

Negative Polarity, Intensification and Free Choice: The Case of the Hmong Emphatic Particle *li*

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In this talk, I present a systematic and detailed description of the distribution of the emphatic particle *li* based on original field research with native speaker consultants of White Hmong (Hmong Daw) and Green Hmong (Mong Leng) from St. Paul (USA) and Chiangmai (Thailand).

- (1) a. kuv tsis tshum koj (**li**).
1SG not provoke 2SG LI
'I did not provoke you (at all).'
- b. koj hais tau zoo kawg (**li**).
2SG say it well very LI
'You said it (very) very well.'
- c. Maiv yuav nrog tus twg tham tau (**li**).
Mai FUT with CL any talk able LI
'Mai can talk to anybody (at all).'

I make the novel observation that the occurrence of *li* requires “licensing”. Specifically, it is licensed in negative polarity, (positive) intensification and free choice environments.

Considering the distribution of the emphatic *li* in environments that license negative polarity items (NPIs), I show that *li* is licensed in sentences with an overt negative marker and in pragmatically neutral yes-no questions. It is also licensed in superlatives and in a type of comparative constructions. In (positive) contexts of intensification, the emphatic *li* is licensed by a degree adverb or the reduplication of an adjective, verb or quantifier that strengthens the force of the expression. In free choice contexts, the emphatic particle *li* is licensed in sentences with a free choice expression.

I lay the groundwork for a unified analysis of the occurrence of *li* in negative polarity, intensification and free choice environments by showing that they share the same syntax. I further show that the emphatic *li* has a domain widening property (Kadmon and Landman 1993), and that it is an “actually emphatic NPI” (Chierchia 2013) in that it gives rise to a negative bias in questions (Borkin 1971). The negative bias accounts for why *li* is not licensed in confirmation seeking questions.

The description adds an adverbial item to the empirical base for the construction of theories regarding negative polarity, free choice and intensification. While it is not uncommon to find items across languages that are licensed in negative polarity and free-choice contexts (e.g., English *any* (Fauconnier 1975) and *at all* (Horn 1972, 2000)), the combination of environments observed with Hmong emphatic particle *li* has not been commonly documented or considered together. The pattern of distribution of Hmong emphatic *li* offers a new perspective on the distribution of the English adverbial *much* (Israel 1996, Rett 2018).