Phonetics of the Hmong White Language
Kia Thao – Education - thaoki@uwec.edu
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Lynsey K. Wolter – English Department

Overview
- To describe the Hmong White Language in the Eau Claire area.
- To develop methods for Hmong White pronunciation and writing.
- Significance: To keep the Hmong Language alive by teaching the younger generation the language of Hmong White.
- Long term goal: To develop a Hmong White Language curriculum to teach the younger generation.

Method
- Interviewing the Hmong White speakers of the Eau Claire area using a list of words from a Hmong White dictionary; the words include a mixture of consonants, vowels, and endings.
- Asking questions about the participants’ ability and perceptions of Hmong White.
- Using PRAAT to record and analyze pronunciations of each participant.
- Using ProsodyPro.praat to analyze the tones of one speaker.
- Note: Participants were divided into two groups. Ages 16 to 25 were considered youth while ages 26 and up were considered elders.

Survey Question Results
The younger participants were asked to comment on how confident they were when speaking in Hmong to an elder. Based on all participants, their comments about their confidence were confirmed by their knowledge of Hmong White vocabulary. For example, Participant 6 felt shy and embarrassed when it came to speaking in Hmong. Out of 109 words, P6 knew 36 words.

The elder participants mainly spoke Hmong to their family members when they were younger compared to today where they are now speaking both Hmong and English. One participant said that sometimes she would speak “Hmonglish,” a combination of Hmong and English words. The same participant also commented that when the younger Hmong generation speaks, their words are not as clear anymore. The example she gave was the word meaning “also.” When a child says, “I want to go too,” the word for “too” is pronounced in two different ways; “thiab” and “hiab”.

On another note, the elders were asked to comment about pairs of words that have the same meaning. In the English language we would call those words synonyms. Even though this question seems to ask about synonyms, there is an interesting aspect to the “synonyms” of the Hmong White Language. Some words that the Hmong people use are borrowed from other languages. For example, the word for car in Laotian, it is lu fais, however in Hmong, it is tseb. To what extent does the Hmong vocabulary help us investigate the history of the Hmong people?

Voiced & Voiceless Sonorants
Hmong White has four pairs of sonorants that can be voiced or voiceless. They are /m/ and /n/ [hm], /n/ and /n/ [hn], /n/ and /n/ [hny], and /h/ and /[hl]. Some speakers replace some voiceless sonorants with voiced ones, for example instead of pronouncing the word hma as [ma] some speakers are pronouncing it as [ma]. An interesting discovery though the research shows that there is a variation of the voiced and voiceless sonorants among the speakers. P1 produced voiceless sonorants consistently while P4 replaced all the voiceless sonorants with a voiced sonorant. With this evidence, why is this happening?

Some participants mention about spending time with a Hmong Green speaker and Hmong Green speakers does not have voiceless sonorants. Is Hmong Green influencing the Hmong White speakers? Or is it English that is influencing the Hmong White language?

Synonyms
Synonyms are in most languages however in the Hmong White language, these “synonyms” tell more than that. As stated before, the Hmong White speakers had borrowed many words of other languages like the word for car. In Laotian, it is lu fais, however in Hmong, it is tseb. To what extent does the Hmong vocabulary help us investigate the history of the Hmong people?

Acknowledgements
- Dr. Lynsey Wolter: Faculty mentor collaborator
- Dr. Jessica Miller: Advice on the survey questions
- Dr. Erica Benson: Advice given to the survey questions and borrowing her equipments
- Dr. Christin DePouw: Advice given to the survey questions and for the books for the research
- ORSP: Funding this research
- All Participants: Participating in this research