Structure of Hmong-Mien Languages
Session #1 Introduction

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Session overview

• Name of the family
• Location
• Homeland
• Subgrouping
• Possible external relationships
• Typological sketch
• Issues of interest to linguists-at-large
Family name

• “Miao-Yao” refers to two official minority groups of China defined only in part by language:
  
  – the speakers of Mun on Hainan Island have been classified as Miao, but their language is Yao
  – the speakers of Bunu have been classified as Yao, but their language is Miao
  – the speakers of Lakkia have been classified as Yao, but their language is Tai-Kadai

• “Hmong-Mien” has been proposed (and has been widely adopted) as a purely linguistic designation
  
  – on the model of Mon-Khmer or Tibeto-Burman: no elevation of particular groups to the exclusion of others is intended
  – no replacement of the name Miao-Yao is intended
Geographical distribution of Hmongic subgroups
The Hmong language: background and sources
Distribution of Hmong in China and Southeast Asia
Have they always been there?  
The HM homeland question

• Are the HM people a wandering tribe of Israel?
  – one supreme God, Adam & Eve, flood story
  – “non-Asian” physical characteristics
  – Hebrew-like letters preserved in textiles

• Are the Hmong from Mongolia?
  – tales of six months light, six months dark
  – tales of travelling from a land of snow and ice
  – Hmongolia!

• Who knows? But evidence exists that they have not been anywhere other than southern China in reconstructable history (2-3 thousand years).
  – Linguistic paleontology (words for animals, plants, objects)
  – Updated “center of gravity’ measurements
Linguistic Paleontology

• The “homeland” is a moving target; a more modest goal is to identify the location of speakers of a protolanguage at some rough point in time.

• One word for a plant indigenous to southern China is reconstructable to PHM.

• Four words for plants and animals indigenous to southern China are reconstructable to proto-Hmongic.

• Proto-Hmongic is a good proxy for HM since native terms are frequently replaced by Chinese words in Mienic languages; hence all five words may point to the location of HM speakers at a time depth of approximately 2500 years BP.
Imperata cylindrica: ‘cogongrass’
PHM *NKan

- ‘Cogongrass’ can be reconstructed to Proto-Hmong-Mien
- Used for thatching roofs
- The tropical variety that is used for thatching roofs gradually disappears north of the 33rd latitude, so primarily southern China

Allium chinense: ‘rakkyo’ or wild onion

PH *ŋəŋ⁶

- ‘rakkyo’ can be reconstructed to Proto-Hmongic
- used both as food and a medicine
- now cultivated in the southern provinces of Guangxi, Hunan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Guangdong
- the Mienic word for ‘wild onion’ has been borrowed from Chinese 韭 jiǔ
**Houttuynia cordata**: 魚腥草 yú xīng cǎo

PH *truw*<sup>D</sup>

- yú xīng cǎo can be reconstructed to Proto-Hmongic
- used primarily as a medicine
- now grows in provinces south of the Yangzi River
Hydropotes inermis: ‘river deer’
PH *ŋguei

- ‘river deer’ can be reconstructed to Proto-Hmongic

- now in the middle and south Yangzi River valley, as well as on reed beaches and grasslands on the southeast coast

- the Mienic word for ‘deer’ has been borrowed from Chinese 獀 zhāng
**Garrulax canorus canorus**: 畫眉鳥 *huàméi*

PH *ʨɔŋʰ*

- *huàméi* (‘painted eyebrow’ thrush) can be reconstructed to Proto-Hmongic
- common in the south Yangzi River basin and non-migratory
- the Mienic word has been borrowed from Chinese 畫眉 *huàméi*
Problems with linguistic paleontology

• Sources may not identify the precise species of the referent.
• Even if the sources are precise, the referent may have changed.
• The climate may have changed since the time of the protolanguage, and plant and animal species may have occupied different locations than they do in the present.
• If there had been a migration from a different location, words for plants and animals from the old location may have dropped out.

• Yet the more individual names of plants and animals indigenous to this area, the more secure the conclusion; even if one species has a somewhat wider range, when the ranges are overlapped, they point to the Yangzi as a common area.
The “center of gravity” theory
(Sapir 1949:455 [1916])

“The major divisions of a linguistic stock represent the oldest differentiations within it and the geographical distributions of each of these divisions as unit must be considered as of equal weight in an attempt to reconstruct the earliest ascertainable location and movements of the stock as a whole. In other words, the geographical centre of gravity, historically considered, of a linguistic stock is not determined directly on the basis of all the dialects of the stock but rather on the basis of its major divisions, regardless of whether they are greatly ramified into subdivisions or not.”
“Homelands of the world’s language families: A quantitative approach”
Wichmann, Müller, & Velupillai 2010

• “… an area defined by languages that are not very different but are spaced far apart is not very diverse, whereas an area defined by languages that are very different but spoken in the vicinity of one another has a high degree of diversity.” (248-49)

• Using lexical data and direct distance measures, they calculated for Hmong-Mien (a test case), “[t]he map shows a gradient radiating from what is today Southern China. The … hypothetical homeland … is located in the vicinity of Bijie, in the present location of the language called Western Xiangxi Miao …” (255-56)
Subgrouping:
Impressionistic view of internal diversification

HM is roughly as internally diverse as a sub-family of I-E (Anthony Diller, p.c.: “it looks like an orphan sub-family”). It would be obvious to a non-linguist that the languages are related upon inspection of a list of cognates.

For example, ‘fire’ (PHM *douX), a very stable and simple word:
In Hmongic:
  tu⁴, tə⁴, teu⁴, dey⁴I, tau⁴, tə⁴, tu⁴, ðoB, te⁴, to⁴', tiu⁴, thɤ⁴, tau⁴, thɔ⁴
In Mienic:
  tou⁴, təu⁴, tou⁴, tau⁴, tou⁴, təu⁴, təu⁴, teu⁴, tu⁴
Hmongic/Mienic split

• Hmongic innovations
  – loss of final –p, -t, -k, -m
  – retraction of initial velars to uvulars except before l, r, and back rounded vowels
  – extensive rime mergers

• Mienic innovations
  – merger of velars and uvulars
  – prenasalized stops > voiced stops
  – development of vowel length contrasts
  – replacement of many native words by Chinese loans
# Mienic lexical replacements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hmongic</th>
<th>Mienic</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>face</td>
<td>*bow&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*hmiən&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heart</td>
<td>*prow&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*sjim&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pus</td>
<td>*buetype&lt;sup&gt;C&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*nəŋ&lt;sup&gt;C&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pig</td>
<td>*mpæ&lt;sup&gt;C&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*dũŋ&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fog/cloud</td>
<td>*hu&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*mow&lt;sup&gt;C&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>*qlow&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*bæk&lt;sup&gt;D&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red</td>
<td>*ʔlin&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*sjek&lt;sup&gt;D&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
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<td>*tuetype&lt;sup&gt;C&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*pou&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bowl</td>
<td>*de&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*ʔwən&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trough</td>
<td>*qroŋ&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*dzu&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thick</td>
<td>*tæ&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>*hou&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Hmong-Mien language family

- Hmong-Mien
  - Hmong-Mien
    - Hmionic
      - West Hmongic
        - Hmong
          - A-Hmao
        - Bunu
        - ...
        - ...
      - North Hmongic
        - Qo Xiong
      - East Hmongic
        - Hmu
        - Jiongnai
      - Pa-Hng
    - Mien-Mun
      - Mien
      - Mun
    - Mienic
      - Biao Min
      - Zao Min
Phylogenetic calculation and revision
Taguchi 2013
Proposed relationships among language families of southern China

• The five major language families of southern China and Southeast Asia
• Major proposals for super-families consisting of two or more of the five
• What constitutes the best evidence for family relationship?
The five language families of southern China & Southeast Asia

• Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman & Chinese)
• Hmong-Mien (= Miao-Yao)
• Tai-Kadai
• Austronesian
• Austroasiatic (Munda & Mon-Khmer)
Number of speakers

- Sino-Tibetan  c. 1.6 billion
- Hmong-Mien  c. 9 million
- Tai-Kadai  c. 78 million
- Austronesian  c. 270 million
- Austroasiatic  c. 101 million
2. Major proposals for super-families

- Greater Sino-Tibetan
- Austric (Wilhelm Schmidt, Gérard Diffloth, Laurie Reid)
- Austro-Tai (Paul Benedict)
- Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian (Laurent Sagart)
- East Asian (Stanley Starosta)
Greater Sino-Tibetan

- Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman & Chinese)
- Hmong-Mien
- Tai-Kadai
- Austronesian
- Austroasiatic (Munda & Mon-Khmer)
Greater Sino-Tibetan

- View widely held by Chinese scholars (e.g. Li Fang Kuei, Wang Fushi, Pan Wuyun). Common representation of ST in older reference books (Voegelin & Voegelin 1977, Katzner 1977).

- Hmong-Mien, and Tai-Kadai (along with Vietnamese) are languages of the “Sinosphere”: SVO, monosyllabic morpheme, isolating, tonal—traits most now consider superficial.

- Yet the shared lexical element extensive and deep: most are cultural borrowings, but it is hard to make a borrowing case for all of them: for example, pHM *hup ‘drink/smoke’ = 喝 ‘drink’ (MC xop > Man. hē).
Austric

- Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman & Chinese)
- Hmong-Mien
- Tai-Kadai
- Austronesian
- Austroasiatic (Munda & Mon-Khmer)
Austric


- Most persuasive are the morphological similarities: especially infixedes *-m- (agentive), *-n- (valence-changing), and *-r- (distributed).

- Of lexical similarities, Diffloth (1994) writes: “[although] …the lexical evidence is not impressive, it is undoubtedly there” (“The lexical evidence for Austric, so far” Oceanic Linguistics 33:309-322): dog, fish, wood, eye, bone, hair, tongue, left.
Austric family tree

Austric

Austroasiatic  Austronesian

Munda  Mon-Khmer
Austro-Tai

- Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman & Chinese)
- Hmong-Mien
- Tai-Kadai
- Austronesian
- Austroasiatic (Munda & Mon-Khmer)
Austro-Tai

• Paul K. Benedict (1912-1997)


• PKB 1975 contains a mix of solid comparisons and less persuasive AT constructions which involve either a formal or a semantic stretch.

• Dismissed as only a contact relationship in Graham Thurgood’s 1994 “Tai-Kadai and Austronesian: the nature of the relationship” *Oceanic Linguistics* 33.2:345-368.
Austro-Tai family tree

- Tai-Kadai
- Hmong-Mien
- Austronesian
STAN (Sino-Tibetan AustroNesian)

- Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman & Chinese)
- Hmong-Mien
- Tai-Kadai
- Austronesian
- Austroasiatic (Munda & Mon-Khmer)
STAN

• Laurent Sagart (CNRS, Paris)


• Change of position upon reconstruction of OC morphology (Roots of Old Chinese, 1999), which more clearly showed that ST (as traditionally constituted) should be adjoined to AN.

• The AN branch of STAN contains Tai-Kadai as an “extra-Formosan” AN subgroup that left Taiwan and returned to the mainland. Striking evidence from conservative TK language Bulang, which seems to preserve AN numerals and shows some disyllabic cognates.
STAN family tree

Sino-Tibetan
  /   \
Tibeto-Burman   Chinese

Austronesian
  /   \
Formosan       Extra-Formosan

         /   \
Tai-Kadai   Malayo-Polynesian
East Asian

- Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman & Chinese)
- Hmong-Mien
- Tai-Kadai
- Austronesian
- Austroasiatic (Munda & Mon-Khmer)
East Asian

• Stanley Starosta (1939-2002)


• Does not present a new analysis of the linguistic evidence—rather integrates proposals of others (chiefly Sagart and Van Driem) with the archaeological evidence. Explicitly rejects AN & TK as sisters (Austro-Tai) and AN & AA as sisters (Austric). Introduces “Yangzian” (AA & HM) as a sister of ST.
East Asian family tree

ST-Yangzian
  Sino-Tibetan
    Sino-Bodic
    Himalayo-Burman
  Yangzian
    Austroasiatic
    Formosan
    Extra-Formosan
      MK
      Munda
      HM
  Austronesian
    TK
    Malayo-Polynesian
3. What constitutes the best evidence for family relationship?

- Regular sound correspondences (the Comparative Method):
  - Latin *culmen* ‘top’  English *hill*
  - Latin *carpere* ‘to pluck’  English *harvest*
  - Latin *caput* ‘head’  English *head*

- Embedded morphological correspondences

- Shared basic vocabulary (body parts, lower numerals, pronouns, earth, fire, water . . .)

- Shared basic vocabulary that is “emblematic” (unusually stable) in the families for which a relationship is proposed
“Unfortunately, neither the inflectional morphology nor the basic vocabulary is sufficiently stable internally and sufficiently impervious to restructuring or replacement through foreign interference to justify giving it status as the sole criterion for genetic relationship … given the possibility of diffused linguistic features of all sorts (and, by implication, to all degrees), no single subsystem is criterial for establishing genetic relationship. In fact, genetic relationship in the traditional sense of one parent per language can only be posited when systematic correspondences can be found in all linguistic subsystems—vocabulary, phonology, morphology, and (we would add) syntax as well”.

(Thomason, S. G. & T. Kaufmann *Language Contact, Creolization and Genetic Linguistics*, pp. 6, 8)
• For all of the proposals there is quality evidence (none of the five proposals is nutty)—

• But for none of the proposals is there much evidence,

• And for none of the proposals is there evidence of every type, as Thomason and Kaufmann say is required to make a convincing case.
• Although there are numerous lexical connections between HM and Tibeto-Burman, the semantic classes involved suggest a contact relationship (Benedict 1987, Mortensen 2002), so a sister relationship with TB seems unlikely.

• Surprisingly few old words are shared exclusively by HM and Tai-Kadai, so a sister relationship with TK seems unlikely.

• Suggestive evidence for more than a contact relationship with
  1. Chinese (Sino-Tibetan)
  2. Mon-Khmer (Austro-Asiatic)
  3. Austronesian/Tai-Kadai
Mon-Khmer/Hmong-Mien resemblances ("Yangzian"?)

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MK</th>
<th>HM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shorto 2006</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blood</td>
<td>*jnhaam</td>
<td>*ntchamX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bone</td>
<td>*c?i[ ]ŋ</td>
<td>*tshunŋX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tree</td>
<td>*t₂ʔɔɔŋ</td>
<td>*ntʃiŋX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
<td>*ʔ[o]m</td>
<td>*ʔ̂əm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to weep</td>
<td>*yaam</td>
<td>*nemX</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mon-Khmer/Hmong-Mien/Austronesian resemblances ("Austric plus"?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MK Shorto 2006</th>
<th>HM</th>
<th>AN Blust ACD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>full</td>
<td>*[d]pu[e]ŋ</td>
<td>*pəɛɛɛX</td>
<td>*penuq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shoot</td>
<td>*paŋ?</td>
<td>*pəyanX</td>
<td>*panaq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tail</td>
<td>*[k]duuʔt</td>
<td>*(k-)tuiX</td>
<td>*buntut ‘rump of chicken’</td>
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Note: ‘rump of chicken’
## Austronesian/Hmong-Mien resemblances

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<th>HM</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Blust ACD</td>
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<tr>
<td>soft</td>
<td>*mlŋæiH</td>
<td>*ma-lumu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bite</td>
<td>*dəp</td>
<td>*ketep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flower</td>
<td>*biŋə</td>
<td>*buna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HM</td>
<td>AN</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die</td>
<td>*dəiH</td>
<td>*ma-aCay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kill</td>
<td>*təiH</td>
<td>*pa-aCay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bird</td>
<td>*m-nɔk</td>
<td>PMP *manuk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I/me</td>
<td>*kəu(ŋ)X</td>
<td>PMP *-ku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you (sg.)</td>
<td>*mui</td>
<td>*-mu (gen.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you (pl.)</td>
<td>*mɔ̱u</td>
<td>*-mu (gen.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• The five super-family hypotheses linking two or more of the language families of southern China and Southeast Asia are sober and sensible proposals. For all of the hypotheses there exists high-quality evidence—just not as much of it as we would like.

• From the perspective of the Hmong-Mien, there is intriguing lexical, morphological and closed-class evidence suggesting a family relationship with AN & TK (thus supporting the Austro-Tai hypothesis and part of the STAN hypothesis). More and better-populated sound correspondences need to be found, however.
Typological mini-sketch of HM languages
(of which much more to come)

- primarily open syllables
- tone
- isolating: no tense, number, case, gender
- if any affixes at all, prefixes
- compounding as primary word derivation process
- SVO
- noun classifiers
- paratactic structures (serial everything: clauses, verbs, nouns)
- utterance-final discourse particles
Issues of interest to linguists-at-large

- Several undescribed or under-described languages
- Some endangered languages (Ho Ne, Hm Nai, Kjɔŋ Nai, Ju No)
- World-record number of distinctive tones
- Flat (paratactic) structures a challenge for syntactic theories based on the universality/innateness of hierarchical structures
- Flat structures a challenge for models of language processing
- Complex noun classification system
- Rich oral traditions (oral epic poetry, ritual language, language disguise, expressives/ideophones, “flowery” oratory extending to everyday speech)
• Multilayered language contact situation
• Ultimate position within south and southeast Asia of historical importance, yet still a mystery.
