal Lao government, so he received funding from the Asia Foundation to publish about 100,000 copies of the **Hmong Daw primers** to distribute to the Mong/Hmong students

Past Reforms (Cont.)

- **1973**

- **Add some graphemes that the Mong Leng did not have to the RPA system.**

Reform in 1978

- **Col. Hang Sao** migrated to the U.S., established the Moob Federation of America, and founded "**Rooj Ntawv Moob**" (Mong Volunteer Literacy, Inc.), elected **Djoua X. Xiong** as Chair, and completed the **Mong Leng primer** on July 30, 1981. On Sept 13, 1980, the big conference of the Moob Federation of America, Inc. met in Joliet, Illinois, and "**Rooj Ntawv Moob**"

The Moob Federation of America & Mong Literacy Volunteer, Inc. Voted to Accept (9-13-1980)

Hmoob Daw	Mong Leng	Change to	Grapheme Voted
[d]	[tl]	→	[dl]
[dh]	[tlh]	→	[dlh]
[nt]	[ntl]	→	[ndl]
[nth]	[ntlh]	→	[ndlh]
[ŋ]	[ŋ]	→	ng

1981

- In 1981, the **Hmong District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance** had its annual conference in Des Moines, Iowa. The conference adopted the additional graphemes of the two Primers to translate the Bible, hymnals, and other Christian literature. The Bible, hymnal books, and other Christian literature were completed and published in both Mong Leng and Hmong Daw in 2000.

Reform in 1982

- On Feb. 5, **1982, General Vang Pao** (Phraya Norapramok), President of the Lao Community, Inc. in Santa Ana, California, **appointed 12 Committee members** (6 Mong Leng and 6 Hmong Daw) to form the Hmong Language Council
- to "set up a committee to research and study Hmong language" (in other words, to reform the RPA spelling system) through the sponsorship of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.

4 American Linguists served as Consultants

1) Dr. William A. Smalley (an original co-founder of the RPA system)
2) Dr. Bruce Downing, University of Minnesota
3) Dr. Charles Johnson (University of Minnesota,
4) Dr. Barbara Robson from the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.

Reform in 1982 (cont.)

General Vang Pao specified that the role of the Committee was to:

1)Study and standardize the Hmong Alphabet and

2)Research on Hmong words and vocabularies (lexicons) (General Vang Pao's letter of appointment, February 5, 1982).

The Committee discussed the two graphemes: "HM" and "M" and "D" and "DL" for 2 hours, but there was no resolution,

Dr. Smalley's Proposition

1	2	3	4
(**Hmoob (Dawb)**	(Moob) Leeg		Voted to Accept
M **HM** **N** **HN** **NY** **HNY** **HNY**	M M N N NY NY NY	M MH N NH NY NY NYH	M MH N NH NY NY NYH
D **DH** **NT** **NTH**	DL DLH NDL NDLH	TL TLH NTL NTLH	DL DLH NDL NDLH

Reform in 1982 (cont.)

- Finally, the Committee voted to accept Column 4 as a compromise and unified to be used with both Mong Leng and Hmong Daw, with **8 votes in favor of Column 4, 3 abstentions, and one absentee vote.**

Reform in 1982 (cont.)

- **There are still problems with "NT" and "NDL" and "M" and "HM." Given this, the following are:**

Hmong Daw	Mong Leng	Compromise & Unified Grapheme
MH **M**	M	Both use "MH," e.g. "MHOV HAB TSHUA"
NT	NDL NT	Both use "NDL," e.g. "DLEJ NDLAS NDLUA"
BUT		Both must write: "MOB MOB Teg" – Use "M" "NTUS NTAUB NAAV"

Reform in 1982 (cont.)

- Given this, both **Mong Leng and Hmoob Daw agreed on changing from Hmong and Mong -→ to a compromised and unified spelling to be used with both Mong Leng and Hmong Daw**. Therefore, **Mhong** is not a misspelling, but was coined to represent both groups as our people for the first time.

Issue of Reducing the Consonantal Blends

- For the grapheme “ng,” the Committee agreed to adopt the Moob Leng Primer

- After Dr. Johnson’s presentation on this topic, the issue of reducing the consonantal blends was tabled for the next meeting due to time constraints.

Issue of Borrowing loaned words

- After Dr. Barbara Robson's presentation from language to language, she uses the following:

(1) Proper nouns like names of people, countries, and animals ~ Use after the local, write together into a word,

- e.g. America -→ write Amelikas
- Do not use: Asmesliskas
- If wanting to write like the locals, use parentheses to enclose,
- e.g. "Kuv nyob Amelikas teb (America)

(2) For other nouns, translate into Hmong/Mong word, but enclose with parentheses, e.g.,

- Computer → Tshuab hlwbhlau (koos-pi-tawj)
- Helicopter → Dlaav qaavtaub (Hes-li-kau-tawj)

Reform in 1982 (cont.)

August 14, 1982

Mechanics of Writing (Punctuation and Capitalization)

Dr. Bruce Downing presented the mechanics of writing to the Committee, which then considered several writing mechanics, including those of the French and others. The Committee agreed that we should follow the mechanics of American writing. Given that, effective from that day on.. The Committee accepted Djoua X. Xiong recommendation pending in the near future (See the following punctuation for more details (See your Handout for more details)

Challenges that Barney & Smalley Had with the Tones

- Challenges that Barney & Smalley had with the Placement of the Tones
- https://drive.google.com/file/d/14AymmPqaC_LzKSnx6gP78aV8gKugWJPu/view

Table 5. Comparison of the Tone Markers between the Mong and the Hmong

- Table 5. Comparison of the Tone Markers between Mong and Hmong
- https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VMgXLGKzzfkfrukCCdtJD0wFvWXTOEbf/view?usp=sharing

Phonology

- Mong Leng dialect consists of 55 consonantal phonemes: 16 single consonants, 21 double consonantal blends, 14 triple consonantal blends, and 4 quadruple consonantal blends. (See Table 1 for Mong/Hmong Consonantal Phonemes), 14 monophthongs (single vowels), 4-5 diphthongs (See Table 2 Table 2 Mong/Hmong Vowel Phonemes), and 8 different vocal tone markers (

Phonology (cont.)

- Whereas the Hmong Daw has **57** consonantal phonemes: 17 single consonantal phonemes, 22 double consonantal blends, 13 triple consonantal blends, 3 quadruple consonantal blends (See Table 1 for Mong/Hmong Consonantal Phonemes), 13 monophthongs (single vowels), 5 diphthongs

Phonology (cont.)

1) Though these two RPA systems are closed, they are distinctive in both pronunciation and written forms. Due to its **phonemic-based construction,**If a passage is written in Mong Leng, it is completely written in Mong Leng and can only be read in Mong Leng (See Tables 4 for more details), unlike Lao (tone), Vietnamese (using diacritics), Chinese (logographic) and Japanese (syllabary)

- refers to the process of building literacy skills, particularly in reading and writing, by focusing on phonemes. Phonemes are the smallest units of sound in a language that can change the meaning of a word. For example, the word "cat" has three phonemes: /k/, /æ/, and /t/. Building literacy from the sounds up

Characteristics of Mong Language

- The RPA writing system, currently and widely used by the Mong/Hmong today, was constructed or devised based upon the phonemic principle, rather than ideographic or character-based like Chinese. Therefore, the RPA system automatically dichotomizes our two dialects along the regional pronunciation differences between “Mong Leng” and “Hmon Daw” with two complete RPA system.

Characteristics of Mong Language (cont.)

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Phonology (cont.)

- If a passage is written in Hmong Daw, it is completely in Hmong Daw and can only be read in Hmong Daw. This is the reason why the original Mong and Hmong primers were developed in two versions, one in Mong Leng and another in Hmong Daw

Characteristics of the Mong/Hmong Language

- The Mong/Hmong language was classified by linguistic typologists as a **subgroup of the** **Sino-Tibetan language family** of Asia. Arlotto (1972) considered it as one of the pre-Sinitic languages and asserted that "within China itself, among the few remaining pre-Sinitic languages we have the Miao-Yao family, spoken by scattered remnants of what once undoubtedly was a widespread and flourishing family" (p. 52).

Characteristics of the Mong/Hmong Language (cont.

- The Mong/Hmong RPA writing system is easy to learn, consistent and absolutely symmetrical, but the spellings vary from dialect to dialect and from idiolect to idiolect when speaking and writing, depending upon the geographic area in Laos where the speakers came from.

- The Mong/Hmong language shares the same sentence structure as English, SVO (Subject + Verb + Object), e.g.
  Kuv hlub koj. Ku**v** (subject) + hlu**b** (verb) + ko**j** (object) that translates into
  - "I love you" in English.

Characteristics of the Mong/Hmong Language (cont.)

- Notice that each word ends with a consonant. These endings are not consonantal phonemes as in English, but they represent the tone markers. The Mong/Hmong do not pronounce the tone markers like the inflectional endings in English, so derivational phonology is not an essential part of their repertoire.

- The Mong/Hmong language is a tone language in contrast with the English language, which is an intonation language. Although linguists classify Mong/Hmong as a monosyllabic tonal language, this is not entirely accurate because its lexicons contain sizable numbers of disyllabic and polysyllabic words.
- a language in which variations in pitch distinguish different words.
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- the melodic pattern of a language, specifically how the pitch of your voice rises and falls when speaking

Basic Elements of the Mong/Hmong Language and Implications for Students and Teachers

- The Mong/Hmong consists of five (5) basic elements of language like any other language: Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics & Pragmatics, and lexicons. Today, I only have time to cover phonology and will cover the other four elements in my next presentation.

- The consonantal phonemes for both Mong/Hmong vary from one dialect to another.

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Basic Elements of the Mong/Hmong Language and Implications for Students and Teachers (cont.)

- The Mong/Hmong RPA writing system is easy to learn, consistent and absolutely symmetrical, but the spellings vary from dialect to dialect and from idiolect to idiolect when speaking and writing, depending upon the geographic area in Laos where the speakers came from.

Phonology

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Phonology (cont.)

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Phonology (cont.)

- 2. Though these **two RPA systems are closed, they are distinctive in both pronunciation and written forms**. Due to its phonemic-based construction, if a passage is written in Mong Leng, it is completely written in Mong Leng and can only be read in Mong Leng (See Tables 4, 5 for more details).

Phonology (cont.)

- 3. If a passage is written in Hmong Daw, it is completely in Hmong Daw and can only be read in Hmong Daw. This is the reason why the original Mong and Hmong primers were developed in two versions, one in Mong Leng and another in Hmong Daw.

Phonology (cont.)

- 4. These letters at the end of each Mong/ Hmong lexicon are tone markers, and the tones are not arbitrary. The tones in Mong/Hmong are considered one of the prosodic or supra-segmental features and the most difficult aspects of the Mong/ Hmong language for non-Mong/Hmong speakers who have attempted to master it.

Phonology (cont.)

- Unlike English, where the structure of the syllable follows the onset and rime, a typical Mong/Hmong lexicon consists of a consonant, a vowel, and a tone marker (e.g., '***Kuv***' ***k*** is a consonant, **u** the vowel, and **v** the tone marker).

IV. Recommendations

- No Change to the RPA System that is already in Place today!

Rationale

- 1. The Mong/Hmong RPA system was created by American missionary linguists, Dr. G. Linwood Barney and Dr. William A. Smalley of the Christian and Missionary Alliance and Father Yves Bertrais (Txivplig Nyiaj Pov) of the Catholic Church to translate the Bible and Christian literature for the Mong/Hmong back in 1950s after the massive conversion of the Mong/Hmong to Christianity, so that they could read the Bible in their own language serving as the foundation of faith and that the Mong/Hmong could “gain a writing system and could use” it as well as a tool for evangelization

Rationale (cont.)

- Given the rationale, Final Recommendation for this Spelling Reform:
-
- **No changes are to be made to the RPA System that is currently in place**.
-

Rationale (cont.)

- It took 50 years, from 1950 to 2000, for the Mong/Hmong to complete the Bible translation and other Christian literature and have them published in both Mong Leng and Hmong Daw to 100%.

Rationale (cont.)

Now, we could start to see the RPA system from its inception to fruition. Today, the RPA system is the most widely used system for the Mong/ Hmong Christian. Today, the **Mong/Hmong Bible has been used in 115 churches of the Hmong District of the C&MA with 250 pastors, with a total membership of 36,000 in the U.S**., **500,000 Mong/Hmong Christians in China, 400,000 in Vietnam, 30,000 kn Laos, 12,000 in Thailand, and about 7,000 in Myanmar, Canada, France, and French Guyana, amounting to over 1 million Mong/Hmong Christians in the world**. These numbers also exclude the 76,000 Hmong/Mong Catholics. The most recent revision of the Mong/Hmong Bible was completed in 2022 (Dr. & Rev. Lantzia Thao, personal communication, August 21, 2025).

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Rationale (cont.)

Dr. William A. Smalley's statement is still echoed loud and clear in my mind today. He had

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•"Fascinating experience, "an opportunity to help Hmong people gain a writing system they needed and could use. Fascinating discoveries: Especially the consonantal system of spoken Hmong – one of the most complex in the world, in some ways, beautifully consistent and logical, marvelously built up of many pieces" (p. 1). [The co-founders of the RPA] We "wanted to be practical and at the same time bring out the beauty and symmetry of the language in the writing system, often not seen by Hmong/Mong" (Dr. William A. Smalley, Handout for the presentation to the Mhong Language Council, University of Minnesota, August 12, 1982).

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Support Dr. William A. Smalley's Statement

- I wholeheartedly agree with Dr. William A. Smalley and stand firm with him on this matter.

Rationale (cont.)

As a trained linguist and an educator working professionally in my disciplines in the last 30 years as a professor of linguistics and education for the California State University Monterey Bay, I can attest to the fact that, the RPA system has been well-researched, solidly built, and grounded on the linguistic principles of the International Phonetic Association (IPA) system. The RPA is found to be absolutely symmetrical; therefore, **no changes are to be made to the current RPA system that has been in place.**

Rationale (cont.)

Despite its complexities, the RPA is the easiest system for us to use. It took me 15 minutes to learn from my colleague, and I could write a book, *Kevcai siv lug Moob* (Thao, 1997). I have also completed another version, *Kevcai siv lus Hmoob*, and it is ready to be published at any time should the need arise. Please refer to the copy in the binder for the course WLC 397, which is displayed on the table.

Rationale (cont.)

Five key elements provided by “Smalley’s maximizing of orthography design and sign language” needed to be used to design the RPA writing system, which are:

(1) Maximizing Motivation
(2) Maximizing Representation
(3) Maximizing Ease of Learning
(4) Maximizing Transfer
(5) Maximizing Ease of Reproduction

Rationale (cont.)

In addition, the Bible, hymnal books, and other Christian literacy materials have been developed and translated into two versions as well. It is predictable that almost the entire Mong/Hmong lexicons end with tone markers represented by the letters: **–b (high tone)**, **-j (high falling tone)**, **-v (mid-rising tone)**, **-- (mid tone)**, **-s (mid low tone)**, **-g (mid low breathy tone)**, **-m (low glottalized tone)**, and **–d (predictable variant of –m low glottalized tone)**

Rationale (cont.)

These letters at the end of each Mong/Hmong lexicon are tone markers, and the tones are not arbitrary. The tones in Mong/Hmong are considered one of the prosodic or supra-segmental features and the most difficult aspects of the Mong/Hmong language for non-Mong/Hmong speakers who have attempted to master it.

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Rationale (cont.)

- Given the rationale, Final Recommendation for this Spelling Reform:
- **No changes are to be made to the RPA System that is currently in place.**
- Thank you!