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# Investigation of the Language Usage of Hmong Ethnic People in the Northwest (Tây Bắc) Region of Vietnam - A Case Study in Bắc Yên, Sơn La province

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## Abstract

The linguistics research in general and in particular, sociolinguistic study of ethnic minorities in Vietnam is a fascinating topic, but is also a very complicated subject in term of some typical reasons. The complication of the subject is originated from the objective reasons such as natural conditions, social and economic conditions and some other subjective reasons which belong to subjective of languages-the ethnic minorities. Hence, when considering the language scenarios of the ethnic minorities in general and the status of using language of ethnic people in particular, the selection of research subject and survey area are very important. Discussing on this subject, author Van Khang Nguyen in his work “Social linguistics” has speculated that: “first of all, one can see that the key point of the perception when investigating language from the perspective of sociolinguistics is the sociability and the variability of language.” The birth of language is the development need of human society and the development of the human society leads to the development of language which aims to meet the need of communication. Therefore, when studying language, the sociolinguistics always set the relationship between social transformations with the language usage. In our case study, the Hmong people in Bắc Yên district is an ethnic group with many typical characteristics for Hmong in Sơn La province as well as in the Northwest region of Vietnam. Currently, the language of Hmong people in Bắc Yên raises quite topical questions. For example, it is important to understand how Hmong people use their native language, national language and foreign language at the same time in their daily activities. How do Hmong people use Hmong writing system in their communication situation? What is their attitude with their language? The above-mentioned questions urged us to carry out a case study on the language usage status of Hmong people in the Northwest Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Northwest Vietnam, Hmong People, Language, Ethnic Minority

## 1. Content

### 1.1. Introduction to Bắc Yên district and Hmong ethnic people in Bắc Yên

Bắc Yên is a highland district of Sơn La province with an average latitude of 1000 m above the sea level. In term of geographic position, Bắc Yên is located in the Northeast of Sơn La province. Its four neighbouring regions are: Phu Yen district on its east side, Mường La and Mai Sơn districts on its west side, Mộc Châu and Châu Sơn

districts are on the south and Trại Tầu district of Tây Bắc province on its north side. Regarding the administration units, Bắc Yên has one main town and other fifteen communes. In term of the geographic zone, Bắc Yên can be divided into two smaller sub-regions if Đà river is taken as a boundary line: the north and the south of Đà river. Based on the elevation of the terrain, Bắc Yên can be divided into three geographic sub-regions. The highland region includes 6 communes Tà Xùa, Làng Châu, Xím Vàng, Hang Chú, Háng Đòng, Hua Nhàn); the middle region includes three communes Phiêng Ban, Mường Khoa, Hong Ngai and Bắc Yên town. The lowland region includes six communes Song Pe, Tạ Khoa, Chim Vàn, Phiêng Côn, Chiềng Sại, Pắc Ngà - the communes which are located near Đà river. Bắc Yên has the form of high-mountain terrain and very highly separated terrains. The geographic division together with the large difference in elevation between the sub-regions lead to the great difference in the climate and the soil properties of each region. In addition, with the large discrepancy on the population and population distribution of different ethnic groups in Bắc Yên.

Nowadays, the population of Bắc Yên district has about 56.848 inhabitants. In term of ethnic minority composition, Bắc Yên has seven different ethnic minorities that live together: Hmong, Thái, Mường, Kinh, Dao, Khơ Mú, Tày (Tran, 2014). The number and ratio of these ethnic group per total population of the district is shown in the table 2.1.

Table 1.1: Population and ratio (%) of different ethnic minorities in Bắc Yên

N	Communes	Number of people	Ratio (%)
1	HMông	24.366	42,86
2	Thái	17.765	31,25
3	Mường	9.837	17,30
4	Kinh	3.044	5,35
5	Dao	1.679	2,95
6	Khơ Mú	105	0,18
7	Tày	52	0,09
Total		56.848	100

Source (Thao, 2017): Cadastral data of Son La province, 2016

These data shows that the Hmong people in Bắc Yên has the largest population with 24.366 over the total 54.848 people of the whole district (occupying 42.86%). In comparison with other Hmong population of other districts, Bắc Yên has largest Mong population in Son La province. Not only having the largest population, Hmong population in Bắc Yên also has the most diversity in Mong branches. According to our preliminary data, there are four main Hmong branches in Bắc Yên: white Hmong (Hmong Đơuz), black Hmong (Hmong Đuz), Hmong Hoa (Hmong Lệnh) and Mong Si (Hmong Đò). Considering their residence locations, Hmong people which belong to these branches also show the distinctive and the mixed features with other ethnic minorities. This accidently created language contact situations among Mong branches and between Mong people with other ethnic minorities.

Hmong people in Bắc Yên reside over a large area which has both concentrated and scattered properties. Nowadays, the Hmong people in Bắc Yên reside in all the communes. The concentrated nature of the population can easily be recognized through the narrow range in a form of a village. Typically, in one Hmong village, most of people are native Hmong without any other type of people. Consequently, where there are many Hmong villages gathering together will create a larger Hmong community. In Bắc Yên, the high-lying area (with 6 communes) can be considered as a typical Hmong ethnic area of Son La and can be considered as a typical region in Tay Bac. The Hmong villages and Hmong ethnic regions both combine to form the traditional residence form of the ancient Hmong. The scattering and intercalation properties in the population distribution of Hmong people are the today derived features. This is reflected through the joint residency with the other ethnic groups in the same village or region. In Bắc Yên, in the middle lying region and low-lying regions, Hmong people have resided mutually with the other ethnic groups such as Thái, Mường, Dao. This style of residence was even though not popular in the history, however, became an essential tendency in the presence because it is the product of the language contact evolution, of the change in administrative boundary, extending or narrowing the farming lands, trading and even

urbanization with Hmong people in Bắc Yên. The population distribution of Hmong people in Bắc Yên is shown in the table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Number and ratio of Hmong people distributed over communes/towns

N	Communes	Number of people	Ratio (%)
1	Hua Nhàn	3.324	13,64
2	Hồng Ngài	2.879	11,81
3	Hang Chú	2.819	11,56
4	Làng Châu	2.629	10,78
5	Tà Xùa	2.379	9,76
6	Xím Vàng	2. 210	9,07
7	Háng Đông	2.093	8,58
8	Phiêng Ban	1.547	6,34
9	Tạ Khoa	881	3,61
10	Phiêng Côn	789	3,23
11	Chim Vàn	714	2,93
12	Chiềng Sại	622	2,55
13	Song Pe	501	2,05
14	Thị trấn Bắc Yên	470	1,92
15	Mường Khoa	431	1,76
16	Pắc Ngà	6	0,02
	Total	24.366	100

Source (Thao, 2017): Cadastral data of Sơn La province, 2016

## 1.2 Research Object

In order to investigate the language usage of Hmong people in Bắc Yên nowadays, we carried out the object selection based on the following standards:

**Research location:** We chose three local locations in three different areas in the district. First, we carried out the survey at Lang San village, Hang Dong commune- which is representative for Hmong in the high-lying mountain region; second, at Moi village in Bắc Yên town-which represents for Hmong in middle-lying mountain region; third, we carried out our survey in Tà Đò B, Tạ Khoa commune- representing for Hmong people in low-lying mountain region (which locates along Đà river). The reason for these selections is that we realized that the language communication situations of Hmong in these regions are quite distinctive. For example, by comparing the geographic locations from these survey locations running down to the center of Bắc Yên district, it can be seen that: if Moi village of Bắc Yên town is only 1 km away from the centre of the town, while Lang San village of Hang Dong commune is up to 49 km from the center of the town and Tà Đò B village of Tạ Khoa commune- a village lying nearby Đà river with mainly waterway has a distance of 21 km from the center of the town. Besides, one should be taken into account is the language communication situation factor of Hmong from above-mentioned regions with the other ethnic groups. All of these influenced to the status of using language of Hmong people in Bắc Yên at different level.

**Number of survey:** 105 people have been studied in which 35 people have been chosen to be directly questioned in each regions and interviewed via question table.

**Gender:** 50 males and 55 females joined the interview.

**Age:** There were three age levels were interviewed: level 1 with age under 30 years old with 35 people (33.33%); level 2 from 30 to 50 years old with 50 people (47,61%); level 3 from 60 years old and above with 20 people (19,06%).

**Profession:** Farmers with 68 people (64,76%); government officers with 12 people (11,42%); student, pupils with 25 people (23,82%).

**Education level:** Without basic education 29 people (27,6%); primary level: 34 people (32,38%); secondary school: 21 people (20%); high school: 11 people (10,47%); colleges: 3 people (2,85%); university: 2 people (1,9%).

### 1.3 Language attitude of Hmong people in Bắc Yên

“The language attitude is defined as the love of native people to their mother tongue and to other languages” (Nguyen, 2016). Sociolinguistics refers to three basic linguistic attitudes: the attitude of language loyalty, the attitude of language discrimination and attitude of language inferiority.

Attitude of language loyalty begins with the love to the language of its people. Thus, all individuals will think toward the protection of their own language. The attitude of inferiority of language can be understood as the bad feelings when one can see that its mother language is not as good as other ones. The attitude of language discrimination can be understood as the underrating and disregards the language or the dialect of another ethnicity, at the same time, too appreciating the language or dialect of one’s own language.

The result of the study on 105 Hmong people in Bắc Yên on the language attitude showed that all of them (100%) have the loyal attitude on their own mother tongue. With the given question “Do you love your own mother language?” All answered “yes.” This shows that Hmong people do love their own mother tongue. When we asked them “Do you love Vietnamese.” The answers showed that 92/105 said “yes,” yielding 87,62%, only 7 people said “no,” making 12,39%. Most of the people who said “no” are elderly. They said that they do not love Vietnamese because they do not know how to speak Vietnamese and cannot understand what others speak to them in Vietnamese. Therefore, Vietnamese language-the national language also received the loyalty from Hmong people in Bắc Yên.

With the same question, but when we asked them “Do you love English?” the result showed that 9/105 people (8,57%) said “yes” to the question, 96 people said “no” (91,43%). All 9 people who answered that they like English are all primary and secondary school pupils. They like English because they want to be good in English in the next school years. Those with the answer “no” because they cannot use English in their daily life. In 16 people who dislike English, there are 16 people who are also students of different school levels, they express that English is difficult either in understanding or in learning in the schools. As a result, the study shows how the attitudes of Hmong people with English of which it is considered as being discriminative because many of them thought that English is not a necessary language in their daily life. We have asked them the same questions: “Do you like other languages of other ethnic groups in the region?” As the result, 61 people said “yes,” occupying 58,09%, 44 people said “no” (41,91%). This means that Hmong people have quite neutral attitude with the other languages of the other ethnic groups with almost the same rate between “like” and “dislike.” The reason that they like the other ethnic’s languages because they want to exchange, to trade or simply to communicate with them in the same region for good friendship or partnership. The other said that they dislike the other ethnicity’s language simply because they do not understand it.

### 1.4 Current status of language usage of Hmong people in Bắc Yên

#### 1.4.1 Current status of language usage in daily life of Hmong people

The most common way of inhabitation of Hmong people in Bắc Yên is gathering together in a village (jaol Hmôngz). Nowadays, Bắc Yên has 89 villages of Hmong people in which 81 villages are native Hmong people (91,01%), 8 villages in which Hmong people live together in the same village with other people such as Thái and Mường ethnic groups. Thus, in the two ways of inhabitation of Hmong people that are viewed as concentration and intercalation, the former is most predominant. Not only that, the Hmong village has also a characteristics of being closed meaning in the same village, there are only several dominant big family lines with the same bloodline

and rarely seen more than five big family lines in the same village. In the daily life in Bắc Yên, Hmong people keep a close relationship among the family members, among the families in a village and among villages in a region. This is reflected via their living habits, production of food, customs and belief.

We observed the communications that can be easily seen in two scenarios: **i)** communication in a family and in a family line and **ii)** social communication. The communicative activities were obtained such as talking to each other among the family members, talking to the visiting guests (Kinh or other people), talks in a wedding party, funerals and ceremonies of giving name for the new-born babies or worships. The social communication can be seen as salutation on the streets, in the village meetings, in the talks between the villagers with the local government, in communication in the market or in music festivals.

The results of our study via question table and observation has shown that in the communications at family and family line level, Hmong people only speak to each other by their mother tongue-Hmong language, with 100%. Vietnamese was also used and mentioned but only expressed via the borrowed words that Hmong vocabulary does not contain such as *bank, car, noodles, ..., computer, committee, Pasteurellosis*. Vietnamese is used in family communication space when talking with the Kinh guest (who speaks Vietnamese) (97,51%), or when communicating with other ethnic groups, Hmong use also Vietnamese with 58,53%, Thái (27,16%), Mường's language (11,14%), Dao (3,17%). One can be seen that in the different communication scenarios containing different types of communication objectives, most of Hmong people are multilanguage speakers. Besides their mother tongue, they can also communicate by other languages such as Vietnamese, Thái, Mường, Dao. However, on the aspect of Multilanguage of Hmong people, there are some special points should be taken into account: the Hmong living on the high-lying mountain region (the Làng Sáng village in Hang Dong commune), most of multilanguage citizens can speak dual Vietnamese and Hmong. For the Hmong living in the middle-lying mountain region (the Moi village, Bắc Yên town) and the Hmong in the low-lying mountain region (the Tà Đò village, Tạ Khoa commune), the multilanguage usage can be seen by the fact that the Hmong people can speak their mother tongue and Thái, Mường and sometimes Dao at the same time. A Hmong person can even speak three, even four different languages. In particular, there are 11 in 35 people (31,42%) in Tà Đò, Tạ Khoa with the age between 30 and 50 can speak Vietnamese and Thái fluently as their second languages.

One should keep in mind that even the multilanguage ability of Hmong people is quite highly developed, there are still a small fraction of people who cannot can only speak their own mother tongue. This is the case of Mrs. Thi Pa Mua (age 67 at Tà Đò B, Tạ Khoa commune) and Mrs. Thi Do Giang (age 82 at Làng Sáng, Hua Nhàn commune). When we asked them by Vietnamese, they appeared not to understand at all, their descendants told us that they can only speak in Hmong. This proves that fact that beside a large number of citizens who can use multilanguages, there are still a small numbers who can only use a single language.

#### **1.4.2 Language usage situation of Hmong people in the school in Bắc Yên**

In determining the research objects, we have carried out a survey by interviewing 25 pupils in different primary and secondary school levels in three different regions in Bắc Yên to briefly evaluate the language usage status in school of students and pupils. In addition, we used a highlighted question "what kind of language did you use when you were in the school?" The data is showed as the following.

There are 25 in 25 Hmong pupils (100%) who can speak their mother tongue and Vietnamese, in which 4 in 25 (16%) can speak Thái, 1 in 25 (4%) can speak Dao. 21 in 25 (84%) pupils joining the interview cannot speak English or can speak only few English words. Thus, with the data shown above, we can conclude on the language usage ability of Hmong pupil as the following.

Vietnamese is the main communicating language in the school, it is used in the main school time when teacher and pupils and other ethnic pupils communicate to each other, all by Vietnamese. This shows that Vietnamese is important official language being used in the school (Tran, 2004, pp. 10-13). The fact that 100% Hmong pupils using Vietnamese in the school is a great achievement from the government in eliminate the illiteracy in Bắc Yên.

Although the ability of using Vietnamese is at different levels but knowing how to use Vietnamese in writing, communicating, reading is considered as a good signal.

Their mother tongue - the Hmong language is used among the pupils during the break time in school, in the dormitory or in the private conversation in the class. If their teachers or friends can speak Hmong, then they are willing to speak in Hmong (however, the conversation take places when someone starts first in Hmong). On the aspect the writing of the mother tongue in the school with the question “*do you know writing in Hmong language?*” The result shows that there are 20 in 25 answered “yes” (80%). Then the question “could you try to read and to write?”, then 20/25 pupils can read and write (with different skillful levels. Then the question “where did you learn this Hmong word?” The answer is “I learned from my friends or from my brothers or siblings; I learned from the telephone.” Also with the question concerning to Hmong language, we gave a small text in Hmong with the title “*lul pǎngx tru chiêx qiv*” cited from page 73, book 1, Hmong language textbook, published in 1998, author Thanh Phan, released by Education and Training Minister, the result showed quite surprised that 25/25 Hmong pupils said that they do not understand these words. This obviously raises a question whether they are **illiteracy** or **not-illiteracy** with their mother tongue. We thought that the above result shows a need that relates to some types of Hmong language that suitable for the present Mong people to learn. This will be presented in another research paper.

Another issue that we learned from this survey is that Hmong pupils do not speak English outside of the class. If they need to practice English under requirement of the teacher, then they also speak reluctantly. They said that English is difficult with them and they do not like English. A Chia Mua (the seventh class pupil, secondary school Hang Dong) told us “I was taught English from the 3rd class, but I cannot speak, if someone ask me about English, then I can only tell that I know “hello.” Thi Chung Thao told us that English is very difficult, she can read English following her teacher on the class but she would forget it easily after that. From the above observation and interview, it is clear that the learning foreign language of the ethnic pupils and overall in the school remains an unsolvable and need further solutions.

#### **1.4.3 Language usage situation of Hmong people in the traditional culture of Mong in Bắc Yên**

The media culture of the small ethnic minorities in the North of Vietnam has been highly cared by the Vietnamese government because it not only serves as an informative tool, but also is an important spiritual symbol in their life.

The media culture is expressed through books, journals, propaganda materials, radio, television channels and telephone and so on. Our study shows that there are post offices which can be accessed to the information and communication system in all the three studied communes Hang Dong, Tà Khoa, and Bắc Yên town; there are also sorts of journals and magazines in Vietnamese, however, there are no Hmong language materials in such forms. There are also radio and television stations spoken in Hmong in Bắc Yên that daily broadcast with certain amount of time: specifically 45 minute with radio channel and 60 minutes with TV channel (Source: wikipedia). The survey were carried out in a 31 families (105 people), the result shows: there are 17/31 people own radio (54,8%), 28/31 (90,32%) own TV, 73/105 (69,5%) with telephone, smartphone, computer with internet access 48/105 (45,71%).

In the field of media and culture, the Hmong in Bắc Yên use their mother tongue (Hmong language), Vietnamese and Thái in which mother tongue and Vietnamese are widely used, Thái is seldom used (2/105 people can understand through the radio, TV by Thái, yielding a 1,9%). All of them (105/105) told that they can watch and understand (at different levels) the radio, TV by Hmong language. There are 103/105 (98,09%) can watch and understand the contents in Vietnamese. When comparing the entertainment programs in Vietnamese and Hmong, Hmong people think that the programs in Vietnamese are more attracting while those in Mong language have no movies in Hmong. Hmong language only broadcasted news and updates which have already been known through Vietnamese programs.

In term of book and newspapers written in Hmong language, all of the interviewed people (105/105) said that they have never read them. The number of people who read newspapers in Vietnamese regularly also have a small numbers with 4/105 people (4,76%); some of them seldom read newspapers in Vietnamese 21/105 (23,8%) or very rarely or never read 79/105 (59,43%).

In term of using telephone, Hmong people use their mother tongue and Vietnamese when talking via telephone, this also depends on whether those who they are talking with are in the same or different ethnic groups. This is understandable because when communicating through the phone, one needs a certain levels of language ability, because they do not see each other when telephoning, then they need to choose their best language type in which they are good at. With the smartphone, Hmong people also use it as a multimedia equipment in order to read, listen music, exchange and learn Hmong language.

This picture shows us a fact that even though the economic conditions of Hmong people have been very much improved as compared to before, but generally, their spiritual life in Bắc Yên still remains so poor and not diverse. Hmong people in contacting with media and other cultural media still remains restricted and less beneficial from public media. We think that in order to improve this situation, one needs to have regulation so that the media can have deeper and better influence inside the Hmong society, enabling media to become a favourable and improve the spiritual life as well as improve language ability of those people at the corner of the world.

## 2. Conclusions

The picture of using language of Hmong people in Bắc Yên district, Son La province is a study on a specific local area but can be considered as a small social picture which can be a representative for the current status of using language of the Hmong people in Son La as well as in Northwest of Vietnam. The current status of using language undergoes the influence of real and objective factors and it is changing overtime. The study results showed that the Hmong people in Bắc Yên love and respect their native language and they also respect the other ones (Vuong, 2020). Only on the aspect of using foreign language, it may begin from different reasons, so Hmong people seem not really care about the foreign language and almost do not use it in their daily activities. In term of cultural media in the life of Hmong people, we think that one needs a change and adjust in order to adapt with growing social trends and more importantly is to change the media culture (the culture that binds to the use of language) to become a suitable information for people. Thus, handling the issues in using language of Hmong people in Bắc Yên is also aim at promoting society economy.

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