Comments received for
ISO 639-3 Change Request
2009-090

Outcome: Partially adopted with
  Significant modification
  Effective date: 2010-03-30
Registration Authority decision on Change Request no. 2009-090: to merge the current code elements [hnj] “Hmong Njua” and [hmz] “Hmong Shua” into a single code element [mjb] “Mong” (new identifier), and remove them from the mapping of [hmn] Hmong (macrolanguage)

The request to merge and retire the current code elements for Hmong Njua and Hmong Shua into a single code element named “Mong” is rejected. While the requester of this change provided a great deal of material for discussion, the evidence provided lacked linguistic information, and was largely based on sociolinguistic arguments that were only applicable to a relatively small proportion of the speakers of these two languages (speakers and descendants who emigrated from Southeast Asia and are resident in the United States), while ignoring the significant populations of speakers in China. Linguists who are aware of the linguistic and sociolinguistic situations of speakers living in China and countries of Southeast Asia presented compelling arguments against the merging of these two languages, demonstrating sufficient distinction to retain these as two separate languages.

Two of the commentators were sympathetic with the desire of the requester to obtain recognition for the autonyms used by speakers in the United States, both for the broader reference name “Mong”, and the more specific names “Mong Leng” and “Mong Njua” as names associated with [hnj]. They noted that several varieties of the language (or group of closely related languages) known most widely as “Hmong” are also known among their speakers as “Mong”, because the voiceless bilabial nasal is no longer a feature of their spoken varieties. Indeed, practically all non-Hmong speakers in the United States are unable to pronounce the voiceless nasal, instead pronouncing the name as /mon/. While disagreeing with the requester regarding the distribution of the loss / absence of this feature (it being absent from some dialects of several Hmongic languages—well beyond the two languages identified in the request—while being present in other dialects of the same languages), they agreed that the spelling reflecting the voiced nasal should be valid. For this reason they agreed that “Mong” is as proper a name as is “Hmong” for these languages. They therefore recommended adding “Mong” as another name used for the macrolanguage Hmong [hmn], and recommended also adding “Mong Leng” and “Mong Njua” as additional names (along with some additional recommendations associated with Ethnologue descriptions for these languages).

The addition of the names “Mong Leng” and “Mong Njua” for use with the ISO 639-3 code element [hnj] was discussed and approved by the review committee that works with the ISO 639-3 RA. The addition of the name “Mong” to the macrolanguage [hmn] was discussed with the ISO 639-2 Registration Authority and the ISO 639 Joint Advisory Committee. They adopted this action effective 08-03-2010 (announced 24-03-2010).

While no name change has been adopted with regard to [hmz] “Hmong Shua” (the rationale for including this language in the request having been overturned), it was discovered that [hmz] was erroneously omitted from the Hmong / Mong [hmn] macrolanguage group in the past. Therefore, [hmz] has been added as a member language of Hmong / Mong [hmn]. (This change was effective 01-21-2010).

By ISO 639-3 policy, there is no change made to the identifiers for [hnj] “Hmong Njua / Mong Leng / Mong Njua” and [hmz] “Hmong Shua”. While the mnemonic character of the identifier may appear to give preference to one name (as more closely reflecting its spelling), the standard does not by this situation express any actual preference or priority to any name associated with the code element.
RESPONSES TO ISO 639-3 REGISTRY CHANGE PROPOSAL (2009-090)
SUBMITTED BY PROFESSOR PAOZE THAO
Response made by Robert McLaughlin, SIL East Asia Group

GENERAL REMARKS
Professor Thao’s proposal here brings into focus the important difference between languages on one hand — the subject of the ISO 693-3 registry — and distinct socio-linguistic groups on the other. The two do not coincide, and one language may contain a diversity of socio-linguistic groups. Members of the Hmong (Mong) diaspora speak the same language(s) as their Southeast Asian and Chinese counterparts. Yet, the Hmong (Mong) in the US are in an important sense, a distinct group in their own right, over and apart from Hmong in other countries. As such, they as a community may develop a consensus — and Professor Thao’s proposal may reflect one such consensus — about their identity or other important issues relating to their ethnicity (such as the name of their ethnic group) that run contrary to the worldwide Hmong majority. It is exceedingly hard to include both the general, worldwide (or “homeland”) viewpoint with that of a distinct subgroup without neglecting one of the two sides. Until a good mechanism is found to balance both, the ISO 639-3 registry wisely concentrates on the majorities of each of the Hmong languages. We would be wise not to forget that other self-perceptions do exist, and they are also valid within the scope of the communities affected, even if an accurate portrayal is beyond the current scope of the ISO registry.

The problem is compounded in this case since Hmong scholars outside China are, naturally, focused on the Hmong populations in Southeast Asia and the worldwide diaspora, especially in the USA. Due to language and political barriers, far less work has been published on Hmong/Miao in China, despite its crucial role as the origin of the Hmong-Mien language family and the home of the majority of Hmong plus nearly all speakers of related, non-Hmong (Miao) languages.

LINGUISTIC ISSUES

LINGUISTIC CLASSIFICATION
Regarding the proposed linguistic classifications, I know of no published classificatory scheme consistent with what Professor Thao is proposing. (At the highest classificatory level, he is following the standard Chinese language-family classification. Chinese scholars consider Hmong and other Miao languages to be part of the Hmong-Mien [Miao-Yao] branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Scholars outside China, including the ISO registry, consider Hmong-Mien to be an independent language family.)

According to the mainstream Chinese academic view, all the languages represented by ISO codes hmw, hnj, hnz, hrn, and cqd are considered to be part of the First Vernacular of the Chuanqianlian Subdialect of the Western (or, CQD) Dialect of the Miao language. (The term “language” in Chinese is best understood as a language branch or similarly large group of historically related languages, while the term subdialect could be translated as “language cluster”. With mutual intelligibility as the defining criterion, each vernacular would count as at least one separate language for ISO registry purposes.) The official standard is based in Dananshan in northwestern Guizhou, and the autonym is “Hmong” (mong, tone class I). The mainstream view is that speakers of the First Vernacular can all understand each other without significant problem. These conclusions were based on government-sponsored linguistic surveys conducted by Wang Fushi et al during the 1950s. While I the assertion of
mutual intelligibility is open to question, this work nonetheless forms the basic framework for classifying the Hmong and related languages. See Wang and Mao, Luo and Yang, et al.

Ji Anlong presents an alternate classificatory scheme (similar to an earlier proposal by Xian Songkui) in which Sinicized Miao (“Skewed-Comb Miao”) is contrasted with White Miao and “Standard Hmong”. Hmong Njua (青苗) is not mentioned at all, but it is clearly excluded from classification with Sinicized Miao since the geographical range listed for the latter does not include counties with significant Hmong Njua populations (Ji, pp 165-168).

“HMONG” VS “MONG” AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE
I know of no Chinese scholars who speak of a “Mong” language as opposed to “Hmong”. This may be the result of Chinese scholarly terminology and limitations of Chinese characters to represent syllables that do not exist in Chinese. Chinese officials and scholars do not normally use “Hmong” to identify the language(s) we are discussing here. Rather, they refer to it as the First Vernacular of the Chuanqiandian Subdialect of the Chuanqiandian [or Western] Dialect of the Miao language. (Luo and Yang, pg 3, for example). When indicating the most common autonym for speakers of the First Vernacular, Chinese scholars will sometimes transliterate [m̥oŋ] with the Chinese character 蒙 [məŋ³⁵], as Chinese doesn’t have a way of even indicating voiceless nasals as English does with /hm/. This, naturally, is easily confused with Professor Thao’s proposed name of Mong. But Professor Thao is attempting to contrast [m̥oŋ] with [moŋ], something that Chinese scholars, to my knowledge, have never attempted to do.

Following Purnell’s work and known linguistic evidence, one potential classification of First Vernacular subgroups is to divide it into four branches: Sinicized Hmong (hmz), White Hmong (mww), Horned Hmong (hrm), and what has been called “Hua Miao”, which itself may in turn contain northern and southern subgroups. Current ISO codes cqd and hnj would fall under this “Hua Miao” label.

As best as scholars have been able to reconstruct, the Hmong-Mien (or Miao-Yao) protolanguage had *m̥n̥iŋ (tone class A) as the ancestral word for the modern Hmong/Mong and other cognate reflexes. (Wang and Mao 1995, pp 75 and 395). In his historical reconstruction of Miao and Yao languages, Purnell (1970, pp 24-25, 40) groups hmz, hmw, hnj, and cqd together as having a common ancestor, “West A” (in turn descended from Proto-Western-Miao), and contrasts with other Western Miao languages such as Large Flowery Miao (hmn) and Huishui Miao (hme); the West A ancestral word for “Hmong” is reconstructed as *m̥oŋ, in tone class I (Purnell appendix A, pg 129). I have not seen yet any theories that the requester’s autonym of “Mong” (moŋ) is independently derived apart from “Hmong” (m̥oŋ). On the contrary, the autonym “Mong” is easily derived from the intermediate, West A precursor *m̥oŋ through the simple process of adding the property [+voice] to previously voiceless nasals – exactly what would be expected since voiceless nasals are less common, or “natural” than voiced. If we are to re-define the Hmong macrolanguage, it would be more justified to narrow the definition of “Hmong” to the languages descended from Purnell’s West A protolanguage - a classification which would still contradict the current proposal.
EVIDENCE FOR DELINEATING “MONG”

Professor Thao has given no wordlist evidence to support his claim. The claim that the “Mong” language is “distinct” from Hmong does not logically require that his proposal be adopted. The fact that they are distinct is the very rationale for having the current, separate codes for hmz and hnj in the first place. To prove his proposal is the most appropriate classification, he would need to offer plausible proof that “Mong” (hmz and hnj) and Hmong (mww, hnn, cqd, etc.) did not share an immediate, common ancestor; and as someone proposing a change to an existing classificatory scheme based on current scholarship – though admittedly imperfect – the burden is on the requester to demonstrate that his proposal is more probable than the existing classification. Two further comments are in order here: why is the requestor classifying Sinicized Hmong hmz and Hmong Njua hnj together as opposed to all other languages in the current Hmong macrolanguage? I did not see evidence for this. Second, if Professor Thao is using the autonym (voiced vs voiceless nasal initial) as his classificatory criterion, it is invalid for the reasons demonstrated already. Furthermore, I have personally found evidence that some speakers of Chuanqiandian Standard (cqd) in at least two locations – including the official Dananshan standard reference point – also now have dropped the distinction between voiced and voiceless nasals; both are now voiced.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC ISSUES

AUTONYMS

With no written records, the claim that “We have always called ourselves Mong” cannot be substantiated, and is in fact contradicted by the two historical reconstructions discussed above. (It should also be noted that, to my knowledge, Hmongb Nzhuab/Njuab and Hmong Lens/Leeg are both autonyms of significant populations.)

From the text of the proposal, it appears that Professor Thao is himself Hmong Njua, and so his opinion per se is valid evidence in favor of listing “Mong” as one of the names used for this group. However, the Ethnologue 16th ed. already recognizes “Mong” (specifically, “Mong Ntsua”) as an alternate name for Hmong Njua. Since he is not a member of the Sinicized Hmong language group and has not presented any linguistic evidence to support his assertion, his opinion does not constitute valid reason for changing the name or alternate name of Sinicized Hmong.

POPULATION FIGURES

According to the Ethnologue 16th ed., the combined populations of hmz and hnj is about 562,000 speakers, yet the proposer claims a population of 2.3 million for his Mong language, leaving over 1.6 million speakers unaccounted for. The aforementioned problem of representing the word “Hmong” using Chinese characters may account for the discrepancy.

LANGUAGE-COMMUNITY ATTITUDES

Folk history and folk etymology can be important sources of evidence for determining whether a given group is distinct or part of a larger ethnic group, but they are not per se valid evidence for determining language classifications or historical relationships. Since Hmong Njua and Sinicized Hmong already have their own ISO codes, the separate identities of these two groups has already been accorded recognition. The fact that they call themselves “Mong” has already been addressed. Furthermore, the proposer has not indicated any evidence, aside from the common pronunciation of the autonym, why Hmong Njua and Sinicized Hmong should be grouped together apart from other Hmong groups.
PETITIONS AND LETTERS OF SUPPORT

Professor Thao has made an impressive effort to gather petitions from a large number of people. However, the value of this evidence is limited since it is still essentially an expression of attitudes, which has some validity as previously addressed, but does not justify any of the changes which Professor Thao is proposing. (The one exception would be letters of support from scholars who provide linguistic or scientifically valid opinion research in support of his proposal. However, if such evidence has been offered, I have not seen it.) A petition, even one with thousands of signatures, is not adequate evidence of anything other than the attitudes of the people who signed it. To be considered as valid evidence for deciding the issues raised in the proposal, it would need to meet the same tests as do the sociolinguistic questionnaires used in language survey: they must be both accurate and representative. Regarding the latter criterion, consider that the ISO registry estimates that at most one-third of Hmong Njua speakers live outside Asia and only one percent of all Sincized Hmong speakers live anywhere outside China. Unless the appropriate proportion of petition signatures were collected in China and Southeast Asia, we could hardly consider the signers representative of either language group.

IMPACT OF ADOPTING THE PROPOSAL

The proposer has made it clear that he wishes to use the ISO endorsement of his Hmong vs Mong classification to gain recognition from political and administrative authorities. This may result in policy-makers and the general public having a concept of the Hmong/Mong that does not fit the known linguistic and ethnographic evidence.

SOURCES CITED


Xian, Songkui. 1997a. Demarcating Subdialects and Vernaculars within the Western Miao Dialect, part 1, in Yunnan Nationalities Languages 1997(1): 54-56. [in Chinese only]


As the requester has actually raised two different issues in the proposed changes, I will address my comments about them separately:

1. Objection of those in the US to being called Hmong Njua or some variety of this; they seem to prefer Mong Leng.

   I would propose changing the main listing for this language [hnj] to Mong Leng with Hmong Njua then being an alternate name. Calling the language simply "Mong" is not descriptive enough. Although the people may refer to themselves simply as "Mong," so do many other related but distinct groups. The reality is that we need a more descriptive name to distinguish between different groups; sometimes this name is given by outsiders and sometimes by insiders. If this one group insists on being called only "Mong," what about the other groups? Calling one group only "Mong" and others Hmong + something else would imply that the group called "Mong" is the main or most important group.

   However, as we do want to take into account how the people themselves feel about the name and avoid calling them something they find offensive, I would suggest this alternative name of Mong Leng. Otherwise, it will lead to additional problems, including the second issue below:

2. Classification of Hmong Njua/Mong Leng [hnj] as a subset of Hmong [hmn]

   The requester has objections to the Hmong Njua/Mong Leng language being listed under the macrolanguage Hmong [hmn]. In my understanding, it seems this change request is about a problem in the US, where the Mong Leng feel they are not given the same recognition as the Hmong Daw, and so do not like the word "Hmong" referring to both groups. It is an important issue for them because apparently the Hmong Daw lect has been given preference in the US. In actuality, though the name for both groups is written "Hmong," virtually no non-Hmong speaker in the US is able to pronounce the voiceless nasal, instead pronouncing the name as /moŋ/.
However, the global situation is very different. Here in China, there is no such distinction between "Hmong" and "Mong." Of the language groups in China that are listed under the macrolanguage Hmong, there are some which pronounce their autonym /moŋ/ (with the voiceless nasal), and some that pronounce it /moŋ/ (with a voiced nasal). This is simply a phonological issue; those that have the voiceless nasal in their phonological system use it to refer to themselves and all other Hmong groups; those that do not have the voiceless nasal in their phonological system refer to all Hmong groups without it. The way speakers in China distinguish between different Hmong groups is by a more specific name, such as (H)mong Njua or (H)mong Shi.

Also, in China the official orthography spells the name "Hmong", even though the village upon which the standard dialect is based (Dananshan in Guizhou) does not have the voiceless nasal in their phonological system, pronouncing it /moŋ/. Historically, it seems that many groups in China (and elsewhere) have dropped the original voiceless nasals from their sound systems.

As an alternative to the request, could we change the name of the macrolanguage Hmong to "Hmong/Mong" instead? The problem with having several languages listed under one code and then just distinguishing them as different dialects is that the Hmong language family is very complex. Many of the existing codes already cover multiple dialects or, in some cases, multiple languages that are also then broken down into further dialects with limited intelligibility (e.g. Chuanqianidian cluster Miao [cqd]).

If you would like clarification on any of my comments, please let me know.

Carey McLaughlin
SIL East Asia Group

Proposal: add “Mong Njua,” “Mong Leng” and “Moob Leeg” as alternate names; delete “Hmong Lens” and “Hmoob Leeg” from alternate names (The second part of this recommendation pertains to the Ethnologue entry for this language. The standard does not include these names.)

Rationale
1. With regard to Hmong Nzhua, many groups of speakers of this variety of Hmong do not include voiceless nasals in their phoneme inventory. Consequently, the realization of their autonym (minus tones) is \([mɔŋ \نظ]\) or \([mʊŋ \نظ]\) or \([mʊŋ \ظ]\) rather than the corresponding \([m̥ʊŋ \نظ]\) or \([m̥ʊŋ \ظ]\) or \([m̥ʊŋ \ظ]\) as realized by speakers of this variety who retain voiceless nasals in their phoneme inventory. The varying pronunciation of Hmong Nzhua autonyms should be recognized by the ISO and those that begin with a voiced nasal may be represented by spelling the autonyms without an initial \(h\) : Mong Njua.

2. With regard to Mong Leng, voiceless nasals no longer appear in this group’s phoneme inventory; consequently, the realization of their autonym (minus tones) is \([mʊŋ \نظ]\) and would rarely if ever be \([mʊŋ \ظ]\). The Mong Leng pronunciation of their own autonym should be recognized by the ISO and may be represented by spelling their autonym without an initial \(h\) : Mong Leng, and by including the Romanized Popular Alphabet spelling of the autonym: Moob Leeg.

3. With regard to the forms “Hmong Lens” and “Hmoob Leeg” suggested for deletion: 
   - Hmong Lens is an incomplete copy into English of the Chinese standard Chuanqiandian written form Hmongb Lens, inconsistently omitting the tone letter \(b\) from the first syllable but retaining the tone letter \(s\) of the second syllable.
   - Hmoob Leeg is possibly a direct conversion from the Chinese Chuanqiandian written form Hmongb Lens to the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) used by many Hmong outside China. The Moob Ntsuab/Moob Leeg version of the Romanized Popular Alphabet does not use \(hm\), \(hn\) or \(hny\); thus the correct spelling in RPA is Moob Leeg. The Hmong Daw version of RPA would indeed spell the name Hmoob Leeg (Heimbach, White Hmong-English Dictionary, 1980, p. 67) but this usage may be derogatory (Lonely Planet Hill Tribes Phrasebook, 1999, p. 101).

Supporting Evidence
1. Evidence for Hmong Nzhua groups some of which use both voiceless nasal and voiced initials, some of which use only voiced nasal initials:
   a) In China: speakers of one variety call themselves “Hmongb Nzhuab” while Chinese sources call them 青苗 Qing Miao or 綠苗 Lü Miao; they live in Malipo and Maguan counties of SE Yunnan; this group preserves all 8 etymological tones and the voiceless nasals. (Source XYZ 1998, pp. 31-32)
   b) In Vietnam: speakers of a variety very similar to #1 above call themselves “Hmongb Lens” (‘Hmong Leng’) or “Hmongb Shuabbuaf” (‘Hmong of Sa Pa’). Some Vietnamese sources call this group Meo Den ‘Black Meo.’ Speakers live in Sa Pa in NW Vietnam. This group also preserves all 8 etymological tones and the voiceless nasals. (Source XYZ 1998, p. 32)
   c) In China: the reference lect for Student’s Practical Miao-Chinese-English Handbook is Hmongb Nzhuab, called 青苗 Qing Miao in Chinese, which may be roughly translated ‘Blue Miao’ in English. One location where this variety is spoken is Xiao Dala village in the Lao Jiezi area of Qiaotou Miao-Zhuang Municipality of Hekou Yao Autonomous County in the
Honghe Hani-Yi Autonomous Prefecture in southern Yunnan Province. The voiceless nasal initials do not occur in the Qiaotou variety; the voiced nasals /m, n, ny/ are used instead. Although the variety name is written “Hmongb Nzhuab” in the standard Chuanqiandian orthography, Qiaotou speakers’ autonym is [mɔŋ ɲʈʂuʌ], not [mɔŋ ʈʂuʌ]. (Xiong and Cohen, 2005, Kunming: Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, pp. 1, 7, 9-10)

2. Evidence for Mong Leng varieties which use the voiced nasal initial in their autonyms

1. In China: a subgroup of Mong Leng who live in “Pingbian county, parts of Wenshan prefecture and scattered in the area up to Kaiyuan county in SE Yunnan” use the autonyms [mɔŋ⁵⁵ sʂɹ⁵⁵] or [mɔŋ⁵⁵ lɦeŋ³³]. Exonyms used for this subgroup include 青苗 Qing Miao and 花苗 Hua Miao. (Source XYZ 1998, p. 29)

2. In Laos, Thailand, USA, France, Canada, French Guyana: a subgroup of Mong Leng numbering well over 200,000 use the autonyms [mɔŋ⁵⁵ ntʃuɜ⁵⁵] or [mɔŋ⁵⁵ lɦeŋ³²]. Exonyms include Meo Dam ‘Black Meo’ or Meo Lai ‘Striped Meo’ in some Thai sources and Blue Meo or Blue Hmong in English sources. (Source XYZ 1998, p. 30)

3. “All the Hmong Leng varieties share a number of distinctive phonological features: The voiceless nasals *m, n, n̥* have merged with the voiced nasals /m, n, n̥/. . .” (Source XYZ 1998, p. 31)

Note that the Mong Leng varieties discussed here under [hnj] belong to Southern Hua Miao and are distinct from the Hmongb Lenl variety belonging to Northern Hua Miao in Weixin County of Zhaotong, Yunnan. (Source XYZ 1998, p. 26)

Need for Further Work on this Listing: The variety now listed as [hnj] Hmong Njua actually comprises two distinct linguistic varieties as noted in the supporting evidence above:

1) Hmong Nzhua of China and Vietnam

2) Hmong Leng of China, Southeast Asia and Western countries, often called “Hmongb Shib” in China but called “Mong Ntsua” in Southeast Asia and Western countries.

Supporting Quote from Hmong Teacher: “外国的‘Hmongb Nzhuab’是中国的‘Hmongb Shib’，而不是中国的‘Hmongb Nzhua’。” [Translation: The “Hmongb Nzhuab” outside of China are the same as the “Hmongb Shib” of China; they are not the “Hmongb Nzhua” of China.] (Hmong Teacher ZYQ in personal communication, 4 December 2009)

Summary: Because the [hnj] listing encompasses not one but two distinct linguistic varieties that are closely related and highly mutually intelligible, and because these two varieties are also subsumed Chuanqiandian Cluster Miao (which has a separate code element), both listings will require further consideration in the future for appropriate clarification. For the present, I recommend that the listing be maintained in recognition of the large number of Mong Leng and Mong Ntsua speakers in Southeast Asia and Western countries, and in distinction from the Hmong Daw listing which is the other major Hmong variety that is well-known in Southeast Asia and Western countries. I recommend that the name spellings “Mong Njua” and “Mong Leng” be added as alternate names...
on behalf of the great number of speakers who do not use the voiceless nasal in their autonym as the Hmong Daw do. Finally, I recommend that the incorrectly-spelled forms “Hmong Lens” and “Hmoob Leeg” be deleted as alternate names.

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