Assessing Hmong Language Retention and Narrative Skills in Hmong-American Children

Our research focuses on Hmong language maintenance and generational language loss in Hmong American families. One part of this work was recently completed as a master's thesis by my student, Mary Vang. The study examined the current language environment in Hmong American households, with three main questions: how frequently and in what contexts parents use Hmong and English at home; how parents' language practices and priorities shape their children's opportunities for Hmong language exposure; and what resources are available to families who want to support their children's Hmong language development. The study included 12 Hmong American parents of children ages 4–12. Four parents were first-generation Hmong Americans who had immigrated from Laos or Thailand, and eight were second-generation Hmong Americans born in the United States. All of the children had been exposed to both Hmong and English from birth and attended primarily English-speaking schools. Parents completed a detailed questionnaire about language use across family members and everyday activities, followed by an open-ended interview about their experiences with Hmong and English, their language priorities for their children, and the challenges they encountered in maintaining Hmong.

The results show a substantial shift toward English in the home. All 12 parents reported that their children preferred English for communication at home, and many parents reported using little or no Hmong when speaking with their children. The parents who reported using more Hmong than English with their children were born in Laos or Thailand. Language use also varied considerably by activity. For example, 83% of parents reported reading aloud only in English, 92% reported that their children watched television in English, and all reported playing word games in English. Hmong was more likely to occur during chores, family gatherings, religious activities, and Hmong New Year or other cultural events. Grandparents were also an important source of Hmong exposure: unlike siblings, who predominantly used English, grandparents generally communicated with grandchildren using a mixture of Hmong and English.

The interviews helped explain these patterns. Parents generally saw English as important for their children's academic and future success, and several noticed a decline in their children's Hmong after they entered English-speaking schools. At the same time, parents wanted their children to maintain Hmong and their connection with Hmong culture and family. Maintaining the language, however, required considerable effort. Parents described limitations in their own Hmong vocabulary, literacy, or confidence in teaching the language, as well as a lack of children's books, media, classes, and other structured learning materials. Time, geographic distance from larger Hmong communities, and children's preference for English created additional barriers. The project also examined community resources, including the Hmong American Association of Colorado, First Hmong Baptist Church of Colorado, and the Hmonglus language-learning app. These resources provide language classes, cultural activities, and opportunities for families and children to engage with Hmong outside the home.

Building on these findings, the next phase of our work focuses more directly on children's Hmong narrative development. We are adapting the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) for Hmong-speaking children and will examine storytelling in both Hmong and English, including how children organize a story as well as their vocabulary, grammatical complexity, and language productivity. We are especially interested in how children's home language experiences relate to their narrative abilities.