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Naming, Re-Naming and Self-Naming Among Hmong-Americans

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Hmong-Americans in Wisconsin use the semantic resources of the Hmong language and social semantic connotations of the naming system to create meaning in personal names. Name changes can be made for functional reasons: a name change can be done to protect the individual against ghosts, spirits or illness. Name changes can also mark life status changes: women gain a new name when they marry, while men are re-named by their parents-in-law, usually after the birth of the first child.

KEYWORDS Hmong personal names, Migration, Names and ethnicity, Naming behavior, Re-naming

Introduction

Whether personal names are truly connotative or only non-connotative (Mill, 1973: 33) continues to be arguable, as attested to by studies of names in non-European cultures such Exner (2007), Makondo (2008) and Zuercher (2007). As the Nilsens observe (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2008: 3), personal names seem to encode the social semantics of both gender and ethnicity. Thus, the question whether names have a semantic function beyond denotation remains the focus of ongoing discussion. This paper will add to the discussion some basic facts about naming in Hmong-American society, and will suggest that some of the semantic burden of names is indeed a social semantic, and that our understanding of this can be enhanced by looking at occasions of naming and identifying the actors who name other people — or themselves — on those occasions. The motivations of namers, including re-namers and self-namers, can give us a view into the role played by semantic elements in names and the social semantics of name choice.

Results of an interview-based investigation of Hmong naming practices show that re-naming and other forms of name changing are frequent in Hmong and Hmong-American society. Based on interviews with seventeen Hmong-Americans in the summer of 2008, the author identified eight possible occasions during the lifespan when naming or re-naming could take place, clearly more naming occasions than we would expect to find in Anglo-American culture, for example. These include:

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1. the initial naming of a newborn
2. re-naming of a child who is fussy or sick
3. family nicknaming
4. peer nicknaming
5. re-naming an individual who is bothered by spirits
6. giving an auxiliary name in another language such as Lao or English
7. a married woman assuming her husband's name
8. a married man being re-named by his parents-in-law.

After a discussion of data-collection, the paper will describe these eight naming occasions and then show how Hmong-Americans adapt the system to deal with the circumstances of immigration and developing and maintaining a Hmong-American identity.

The Hmong, an ethnic minority in Laos, were drawn into the war in Southeast Asia, when some Hmong collaborated with the CIA in the "secret war" in Laos. When the United States withdrew from that war, the Hmong were left in severe danger of genocidal actions against them by the Pathet Lao (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). An exodus from Laos brought thousands of Hmong first to refugee camps in Thailand, and from there to countries such as France and Australia. Most diasporic Hmong, however, came to live in the United States, and eventually settled in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. As a minority group in every country they have lived in, the Hmong tend to see ethnic identity as highly salient; Hein (2006) characterizes this as a "hermetic" ethnic boundary. Thus, while there is plenty of evidence for linguistic assimilation — young Hmong-Americans may learn English before they learn Hmong — in the data collected for this study, there was only some evidence of onomastic assimilation; the use of English names was clearly in the minority, and none of the interviewees had changed their names to English names at the time of citizenship.

Data collection

The author enrolled in an intensive course in Hmong language at the University of Wisconsin during the summer of 2008; this gave her the opportunity to meet Hmong-American adults of various ages among classmates, teaching staff, and local Hmong-Americans in leadership positions who were brought into the classroom for class enrichment. Each of these adults was invited to participate in an interview about Hmong naming practices. Each interviewee was then also asked whether the author could have permission to cite each of the interviewee's real names or nicknames. All gave permission. Names of children, parents, and siblings of interviewees, however, will not be reported here, since the bearers of those names could not be asked for permission. Nine of the 17 interviewees were women, and eight were men. One of the women was 36 years old, and the other eight were between the ages of 20 and 23; four of the men were between the ages of 35 and 44, and four were between the ages of 19 and 21. Obviously it would have been preferable to interview more people across a broader spectrum of ages, but these were the people available to be asked.

There are two dialects of Hmong represented among the interviewees, White Hmong and Green Hmong (these names reflect the colors of traditional garb [Lo,

2003]); since there were speakers of both dialects among the interviewees, names were collected in the form of the interviewee's preferred dialect. Hmong Americans also manage their literacy practices working between two spelling systems, the Romanized Popular Alphabet (Smalley, Vang, and Yang, 1990) and an Anglicized representation system used by American school and university authorities, for example, or in sites such as Facebook. For the most part, spellings were collected using both systems.

The Hmong social world is organized into approximately 18 patrilineal exogamous clans (Lo, 2003); Hmong living in Western countries use these clan names as surnames (Jaisser, 1995). Thus, although there are only eight surnames represented among 17 interviewees (*Yaj* and *Yaaj* are White and Green versions of the same clan name, as are *Vaj* and *Vaaj*), none of the interviewees were members of the same household or nuclear family. Table 1 shows the names of all 17 interviewees in both spelling systems, with the gender of each name-bearer indicated.

The RPA represents syllabic tone by means of a final consonant symbol; thus, final –b indicates high tone as in *Tub*; final –j indicates a high falling tone as in *Xyooj*; final –v indicates a mid rising tone as in *Suav*; final –g indicates a falling breathy tone, final –m indicates a low falling tone, and final –s indicates a low level tone. A final zero consonant indicates a mid tone. A doubled vowel in RPA such as –aa, –ee and –oo indicates a vowel followed by a velar nasal. Further details on the RPA are available in Smalley *et al.*, 1990, while Jaisser, 1995, gives phonetic details on the phonemes of Hmong.[1]

TABLE 1

HMONG NAMES IN RPA AND ANGLICIZED SPELLINGS

Romanized Popular Alphabet		gender	Anglicized spelling
1.	Cua Lis	f	Choua Lee
2.	Suav Yaj	m	Shoua Yang
3.	Lauj Yaj	f	Lor Yang
4.	Txawj Kuam Yaj	m	Cher Koua Yang
5.	Paj Ntaub Lis	f	Pa Ndau Lee
6.	Xw Xyooj	f	Sue Xiong
7.	Tub Khaaj	m	Tou Khang
8.	Zuag Xyooj	f	Zoua Xiong
9.	Fwm Tsu Thoj	m	Fue Chou Thao
10.	Tooj /Lauj Pov Vaj	m	Lo Pao Vang
11.	Nrawm Nroos Xyooj	m	Dardong Xiong
12.	Paj Kub Muas	f	Pa Kou Moua
13.	Ma Li Yaaj	f	Mary Yang
14.	Xeem Xais Vaaj	m	Seng Sai Vang
15.	Ntxhoo Lauj	f	Xong Lor
16.	Tub Thoj	m	Tou Thao
17.	Kiab Xyooj	f	Kia Xiong

Occasions for naming or re-naming

One feature that makes Hmong naming practices of interest is the frequency with which naming or re-naming can occur. In the author's Anglo-American background, one can expect a newborn to be named, nicknames to be given by peers or family, and a woman's name to be changed at marriage, though the last practice is perhaps no longer as widespread as it once was.[2] The fact that Hmong-Americans find four more occasions for name-changing makes theirs a group particularly suitable for onomastic research, and for research on the connotation/denotation issue: why do Hmong and Hmong-Americans find so many other occasions for naming or re-naming, such as re-naming a child who is fussy or sick, re-naming someone bothered by spirits, taking an auxiliary name in another language, and re-naming married men? The reasons seem to be semantic, social and highly practical. This section will summarize the interview responses to questions about each of the eight naming occasions listed above.

Naming a newborn

Newborns are usually named by an older relative, not necessarily the parents. One of the interviewees stated that grandparents usually name newborns. Four of the seventeen interviewees reported that they were named by a grandfather, and one reported she was named by her father's stepmother, who was like a grandmother to her. Four reported they were named by their father, and three reported they were named by both parents. Five were uncertain who had named them; one of these thought her father had named her and two thought both parents had named them. One interviewee discussed the interview with her father, who then sent comments to me via his daughter on the semantics of naming: Hmong names, he claimed, usually and traditionally connote one of four things, wealth, nature, power or good fortune. Another interviewee, however, claimed that the tradition includes naming children after household artifacts, a claim supported by examples in Jaisser (1995), who gives glosses to common names, including "basket," "fishing hook," and "bell," *inter alia*.

Re-naming a fussy or sick child

However, an infant can be re-named if the first name is found to be somehow unsuitable. One interviewee, Tooj Pov Vaj, reported that children are named after objects, and different objects have different strengths. For example, a name like *Pob Tsuas*, "rocky mountain," is much stronger than the name *Pob Zeb*, "rock." The female name *Ziag*, "sickle," is stronger than the name *Paj*, "flower." If a name is too strong for the personality of the child, the child will be fussy or ill. If a shaman determines that the name is spiritually incompatible with the child's innate personality, then the name can be and should be changed. Five of the interviewees reported that they had had a name change because of fussiness or illness during infancy or childhood. Several of these cases seem to have involved the semantics of the names: Cua (meaning "wind") was renamed Phawv ("little rice basket"); Tsawb (meaning "banana tree") was renamed Suav (meaning either "Chinese" or "to count"). Paj Tuam was named Tuam after her father (*tuam* is a polysemous/ambiguous lexeme as so many Hmong lexemes are, with meanings such as "to kick," "to build," "a post-hole

digger," "courageous, reckless"); Paj Tuam's infant spirit apparently did not like having so masculine a name and so she was renamed Hnub Qub, meaning "star"; the *Hnub* has stuck as a nickname. Tub (meaning "boy, son") was renamed Ntxhoo Pov; this name stopped him from crying, but no one uses that name for him now. There was one case of an infant renaming involving English. Zuag cried a lot, and was soothed with the English address term "Baby." The second syllable of this English word, Bee, remained as a family nickname.

Family nicknames

Hmong families give nicknames and diminutive names to children. Fourteen of the seventeen interviewees reported at least one family nickname and six reported more than one. Four of these were kinship names such as *Me Ntxhais*, "little daughter," *Ntxawm*, "youngest daughter," or *Tub*, "son," the last two of which can also function as given names. But family nicknames can also reflect physical or personality traits of the nicknamed person, so family-given nicknames included: "little fisherman," for a girl who loved boys' activities, *Maum Nkai*, "flirtatious girl," for a small girl who talked a lot, *Xov Phiam*, "government official," for a boy whose facial expression was one of great seriousness, *Puj Dlub* (Green Hmong), "black woman," for a girl with a dark complexion. Nicknames can also be derived from the sounds of child's given name, so Nrawm Nroos became Dong, and Kiab became Kiko to siblings. Lauj, whose name is spelled Lor in the Anglicized representation, acquired a final /–i/ and became Lori, when her older sister created an English nickname from a Hmong given name. Three other interviewees received English family nicknames: the only sister in a large family of brothers was called "Boy" by her cousins, because her father cut all the children's hair in the same style, her brothers' and hers; another interviewee was called "Baby" by his father for a short while. One of the 30-somethings reported that his nieces and nephews had given him the English name "Spencer" as a nickname, but he had no explanation for their choice.

Peer nicknames

Peers also contribute nicknames to a Hmong child. Suav, for example, was nicknamed Plas, "owl," by peers because of his earnest, wide-eyed expression. Txawj Kuam was nicknamed Teev, "scales," and Qaib, "chicken," although he does not know why either name was chosen for him, beyond the explanation of children's propensity for teasing. *Tub*, "son," is a common given name, and one of the two Tubs in my interview group reported that peers had named him Tou Tou to distinguish him from another Tub. Similarly, Kiab was one of two Kiabs in her church group, so they were named Kia A and Kia B; Kia B, the interviewee, acquired the syllable /bi/ as part of her name and became Kibby — a peer-given nickname. As can be seen from these examples, both semantic and pronunciation features contribute to nicknaming.

Re-naming to protect from spirits

A person of any age may encounter a spirit — in the animist world of the Hmong, spirits are to be found in many places — and a spirit may pursue or pester a human following an initial encounter (the conversion of some Hmong to Christianity has not

expelled spirits from Hmong-American discourse). One way to protect a child from spirits is to give the child the name of a household implement, such as *Tsu*, "rice steamer." Another is to add clan names as middle names, such as in the fabricated example *Tub Yaj Hawj Xyooj* — instead of plain *Tub Xyooj*. But spirits can be very persistent; one interviewee's brother was pursued by spirits, and finally had to have his name changed to protect against them. One interviewee, Paj Ntaub, was originally given a different name by her grandfather, a shaman. When she encountered a "wandering spirit," as she put it, that spirit pursued her; during a visit in Thailand to the same grandfather who originally named her, the grandfather changed her name to Paj Ntaub. She hopes the name change will keep the spirit at bay, and if it does she may change her name legally in this country as well.

Names in languages other than Hmong

A person may acquire a name in another language in the form of a nickname or kinship term, as we have seen. But Hmong parents may also give children names in languages other than Hmong. Becoming a citizen also offers the chance to choose another name. However, none of the interviewees who had become US citizens changed their names on this occasion. One interviewee, Xw, noted that her name became Sue when anglicized, and that seemed to serve adequately. There were two instances of parents giving non-Hmong names to children: Lauj Pov Vaj, who was born in Laos, and whose father was a schoolteacher, was given a Lao name (Mai) solely for use in school; the thought was that having a Lao name would protect him as a minority child against discrimination. Ma Li was born in the United States, and given a name that her father said was Thai, and also an English name, Mary, which is what she uses most often. Her father was a Christian at the time of her birth, and wanted to give her a biblical name.

Women's married names

Women acquire a new name when they marry. Only one of the women interviewed was married and had a married name; Choua Lee was the name she used in the Anglo world, but in the Hmong community she is Niam Thaj Yeeb Lis, or Mrs Ta Yeng Lee. She explained that, if she were to use her given name in the Hmong community, she would present herself as one still trying to appear young and unmarried. Similarly, one of the younger women speculated that, when she marries someday, she will be called *Niam + husband's name* by elders, even though her friends will still call her Hnub.

Men's maturity names

A similar interpretation prevails with the man's honorary name, also called a maturity name. After a married couple has produced at least one child, the wife's parents may then re-name their son-in-law. According to interviewee Lauj Pov Vaj, it is the wife's responsibility to initiate discussion of her husband's name change. Lauj Pov and his wife took a list of names they liked to the wife's parents, who chose *Tooj*, so he is now Tooj Pov Vaj. The re-naming is like a second wedding ceremony, he reports, in that representatives of both sides of the family attend, and a pig is killed and a feast is held, and the in-laws take the meat home with them. Vaj sees the change as social, and has not changed his name officially.

In contrast, Suav Yaj, a young man in his 30s, though not yet married, sees the acquisition of a maturity name as a manifestation of gender equality in Hmong culture in that the naming of a son-in-law by his in-laws stresses that he has become a part of the wife's family — even though the usual interpretation of marriage is that the wife becomes a part of the husband's family and clan. Yet another interpretation is that the maturity name functions like the woman's married name — it signals that the bearer is mature and no longer single. Cua Lis told a story of a man who delayed acquiring his maturity name until his own children were old enough to be married; at that point he had to admit that he was married and add a maturity name.

Effects of migration on Hmong naming practices

Even as I outlined these eight naming and re-naming occasions, I have tried not to present them as "pure" or "traditional" practices; it is evident that migration and contact with other languages have affected some of the manifestations of these naming practices. The interviewees' responses show the adaptability of the naming system in meeting new conditions.

One example of the effects of migration is that of Txawj Kuam, whose parents-in-law remained in Thailand, while he and his family migrated to Wisconsin. Kuam felt he needed a maturity name to be respected in the Wisconsin Hmong community, so he and his wife chose a name, then consulted with their pastor, who approved of the name. When finally they had the chance to consult with the wife's parents, the parents fortunately also approved of the added name, *Txawj*; but because of the exigencies of migration Txawj Kuam essentially re-named himself, a departure from the procedure described by Tooj Pov Vaj. Both Niam Tham Yeeb Lis and Tooj Pov Vaj have adapted by having different names for different communities, using their married name and maturity name, respectively, within the Hmong community, and the names Choua Lee and Lo Pao Vang with most English-speakers. In contrast, Fwm Tsu Thoj uses only his maturity name, but my impression is that his dealings within the English-speaking world are not so extensive.

Predictions of future naming decisions

Since the majority of the interviewees were young, it was possible to deviate somewhat from the original interview script with some of them to ask them to predict how they would choose names as they encountered naming occasions later in life. What naming decisions do these Hmong-American college students predict for themselves? Many of the younger women want to keep names that make clear their connection with their birth families, and to give children names with at least some Hmong elements. For example, one young woman said that, if she were to marry a Hmong man, she would want to keep her birth clan name or hyphenate clan names, but if she marries a non-Hmong man she will take his last name. In either case, she wants her children to have Hmong middle names. Another interviewee, whose current boyfriend is Vietnamese, would take her husband's last name and keep her clan name as her middle name. Her children would have English first names, Hmong middle names and a Vietnamese surname. In contrast, Zuag Xyooj wants to give her children

Hmong first names, spelled in RPA. She perceives some new Hmong given names, with meanings such as "ideas," and "lightning," as creative and cool. But she wants to keep her birth name when married, or perhaps attach her husband's name by hyphenation, so that her connection to her birth family remains obvious. Paj Kub will have two names for herself, one for use by friends, *Hnub*, and *Niam + Husband's name*, for use by Hmong elders. Her children should have Hmong first names or middle names — she likes the name *Ywj Pheej*, "free," for a boy — but she also wants her children to have the option of an English name. Ntxhoo Lauj plans to hyphenate her last name with her husband's, and use her clan name somewhere in her children's names.

The practice of a man's in-laws giving the maturity name has not stopped parents of the young men who were interviewed from speculating on suitable maturity names for their own sons. Tub Khaaj's mother has suggested that Tub add the name *Txawj*, "smart, educated, skilled," as his maturity name. Xeem Xai already has his father's maturity name as his middle name, so his current full name is Xeem Xai Ntshua Ntxawg Vaaj. His father suggests prefacing this name with *Tswv*, "leader," for a maturity name, though Xeem Xai worries that this particular maturity name may require too much of him; still, it is interesting that in both cases, the parents are suggesting name elements for a naming decision that may ultimately be made by in-laws as yet unidentified, since neither of the young men is engaged yet.

Discussion

The readiness with which young Hmong-American men and women were able to answer questions about future name changes and namings shows that they had thought about these things — and were unlikely to leave name decisions entirely to elders or in-laws. In thinking about future names both for themselves and for children, these young women and men considered both the semantic load of names and the desirability of signaling both Hmong identity and social links between clans, rather than signaling an American identity or an identity only as a member of the husband's birth patriline. The resourcefulness of Txawj Kuam Yaj in choosing his own maturity name, absent eligible in-laws, also demonstrates the flexibility of the Hmong-American naming system and the onomastic flexibility and social resourcefulness of its users.

The semantic connotation of name elements clearly plays a role in how Hmong-Americans make naming decisions. The reference to household objects or natural phenomena, for example, plays a role in assessment of the "strength" of a name or of the compatibility of the name with the name-bearer's personality, as Tooj Pov Vaj's discussion of re-naming indicates. The assessment of *Tuam*, an element with several different meanings, as too masculine a name for a girl also shows the role of connotation in the minds of the re-namers.

Similarly, the elements chosen for men's maturity names usually seem to be chosen to bring connotations of honor or maturity to the bearer. Glosses of the elements in this set include:

Fwm — to revere, honor, respect
Tswv — leader, master
Txawj — educated, skillful, able

Not all maturity names are so obviously honorific: it is not clear why *Tooj* (meaning "copper, brass") functions as a maturity name, but there may well be some cultural or personal information relevant to the choice which was not uncovered in these interviews.

Finally, there seems to be a semantic aspect to the attractiveness of the new Hmong names some of the younger women want to choose for their future children. *Tswv Yim*, "idea," and *Ywj Pheej*, "free," both designate concepts that are more abstract than "rice strainer," though not necessarily more abstract than "honor" or "educated;" nevertheless, presumably part of what makes these new Hmong names attractive to young Hmong-American women stems from the connotations of these common words. One of the younger men interviewed seems to have been given a non-traditional name; *Nrawm Nroos* means "quickly," and was considered by the bearer of the name to be a unique name, though he noted that his parents had given all their children creative names. Nrawm Nroos was particularly proud of his name, both because of its meaning and uniqueness and because it signals his Hmong identity.

A social semantic of connections also plays a role in future name choices. Young women want to choose a married name that reflects birth clan membership for themselves, and names that reflect Hmong affiliation, possibly including mother's birth clan, for their children. In addition, the interpretation of the men's maturity names as connecting them to their in-laws offers another example of a social semantics of connection.

Summary

Results of interviews with seventeen Hmong-Americans show that the connotations of names are a factor when parents or grandparents name newborns, when names are changed because of illness or infant fussiness, and in the choosing of maturity names for men. The social semantic content of names also seems to play a growing role in projected newborn naming and in women's choice of a married name. In both cases, we have found that some young Hmong-American women want their own birth clans reflected in their adult names and possibly also in the names of their children. Furthermore, although immigration and acquisition of citizenship offer the opportunity to acquire English names, young adult Hmong-Americans, including young women who might marry non-Hmong, seem to want to retain the ethnic labeling that a Hmong names supplies, both for themselves and their children. This initial study was based on only a small sample of interviewees, but it nevertheless outlines the directions that further research on Hmong names might take.

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Notes

[1] Jaisser (1995) also provides IPA equivalents of the RPA consonants and vowels.

[2] Lillian (2008:238) points out that preference for assuming the husband's surname is rising again.

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