

## Hidden Melodies of the Hmong Language: The Rhythmers

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### Abstract

Rhythmers are used in the Hmong language. However, there is no literature on them. The word rhythmmer itself is not in the English dictionary; it was first observed and termed by Dr. Cho Ly in his Ph.D. dissertation (Ly, 2004). The objective of this study is to further understand the meaning of rhythmers by analyzing approximately 100 sentences with rhythmers. The rhythmers studied consisted of those taken from Dr. Ly's Ph.D. data and everyday dialogue. After observation, it was discovered that rhythmers add meaning to sentences and/or change the meaning of the sentences. In some cases, they only add rhythm to sentences and help the sentences flow better. They are not necessarily meaningless words. They are usually placed at the end or beginning of sentences or at the end of a clause. Nonetheless, they cannot be used randomly. Therefore, the rhythmers are a new part of speech.

**Keywords:** Hmong language, Hmong words, rhythmers, speech

### Introduction

The parts of speech, as described by the Western linguists, cover all the words used in Western languages and aim to cover all the words used in the world. They constitute a very useful base to describe all the languages of the world, but in the case of Hmong language, some words do not belong to any of the parts of speech described so far. For his Ph.D. research, Ly (2004) noticed that many words used by the Hmong speakers of France, the United States of America, French Guiana, and Australia have never been described in the literature. Despite their heavy usage (8.59% to 13.57% of the words transcribed depending on the countries), they seem

to have been forgotten by the authors who have described the Hmong language. Ly suggested the term “rhythmers” to name them. He created this word based on his observation that usage of these words adds rhythm to the sentence and makes the Hmong language melodious. But, as said earlier, the total lack of literature on this topic does not help the study of this new Hmong part of speech. In his Hmong Linguistic course, Ly introduced this notion to the co-authors of this paper and had them study the rhythmers in a project.

This article aims to describe the rhythmers more in detail. First, concrete examples of Hmong sentences with rhythmers will be used to better describe to what the rhythmers refer. Then, a definition will be suggested. Furthermore, the authors will describe how they have studied the rhythmers for this paper, then analyze a few of them to show that these words do not correspond to any existing part of speech. The data gathered by Ly show that some rhythmers can be used by themselves, while others are used in association with another rhythmmer. Both single and double rhythmers will be studied in this paper. The findings suggest that if the rhythmers do not have an intrinsic meaning, most of the time, they do contribute to change the meaning of the sentence. Nevertheless, sometimes they seem to just play that role of giving more rhythm to the sentence without adding any meaning. But most certainly, the scarcity of research on the rhythmers calls for more studies on them.

### **Description and Definition**

For the reader to have a better understanding of what a Hmong rhythmmer is, let us use a concrete example. In sentences like: “*Koj saib o, nwg tsi noog kuv has le na. Kuv ua caag paab nwg ma?*”, the words “*o, le na, and ma*” are rhythmers. At first, these words seem to not mean anything and seem to be there just to “balance” out the rhythm of the sentence. If one were to take these words out, the sentence would still be grammatically correct and make sense, but it

seems to be less natural and the flow seems to be less spontaneous. A closer look into the usage of these words show that in the clause *koj saib o*, *o* does not really change the meaning of the clause and this sentence would be translated as “Look”. It seems to be used just for rhythmic reasons. But, in the second clause *nwg tsi noog kuv has le na*, the words *le* and *na* do change the meaning of the clause. Without the rhythmers, the clause would be translated as “He does not listen to me” while with the rhythmers, it would be translated as “He does not listen to me at all”. Finally, in the second sentence, “*Kuv ua caag paab nwg*” would be translated as “How can I help him/her”, while with *ma* at the end, it translates as “How can I even help him/her”. By themselves, without being put in a sentence, *o*, *le*, *na*, and *ma* do not mean anything. In other respects, if the second sentence changes its rhythmers *ma* into another one like *mas*, then it would be translated to “Yes, how can I help him/her?”, which sounds incorrect in Hmong because *mas* seems to not be an appropriate rhythmmer in this sentence. More explanations in the analysis part are to come; however, this brief example led us to the following definition for this new part of speech:

A rhythmmer is a word used at the end of a sentence or a clause and adds some rhythm to the sentence. Even though it seems to be intrinsically meaningless, the rhythmmer sometimes plays a semantic role in the sentence and cannot be used indifferently.

Now let us describe how the rhythmers were studied in this paper.

## Methodology

The rhythmers studied can be classified into one of the following three categories: a single rhythmmer, the two rhythmers *mas* and *es*, and the double rhythmmer. *Mas* and *es* were put in a different category because they can also be used as an oral pause. There was an interest to see if they can also be considered as rhythmers. Finally, some double rhythmers were first observed

by Ly. He realized that a rhythmmer is not always used by itself: it can also be followed by another rhythmmer. A few of them were analyzed here as well.

The data for this study were gathered over a period of time. The first set of data was collected by Ly between 2001 and 2002, during his field research for his Ph.D. dissertation. Then using the rhythmers observed, he made up other sentences using them and introduced these sentences in his Hmong Linguistics and Teaching course (Spring 2019) as an assignment for his students. The students studied a total of 10 rhythmers used in different sentences: *os, ne, es, as, mas, pob, neb, nab, aib, and laib*. Five sentences were established for each of those rhythmers. Students also had to find 3 other rhythmers and use them in 5 different sentences. This totaled to approximately 10 rhythmers and 50 sentences. All the rhythmers were studied in group class projects. The purpose was to determine whether or not the rhythmers have a meaning, and if so, if their meaning would change when used in another context. After the course, there were 5 additional rhythmers studied: *li, li os, li as, li es, and li pob*. These were also collected by Ly and used in other sentences created by the authors. Five sentences were established for each rhythmmer, which equaled to 50 sentences. Overall, there were approximately 15 rhythmers and 100 sentences studied.

The sentences were analyzed using four steps. First, a rhythmmer was put into a sentence. The entire sentence and rhythmmer was interpreted and translated together. Then, the sentence was interpreted and translated without the rhythmmer. Next, other rhythmers were used to replace the rhythmmer and the sentence was re-interpreted. The sentences were contrasted and analyzed. Finally, there was a cross-analysis of rhythmers across different sentences. The same rhythmmer was used in different sentences and contexts. This allowed for observations on whether or not the rhythmmer would change its meaning.

The sentences were analyzed to answer a few questions like: does a rhythmmer have a meaning? Does it serve a purpose in the sentence? Does a rhythmmer always have the same meaning? Can multiple rhythmers have the same meaning? These questions will be answered in this study.

## Analysis

It was previously mentioned that the rhythmers studied can be classified into one of the following three categories: a single rhythmmer, the two rhythmers *mas* and *es*, and the double rhythmers.

*Pob*, *nab*, *os*, and *ne* are all single rhythmers and have no meaning by themselves.

### Pob

*Nws dag xwb pob!*

He/she must be only lying!

*Nws dag xwb!*

He/she is only lying!

*Nws dag xwb ne.*

See, I told you, he/she is only lying.

After observing the sentences, the rhythmmer *pob* is placed at the end of a sentence when a person is uncertain. *Pob* has not been observed to be placed at the beginning of a sentence, as a rhythmmer. It can be used to express desperation and frustration. When "*pob*" is annexed, the statement or thought is said with great uncertainty. The thought could also be a guess. It appears that the underlined words "must be" correspond to *pob*. It is believed so because if *pob* was subtracted from the sentence, it would then simply be "He/she is only lying". Someone is being accused of lying, but it is unknown if they are truly lying or not, hence the *pob*. When a different

rhythmer is placed at the end of the sentence, it now changes the overall meaning. This was observed to be true because when *ne* was annexed, the sentence is now pointing out or confirming that someone is indeed *just* lying. It is now said with certain and is no longer a guess or accusation.

### **Nab**

*Koj puas nco kuv thiab nab?*

Do you miss me as well? (manner)

*Koj puas nco kuv thiab?*

Do you miss me as well?

*Koj puas nco kuv ma?*

But do you miss me?

The rhythmer *nab* is observed to be placed essentially at the end of a sentence. The entire sentence is interpreted as, “Do you miss me as well (manner)?” The manner is the tone of how the sentence is said. The translation without the rhythmer is, “Do you miss me as well?” This translation does not have the “manner”. Comparison of these two sentences show that *nab* is observed to be annexed when confirmation or validation is wanted from the person asking. “Manner” is not the direct translation of *nab*, but simply adds to the manner in which the sentence is spoken, in a sweet, loving, or cute sense. Some people may even describe it as a cringe-causing expression, since it is commonly used when couples sweet talk to each other. However, the usage of another rhythmer gives the sentence a different meaning. In this study, *nab* was replaced by the rhythmer *ma*. The sentence would be “*koj puas nco kuv ma?*” This is translated as “But do you miss me?” The rhythmer *ma* may have been placed at the end of the sentence in Hmong but is translated to be at the beginning of the English sentence as “but.” The

reason behind this is because *ma* is only used when someone is being questioned, but not in the same manner as *nab*. *Ma* is a more direct way of asking with less “sweetness” to it.

### **Neb**

*Nws xav li cas neb?*

(Hmm, I wonder to myself) What does he/she think?

*Nws xav li cas?*

What does he/she think?

*Nws xav li cas ma?*

What does he/she think though?

After observations, the context of *neb* is found to be used when someone is having an inner thought or is speaking to themselves. *Neb* is used by a person who is not expecting a response from another individual. A response is only given when another individual (accidentally) overhears the thought. In the sample sentence, *neb* corresponds to “Hmm, I wonder to myself.” This is true because *neb* expresses that the question is a covert thought. When *neb* is subtracted, the sentence simply becomes a regular question. Without *neb* the question can be asked openly to anyone, rather than it being a personal question. Replacing *neb* with *ma* changes the meaning of the sentence from a personal question to a direct question. *Ma* translates to “though” and could also be loosely translated to “ultimately.” This indicates that *ma* is an ultimate thought contrasted to *neb* where it's a personal thought. It changes from a first person to a third person thought.

### **Os**

*Kuv tsis paub os.*

I don't know.

*Kuv tsis paub.*

I don't know.

*Kuv tsis paub as.*

I don't know (clueless, shrug)

*Os* has been observed to be placed at the end of a sentence to make it sound smoother. Although it does not add meaning to the sentence, it does add manner. *Os* is also annexed to sound polite, show understanding, and in some cases be submissive.

In these three sentences, there does not seem to be a difference between the first two sentences despite the usage of *os* in the first sentence. As stated earlier, *os* is just added to sound more polite, to make the statement sound smoother. But in this case, it cannot be translated into a concrete word in English. *Os* is a typical example of a rhythmmer used for rhythmic purposes only. Therefore, it is not surprising that changing *os* for another rhythmmer, *as* in this case, modifies the meaning of the sentence. Although *Kuv tsis paub as* has not been translated with the addition of an English word, it is perceived as a statement that expresses a total ignorance (the sentence meaning I do not know). The speaker says it to express that he/she is clueless and cannot help the interlocutor. Or like expressed here above, the usage of *as* here makes one perceive the speaker saying it with a shrug to better express his/her ignorance. If the sentence was used with another rhythmmer like *nawb* (*kuv tsis paub nawb*), it would be possible to translate it with a concrete word: "Hey, I don't know!" The word "hey" is added to translate *nawb* as "hey, it is not me, I don't know!"

### **Mas and es**

*Mas* and *es* are meaningless words intrinsically. *Mas* and *es* are observed to be single rhythmers; however, they were put into their own, separate category because they can serve as an

oral pause as well. An oral pause is a word said to mark a pause or rest when speaking.

Therefore, *mas* and *es* can only be translated from a context. A sentence with the rhythmmer is interpreted for the translation.

*Mas* and *es* are rhythmers that can be placed at the beginning or at the end of a sentence and/or a clause. They were observed to not be used interchangeably with each other. The reason for this is because *mas* is used for affirmative statements, while *es* is for negative statements. However, when used as an oral pause, they do not have a meaning.

A typical and frequent usage of *mas*, as a rhythmmer, is “*Yog los mas*” which translates to “Yes, it is” [“*Yog*” means yes in this sentence]. A correct usage for *es* is “*Tsis yog es*” which translates to “No, it is not” [“*Tsis yog*” means no in this sentence]. Inverting *yog* and *mas* in these two sentences makes them sound awkward: “*Yog los es*” and “*Tsis yog mas.*”

Nonetheless, one can still find a sentence like “*Yeej tsis yog los mas,*” which translates to, “Yes, it is not”, which may be confusing. Said in Hmong, the sentence can be contradicting, but the sentence makes much more sense when translated to English. This sentence is grammatically correct, even though it has “*tsis yog,*” a negative statement, with “*mas*”, a positive reinforcement, as the rhythmmer. In this sentence, *mas* is used to confirm a negative statement, which takes us back to our original assertion: *mas* is used in an affirmative statement. Even though the sentence has both negative and positive context, their purpose is not to contradict each other.

When used as oral pauses, the equivalent to *mas* and *es* in English would be “uh” or “um” with a few exceptions. When *mas* and *es* are used in sentences, they signify that a person has stopped speaking and is thinking about their next thought. The same rules apply to uh and um in English. For example: “I think it was, um, the color white.” In Hmong “*Kuv xav mas, yog xim*

*dawb*.” Unlike *uh* and *um*, *mas* and *es* were not found placed at the beginning of sentences and are viewed as formal speaking etiquettes. Compared to *uh* and *um*, they can be used anywhere in a sentence and are viewed as casual and informal speaking etiquettes. In Hmong, the musicality of the language sometimes requires a pause that is expressed by the usage of *mas* or *es*. Oral pauses, just like rhythmers, are used to dress the sentence up to sound more polite. The choice of rhythmers in Hmong may also play a role in the musicality of the language, but this aspect of the rhythmers has not been studied yet.

*Mas*, in most instances, indicates a submissive manner, used to be polite, obedient and show comprehension. This rhythmmer would usually be used when being lectured, scolded, or sometimes when being praised by elders. However, “*Yog los mas*” may be exaggerated in various ways and not fall under the “polite” category sometimes. Hence, the meaning of the rhythmmer may change depending on the tone it is said with.

Through experience and observations, Hmong is a simple, low maintenance language. An additional trait that was observed is that Hmong speakers sometimes drop the beginning letter of certain words to create a shorter version of it. For instance, in the sentence: “*Mus es, tsim txiaj nawb*.” The actual sentence is “*Mus ces, tsim txiaj nawb*.” [*ces* means then] which translates to “(If you) go then, be good.” “If you” is in parentheses, because in the Hmong sentence, it is not actually said aloud but is automatically implied. Sometimes, *es* will be mistaken as an oral pause in this case. Although it may be perceived as an oral pause, it is not. *Es* in this sentence is not a rhythmmer, it is just a short version of “*ces*.” This pattern has gone unnoticed, so it is not questioned. It may be challenging to distinguish between the two, but *ces* and *es* should not be used interchangeably and should not be confused with each other.

When used as a rhythmmer, *mas* and *es* can sometimes be perceived as a reproach. *Mas* and *es* are perceived as a reproach when they are placed *after* a noun or a pronoun and said in an exclamation tone. For example, “*Koj mas!*” [*Koj* means you], “*Pov mas!*” or “*Lawv es!*” [*Lawv* means they]. While these sentences are all perceived as reproaches, the reproach is not carried by the noun (John) or the pronoun (*koj*) but by the rhythmmer. However, there is an exception: if *mas* or *es* is placed after a noun or pronoun, but is said in a gentle manner, or the speaker is not blaming someone else, then it is just considered as an oral pause. In summary, as an oral pause, *mas* and *es* are not perceived as a reproach, but as rhythmers, they can be a reproach depending on the tone of the sentence. The reasoning behind this is that an oral pause has no meaning but already has a dedicated purpose: to pause, so it cannot be a reproach and have another function simultaneously. A rhythmmer, however, has no intrinsic meaning and may or may not change the meaning of a sentence; it is mainly there to make the sentence flow more smoothly. But here, the rhythmmer gets a reproach meaning by the way it is pronounced (exclamation) and the tone in which it is pronounced.

### **Double Rhythmers**

Finally, some double rhythmers were first observed by Ly. He realized that a rhythmmer is not always used by itself: it can also be followed by another rhythmmer. A few of the double rhythmers were also analyzed for their meanings and purposes. The double rhythmers *li es* and *li as* are two examples.

### **Li es**

*Nej twb tsis qhia peb li es.*

You guys didn't even tell us (at all) though.

*Nej twb tsis qhia peb.*

You guys did not even tell us.

*Nej twb tsis qhia peb ne.*

But, you guys did not even tell us.

*Li es* was observed to be placed at the end of the sentence. We suggest translating it as “You didn’t even tell us (at all) though”. The double rhythmmer can be broken up to its single rhythmers. Each rhythmmer is observed to have its own meaning. In the sentence “*Nej twb tsis qhia peb li*,” the single rhythmmer *li* is interpreted and translated to mean “at all”. On the other hand, in the sentence “*Nej twb tsis qhia peb es*,” the rhythmmer *es* is interpreted as “blaming them for not telling”. Both rhythmers combined make the double rhythmmer *li es*’s overall interpretation. Its meaning is parallel to the creation of the double rhythmmer. There is an additive meaning (at all). “At all” was put in parentheses to show the double rhythmmer’s implied meaning. It would not be written in the exact translation of the sentence. A comparison of *li es* to a sentence without the double rhythmmer and then with another rhythmmer helps show its importance and meaning. The sentence without the double rhythmmer is “*nej twb tsis qhia peb*.” It is translated as “you did not even tell us.” The sentence without the double rhythmmer is observed to have less flow. Comparison of the two sentences show that the use of *li es* gives an additional meaning to the message and adds rhythm to the sentence. This also indicates that there is a different context and an appropriateness in which the sentence is used. For example, let us analyze this sentence with the rhythmmer *ne*: “*nej twb tsis qhia peb ne*.” Here, our translation of the sentence is “but, you guys did not even tell us.” The rhythmmer *ne* is used like a reproach, an expression of disapproval. The change of rhythmmer changes the way we understand the sentence, so therefore, modifies the meaning of the sentence. Therefore, rhythmers cannot be used randomly.

## Li as

*Kuv tsis paub yuav hais dab tsi li as.*

I don't know what to say at all.

*Kuv tsis paub yuav hais dab tsi.*

I don't know what to say.

*Kuv tsis paub yuav hais dab tsi os.*

I don't know what to say.

The sentence for *li as* was “*kuv tsis paub yuav hais dab tsi li as.*” *Li as* is also placed at the end of the sentence here. It is translated as “I don't know what to say at all.” The single rhythmmer *li* is interpreted and translated to mean “at all”. It refers to “what you say” whereas *as* refers to “what you don't know”. This rhythmmer also adds a feeling of clueless-ness. Overall, there is additive meaning. *Li as* refers to both “what you say” and “what you don't know”. The translated meaning that we suggest is “at all.” The sentence without the rhythmmer is “*kuv tsis paub yuav hais dab tsi.*” Without the rhythmmer, the translation changes into “I don't know what to say”. Comparison of the two sentences yields the same observation as with *li es*. The addition of a rhythmmer gave a supplementary meaning and added more rhythm to the sentence. The sentence flows better. For instance, “*kuv tsis paub yuav hais dab tsi os.*” The translation is “I don't know what to say.” *Os* is not interpreted for it just transcribes a smooth way to say the sentence.

It was previously observed that a change of rhythmmer may also indicate the way a sentence is said. This leads us to suggest that there was an inappropriate usage of rhythmmer. This was more apparent with the rhythmmer: *li pob* and *laib*. The double rhythmmer *li pob* is analyzed in the sentence “*nws phem ua luaj li pob?*” Our translation is: “probably, he/she is so very mean?”

The double rhythmmer is observed to be inappropriately placed at the end of the sentence. Contradictory ideas appear in conjunction, because both a statement and question were combined. The term *ua luaj*, prevalently used in statements, expressed there was already a level of certainty established. The single rhythmmer *pob* is interpreted as uncertainty, therefore *pob* is questioning something or someone. Thus, this is an inappropriate use of the double rhythmmer *li pob*, since the rhythmmer and the statement itself repel each other. This confirms our suggestion that rhythmers cannot be used randomly to prevent the fabrication of absurdity.

About the inappropriate usage of the rhythmmer *laib*, in a sentence like: “*koj puas nco kuv thiab laib?*”, we were not able to translate it with the rhythmmer, for it is not a well-established question. The question by itself can be translated, but the addition of the rhythmmer *laib* makes it hard to translate or interpret. The only way to translate *laib* would be to translate it as a noun rather than a rhythmmer: “Do you miss me too, you gangster?” [*Laib* in English means gangster]. The question can be translated in a variety of ways; however, the question would lack flow and rhythm, contradictory to the observed role of rhythmers thus far.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The objective of the study was to further understand rhythmers by analyzing approximately 100 sentences with rhythmers. The sentences were analyzed to answer a few questions like: does a rhythmmer have a meaning? Does it serve a purpose in the sentence? Does a rhythmmer always have the same meaning? Can multiple rhythmers have the same meaning? Observations of the sentences showed that most of the time, rhythmers do add meaning to sentences and/or change the meaning of sentences even though they cannot always be translated by an English word. In this case, to better translate them, a whole description of the context may be needed. *Kus tsis paub as* is an example of a rhythmmer that is not translatable with one word

but requires a whole explanation of the context and even a description of the image of the speaker saying such a sentence to better understand it. This shows the difficulty to translate a word that does not belong to any category of word described so far by Western linguists.

Syntactically, they are usually placed at the end or at the beginning of sentences or at the end of a clause. The purpose is to help the sentences flow better by ending it with a higher or lower tone instead of the tone of the last word used, as if the tone of that word was inappropriate. Therefore, the position of the rhythmers in a sentence or a clause is mostly at the end. A deeper study of the rhythmers used in the beginning of the sentence needs to be realized to better understand their syntactic role, but although it has been observed, it has not been done in this study.

Even though they add rhythm to the sentence, sometimes they have no meaning. *Os* is a good example of a rhythmmer used for rhythmic reasons only, although it also makes a statement sound more gentle, subtle, polite. *Os* is used quite frequently in Hmong, but most of the time, should a non-Hmong ask the meaning of this word, Hmong speakers will not be able to translate it, nor to explain why they use it. *Os* is used indifferently with affirmative or negative statements but does not change the meaning of the sentence.

About the question “can multiple rhythmers have the same meaning”, it was observed that they do not. They only give one specific meaning to the sentence and another rhythmmer gives it another meaning. Different purposes or meanings mean they cannot not be used randomly. *Laib* and *pob* have showed this. An incorrect usage of rhythmers makes the sentence sound incorrect, wrong. For instance, it was described that *pob* is more used in interrogative sentences and the usage of a different rhythmmer makes the sentence sound incorrect to a Hmong speaker. The examples of *mas* and *ne* also illustrates this statement: *mas* is more used for affirmative

statements while *ne* is more for negative statements. Overall, it was concluded that rhythmers are their own part of speech since they do not correspond to any existing part of speech described so far. There still needs to be additional research on rhythmers. This study showed a rhythmmer needs to be individually studied and compared to other rhythmers to better understand it. A single rhythmmer itself is unique. There are other aspects to be studied, such as the role of a rhythmmer as a tense marker. This phenomenon has been observed and discussed as well but not studied here. It most certainly needs to be studied more in detail. The Hmong language is also continuously changing and developing. There are still many rhythmers to be discovered and to be studied. They can also be interpreted and translated differently according to the person studying them, so some readers may not agree with the results presented here.

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