

Preliminaries to Mong Leng (Hmong Njua) Phonology

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1 Introduction

Mong Leng (also called Hmong Njua or Green Hmong) is a dialect group within Far Western Hmong, and Mong Leng varieties are mutually intelligible with several other dialects of Far Western Hmong, including Hmong Daw (White Hmong). The Mong Leng speaker population is quite large for a Hmongic language, and there are perhaps 1,245,000 or more speakers worldwide. These speakers are distributed through parts of Southwestern China (Guizhou, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces), Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma and (via migration from Laos) the United States, French Guiana, France, Australia, and several other western nations.

This paper is meant as a short sketch of the phonological inventory and phonotactics of Mong Leng. The dialect presented in this paper is a somewhat idealized form of the language variety spoken by Mong Leng emigres from Xieng Khoang province in Laos. A different treatment of a similar dialect of Mong Leng (from Thailand) is to be found in Lyman (1974). Basic information about Hmong Daw (White Hmong) phonology is to be found in Heimbach (1969:xi-xiv, xvii-xxiii), and a different treatment is given by Ratliff (1992:8-13). Wang (1983:16-23) gives a good phonological sketch of the Dananshan dialect of Hmong, closely related to both Mong Leng and Hmong Daw.

1.1 Orthography

A number of different orthographies have been devised to write Mong Leng. The most widely used orthography is a modified form of the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA). It employs a number of unusual conventions, including the use of syllable-final “consonant” symbols to mark tones and the doubling of vowel symbols to indicate nasalization.

2 Segments

Mong Leng has a rather rich inventory of segments, but a very restricted inventory of segment types. It also displays a fairly rich set of tonal contrasts. Some of the tonal categories have significant correlates in voice quality.

2.1 Consonants

Mong Leng makes contrastive use of most of the widely recognized places of consonant articulation (*alveolar* being an important exception).

Simple consonants

/p/	/t/		/c/	/k/	/q/	/ʔ/
/p ^h /	/t ^h /		/c ^h /	/k ^h /	/q ^h /	
/ ⁿ p/	/ ⁿ t/		/ ⁿ c/	/ ⁿ k/	/ ⁿ q/	
/ ⁿ p ^h /	/ ⁿ t ^h /		/ ⁿ c ^h /	/ ⁿ k ^h /	/ ⁿ q ^h /	
	/ts/	/tʃ/	/tɕ/			
	/ts ^h /	/tʃ ^h /	/tɕ ^h /			
	/ ⁿ ts/	/ ⁿ tʃ/	/ ⁿ tɕ/			
	/ ⁿ ts ^h /	/ ⁿ tʃ ^h /	/ ⁿ tɕ ^h /			
/m/	/n/		/ɲ/	(/ŋ/)		
	/v/	/ʒ/	/j/			
	/f/	/s/	/ʃ/	/ç/		/h/
	(/s ^h /)					
	/l/					
	/ʎ/					

Table 1: Inventory of simple consonants.

Table 1 gives the inventory of stop consonants in Mong Leng. A few explanatory notes are in order:

- The retroflex affricates of Mong Leng correspond to retroflex plosives in Hmong Daw. For many speakers, the retroflex affricates have merged with the postalveolar affricates.
- Unlike Hmong Daw, Mong Leng does not have a contrasting series of voiceless nasals.
- The palatal stops have a slightly affricated release, and vary widely in their place of articulation. Some speakers pronounce them as [tɕ], [tɕ^h], [ɲtɕ], and [ɲtɕ^h]. For other speakers, they may be realized as palatalized dorsals, perhaps [k^j], [k^hj], [ɲk^j], and [ɲk^hj].

- The velar nasal /ŋ/ is very rare as a consonant onset, occurring only in one noun (*gus* ‘goose’) and in a few ideophonic expressions (typically called “expressives” by linguists working the Asianist tradition). Depending on analysis, /ŋ/ may occur as a syllable coda.
- At least one lexical item is usually produced with an aspirated dental fricative: *xob* [s^hoŋ] ‘negative imperative’ < *ts^hoŋ. The particle *txha* ‘thus’ varies in pronunciation, and is sometimes produced with this onset as well: [ts^haŋ ~ s^haŋ ~ haŋ].

Clusters

The only true consonant clusters in Mong Leng are obstruent-lateral clusters. The lateral combines with all of the common labial and velar obstruents (see Table 2). These

/p/ [pɬ]	/p ^h / [p ^h ɬ]	/ ⁿ p/ [mpɬ]	/ ⁿ p ^h / [mp ^h ɬ]	/ml/
/k/ [kɬ ~ tɬ]	/k ^h / [k ^h ɬ ~ t ^h ɬ]	/ ⁿ k/ [ŋkɬ ~ ntɬ]	/ ⁿ k ^h / [ŋk ^h ɬ ~ nt ^h ɬ]	

Table 2: Consonant clusters.

could be analyzed, alternatively, as obstruents with a secondary lateral release. However, such an analysis complicates the inventory of consonant features unnecessarily.

2.2 Vowels

Oral Monophthongs

Mong Leng has a relatively unexceptional six vowel system, shown in Figure 1.

/i/	/i̥/	/u/
[i]	[i̥]	[u]
/e/		/o/
[e]		[ɔ]
	/a/	
	[æ ~ a]	

Figure 1: Oral monophthongs.

Nasal Monophthongs

There are three nasalized vowels in Mong Leng, shown in Figure 2. Note that these vowels, especially the high vowels, are sometimes followed by a velar nasal coda. Phonologically, there are at least two possible analyses of these rhymes. On the one hand, we could hypothesize that these rhymes are underlyingly VN sequences. The nasal coda triggers nasal voicing, and the nasal is subsequently deleted, optionally after high vowels and necessarily after /a/. The other option is to treat these vowels as

/ĩ/	/ũ/
[ĩŋ ~ ěŋ ~ ě]	[ũŋ ~ õŋ ~ õ]
/ã/	
[ã]	

Figure 2: Nasal monophthongs.

underlyingly nasalized, and to attribute the nasal coda after high vowels to so-called “nasal coda restoration.”

Diphthongs

All Mong Leng diphthongs consist of a syllabic nucleus (/a/ or /u/) followed by an off-glide. The diphthongs are listed in Figure 3.

/ai/	[aɨ]
/au/	[aw]
/aĩ/	[au]
/ua/	[u ^ə ~ ɒ ^ə]

Figure 3: Diphthongs.

2.3 Tones

Every Mong Leng syllable bears one of seven contrasting tonal contours. These are typically identified, by linguists working on Hmongic languages, by referencing their historical categories (A1, A2, B1, . . . , D2). A summary of the tonal system is given in Table 3.

A1	/H/	[˥]	high	<i>tib</i>	[ti˥] ‘to pile’
A2	/HL/	[˥˩]	high falling	<i>tij</i>	[ti˥˩] ‘older brother’
B1	/MH/	[˥˨]	high rising	<i>tiv</i>	[ti˥˨] ‘to endure’
B2/C2	/MLf/	[˩˥f]	falling breathy	<i>tig</i>	[tʰi˩˥f] ‘to turn’
C1	/M/	[˨˩]	mid	<i>ti</i>	[ti˨˩] ‘close’
D1	/L/	[˩˩]	low	<i>tis</i>	[ti˩˩] ‘wing’
D2	/MLʔ/	[˩˩ʔ]	falling creaky	<i>tim</i>	[ti˩˩ʔ] ‘because’

Table 3: Tones.

There is an additional, morphologically derived tone, that is a variant of tone D2. This tone, /LM/ [˨˩] “low-rising”, occurs as a variant of D2 in specific phrase final positions and in a derivational morphological process that converts locative prepositions having the D2 /MLʔ/ tone into demonstratives.

3 Phonotactics

The phonotactics of Mong Leng are quite straightforward. For the most part, consonants (as onsets) combine in free assortment with vowels and tones to form syllables. Morphemes are, for the most part, monosyllabic, and most words consist of a single morpheme. Disyllabic words are quite common, however, and there are many polysyllabic words (mostly compounds). In these words, there are no special constraints on what consonants may occur word medially, nor is there any evidence of resyllabification.

Syllable types

If nasality is treated a vowel feature, rather than the realization of a segmental phoneme, and if the phonatory correlates of tone are likewise treated as tone features, then there are only four syllable types in Mong Leng: CV, CVV, C₁C₂V, and C₁C₂VV (where C₁ is a labial or dorsal obstruent and C₂ is a lateral approximate).

Phonotactic constraints

There are a few significant constraints upon the phonotactic structure of syllables in Mong Leng. The important constraints are as follows:

- Nasalized vowels do not occur in diphthongs. This reflects a diachronically earlier constraint against (nasal) codas in rhymes containing diphthongs.
- The high front vowel /i/ does not occur after uvulars. This is due to historical process that lowered front vowels in this environment.
- The B2/C2 tone (“falling breathy”) never occurs in syllables with aspirated onsets (with the possible exception of a few expressives). Likewise, the tones A2 and D2 only occur in the same syllable as aspirated consonants in relatively recent loanwords from other languages (primarily, Chinese).

Bibliography

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