

The syntax of White Hmong reciprocals and reflexives

In this project, I provide data from two native speakers to show how reciprocals and reflexives are constructed and bound in White Hmong.¹ I argue that White Hmong (henceforth, Hmong) follows the ‘traditional’ binding theory (Reinhart 1983; Chomsky 1986) and supports that *vP* and CP are phases in Hmong. I also show that the true reciprocal is a Voice head (not a DP) in Hmong and the ‘false’ reciprocal is a reflexive construction with dual or plural pronouns.

Empirically, Hmong has been understudied and most literature of the language are from the 1900s, so this project is a more modern view of how the language is used by immigrant communities and their children in the United States today.

1. Facts and data

Fact 1: The standard structure of reflexive DPs in Hmong is [PRO + CLF + *kheej*] (1-2).

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| (1) kuv pom kuv tus kheej
1SG see 1SG CLF self
<i>I see myself.</i> | (2) nws pom nws tus kheej (KX)
3SG see 3SG CLF self
<i>He sees himself.</i> |
|---|---|

Fact 2: *kheej* ‘self’ can occur alone as the object of a clause and bind to the subject (3).

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|---|---|
| (3) kuv pom kheej (KX)
1SG see self
<i>I see myself</i> | (4) lawv sib txawb pob zeb (YX)
3PL RECIP throw CLF rock
<i>They threw rocks at each other.</i> |
|---|---|

Fact 3: There are two ways to translate reciprocal meanings into Hmong. Method 1 is another *kheej*-reflexive construction using a dual pronoun (5). Method 2 is a ‘true reciprocal’ where the reciprocal *sib* is a Voice morpheme and not a nominal ((4), (6)).

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|--|---|
| (5) nkawm tham txog nkawm tus kheej (YX)
3DU talk about 3DU CLF self
<i>They (du.) are talking about each other.</i> | (6) nkawm sib tham (YX)
3DU RECIP talk
<i>They (du.) are talking to each other.</i> |
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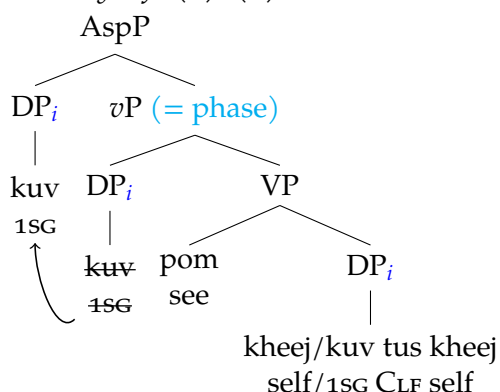
2. Proposal: reflexives

The clausal projection in Hmong is AspP instead of IP or TP since it doesn’t mark tense and is an analytic language (see Lin 2006 for similar arguments for Mandarin). The subject raises from Spec,*vP* to Spec,AspP due to a strong EPP on Asp (Chomsky 1982; 1993).

For the sake of space, my structures don’t include all terminals and projections unless they are overt or a DP. Binding domains are synonymous with phases (Chomsky 1995), so binding between the antecedent (in Spec,*vP*) and the reflexive (the sister of V) happens at the *vP* phase (7). The reflexive can either be *kheej* or a full reflexive DP.

¹CLF: classifier, DU: dual number. All data in this project comes from two White Hmong speakers from Wisconsin: one is 24 (KX) and one is 34 (YX), and they are siblings. The Hmong examples are all written in the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) as it is the most-utilized orthography by Hmong speakers in the US.

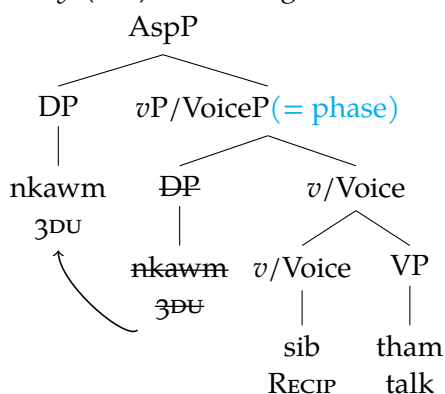
- (7) **Kuv pom kheej/kuv tus kheej**
'I see myself' (3)/(1)



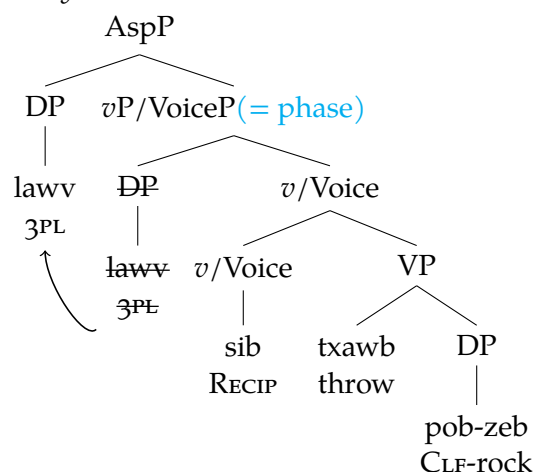
3. Proposal: reciprocals

Regarding the reciprocal data, I argue that the word *sib* is a Voice head and not an anaphoric DP.

- (8) **Nkawm sib tham** (6)
'They (du.) are talking to each other'



- (9) **Lawv sib txawb pob zeb** (4)
'They threw rocks at each other'



Initially, *sib* looked like a separate DP, which meant the sudden switch from SVO to SOV word order had to be explained. Since *sib* is not an anaphor and it is instead a Voice head, the word order poses no issues for the syntax. It's not novel to associate Voice with reciprocity (Kratzer 1996), although this has never been discussed with Hmong data.

The final structure, (9), shows that the SVO word order truly is maintained when we have both *sib* and a DP object. As a final note on the reciprocal structure, it's clear that the domain of the reciprocal meaning is the phase. Before the subject raises out of the *vP* structure, it is established as the agent of the reciprocal action. So, not only is the domain of the reciprocal clear, but the timing of the reciprocal mapping is also clear.

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