

The emerging preference for "HMoob" as a term of self-identification

by Ariana Thao

While most people have seen “Hmong” or “Hmoob” appear in text, fewer people have seen the word “HMoob” or understand where it came from. As a member of the HMoob American Studies Committee at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and as a HMoob person, I am writing this article to discuss an emergent trend related to how HMoob community members self-identify. In Wisconsin, as well as other parts of the United States, compositional diversity within HMoob communities includes linguistic diversity. The language spoken by HMoob communities is comprised of two main dialects, Green (Moob Leeg) and White (Hmoob Dawb), with of course a number of different variations of these two dialects.

The term “HMoob” was created by community members as a more inclusive alternative to the other terms (i.e. “Hmong,” “Mong,” and “Hmoob”) that are written in a Latin-based alphabet. The term “HMoob” is considered to be more inclusive because it incorporates graphemes (i.e. letters) from all three other terms of group-based identity.

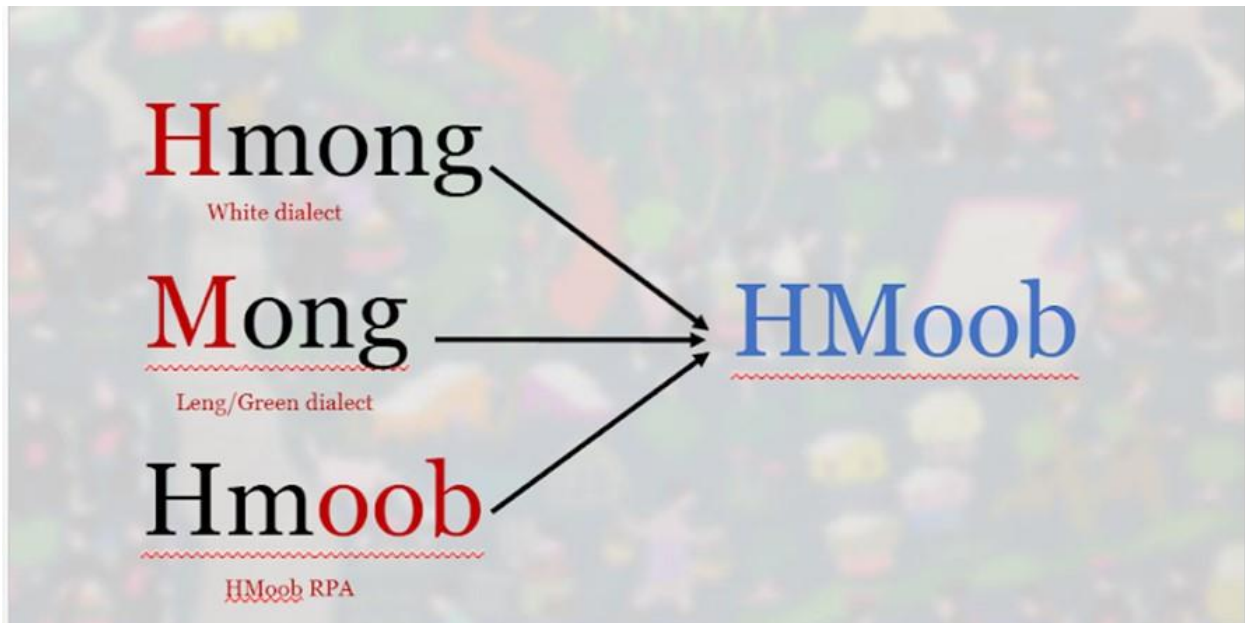


Image source: The HMoob American Studies Committee at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Throughout written work, the HMoob people and language have been categorized under the generic term “Hmong”. However, the HMoob people and language represent a diverse group of communities and identities. The usage of the spelling of Hmong reflects the White dialect pronunciation and word structures of Hmoob used by predominantly Caucasian, English dominant speakers. Additionally, the Green dialect is pronounced as Mong under these structures. Differently, the usage of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) spelling of Hmoob reflects the written system predominantly used by HMoob Americans. The spelling denotes the voice inflections and tones necessary to pronounce the words correctly.

To be more inclusive of the different communities within the larger HMoob community, this movement to incorporate the spelling of “HMoob” in literature and writings was developed. As a we [re]claim our own narratives and to assert our own authentic level of self-determination, the HMoob American Studies Committee at the University of Wisconsin-Madison developed this different spelling. This spelling comes about as the combination of different pronunciations, identities, and forms of language. Thus, the spelling is changed from Hmong to Hmoob to claim the Romanized Popular Alphabet that is used as the dominant form of the written HMoob language. Additionally, the capital letters “H” and “M” represent the two dominant dialects spoken by the HMoob people. When saying HMoob, the “H” is heard by those who speak the white dialect, while those who speak the green dialect are heard without the “H” sound. Therefore, the capital “H” and the capital “M” represents the purposeful inclusion of both dominant dialect groups. In the culmination of these reasonings, the spelling of Hmong as HMoob was created.

In our work as the HMoob American Studies Committee, we developed the term as a rebranding of our organization to reflect our own identities instead of how the larger society identifies us. Furthermore, the “Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub” research team at the University of Wisconsin-Madison used this term as a way to better explain their participants’ identities in their study on the experiences of HMoob American college students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Thus, as the HMoob communities establish themselves around the United States, they have worked toward movements to be recognized in the smaller and larger spaces. From literature to taking part in the larger political system of the United States, the HMoob people have worked to be a part of their communities. This movement incorporates the different language usage works to ensure that the spelling of HMoob is integrated into writing and soon replaces the spelling of Hmong. To change this spelling is to recognize the different communities within the HMoob community, but to also allow HMoob persons to determine how their own identity is represented within the literature. This movement is meant for those who identify as HMoob to advocate for in their own programming, as well for non-HMoob persons and their corresponding agencies to reconsider how the term is represented in text-based form.