Mother of Writing: The origin and development of a Hmong Messianic script By William A. Smalley, Chía Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang, and: *Hmong Njua: Syntaktische Analyse einer gesprochenen Sprache mithilfe datenverarbeitungstechnischer Mittel und sprachvergleichende Beschreibung des südostasiatischen Sprachraumes* By Bettina Harriehausen (review)

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Mother of Writing: The origin and development of a Hmong Messianic script. By WILLIAM A. SMALLEY, CHIA KOUA VANG, and GNIA YEE YANG. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. Pp. xii, 221. $15.95.

Hmong Njua: Syntaktische Analyse einer gesprochenen Sprache mithilfe datenverarbeitungstechnischer Mittel und sprachvergleichende Beschreibung des südostasiatischen Sprachraumes. By BETTINA HARRIEHAUSEN. (Linguistische Arbeiten, 245.) Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1990. Pp. xxv, 307. DM 128.00.

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Among languages spoken by recent arrivals in the United States, one of the most interesting is Hmong—introduced by immigrants from Laos who fled their homeland, starting in 1975, because of the Indochina war. Varieties of this language (a member of the Hmong-Mien family) are spoken by perhaps as many

as six million people, centered in southern China and in adjacent areas of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The best known varieties in Laos and Thailand are Hmong Daw and Hmong Njua; these are, at least in part, mutually intelligible. Overseas populations now exist in France, French Guiana, and Australia; and there are some 85,000 speakers in the US, especially in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.[1]

The Hmong people have historically lived as minority populations in mountainous areas, practicing slash-and-burn agriculture and lacking any established writing system. It is remarkable that, since 1950, two successful writing systems have been created for Hmong, each with its community of literates. One of these, the so-called Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), was devised in 1951–53 by a missionary group which included William Smalley, and is now widely used. The other, the unique 'Pahawh Hmong', is said to have been revealed in 1959 to a native religious leader, Shong Lue Yang—called by his disciples the 'Mother (i.e. source) of Writing'—and has continued to be taught since his assassination in 1971. Both writing systems have unusual characteristics, and the Pahawh Hmong presents phenomena perhaps unique in the history of written language; these are the topic of the book by Smalley et al. here under review (hereafter *MW*). The book by Harriehausen is a descriptive syntax of Hmong Njua as currently spoken in California (and will be abbreviated *HN*); I will discuss it more briefly.[2]

1. *MW* has the distinction of being written by Smalley (the missionary who was one of the inventors of the RPA) in collaboration with two Hmong men who are active in transmitting Shong Lue Yang's messianic message as well as his writing system. As Smalley tells us, since the final English text was prepared by him, 'everything is inevitably filtered through his mind and recast to some degree in his thought patterns' (2). However, he has shown great

[1] Some matters of terminology need to be clarified. Hmong has been called 'Miao' in China, as well as 'Meo' in Indochina and Thailand, but those terms are disfavored by native speakers. Similarly, the Hmong-Mien family (of controversial affiliation) was formerly called 'Miao-Yao'. The Hmong Daw variety is sometimes called 'White Hmong', while Hmong Njua is also known as Hmong Leng, Blue Hmong, or Green Hmong, as well as Mong Njua and Mong Leng (this variety lacks the *hm* onset). The color terms may refer to colors used in traditional womens' costumes.

Useful references on Hmong Daw include Fuller 1985 (1988) and Heimbach 1969; on Hmong Njua, see Lyman 1974, 1979, and Xiong et al. 1983. For a recent collection of articles on Hmong-Mien linguistics, with bibliography, see Strecker et al. 1987. In general, more research has been published on Hmong Daw than on Hmong Njua.

[2] Hmong proper names as cited in these publications are given in informal romanized spellings frequently used by the Hmong people in dealing with outsiders. In this review they are distinguished from RPA spellings (given in italics and explained below), and from phonetic approximations written between brackets. For the phonetic writing of tone, rather than the typographically difficult symbols used in *MW*, I borrow diacritics used in *HN* (p. 25, n.): *â* for high tone and *à* for falling tone. Thus we have equivalences such as the following: Hmong Daw = *Hmoob Dawb* [hmɔ̂ŋ ʔdâw], Hmong Njua = *Hmoob Ntsuab* [hmɔ̂ŋ ndʒûa], Pahawh Hmong = *Phaj Hauj Hmoob* [phà hàu hmɔ̂ŋ], Shong Lue Yang = *Soob Lwj Yaj* [ʃɔ̂ŋ lùi yà]. The informal spelling 'Yang' corresponds to the Hmong Njua pronunciation *Yaaj* [yà̰ŋ].

respect and sensitivity in presenting the history of Shong Lue and of the Pahawh Hmong.

Ch. 1, 'How the alphabet began' (16–25), describes how the script was revealed to Shong Lue in 1959, by a divine visitation at his village home in Laos; and how he revised it three times, to increase ease of learning and efficiency. The significant point is made that, although Shong Lue no doubt occasionally saw written materials in Laotian and/or French, he received no education and had no opportunity to become literate in any language. Ch. 2, 'Spread of the alphabet' (26–39), tells how the system was disseminated among the Hmong up to 1971.

Ch. 3, 'The sounds of Hmong' (40–52), presents Hmong phonology—with emphasis on Hmong Daw, but with notes on Hmong Njua—and introduces the RPA transcription.[3] Since the language is of the 'isolating' type familiar from east and southeast Asia, there is a high degree of correlation between the word, the morpheme, and the syllable. We can define the syllable, in a slight restatement of the *MW* description, in terms of a consonantal ONSET followed by a RIME, the latter in turn consisting of a vocalic NUCLEUS plus a TONE. The inventory of onsets is exceptionally rich, including the stops *p t r* [ʈ] *c* [ʈ] *k q*, plus nasals, fricatives, and sonorants—and also involving added features of affrication, aspiration, prenasalized onset, and lateral release. The complex onsets are written in the RPA as clusters, e.g. *ntxh* [ntsh] and *nplh* [mplh].[4] The vocalic nuclei include simple *i e w* [ɯ] *a u o* plus the diphthongs *ia ua* and *ai aw* [aɯ] *au*. There are also nasalized nuclei, which RPA writes with double vowels: *ee* [ẽŋ] and *oo* [õŋ] in Hmong Daw, plus *aa* [ãŋ] in Hmong Njua. Finally, there are seven contrasting tones, plus a marginal eighth tone which is grammatically conditioned. At this point, taking advantage of the fact that Hmong has no syllable-final consonant phonemes, RPA takes the unusual step of pressing consonant letters into service: *ab* high, *am* glottalized, *ad* low-rising, *aj* falling, *av* rising, *a∅* mid, *as* low, and *ag* mid-falling aspirated. The resulting orthography, which requires no diacritics or unusual symbols, is increasingly accepted both by Hmong and by foreign students of the language, and is used in both the books reviewed here. However, the Pahawh Hmong continues in use as an alternative (except in Laos, where writing it is politically dangerous).

Ch. 4, 'The writing system' (53–63), describes the form of Pahawh Hmong currently taken as standard. There are two basic classes of symbols. In the first of these, which can be labeled 'vowels', each vocalic nucleus is written with one of two characters, which correspond to *b*-tone and *v*-tone respectively. Each character also occurs with a set of three diacritics, placed above the basic symbols to specify the remaining tones. However, these 'vowel' characters correspond not only to vocalic nuclei as such, but also to such nuclei preceded by *k*—which is, in other words, the 'unmarked' consonant for the system. Table 1 illustrates the pattern for the nucleus *u*.

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[3] For further information on the RPA, see Smalley 1976.

[4] RPA *x* is [s], while *s* is [ʃ]—a characteristic which historically reflects the orthography of Vietnamese.

ɰ	ɰ̇	ɰ̣	ɰ̃	ɲ	ɲ̇	ɲ̣	ɲ̈
-b	-m	-d	-j	-v	∅	-s	-g
(k)ub	(k)um	(k)ud	(k)uj	(k)uv	(k)u	(k)us	(k)ug

TABLE 1. Pahawh Hmong 'vowels'.

The second class of basic symbol, the 'consonants', comprises twenty characters, each used either alone or with one of two diacritics, as shown in Table 2. However, in this type of symbol neither the characters nor the diacritics have any constant value: correspondences between symbol and sound are completely arbitrary.[5] There is a distinct representation for every consonantal onset, including glottal stop and (utterance-medial) zero.

E qh	**Ė** hny	**É** hm
R m	**Ṙ** txh	**Ŕ** q

TABLE 2. Pahawh Hmong 'consonants'.

Finally, a unique feature of Pahawh Hmong is that, although writing is from left to right, the sequence within each syllable is 'vowel' plus 'consonant' (59–60)—rather as if the onset were considered peripheral to the rime. However, the result (as *MW* emphasizes, 61) is not a syllabary, but 'an alphabetical system, fitting the pronunciation of the Hmong language perfectly, compactly, and relatively efficiently.'

Ch. 5, 'Evolution of the writing system' (64–74), explains the changes that were in Shong Lue's successive revisions of the Pahawh Hmong. Ch. 6, 'Punctuation, numerals and other symbols' (75–85), describes the nonalphabetic symbols proposed by Shong Lue, including punctuation marks derived from European models. The numeral system was originally logographic, as in Chinese, with no zero but with individual symbols for 'ten', 'hundred', and 'thousand'; this was later replaced by an arithmetic system. Logographic symbols were also supplied for arithmetic functions, for periods of time, and for Hmong clan names.

Ch. 7, 'How did Shong Lue Yang do it?' (86–102), considers the question of possible models for the development of the Pahawh Hmong. The system includes intriguing similarities to the Lao alphabet, but also striking differences from it. As constrasted with roman scripts, where consonants and vowels have equal value, the Lao script (like others of India and southeast Asia) treats consonants as central and vowels as peripheral—but the Pahawh Hmong does just the opposite! Lao uses superscript diacritics to indicate tone, but they are

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[5] As these examples show, some characters of Pahawh Hmong resemble familiar letters of the roman alphabet, but depart from the traditional phonetic values. This phenomenon is familiar, of course, in the Cherokee syllabary of Sequoyah, where **D** stands for *a*, **R** for *e*, etc. It appears that the originators of these writing systems may have borrowed the shapes of roman letters they had seen, without being aware of the pronunciations used in European languages.

interpreted in conjunction with the associated consonants; the Pahawh Hmong also uses diacritics to indicate tone, but they are interpreted in conjunction with vowels. If Shong Lue had based his alphabet on Lao and/or roman writing, it is hard to understand why it turned out to be so different from those scripts, and yet so well adapted to Hmong phonology. In fact the Pahawh Hmong seems to respond to some psychological reality in the structure of the Hmong syllable as consisting of two 'half-syllables' (92), namely the onset and the rime; it is a 'demi-syllabic' writing system.[6]

Its development and spread also seem to be motivated by 'a point of view which is prevalent in Southeast Asia ... that each different language should have an identifiably different writing system' (95). The authors state (101): 'As best we can evaluate the evidence, Shong Lue Yang created the Pahawh Hmong system himself. Although without education, he apparently possessed extraordinary insight and ability to analyze speech. His linguistic sense might fairly be called genius.'

Ch. 8, 'From handwriting to wordprocessing' (103–18), describes the means which have been used to reproduce the Pahawh Hmong. Woodblock printing in Laos in 1967 was followed by more modern means after the emigration of Hmong speakers: rubber stamps in Honolulu in 1978, press-apply letters in North Carolina around 1981, a manual typewriter in Minnesota in 1982, and an electronic typewriter in California in 1986. Finally a word processing program was developed in Minnesota, with assistance from Smalley, in 1987; and this has been used in production of the present book. Thus the Pahawh Hmong has gone from handwriting to the most modern technology within twenty years. Ch. 9, 'Contemporary use of the alphabet' (119–35), estimates that about 2,000 people may regularly use the Pahawh Hmong at present. 'What has kept the Pahawh Hmong alive,' the authors write (134), 'is not its usefulness [but] its symbolism. In the minds of people sympathetic to it, the Pahawh Hmong represents a unique Hmong identity and equality with the other languages around them in Asia ...'

Ch. 10, 'The alphabet in history' (136–48), gives a brief survey of the history of writing systems. It has been hypothesized that alphabets necessarily evolve from logographic and syllable systems by 'unidirectional development' (Gelb 1963), though this principle has recently been debunked (Daniels 1990). But the Pahawh Hmong apparently 'constitutes a separate line in the history of writing ... Furthermore, we have no other documented case of a person who could not read or write devising such a perfect alphabetical system' (147).

Ch. 11, 'Other Hmong writing systems' (149–63), refers to alternative systems, including the RPA, which have existed for writing Hmong. A native system called the 'Sayaboury alphabet', which turned up in Laos in manuscript form in 1983, is of special interest. Although its characters have unique shapes, its principles resemble those of European alphabets—with tone represented

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[6] Possible evidence for such psycholinguistic reality is provided by morphological alternations occurring in onomatopoetic reduplications like Hmong Njua *nkuj nkis* 'nibbling (rats)' (*HN*, 44); these are paralleled in other Southeast Asian languages.

by a syllable-final character, as in the RPA. Nevertheless, one feature is highly unusual: as *MW* describes it (158), there are just five vowel symbols, and each vocalic nucleus is written with a combination of two of those symbols. Thus, if we let @ and % represent two such vowel symbols, then @% stands for *ee*, %@ for *au*, @@ for *i*, and %% for *w*.

Ch. 12, 'Other views on "Mother of Writing"' (164–82), gives the views of three Hmong leaders, ranging from hostile to sympathetic. At the end of the chapter, Smalley expresses his personal belief in the authenticity of Shong Lue Yang's work. An interesting point made in this connection is that 'Shong Lue's presentation of the Pahawh Hmong was always in tables, with the vowels and tones, at least, arranged in a pattern rather than strung out in linear *a b c* fashion' (177). That is, Shong Lue somehow understood not only how 'demi-syllabic' symbols could work, but also the relevance of a two-dimensional matrix for displaying them. The book ends with a Chronology (183–6), a list of Hmong individuals mentioned (187–91), endnotes (193–207), bibliographical references (209–18), and an index (219–21). Not only the scholarship, but also the design and production of the book, are exemplary. Smalley and his colleagues have given us a work of great importance for the typology and history of written language.

2. *Hmong Njua* is a syntactic analysis 'wobei die deskriptive Methode einem tagmemischen Modell folgt' (1); having read this, one is surprised to find no tagmemic terminology or bibliography. However, the description is strongly oriented to the concept of word classes, as fillers of slots in syntactic constructions. Data were collected from two young women living in the Hmong community of Isla Vista, adjacent to the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Harriehausen expresses thanks to her 'Doktorvater' Thomas Gardner, and to Charles Li and James Matisoff for guidance in her work in California.

Special features of *HN*, as indicated in the subtitle, include an account of how computational aids were used in organizing data (13–17, 266–73) as well as a comparison of constructions in Hmong with those of neighboring languages such as Thai and Chinese (e.g. serial verbs, 154–69; for more discussion of this topic, see also Clark 1989). Since most published work on Hmong syntax has dealt with Hmong Daw, the present volume is welcome for the new insights it provides on Hmong Njua. However, it is unfortunate that Harriehausen chose to publish in German, a language less accessible than English to her potential audience—including the Hmong themselves.[7] It is also unfortunate that *HN* seems to have been published with a minimum of copy-editing or proofreading. Even for a volume on syntax, the phonological tables (30–31, 41) are disaster areas: all diacritics have been omitted, and other symbols have been misplaced.

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[7] In this connection, it is especially odd to find Harriehausen saying (248), 'Mit dieser Arbeit habe ich ... versucht, ein Werk zu schaffen, das ... den Sprechern dieser Sprache als Grundlage dienen kann, ihre eigene Muttersprache bewusster zu erleben.'

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Sociolinguistics as a distinct field of investigation has had a very slow start in Hungary. Only in the last five years has there been concentrated work on the forms of everyday language, to say nothing of the social distribution of particular lexical items and grammatical structures. *Élőnyelvi tanulmányok* (*ET*) is one of the first published signs of the new work going on in Hungary. The importance of *ET* cannot be appreciated without knowledge of the historical and intellectual context in which the studies were conducted and have now been published.

Three factors have impeded the development of a linguistics oriented toward