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Author
Annie Jaiser et al.

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VERB PHRASE STRUCTURE

DIFFERENT CORRESPONDENCES TO ENGLISH "TO BE"

The verb "to be" has several equivalents in Hmong. To help you choose the correct one, think about what the verb "to be" means in a given English sentence and how it could be paraphrased. For instance, in the sentence "The house is in the mountains," "is" could be paraphrased as "is located" (hence *nyob* would be used in Hmong), whereas in "There is a book on the table," "is" refers to the existence of something (hence *muaj* would be used in Hmong). Below are the most common Hmong equivalents of English "to be" along with an exercise to help you practice their usages.

I. YOG 'to be' in the sense of "to be equal" or "to be true"

    1. <u>No</u> *yog* when the predicate is an adjective in English:

Nws mluas.	'S/he is very sad.'	(**not** **Nws yog mluas mluas.*)
Koj siab.	'You are tall.'	(**not** **Koj yog siab.*)

    2. *Yog* is used when the predicate is a noun phrase:

Nws yog ib tug xib fwb.	'He is a teacher.'
Tus no yog tus hlob.	'This one is the oldest.'

    3. *Yog* can also be used to introduce the equivalent of an English 'if' clause (*yog* = literally, '<u>be</u> it the case'):

|	
Yog li ces tsis cheem koj.	'If that's the case, I won't keep you then.'
Yog koj mus mas kuv mus thiab.	'If you're going, I'm going too.'

    4. As we shall see in the section on Questions and Answers below, *yog* can also show up in the tag question *puas yog?* (literally, <u>is</u> that the case?):

Maiv muaj ob tug nus, puas yog?	'My has two brothers, doesn't she/right?'

II. NYOB 'to be' in the sense of "to be located, to be situated," hence also 'to live'

Me lub tsev nyob tsis deb tsis ze cov roob loj loj.	'Marilyn's house is neither far nor close to the mountains.'
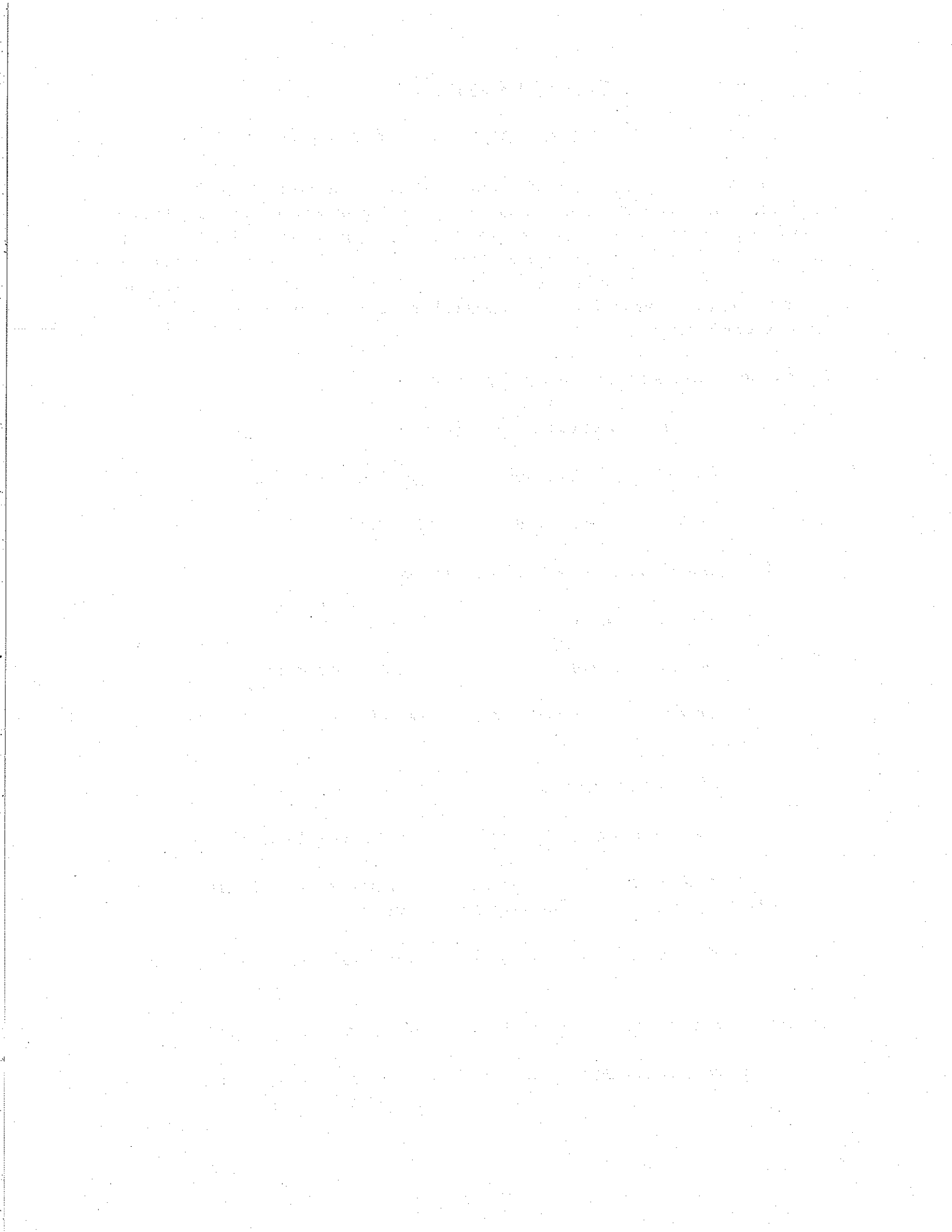
Kuv nrog kuv tus txiv thiab kuv tus ntxhais nyob.　　'I live with my husband and my
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　daughter.'

III. MUAJ 'to be' in the sense of "to exist"

1. In constructions equivalent to English existential "there is/are":

　　Muaj xya leej nyob hauv no.　　　　'There are seven people living here.'
　　Puas muaj neeg nyob tsev?　　　　　'Is there anybody home?'

2. In age expressions:

　　Kuv tus ntxhais muaj yim xyoo xwb.　　'My daughter is only eight years old.'

<p style="text-align:center">*********</p>

Practice exercise: Insert *yog, muaj, nyob,* or leave blank if appropriate.

1.　Ntxawm _____ plaub caug rau xyoo. 'Ntxawm is forty six years old.'

2.　Mas _____ nkees vim tias nws tsaug zog tsis txaus. 'Mas is tired because he did not

　　get enough sleep.'

3.　Kuv _____ ib tug ntxhais kawm ntawv.　'I'm a (female) student.'

4.　Tsis _____ dab tsi noj. 'There is nothing to eat.'

5.　Maiv _____ tshaib tshaib plab. 'Maiv is very hungry.'

6.　Neeb _____ ib tug ntxhais Ziv Poom. 'Neeb is a Japanese girl.'

7.　Nws tsis _____ hauv tsev. 'She's not at home.'

8.　Peb sawv daws _____ hauv teb chaws As mes lis kas. 'We all live in the United States.'

9.　Lawv _____ zoo siab. 'They're happy.'

10.　Kab Npauj lub tsev _____ ze lub pas dej. 'Kab Npauj's house is near the lake.'

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

I. "YES-NO" QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. The main way to ask a yes-no question is to insert *puas* before the verb you are questioning:

Nej puas nyiam txiv puv luj?   'Do you (pl.) like pineapple?'

Koj puas muaj koj phau ntawv Hmoob?   'Do you (sg.) have your Hmong book?'

The way to answer these questions is to repeat the verb with or without the negative *tsis*, depending on whether you want to give an affirmative or a negative answer:

Affirmative answer:	*Nej puas nyiam txiv puv luj?*	*Nyiam.*
	'Do you (pl.) like pineapple?'	'Yes, we do.'
Negative answer:	*Koj puas muaj koj phau ntawv Hmoob?*	*Tsis muaj.*
	'Do you (sg.) have your Hmong book?'	'No, I don't.'

2. Another way to ask a yes-no question is to add *puas yog* (literally, 'Is that the case?'; equivalent to French "n'est-ce pas?") at the end of a statement. *Puas yog* can be added to *any* statement to turn it into a yes-no question. Typically, this pattern is used when the speaker is seeking confirmation of what s/he is saying.

Lauj Pov muaj ob tug muam, puas yog?
'Lopao has two sisters, doesn't he/right?'

Answer: *yog* (confirms what the speaker said) or *tsis yog* (contradicts what the speaker said).

3. Polite requests can appear in the form of a yes-no question by adding *puas tau?*—which is equivalent to 'could you please/would you please?'—at the end of the request:

Hais dua, puas tau?
'Could you please say that again?'

Thov koj mus qhib lub qhov rooj, puas tau?
'Would you please go and open the door?'

Answer: *tau* (listener agrees to request) or *tsis tau* (listener turns down request)

4. Adding the particle *los* at the end of a sentence will turn it into a type of yes-no question which expects a *positive* answer. The sentence is typically formulaic or states the obvious, and the speaker is merely seeking confirmation as a way of making "small talk." S/he is not seeking a true/false type of answer as is the case with the yes-no questions discussed in (1) and (2):

> *Koj tuaj lo s?* Hi! (literally, something like 'So, you've come/arrived, have you?')

> *Koj cheb/zov tsev lo s?* (conversational opener: 'So, you're sweeping/taking care of the house, are you?')

Answer: Verb + particle *os*—e.g., *Tuaj os.*

II. "OR" QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Insert *los* (meaning 'or' here, not 'come') between the two options:
> *Tus no yog ib tug menyuam tub los ib tug menyuam ntxhais?*
> 'Is it a baby boy or a baby girl?'

Answer with one option, or with the whole sentence:
> *(Tus no yog) ib tug menyuam tub.*
> '(It's) a baby boy.'

2. The tag question *tas lawm los tsis tau?* 'finished or not?' often appears at the end of a statement as a way of asking somebody whether s/he has finished doing what is expressed in the statement. This construction is frequently used in spoken Hmong. Notice that while it appears in the form of an or question in Hmong, it typically translates as a yes-no question with 'yet' in English:

> *Koj noj mov tas lawm los tsis tau?* Have you finished eating yet or not?

Answer: *tas lawm* (positive answer: 'Yes, I have') or *(tseem) tsis tau* (negative answer: 'Not yet').

III. REPORTER'S/"WH" QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In Hmong, the question word (what, who, where, when, why, etc.) occurs in the same slot as the answer to the question—i.e., not at the beginning of the question as in English:

1. What?: *dab tsi* (also spelled *dabtsi*)?*

    Koj noj dab tsi?   'What are you eating?'
    Kuv noj pob kws.   'I'm eating corn.'

    Xim dab tsi?   'What color?'
    Xim dub.   'Black.'

2. Who?: *leej twg?/twg twg?*

    Leej twg/Twg twg xav mus ua si?   'Who wants to go and have fun?'
    Lauj Pov xav mus ua si.   'Lopao wants to go and have fun.'

3. Which?: *twg?*

    Koj yuav mus tom khw hnub t w g?   'Which day are you going to the market?'
    Mus hnub vas Xaum.   'I'm going on Saturday.'

4. Why?: *Vim li cas?/Ua (li. cas.?*
   Because: *Vim tias/rau qhov/vim yog*

    Vim li cas koj nkees nkees li?   'Why are you so tired?'
    Vim tias/Vim yog kuv mus ua si   'Because I stayed out too late/had too
    ntau ntau!   much fun!'

    Ua cas koj zoo zoo siab?   'Why are you so happy?'
    Rau qhov kuv txais tau ib tsab ntawv 'Because I received a letter.'
    lawm.

5. How much/many?: *pes tsawg*

    Nws muaj pes tsawg tus menyuam?   'How many children does s/he have?'
    Nws muaj o b tug menyuam.   'S/he has two children.'

6. Where?: *qhov twg?*

    Lauj Pov tuaj qhov twg tuaj?   'Where does Lopao come from?'
    Nws tuaj tim Minnesota tuaj.   'He comes from Minnesota.'

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*   In spoken Hmong this is often pronounced *atsi*.

7. How?: *li cas?*

       Nws lub npe hu li cas?   'What's her name?'
       Nws lub npe hu ua Maiv.   'Her name is My.'

       Koj mus tod li cas?   'How are you going there?'
       Kuv yuav mus taw.   'I'm going on foot/I'm walking.'

       Hnub no huab cua zoo li cas?   'How's the weather today?'
       Hnub no tshav ntuj.   'It's bright and sunny today.'

8. What kind?: *yam li cas?*

       Muaj tsiaj yam li cas nyob saum Npis   'What kind of animal is sitting on
       lub taub hau?   Npi's head?'
       Muaj ib tug dev nyob saum Npis   'A dog is sitting on Npi's head.'
       lub taub hau.

NEGATION

I. THE CERTAIN FALSITY NEGATIVE MARKER *TSIS*

While turning a positive statement into a negative one is a fairly complex matter in English,* the same is not true of Hmong: when the falsity of the proposition expressed by the clause is certain, the proposition is negated simply by inserting the negative marker *tsis* in front of the verb:

1 a. *Kuv paub*   b. *Kuv tsis paub.*
    I   know   I   neg know
    'I know.'   'I don't know.'

When there is more than one verb—a frequent occurrence in Hmong—the negative marker is placed before the verb which is being negated semantically:

2 a. *Kuv tsaug zog txaus.*   b. *Kuv tsaug zog tsis txaus.*
    I   sleep   suffice   I   sleep   neg suffice
    'I got enough sleep.'   'I didn't get enough sleep.'

In comparative constructions† *tsis* occurs before the stative verb modified by *dua*:

3. *Tus noog no tsis loj dua   tus noog ntawd.*
   clf bird this big neg comp clf bird   that
   'This bird is not bigger than that bird.'

In superlative constructions, *tsis* occurs either before the first verb or before *tshaj*:

4 a. *Tus noog no tsis loj tshaj.*
    clf bird this neg big surpass
    'This bird is not the biggest.'

   b. *Tus noog no loj tsis tshaj.*
    clf bird this big neg surpass
    'This bird is not the biggest.'

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* The main complexity stems from the fact that sentences with auxiliaries are negated by adding "not" (or its contracted form, "n't") after the auxiliary while sentences with ordinary verbs need the auxiliary "do" before "not"/"n't", cf. "She can't go" vs. "She didn't go."

† For details see "Comparative and Superlative Constructions" section.

II. THE UNCERTAIN FALSITY NEGATIVE MARKER *(TSIS) TXHOB*

As seen in the examples in the section above, the negative marker *tsis* is used when the falsity of the proposition expressed by the clause is certain. On the other hand, when the falsity of the proposition is not certain, the special negative marker *txhob*—optionally preceded by *tsis* with no apparent difference in meaning—is used. Uncertain falsity is characteristic of negative imperative constructions[*] (as in 5), since issuing a negative command does not guarantee success, and of constructions involving speculation (as in 6) or hope (as in 7). The contrast between the two negative markers is clearly illustrated in 6: *(tsis) txhob* appears in the if-clause, which refers to a speculative state of affairs, while *tsis* is found in the main clause, which refers to an actual state of affairs.

5. *(Koj) (tsis) txhob   hais   li ntawd!*
   you   neg   neg uncert speak like that
   'Don't speak like that!'

6. *Yog kuv (tsis) txhob   ua, peb twb tsis swb lawm.*
   if   I   neg   neg uncert do we   sure neg lose perf
   'If I hadn't done this, we would not have lost.'

7. *(Tsis) txhob   mus los mas.*
   neg   neg uncert go   prt prt
   'Don't go (please).'

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[*]   Imperative constructions typically have the same grammatical structure as basic declarative constructions, as seen below (note that the second-person pronoun is optional):
      (Koj) mus.
      you   go
      'Go!'

VERB SERIALIZATION

Paying close attention to the verbs, consider the following sentences from *"Dab neeg nab qa tsiav"* 'The school lizard,' by Lyfu Vang, found in the reading section.

From *"Dab neeg nab qa tsiav"* #1

1. *Ib tug nab qa tsiav* **khiav** **tawm** **los.**
                     run   come out come
   'A lizard escaped—literally, came running out.'

2. *Tub Sawm* **sawv**   **mus** **ntes** *tus nab qa tsiav*
                rise, get up go   catch

   tab sis nws **khiav** **tawm**   *tim lub qhov rooj* **mus** *lawm.*
                run   come out   go
   'Sawm got up to catch the lizard, but it ran out the door.'

3. *Tub Sawm thiaj li* **rov qab** **los** **zaum.**
                         return   come sit
   'So Sawm sat down again.' [*rov (qab)* + Verb = 'to do Verb again/to re-Verb']

From *"Dab neeg nab qa tsiav"* #2

4. *Nws tus nab qa tsiav* **nkag** **nkag** **nyob**   *saum nws lub rooj sau ntawv.*
                          crawl crawl be located
   'His lizard crawled around on top of his desk.'

5. *Tub Riam thiaj* **mus** **sawv** **ntsug** *tim lub qhov rais.*
                     go   stand upright
   'So Riam went and stood by the window.'

From *"Dab neeg nab qa tsiav"* #3

6. *Ib tug nab qa tsiav* **nkag** **tawm**   *tim lub qhov rooj* **los.**
                        crawl come out   come
   'A lizard crawled in through the door.'

7. *Nws maj mam* **nkag** **los** **nres** *ze ze ntawm Maiv Tooj lub rooj zaum.*
                   crawl come stop
   'It slowly crawled very close to Maiv Tooj's chair.'

8. *tus nab qa tsiav thiaj li   khiav tawm   tim lub qhov rooj   rov qab   mus lawm.*
                                   run   come out   return   go
    '... the lizard went running out the door again.'

9. *Tus xibfwb thiaj li   sawv   mus   qhib lub qhov rooj.*
                         get up, rise go   open
    'The teacher (got up and) opened the door.'

From *"Dab neeg nab qa tsiav" #4*

10. *Maiv Tooj ho yuav   nce   mus saum nws lub rooj zaum.*
                          climb   go
    'Maiv Tooj climbed on top of her chair.'

11. *Ib tug nab qa tsiav   khiav los   ze ze ntawm lawv cov rooj zaum.*
                        run   come
    'A lizard was running around very close to their chairs.'

12. *Maiv Tooj qw   qw   kom Tub Riam mus   qhib lub qhov rooj.*
                 shout shout order   go   open
    'Maiv Tooj shouted at Riam to go and open the door.'

13. *Tus nab qa tsiav twb   khiav tawm   tim lub qhov rais   mus lawm.*
                       run   come out   go
    'The lizard ran out through the window.'

As you can see in all of these examples, Hmong likes to string verbs together without any coordination and/or subordination markers. It is not uncommon to find strings of up to four or five verbs sharing the same subject, as illustrated in the following example:

14. *Yam zoo tshaj plaws mas, nej   yuav tsum   mus nrhiav nug   xyuas saib*
    thing good most top   you   must   go   look for ask   visit   see

    luag   muaj   kev pab   hom dab tsi nyob ncig   ib cheeb tsam ntawm nej
    others have   way help kind what be-at around environs   at   you

    'The best thing to do is for you to find people who live in your neighborhood who can help you with different things.'

This phenomenon of stringing verbs together is referred to as verb serialization and is a feature characteristic of many languages of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Typically, verb serialization involves:

a. A concatenation of two or more verbs sharing the same subject (and sometimes an object)
b. No overt marking of subordination or coordination
c. Taking what is conceived of as a single, unitary action/activity/event in English, breaking it down into its different component parts, and stating all the subparts explictly via a string of verbs. These verbs can occur side by side or can have elements sandwiched in between them—elements such as a direct object after a transitive verb or a location phrase after an intransitive verb.

A good way to begin studying verb serialization in Hmong is to look at constructions in which it is typically used.

I. MOTION + DIRECTION SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

In this type of verb serialization, the string of verbs starts with one or more action verbs involving motion (e.g., *khiav* 'run,' *nce* 'climb,' *nqa* 'pick up and carry in the hand(s),' *nkag* 'crawl,' etc.) and ends with a verb describing the direction of movement in relation to the speaker and hearer. The most common directional verbs are *mus* 'go' and *los* 'come'; *los* indicates motion toward the speaker or point of reference, while *mus* refers to motion away from the speaker or point of reference. Examples 1, 2 (second clause), 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 13 from *"Dab neeg nab qa tsiav"* above, as well as the examples below, illustrate this very common type of serialization. Typically, these strings of verbs correspond to a single verb or a verb followed by a preposition in English.

15. *Lawv nce nkag mus*   vs.   *Lawv nce nkag los*
    they climb crawl go   they climb crawl come
    'They climbed out.'   'They climbed in.'

16. *Nqa taws mus*   vs.   *Nqa taws los*
    carry wood go   carry wood come
    'Take the wood.'   'Bring the wood.'

17. ... *peb yawg hlob Vaj Pov tau khiav tawm teb chaws*
        our grandfather elder Vaj Pov attain run come out country
    '... our leader Vang Pao fled the country'

18 a. *Nws nqa nws rab hneev los tsev.*
      s/he carry her/his clf crossbow come home
      'S/he brought his/her crossbow home.'

   b. *Nws nqa nws rab hneev mus.*
      s/he carry her/his clf crossbow go
      'S/he took his/her crossbow.'

19. *Ntshav* ***tawm*** ***tawm*** *hauv* *tus* *qav* *lub* *qhov ncauj* ***los*.**
    blood   come out   come out   inside clf frog clf   mouth   come
    'Blood was streaming out of the frog's mouth.'

Looking over all these examples and others following the same pattern, you should begin to feel that motion verbs such as *khiav, nce, nqa,* and *nkag* are not complete without a directional verb such as *mus* or *los*.*

II. CAUSATIVE SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

These serial verb constructions describe *direct* causation: the first verb describes the direct action of the subject on the object, which causes the change described by the second verb, as seen in (20-25) below. Note that while all the verbs in the motion + direction type of serial verb construction shared the same subject, in the causative type the object of the first verb in the series is interpreted as the subject of the second.

20. *Nws* ***ntaus*** *tus* *dev* ***khiav*** *kiag.*
    s/he hit   clf dog run   int
    'S/he hit the dog so that it ran away.'

21. *Lawv* ***tua*** *tus* *txiv neej* ***tuag.***
    they   shoot clf   man   die
    'They shot the man dead./The man was shot to death.'

22. *Lawv* ***ua*** *lub* *tsev* ***siab siab.***
    they   make clf house high high
    'They built the house very high.'

23. *Peb* ***khawb*** *lub* *qhov* ***tob tob.***†
    we   dig   clf hole   deep deep
    'We dug the hole very deep.'

24. ***Pov*** *pob* ***los*** *rau* *kuv.*
    throw ball come to   me
    'Throw the ball (so that it comes) to me.'

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*   Another common directional verb is *tuaj,* which, although it translates as 'come' like *los,* has a different shade of meaning: whereas *los* means 'come (back) to a place where one resides or belongs,' *tuaj* means 'come to a place where one does not reside or belong (i.e., temporarily).' See example (36) for an illustration of the meaning of *tuaj.*
†   Recall that while *tob* 'deep' and *siab* 'high, tall' are considered to be adjectives in English, they are treated as verbs in Hmong. (See "Different Correspondences to English 'To Be'" for details.)

25. *Npis xa ib tsab ntawv **mus** rau nws niam.*
    Bee send clf letter   go to his mother
    'Bee sent a letter (so that it went) to his mother.'*

III. DISPOSAL SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

As suggested by their name, disposal serial verb constructions generally describe situations in which the subject of the first verb disposes of, destroys, or relinquishes the object in some way, as seen in (26-30). As is the case with the causative constructions discussed above, there is a noun phrase between the two verbs involved in the series. However, while in the causative type this noun phrase is interpreted as being both the object of the first verb and the subject of the second verb, in the disposal type the shared noun phrase is the object of both the first and the second verbs.

26. *Tus tub **pov** nws rab hneev   **tseg**.*
    clf boy throw his clf crossbow leave, abandon
    'The boy threw his crossbow down.'

27. *Lawv **xa** ib qho khoom **pub**   kuv.*
    they send some thing give present me
    'They sent some things to me (as a present).'

28. *... koj thiaj li **tom** kuv **noj***
    ... you so bite me eat
    '... so you can gobble me up'

29. *Nws **muab** poj niam **nrauj** lawm.*
    he take wife   divorce perf
    'He divorced his wife.'

30. *Ces txawm **muab** **pov** rau tshav ntuj.†*
    and then take throw put in sunlight
    'So then they took it and threw it into the sunlight.'

NOTE: There are a lot of sentences which follow the grammatical pattern found in (29-30) but which do not have a "disposal" meaning: while the first verb is also *muab* 'take,' the second verb

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* It is interesting to compare the causative serial verb constructions in (24-25) with a motion + direction construction such as (15) *Lawv nce nkag mus/los* 'They climbed in/out.' Both types of constructions include the directional verbs *mus* and *los*. However, there is a difference between the two types of constructions in terms of *who* does the moving: in the motion + direction type, it is the subject of the first verb (which is the subject of all the verbs in the series) which does the moving; in the causative type it is the object of the first verb which moves as a result of what the subject does.

† The subject "they" and the object "it" are both derived from the larger context of the story.

does not necessarily describe how the object is "disposed of," but simply how it is dealt with or what happens to it. This is illustrated in (31-32):

31. ***Muab** lawv* **cais** *raws li lawv lub cev thiab lawv qhov feem.*
    take them separate from according to their clf body and their type
    'Classify them according to their shape and type.'

32. *Pog Xeev Laus thiab Yawg Xeev Laus nkawd yug tau ib tug ntxhais;*
    Mrs. Seng Lor and Mr. Seng Lor they-two give birth get one clf daughter

    *nkawm **muab hu ua** Muam Nkauj Liag, no.*
    pair take call Mua Ngao Lia this

    'Mr. and Mrs. Seng Lor gave birth to a daughter; they named her Mua Ngao Lia.'

IV. INSTRUMENTAL SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

Instrumental serial verb constructions are equivalent to English "to do X with Y." The most common verbs to occur as the first element of these constructions are *xuas* 'grasp, hold, grope,' *muab* 'take (in hand),' and *siv* 'use.' They are followed by the instrument used to carry out the action, after which comes the verb describing the purpose to which the instrument is put— e.g., 'to take-key-to-open', 'to use-knife-to-cut,' etc. In sentences with *xuas* or *muab* the handling of the instrument is emphasized, whereas in sentences with *siv* the notion of utilization is stressed. These points are illustrated in the examples below:

33 a. *Nws tau **xuas** yuam sij qhib qhov rooj lawm.*
     s/he attain grasp key open door perf
     'S/he opened the door with a key.'

   b. *Nws tau **muab** yuam sij qhib qhov rooj lawm.*
      s/he attain take key open door perf
      'S/he opened the door with a key.'

   c. *Nws tau **siv** yuam sij qhib qhov rooj lawm.*
      s/he attain use key open door perf
      'S/he opened the door with a key.'

34 a. *Tus neeg caum nqaij tau **xuas** phom tua tus noog.*
     clf person chase meat attain grasp gun kill clf bird
     'The hunter killed the bird with a gun.'

   b. *Tus neeg caum nqaij tau **muab** phom tua tus noog.*

> clf   person chase meat attain take   gun   kill clf bird
> 'The hunter killed the bird with a gun.'

> c. *Tus neeg   caum nqaij tau   siv phom tua tus noog.*
> clf   person chase meat attain use gun   kill clf bird
> 'The hunter killed the bird with a gun/used a gun to kill the bird.'

NOTE: When *siv* is used, the implication is that the instrument is already in the agent's hand(s). When *xuas* or *muab* are used, the agent may or may not already have the instrument in hand, depending on the context. For example, in 33, if the key needed to open the door is in full sight on top of a table—i.e., no groping is necessary to access it—it is preferrable to use *muab* (a neutral 'take (in hand)' over *xuas*. A good way to get a sense of the subtle differences among these three verbs is to ask a Hmong person to act these sentences out for you.

V. PURPOSE SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

Purpose serial verb constructions involve a motion verb such as *mus* 'go,' *los* 'come,' *tuaj* 'come (to a place where one does not reside or belong),' *sawv* 'get up, rise,' etc. and an action verb such as *ntes* 'catch,' *qhib* 'open,' *nrhiav* 'look for.' Examples 2, 9, 12, and 14 from *"Dab neeg nab qa tsiav"* above, as well as the examples below, illustrate this type of serial verb construction.

> 35. *Kuv nrog kuv tus txiv   mus pem Chicago; wb **mus noj** mov ntawm lub*
> I   with my clf husband go up Chicago we go eat rice at   clf

> *tsev noj mov Nyab Laj.*
> restaurant   Vietnamese

> 'My husband and I went up to Chicago; we went [there] to eat at a Vietnamese restaurant.'

> 36. *Tej zaum   nkawd **tuaj xyuas** wb pem Indiana thiab.*
> sometimes they   come visit   us up   Indiana too
> 'Sometimes they come to visit us up in Indiana too.'

VI. VERB (OBJECT) + ACCOMPLISHMENT VERB SERIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

In these serial constructions, the second verb is a verb of accomplishment such as *tau* 'get, obtain,' *raug* 'hit the target,' or *txaus* 'suffice, be enough.' The presence or absence of the negative marker *tsis* 'not' before the second verb indicates whether the action expressed by the first verb has been accomplished successfully or not, as seen in the contrast between the (a) and (b) sentences in examples 37-39:

37 a. *Tooj tua (phom) raug.*
    Tooj fire gun   hit the target
    'Tooj fired and hit his target.'

b. *Tooj tua (phom) tsis raug.*
    Tooj fire gun   neg hit the mark
    'Tooj missed.'

38 a. *Kuv tsaug zog txaus.*
    I   sleep   suffice
    'I got enough sleep.'

b. *Kuv tsaug zog tsis txaus.*
    I   sleep   neg suffice
    'I didn't get enough sleep.'

39 a. *Kuv nrhiav tau txiv neej.*
    I   look for get man
    'I found a man.'

b. *Kuv nrhiav tsis tau txiv neej.*
    I   look for neg get man
    'I can't find a man.'

Hence,

nrhiav	= 'to look for, search'
nrhiav tau	= 'to find'
nrhiav tsis tau	= 'to not be able to find'

VII. ELABORATION SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

These are cases of verb serialization whose primary function seems to be a stylistic one—namely, to overtly specify all the subparts of an event/situation to an extent that is not found in a language like English. In all of the examples below (and in serial verb constructions in general), the translations show that English has a much higher tolerance for vagueness in this area than Hmong does.

40. *Nws nyeem ntawv rau kuv niam mloog.*
    s/he read   book   to   my   mother listen
    'S/he's reading to my mother.'

Contrary to English, the action performed by the person being read to—namely, listening—has to be stated explicitly in Hmong.

41. *Kuv mam zov ntsia koj mus.*
    I   so then guard watch you go
    'I'll watch you go.'

This sentence is said by a father to his young son, who is afraid of leaving the area where his father is plowing to go to the edge of the field to play. The sentence would be correct grammatically speaking without *zov* 'guard, care for, look after,' but it would not be good, idiomatic Hmong. The sentence is better with *zov*, which states explicitly the component of the situation whereby the father is taking care of the son by watching.

42. ... **tso**   **kwv**   **tso**   **tij**   **tso**   *txiv*   **tseg**
    relinquish younger brother relinquish older brother relinquish father abandon
    '...leave one's relatives behind.'

Here again it is stylistically better Hmong to elaborate on the abandoning of specific relatives.

VIII. TIPS TO FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS

1. Expose yourself to many instances of verb serialization by reading Hmong (the Johnson folk tales are a good way to start). This will help you develop a feel for verb serialization.

2. Think of all the different components of an action or an event, and state them explicitly.

3. Bear in mind that *los* has to be used to express motion toward the speaker or point of reference, while *mus* has to be used to express motion away from the speaker or point of reference.

4. If all else fails, ask a native speaker to act out sentences with multiple verbs for you.

TENSE AND ASPECT MARKERS

I. TENSE

Tense refers to the grammatical means a language uses to express the location in time of a situation (event, activity, or state). In languages such as English, French, German, or Spanish, we speak of the past, present, and future tenses; these languages encode the differences between tenses in the verb forms, which change depending on the tense. In English, for instance, the past tense of a verb is formed by adding the suffix "-ed" to the verb stem (e.g., They cook<u>ed</u> dinner last night). In addition, there are a finite number of verbs which have an irregular past tense (e.g., go/went, buy/bought, sleep/slept, etc.). In Asian languages, verb forms typically stay the same regardless of the location in time of a situation. This does not mean that these languages do not have tense, however. While they do not mark time reference by altering verb forms, they do locate situations along the time line via temporal adverb phrases such as "last year," "twenty years ago," "in 1900," etc. Let us compare a prototypical English and Hmong past tense sentence to illustrate this point:

1. *Nag hmo   kuv   mus   tom   khw.*
    yesterday   I   go   loc   market
    'I went to the market yesterday.'

In the English sentence the location in time of the action is indicated twice, once via the adverb yesterday and once via the change in the verb form from "go" to "went"; in Hmong (and other Asian languages), tense is simply indicated once, via the adverb *nag hmo* 'yesterday.' Hmong (along with other Asian languages) is thus easier and more economical in this respect: in natural written and spoken discourse, the time frame of a situation is established at the beginning of a story or conversation and is not referred to again unless it changes. From an Asian language point of view, having to conjugate verbs in addition to using temporal adverb phrases to mark tense seems redundant and is the source of great learning difficulties in acquiring a language such as English.

II. ASPECT

Besides being described in terms of their location on a time line via tense, situations can also be described in terms of the ways they unfold and are profiled by the speaker. To illustrate this point, let us compare and contrast the following English sentences:

2. I eat rice every day.
3. Don't bother me now; I'm eating.

In sentence (2) "I eat" refers to a *habitual* situation, occurring on a regular basis; in sentence (3), on the other hand, "I'm eating" refers to an *ongoing* situation, unfolding at the time it is being uttered. The difference between these two sentences is not a difference in tense, but rather in what is called

"aspect." Aspect refers to the grammatical means a language uses to profile a situation in terms of concepts such as "durativity" (ongoing situation), "completion" (completed situation), "iteration" (repeated situation), etc. Thus, in English, the simple present tense can be used as a grammatical device to express a habitual situation such as the one in (2), while the present progressive ["to be" + main verb + "-ing"] can serve to encode an ongoing situation such as the one in (3).

A further way of clarifying the distinction between tense and aspect is to use the following test: something is considered to be aspect rather than tense if it can co-occur with tense (or other forms of time specification such as temporal adverbs). Thus the English progressive and perfect are aspects because they can be used with any tense (present, past, or future), as seen below:

TENSE → ↓ **ASPECT**	*PRESENT*	*PAST*	*FUTURE*
PROGRESSIVE	I am eating (today)	I was eating (yesterday)	I will be eating (tomorrow)
PERFECT	I have eaten (today)	I had eaten (yesterday)	I will have eaten (tomorrow)

Cross-linguistically, the most common aspect distinction is between perfective and imperfective. A helpful metaphor for illustrating this contrast is to think of a camera lens whose focus can be adjusted to allow a situation to be viewed from different perspectives and angles. With this metaphor in mind, perfective aspect refers to situations viewed synthetically "from the outside," as completed wholes with clear results or endpoints; since their terminal boundary is in sharp focus, these situations typically occur in the past and are fully realized. Imperfective aspect refers to situations viewed analytically "from the inside," with explicit reference to their internal development and leaving their endpoints out of focus. Thus imperfective aspect puts the emphasis on the situation as process and includes the progressive and the habitual aspects discussed above.

While tense is an easy area of Hmong grammar to deal with since time specification is achieved solely via temporal adverb phrases, aspect is a more challenging domain. As is the case with tense, verb forms themselves do not change in order to reflect aspect contrasts, but there are a number of verbal modifiers which are used as grammatical devices to encode aspectual differences. Most of these verbal modifiers are elements which occur before the verb;* a good case in point is the pre-verbal marker *tab tom*, which Hmong uses as the grammatical means of encoding ongoing situations, as seen in (4):

4. *Lawv tab tom noj mov.*
   they   prog   eat rice
   'They're eating.'†

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* The major exception to this is the perfective aspect marker *lawm*, which occurs at the end of a sentence or clause (see section on sentence/clause + *lawm* below for details).

† Since there is no time specification in Hmong, the sentence could also translate as 'They were/will be eating.'

Sentence (4) illustrates the fact that Hmong and English share the progressive aspect on a conceptual level, but encode it differently in the grammar: while English uses the progressive made up of "to be" + main verb + "-ing," Hmong uses the pre-verbal element *tab tom*.*

The next four sections discuss the major aspect markers of Hmong in detail.

III. *TAB TOM* + VERB = SITUATION IN PROGRESS

Tab tom is an aspect marker which can appear in pre-verbal position to indicate that a situation (activity, event, state) is in progress. (5-8) illustrate this usage of *tab tom* as an indicator that a situation is in the process of unfolding:

5. *Lawv txiv   mus tom khw   lawm, tiam sis lawv niam   **tab tom** ntxhua*
    their father go   loc market perf but/and their mother   prog   wash
    khaub ncaws.
        clothes
    'Their father has gone to the market, and their mother is washing clothes.'

6. *Nws **tab tom** ua hauj lwm tim khw.*
    she   prog   work   at   market
    'S/he's working at the market.'

7. *Thaum kuv tus phooj ywg tuaj   (kuv) **tab tom** noj mov.*
    when   my   clf friend   come   (I)   prog   eat rice
    'When my friend arrived I was eating.'

8. *Tam sim no Npis **tab tom** kawm ntawv tiam sis (nws) xav   saib   this vis.*
    right now   Bee   prog   study   but   (he)   want   watch   TV
    'Right now Bee is studying, but he wants to watch TV.'

The pre-verbal modifier *tab tom* can also indicate that a situation is about to start, as seen in (9). This is especially clear when *tab tom* appears in conjunction with the irrealis marker *yuav*, as illustrated in (10).†

9. *Npis **tab tom** nto   hluas nraug; Maiv **tab tom** nto   hluas nkauj thiab.*
    Bee   prog   reach puberty   My   prog   reach puberty   too
    'Bee is about to reach puberty; My is about to reach puberty too.' (I.e., they're about to be of marriageable age in Hmong culture.)

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* The *tab tom* +verb construction, however, is not used as frequently as the English progressive (see next section for details).

† For a definition of realis and irrealis, see footnote in *Tau* section and discussion in *Yuav* section below.

10. *Thaum tus Tsov **tab tom** yuav dhia, tus Qav txawm tuav kiag tus Tsov tus tw.*
    when   clf Tiger prog irrls jump clf Frog then grab int clf Tiger clf tail
    'When the Tiger was about to jump, the Frog grabbed tightly onto the Tiger's tail.'

From this we can see that *tab tom* is typically the equivalent of the English progressive aspect made up of the auxiliary "to be" followed by a verb in the gerundive "-ing" form (e.g., 'Bee is study<u>ing</u>'). In terms of usage though, there is a crucial difference between the two languages: while the progressive is used profusely in English, this is not the case in Hmong. The *tab tom* construction is used only when it is not clear from the context that a situation is in progress or about to happen. Hence, you must be careful not to fall into one of the beginner's learning traps— i.e., resorting to translation: the English progressive very rarely translates as *tab tom* + verb; most of the time, the simple verb form is used (e.g., *Nws ua hauj lwm* 'S/he's working'). This is further illustrated in the dialogues, readings, and oral comprehension stories found in this book: while *tab tom* is hardly ever used in Hmong, the progressive forms are common in the English translations of these materials. A good strategy, then, is to look at natural Hmong discourse and to notice how infrequent this construction is. Paying close attention to its actual occurrences will help you figure out when it is necessary to use it.

IV. SENTENCE/CLAUSE + *LAWM* = COMPLETED SITUATION

The word *lawm* has three different grammatical functions with a common semantic thread running through them. First, *lawm* can be used as a main verb meaning 'to leave, depart, go,' as seen in (11) below. This is the least common usage of *lawm; mus* 'to go' is much more common.

11. *Lawv **lawm** lauj.*
    they leave prt
    'They have gone.'

Second, *lawm* can be used as a location word referring to a place a certain distance away from the speaker when it is followed by a locative phrase as seen in (12-13):

12. *Cia peb mus **lawm** tom lawv.*
    let we go distance there they
    'Let's go to their place.'

13. *Nws khiav **lawm** pem Tsheej Maim.*
    s/he run distance up Chiang Mai
    'S/he escaped to Chiang Mai.'

Third (and this is the most common usage), when *lawm* is found at the end of a sentence or clause, it functions as the perfective marker in Hmong. This means that *lawm* signals the completion of a given situation (event, activity, or state), as seen in (14):

14. *Kuv noj mov **lawm**.*
    I   eat   rice   perf
    'I am finished/I am done eating.'

To illustrate the usage of *lawm* in a richer context, let's look at two instances of its occurrence in an excerpt of the oral comprehension story *"Npis npaj mov noj"* 'Bee prepares a meal (to eat)':

15. *Npis rov qab los tsev los muab ib   lub lauj kaub rau dej   rau,   npau   **lawm**,*
       Bee   return home   dir   take   one clf   pot   put water into   boil   perf
    nws mam li npaws zaub paj   rau. Nws cub   mov thiab. Thaum tiav   huv si
    he   then   break cauliflower into he   steam rice too   when   ready all
    ***lawm** nws mam li noj.*
    perf   he   then   eat
    'After he returns home, he puts water in a pot. After the water boils, he breaks the cauliflower into it. He also steams the rice. When everything is ready, he proceeds to eat.'

In both instances *lawm* signals the completion of a situation: in the first one the boiling of the water, and in the second one the readiness of the meal.

Since *lawm* is a completion marker, it comes as no surprise that it is used with the pre-verbal marker *twb* 'already, really', as seen in this excerpt of *"Tus tsov los xyuas"* 'Tiger shows up for a visit':

16. *Tus   tsov hais tias, "Kuv yuav noj koj."   Tiam sis kuv teb tias, "Koj noj kuv*
    clf   tiger say   I   fut   eat   you   but   I   answer   you   eat   me
    *tsis tau. Kuv twb   noj koj **lawm**."*
    neg can   I   already eat   you perf
    'The tiger said, "I'm going to eat you." But I answered, "You can't eat me. I've already eaten you."'

As Ratliff (1992) has pointed out, the common semantic thread that runs through the three grammatical functions of *lawm* discussed above has to do with a line between the home center and a certain distant point:
  • with the main verb *lawm* 'to leave,' the focus is on the beginning of movement along the line;
  • with the locative *lawm*, the focus is on the point at the end of the line—i.e., "there"; and
  • with the perfective aspect marker *lawm*, the focus is on the completion of the movement.

When *lawm* occurs at the end of a clause or sentence it sometimes indicates that the action is merely underway—i.e., has left the starting point, but has not been completed yet, as seen in (17). A good way to think about this is to consider it as the completion of the outset of the action rather than the entire action. In (17), while the playing is not completed, the taking off to do so is. Context will help you catch this nuance.

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17. *Tus tub tau rab hneev;   nws thiaj mus ua si lawm.*
    clf boy get clf crossbow he then go play perf
    'The boy got the crossbow and went off to play.'

As noted earlier, *lawm* is most commonly used as a perfective aspect marker to signal the completion of a situation (event, activity, state). As such, *lawm* is independent of tense: the situation can be viewed as completed not only in the past, but also in the present and future, as seen in (18):

18. *Thaum txog peb caug lawm sawv daws thiaj tau   hnav khaub ncaws tshiab.*
    when arrive New Year perf everybody then attain wear clothes   new
    'So when the New Year arrives, everybody gets to wear new clothes.'

As a perfective marker, *lawm* is often preceded by *tas* 'done, finished, completed,' which further underlines the completion of a situation. As discussed in the Parataxis section, one of the characteristics of Hmong style is to conjoin elements with similar meanings, and *tas lawm* can be analyzed as one such stylistic variant. The usage of *tas lawm* is illustrated in (19), an excerpt from "The Tiger and the Frog":

19. *"Koj yuav noj kuv! Kuv twb   tho   koj lub siab noj tas   lawm las as."*
    you irrls eat me I   already pierce your clf liver eat finished perf prt
    'You're going to eat me! But I've already eaten your liver.'

V. TAU

Tau is one of the most frequently occurring elements in the Hmong verb phrase as well as one of the most challenging to interpret since it has several functions. An understanding of its core meaning combined with a look at its position vis-à-vis other elements in the verb phrase will help you come to grips with its multiple usages.

A. *TAU* AS A MAIN VERB = 'TO GET, TO OBTAIN'

i. *Tau* used by itself = 'to get, to obtain'

When *tau* is used by itself in a verb phrase, it functions as a transitive verb meaning 'to get, to obtain,' as illustrated in (20-21):

20. *Koj yuav tsum cog zaub   coj mus muag, koj tau nyiaj, koj mam li*
    you must plant vegetables take go sell you get money you then
    yuav nplhaib.
    buy ring
    'You must plant vegetables for sale, and you'll get money to buy the ring.'

21. *Tus   tub   tau rab   hneev;   nws   thiaj   mus   ua si   lawm.*
    clf   boy   get clf   crossbow   he   then   go   play   perf
    'The boy got his crossbow and went off to play.'

As a transitive verb, *tau* shares the grammatical properties of other transitive verbs: it can be preceded by the question marker *puas*, the negative marker *tsis*, or the progressive aspect marker *tab tom*. It can also be used in conjunction with the completion aspect marker *lawm* (see section on aspect marker combinations); finally, like all verbs, it can be be reduplicated to convey the iterative aspect—i.e., *tau tau* = 'keep getting.'

ii. Verb + *tau* 'to get, to obtain' = actual accomplishment of action

When *tau* follows another verb, it indicates the actual accomplishment of the purpose of an action and points to the <u>yield</u> of the action expressed by the verb. This is clearly illustrated in the contrast between *xav* and *xav tau* in (22): in the first part of the sentence, *xav* simply refers to the act of thinking (hard, since *xav* is reduplicated) about something, whereas in the second part, the occurrence of *tau* after *xav* means that the thinking has actually yielded a result—namely, getting an idea:

22. *Tus   qav   xav   xav   ib pliag,   tus   qav   xav   tau   tswv yim.*
    clf   frog   think think   awhile   clf   frog   think   get   idea
    'The frog thought it over for awhile and got an idea.'

This verb + *tau* construction falls into the broader category of serial verb constructions made up of a verb followed by an accomplishment verb (see section on verb serialization for details). The notion of *tau* confirming the result/yield of an action is further illustrated below. Note the following helpful translations:
    'to find'   =   *nrhiav tau*—i.e., 'to look for' + 'to get, obtain'
    'to chase' =   *caum tau*—i.e., 'to chase' + 'to get, obtain'

23. *Nws   yug   tau ib   tug tub tag.*
    she   give birth get   one   clf   son   finish
    'She gave birth to a boy.'

24. A: *Koj   yuav   tau dab tsi?*
       you   buy   get   what
       'What did you buy?'
   B: *Kuv   yuav   tau ib co   qe,   nqaij qaib,   zaub.*
       I   buy   get   some   egg   chicken   greens
       'I bought some eggs, chicken, greens.'

25. *Kuv nrhiav tau phau ntawv.*
   I   look for get clf   book
   'I found the book.'

26. *Me nyuam caum tau ib   tug npauj npaim zoo nkauj.*
   child   chase get one clf   butterfly   beautiful
   'The child caught a beautiful butterfly.'

B. _TAU_ AS AN AUXILIARY VERB

Over time, *tau* evolved into an auxiliary (helping) verb in addition to being a main verb. As an auxiliary verb, *tau* can occur both in pre-verbal position and in post-verbal position, with correspondingly different shades of meaning, as discussed below.[*]

i. _Tau_ + verb = 'to get to, to manage to V' = _tau_ as attainment marker

When *tau* occurs before a main verb, it functions as an aspect marker[†] conveying the attainment or fulfillment of the situation (activity, event, state) described by the verb. The situation can take place in the past, present, or future, as seen in the examples below. In Hmong, the time frame of a situation is given at the discourse level (i.e., entire conversation, story, etc.) rather than the isolated sentence level, so you will need to look at the larger context of a sentence to figure out the time reference if it is not explicitly stated. If you know from context that a sentence refers to the past, *tau* + verb translates as a past tense in English.

27. *Lawv tau   noj nqaij nyug.*
   they   attain eat   meat beef
   'They ate beef.'

But if there is an explicit past time marker such as an adverb referring to the past, *tau* is optional and is typically left out entirely, as seen in (28) and (29) respectively:

28. *Nag hmo niam tais   (tau)   hais ib   zag dab neeg*
   last night grandmother (attain) tell   one clf   story
   'Grandmother told us a story last night.'

29. *Nag hmo sawv ntxov muaj ib   tug tsov tuaj   hauv kuv lub tsev.*
   yesterday morning   be   one clf tiger come to   my clf house
   'Yesterday morning, a tiger came to my house.'

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[*] The pattern whereby a main verb meaning 'to get, to obtain' has developed into both a pre-verbal and a post-verbal auxiliary with the same meaning differences as in Hmong is found in other Asian languages (e.g., Chinese, Thai, Mien, Vietnamese, Khmer, Lahu, and other Hmong dialects).
[†] See sections on tense and aspect above for details on the notion of aspect.

In much of the literature on Hmong grammar, *tau* + verb has been described as the equivalent of the English past tense. While it is true that an attained situation is often a past situation and that *tau* + verb typically translates as a past tense in this case, this description covers only part of the picture and is misleading in gaining an understanding of the *tau* + verb construction. Rather than fish for a one-word translation for *tau*, it is better to think of it as a word referring to a state of affairs that has been successfully reached or that is going to be reached. *Tau* should definitely not be equated with the past tense in English. *Tau* is not a tense marker; it functions as an aspect marker, and the fulfillment of the situation can take place not only in the past, but also in the present and in the future, as seen in (30-32). Hence, a more accurate way of describing the *tau* + verb construction would be to analyze it as meaning 'to get to/to manage to V, to reach the state described by V, to have the opportunity to V' (where V = main verb):*

30. *Thaum txog peb caug lawm sawv daws thiaj tau   hnav khaub ncaws tshiab.*
    when arrive New Year perf everybody then attain wear clothes   new
    'So when the New Year arrives, everybody gets to wear new clothes.'

31. *Kuv niam hluas   nyob hauv Oregon; nws tsis tau   yuav txiv.*
    my younger sister live in   Oregon she neg attain get married
    'My younger sister lives in Oregon; she's not married (yet).'

32. *Tus Tsov hais tias, "Qav, koj nyob qhov twg? Koj puas tau   dhia?*
    clf Tiger say   Frog you be   where   you Q   attain jump
    'The Tiger said, "Frog, where are you? Have you jumped over yet?"'

ii. Verb + <u>*tau*</u> = 'can, be able to V' = <u>*tau*</u> as potential mode marker

When *tau* occurs after a main verb, it functions as a potential mode marker expressing possibility, permissibility, ability. As such, it translates as 'can, be able to'; the verb + *tau* construction is illustrated in (33):

33. *Qav, wb   sib   twv   dhia hla   tus cav no saib leej twg dhia tau*
    Frog we-two recip compete jump go across clf log this see who   jump can
    deb   dua
    far   comp.
    'Frog, let's have a race jumping over this log to see who can jump farther.'

As will be seen in the section on modality markers, "can, be able to" covers a large meaning territory in English that is broken down into at least three separate words in Hmong: *tau*, *taus*, and *txawj*. For further details on *tau* as a potential mode marker and on the distinction between *tau*, *taus*, and *txawj*, see below.

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* Another way of describing this construction is to label it "realis," a term used to refer to situations which actually occur, regardless of time reference. Its "irrealis" counterpart is the *yuav* + *V* construction, which points to unrealized, hypothetical situations (see section on *Yuav* for details).

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NOTE: Both the potential mode *tau* (section B.ii) and the accomplishment *tau* (section A.ii) occur in the same order in the verb phrase—i.e., verb + *tau*—and you may wonder how to distinguish between them. A good strategy is to see if *tau* occurs after a transitive action verb potentially resulting in something real or good, if it is followed by a direct object, and if it can be analyzed as meaning "to get, to obtain"; if so, you are dealing with the accomplishment *tau*. While there is always a direct object in the verb + accomplishment *tau* construction, this is not necessarily the case with the potential mode *tau*; the verbs involved in that construction can be either transitive or intransitive. And, as usual, context will help you in distinguishing between the two as well.

C. *TAU* + *TIME PHRASE CONSTRUCTIONS* = *DURATION, PAST TIME REFERENCE*

When *tau* is followed by a time phrase (e.g., two years, five months, etc.), the construction as a whole expresses either duration from a point in time in the past up to the present, or a past time reference. This usage of *tau* is illustrated in (34-37); note how the *tau* + time phrase construction can occur either at the beginning or at the end of the sentence.

34. **Tau** *xya hli los no Npis tsis tau sau tuaj rau peb.*
attain seven month come here Bee neg attain write come to us
'It's been seven months that Bee hasn't written to us/Bee hasn't written to us for seven months.'

35. **Tau** *plaub xyoos tas los lawm Npis nyob Fab kis teb.*
attain four years finish come perf Bee be France
'Bee was in France four years ago.'

36. *Npis nyob Fab kis teb* **tau** *plaub xyoos los lawm.*
Bee be France attain four years come perf
'Bee has been in France for four years.'

37. *Npis tau nyob Fab kis teb* **tau** *plaub xyoos los lawm.*
Bee attain be France land attain four years come perf
'Bee was in France for four years.'

D. *TAU* *IN OTHER CONSTRUCTIONS*

i. *Tseem tsis tau* V or *tseem* V *(object)* *tsis tau* = *'not ... yet'*

When *tseem* 'still' is used by itself in a verb phrase, it occurs before the verb, and the *tseem* + verb construction refers to an action or an event which is still going on, as seen below:

38. *Niam txiv* ***tseem*** *nyob hauv Los Tsuas teb.*
    parents   still   be   in   Laos   country
    'My parents still live in Laos.'

When ***tseem*** 'still' is used in conjunction with the negative phrase *tsis tau*, the construction as a whole refers to something which has not happened yet. This applies both with the pre-verbal aspect marker *tau* and the post-verbal potential mode *tau*, as seen in (39-40) and (41) respectively:

39. *Npis* ***tseem tsis tau*** *noj mov.*
    Bee still   not attain eat
    'Bee hasn't eaten yet.'

40. *Mus   hnub vas xuv los hnub vas xaum, kuv* ***tseem tsis tau*** *paub*
    go   day Friday or day Saturday I   still   neg attain know
    'I don't know yet whether to go on Friday or on Saturday.'

41. *Maiv Qhua* ***tseem*** *hais lus* ***tsis tau.***
    Maiv Qhua still   say words neg can
    'Maiv Qhua can't talk yet.'

ii. X ... *puas tau?* = polite request

As discussed in the "Questions and Answers" section, *tau* is found in the tag ***puas tau?***, which can be appended to any imperative statement to turn it into a polite request equivalent to English "Could you/Would you please (do X)?" This is illustrated below:

42. *Hais dua,* ***puas tau?***
    say again Q   can
    'Could you/Would you please say that again?'

43. *Thov koj mus qhib lub qhov rooj,* ***puas tau?***
    ask you go open clf   door   Q   can
    'Could you/Would you please go and open the door?'

iii. X + *los tau* = consent, agreement

Tau is also found in the phrase *los tau*, which can be added to a statement to express consent/ agreement with what your interlocutor is saying. In conversation, *los tau* occurs in the high-frequency phrase *Ua li los tau*, which is used to express agreement with what has just been said or suggested and translates as 'as you wish/okay, let's do it/sure.'

44. *Tus   qav   hais tias,   "Koj dhia   ua ntej."*
    clf   Frog say   you   jump   first
    'The Frog said, "You jump first."'

    *Tus   tsov   teb   hais tias: "Ua   li ntawd   **los   tau**."*
    clf   Tiger answer saying   do   like that consent
    'The Tiger answered, "Okay, let's do it."'

45. *Tus   Qav   teb   dua   tias: "Koj   xav   dhia   dua   **los   tau**,   tsis ua li cas."*
    clf   Frog answer again saying you   want jump   again consent   no problem
    'Again, the Frog said, "You're willing to jump again? That's fine with me."'

iv. *X + **tas lawm los tsis tau**? = 'X + finished or not?'*

As can be seen in the "Questions and Answers" section, *tau* appears as the last element of the high-frequency tag question *tas lawm los tsis tau?* 'finished or not?' This tag quesion occurs at the end of a statement as a way of asking somebody whether s/he has finished doing what is expressed in the statement, as seen in (46):

46. *Koj   noj mov   **tas**   **lawm los tsis   tau**?*
    you   eat rice finish   perf   or   neg   attain
    'Have you finished eating yet?'

    Positive answer: ***Tas   lawm*** 'Yes, I have.'
    Negative answer: ***(Tseem)   tsis   tau*** 'No, not yet.'

Note also the usage of ***los   tau*** in the following:
    *tus twg **los tau***   'anyone'
    *qhov twg **los tau***   'anywhere'

VI. YUAV

A. ***YUAV** + VERB = IRREALIS SITUATION*

When it is used before a main verb, *yuav* indicates that a situation (activity, event, state) has not happened. Quite often, it points to the fact that a situation is going to unfold, and hence translates as a future in English, as seen in (47):

47. *Tus   tsov   hais tias,   "Kuv   **yuav**   noj   koj."*
    clf   tiger say   I   irrls   eat   you
    'The tiger said, "I'm going to eat you."'

However, just as it is misleading to analyze *tau* as a past tense marker (see above), it is misleading to consider *yuav* as a future tense marker in Hmong. We saw that when there is an explicit past time reference in the discourse (e.g., last year, yesterday), *tau* is optional and typically left out. The same is true of *yuav* when it is used to refer to a situation that is going to unfold: when there is a temporal adverb with future time reference at the discourse level (e.g., tomorrow, next week, etc.), *yuav* is typically omitted.

A more accurate way of describing the *yuav* + verb construction is to analyze it as describing situations which belong to the realm of the unfulfilled or unrealized, not just situations which will happen at some future point—hence its irrealis marker label. Irrealis is a term used to refer to situations which have not (yet) happened; this includes hypothetical or non-occurring situations with past, present, or future time reference. In Hmong the *yuav*+ verb construction is used to describe such irrealis situations;[*] the fact that it is used to refer not only to future situations, but also to hypothetical and non-occurring ones is clearly illustrated in (48-50) below. In (48) the first *yuav*+ verb construction points to an intended future action on the Tiger's part, and the second one to a state of speculation as to what to do on the Frog's part; in (49) the *yuav*+ verb construction refers to the Frog's hypothetical death, and in (50) it is preceded by the progressive marker *tab tom* to point to a situation which is about to happen but has not quite done so yet.

48.
Tus	Tsov	hais tias,	"Kuv	tshaib tshaib	plab	li	kuv	**yuav**	noj koj."
clf	Tiger	say	I	hungry hungry	stomach	int	I	irrls	eat you

Tus	Qav	tsis	paub	**yuav**	ua	li cas	li.
clf	Frog	neg	know	irrls	do	what	int

'The Tiger said, "I'm very hungry and I'm going to eat you." The Frog didn't know what to do.'

49.
Tus	Qav	mob mob	nws	twb	**yuav**	tuag,	tab sis	nws	tseem	hais	taus	lus.
clf	Frog	hurt hurt	he	really	irrls	die	but	he	still	speak	can	words

'The Frog was hurting so badly that he thought he was going to die for sure, but he could still talk.'

50.
Thaum	tus	Tsov	tab tom	**yuav**	dhia,	tus	Qav	txawm	tuav	kiag	tus Tsov	tus	tw.
when	clf	Tiger	prog	irrls	jump	clf	Frog	then	grab	int	clf Tiger	clf	tail

'When the Tiger was about to jump, the Frog grabbed tightly onto the Tiger's tail.'

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[*] Its realis counterpart would be the *tau* + verb construction discussed under B.i in the section on *Tau*.

B. OTHER MEANINGS OF YUAV

Yuav can also be a main verb with different meanings (see below), so you will have to pay close attention to its position in the verb phrase and to the context in which it is used to determine the intended meaning. As a main verb, yuav can have the following meanings:

- *yuav* = 'to take, to obtain'; 'to buy' (when money is involved)

  Note also these common phrases:
  yuav poj niam = 'to take a wife, to get married'
  yuav txiv = 'to take a husband, to get married'

- *yuav* = 'to want, to desire'

These meanings are illustrated in (51-53):

51. *Koj yuav tsum cog zaub coj mus muag, koj tau nyiaj, koj mam li*
    you   must   plant vegetables take go   sell you get money you   then

    yuav *nplhaib.*
    buy   ring

    'You must plant vegetables for sale, and you'll get money to buy the ring.'

51. *Kuv niam hluas nyob hauv Oregon; nws tsis tau **yuav** txiv.*
    my   younger sister live in   Oregon   she neg   attain get married
    'My younger sister lives in Oregon; she's not married (yet).'

53. *Tub Riam **yuav** zaum.   Tub Sawm ho   **yuav** sawv.*
    son Tria want sit down son Sher then want get up
    'Tria wants to sit down. Then Sher wants to get up.'

NOTE: *Yuav* also occurs as the first element in the *yuav tsum/yuav tau* + verb construction, which expresses obligation (e.g., *Kuv yuav tsum/yuav tau mus.* 'I must go.'). See section on "Modality Markers" for details.

MODALITY MARKERS

I. The Modal Verbs "Must" and "Can"

A. "MUST": *YUAV TSUM, YUAV TAU*

The notion of obligation is conveyed by inserting either *yuav tsum* or *yuav tau* before the verb (*yuav tsum* being the more common form of the two), as seen in the examples below:

a. *Koj   mus.*   *Koj   yuav tsum mus.*
    you   go   you   must   go
    'You go.'   'You must go.'

b. *Lub   ntiajteb no   me   hwv.   Peb   yuav tau muab ua   kom   loj   dav.*
    clf   world   this   small int.   we   must   take make so that big   wide
    'The world is so small. We have to make it bigger and wider.'

B. "CAN": *TXAWJ, TAUS, TAU*

"Can" covers a large meaning territory in English that is broken down into at least three separate words in Hmong: *txawj*, *taus*, and *tau*. All three are typically translated as "can" in English, as seen in the examples below (note that *txawj* occurs <u>before</u> the main verb while *taus* and *tau* occur <u>after</u> the main verb):

a. *Nws   txawj   hais   lus   Fab kis*
    s/he   can   speak words   French
    'S/he can speak French.'

b. *Nws   khiav   taus*
    s/he   run   can
    'S/he can run.'

c. *Nws   mus   tau*
    s/he   go   can
    'S/he can go.'

Although *txawj*, *taus*, and *tau* all translate as "can" each of them covers a different portion of the large meaning territory covered by "can" in English; hence *txawj*, *taus*, and *tau* cannot be used interchangeably. To help you figure out which shade of meaning each expresses, look at the illustrated example sentences on the next three pages. The illustrations, along with the contrast between the positive and the negative versions of each sentence, should help you figure out the meaning of each example sentence (if not, translations are provided in the appendix). **Hint:** to determine the meaning differences between *txawj*, *taus*, and *tau*, try to find a way of paraphrasing "can" in each case and to think about in what sense "can" is used.

II. *TXAWJ* VS. *TAUS* VS. *TAU*

A. *TXAWJ*

1.   (a)

Nws **txawj** ua luam dej.

   (b)

Nws **tsis txawj** ua luam dej.

2.   (a)

Nws **txawj** hais lus As kiv.

   (b)

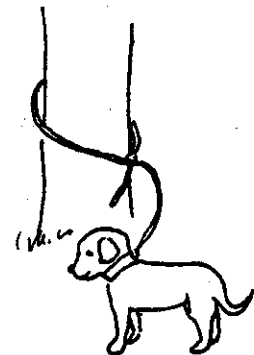Nws **tsis txawj** hais lus As kiv.

3.   (a)

Nws **txawj** ua mov noj.

   (b)

Nws **tsis txawj** ua mov noj.

4.   (a)

Miv **txawj** nce ntoo.
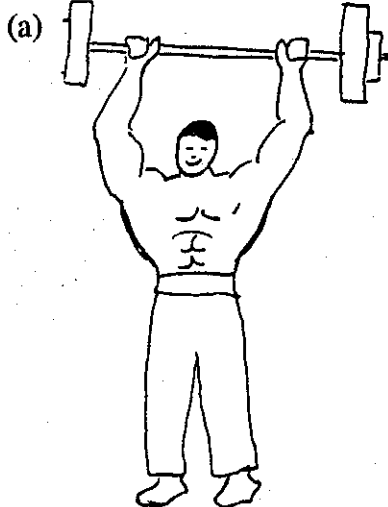
   (b)

Dev **tsis txawj** nce ntoo.

B. *TAUS*
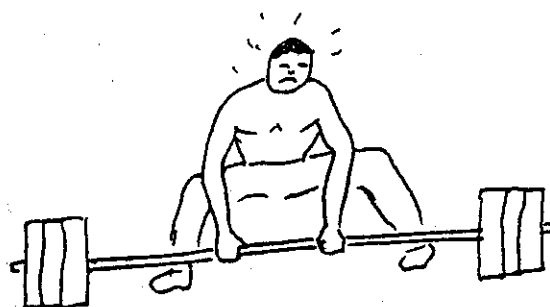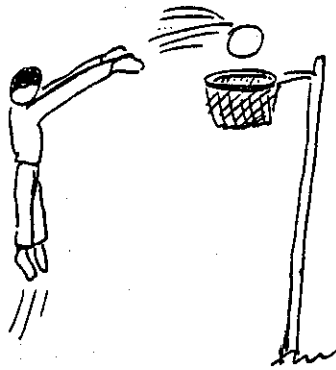
1. (a)

Nws khiav **taus**.

(b)

Nws khiav **tsis taus**.

2. (a)

Nws nqa **taus**.

(b)

Nws nqa **tsis taus**.
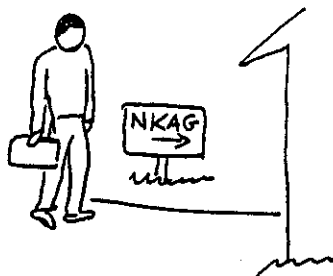
C. *TAU*

1. (a)

Nws pov npas **tau**.

(b)

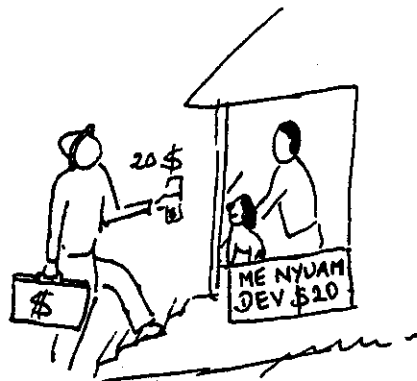Nws pov npas **tsis tau**.

2. (a)

Nws mus **tau**.

(b)

Nws mus **tsis tau**.

3. (a)

Nws muas tus me nyuam dev **tau**
(vim tias nws muaj nyiaj).

(b)

Nws muas dab tsi los **tsis tau**
(vim tias nws tsis muaj nyiaj).

D. *TXAWJ*, *TAUS*, AND *TAU*: THREE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF ENGLISH "CAN"

From the illustrated example sentences with *txawj*, we can see that *txawj* means "can" in the sense of "know how to," and hence expresses an <u>acquired ability</u>—e.g.,

Nws txawj ua luam dej.	'He can swim.'
Nws txawj hais lus As kiv.	'She can speak English.'

To understand the difference between *taus* and *tau*, it is best to start looking at the contexts in which *taus* is used and to contrast them with contexts in which *tau* is used. From the illustrated example sentences we can see that *taus* is used when one is asserting one's (or someone else's) <u>physical</u> ability or inability to do something:

Nws khiav taus.	'He can run.'
Nws nqa taus.	'He can lift it.'
Tus poj niam laus sawv tsis taus.	'The old woman can't get up.'
Kuv haus cawv tsis taus.	'I can't drink alcohol.'

Taus is also used to indicate that one has or does not have the resources to do something:

Kuv pab koj tsis taus.	'I can't (don't have the means) to help you.'
Nej muas lub tog zaum ntawd tsis taus.	'You can't afford to buy that sofa.' [as opposed to:]
Nej muas kuv tus cwj mem tsis tau.	'You can't buy my pen (because I won't let you).'

The renowned Hmong scholar Yang Dao has given the following explanation of the difference:

<u>external</u> hindrance or lack of hindrance: *tau*

Kuv nyob ntawm no tsis tau li.	'I can't stay here any longer.' (perhaps because I have another appointment)

<u>versus</u>

<u>internal</u> hindrance or lack of hindrance, whether physical or psychological: *taus*

Kuv nyob ntawm no tsis taus li.	'I can't stay here any longer.' (perhaps because I can't stand your cigarette smoke, or perhaps because I can't stand you)

To summarize the difference between *taus* and *tau*, we can say that *taus* is to be used when there is a personal hindrance or lack of hindrance; that hindrance can be physical, psychological, or due to the extent or nature of one's holdings. Elsewhere *tau* is used.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *TXAWJ, TAUS,* AND *TAU*: SUMMARY TABLE

	MEANING	EXAMPLE
TXAWJ	"Can" in the sense of "know how to"; <u>acquired ability</u>.	1. *Poj niam Hmoob txawj ua paj ntaub; kuv tsis txawj.* 'Hmong women can do embroidery; I can't.' 2. *Lawv txawj ua luam dej.* 'They can swim.'
TAUS	<u>Personal, internal</u> hindrance or lack thereof; hindrance can be physical as in (1), psychological as in (2), or due to the extent or nature of one's resources as in (3). Often used in the negative.	1. *Nws khiav tsis taus.* 'He can't run.' (because he has a broken leg) 2. *Kuv nyob ntawm no tsis taus li.* 'I can't stay here any longer.' (because I can't stand you) 3. *Kuv pab koj tsis taus.* 'I can't help you.' (because I don't have the means to)
TAU	<u>External</u> hindrance or lack thereof, permission, possibility, right to, etc.; least restricted in meaning and usage.	1. *Nws mus tau.* 'He can go (in).' [the store is open] 2. *Nws mus tsis tau.* 'He can't go (in).' [the store is closed] 3. *Kuv nyob ntawm no tsis tau li.* 'I can't stay here any longer.' (because I have another appointment)

From all this we can see that *txawj* and *taus* are more restricted in meaning than *tau*. Hence a good strategy for making the proper choice among the three words is to think about what "can" means in English, and to go through a process of elimination: if "can" cannot be paraphrased with "know how to," or if there is no personal hindrance (as described above) involved, use *tau*. [NOTE: The story *"Khoua"* above illustrates the difference between the three in a clear fashion.]