

**Martha RATLIFF**

## **Interrogative Pronouns in Isolating Languages**

Interrogative pronouns in the Hmong-Mien language family of Southeast Asia are highly unstable. The only interrogative pronoun with a modicum of stability is ‘which’, reconstructible to the Hmongic level (Ratliff 2010). Interrogative pronouns are frequently semantically decomposed compounds, with the ‘which’ element extracted: ‘who’ = ‘which person’, ‘what’ = ‘which thing’, ‘when’ = ‘which time’, ‘where’ = ‘which place’. In virtually all of the isolating Hmong-Mien languages, interrogative pronouns are either transparent compounds of this sort, or opaque disyllabic words. In this presentation, I will address the question of borrowability of elements within these compounds (assumed to be no less common than the borrowing of other elements) and the rate of new interrogative pronoun creation (assumed to be fast, given the poor lack of correspondence across languages). I will also compare the stability of interrogative pronouns in Hmong-Mien to the stability of interrogative pronouns in creoles and other isolating languages characterized by heavy use of compounding.

### **Reference**

Ratliff, Martha. 2010. *Hmong-Mien Language History*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.

### **Workshop title**

Stability and Borrowability of Interrogative Pronominals

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