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

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### 1. Introduction\*

In this talk, I present a 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).

The emphatic particle *li* in Hmong is used to emphasize or strengthen the force of the expression.

- (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.'

The emphatic *li* is to be distinguished from other homophonous particles in the language.

These include the possessive marker *li*, *li* as a clausal pro-form and *li* as a marker of comparison of equality.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I do not consider *li* in contexts of comparison of equality an emphatic *li*, even though such contexts have been noted to allow NPIs.

(i) The boy runs as fast as **anyone** in his class. (Haspelmath 1997: 51)



- (iii) Show that the emphatic *li* has a domain widening property (Kadmon and Landman 1993), and that it gives rise to a negative bias in questions (Borkin 1971) and can be considered an “actually emphatic NPI” (Chierchia 2013).
- (vi) Discuss questions raised by the description/analysis with respect to
  - (a) the lexical meaning of the emphatic *li* and how the emphatic *li* might be connected with adverbs *tamusli*, *tasli* and *musli*.
  - (b) the extent to which the patterning in Hmong is found in English NPI/quantity word *much* (Israel 2001, Rett 2018) and Hindi enclitic *-hi* (Bajaj 2016).

## 2. The distribution of the emphatic particle *li*

### 2.1 The emphatic *li* in NPI contexts

The emphatic particle *li* is licensed in sentences with an overt negative marker and in pragmatically neutral yes-no questions.

#### 2.1.1 *li* in negative sentences

The emphatic *li* is licensed by a sentential negator *tsis/tsi* ‘not’.

The occurrence of *li* gives rise to an interpretation/emphasis that is similar to the adverbial NPI *at all* or *one bit* in English. I translate *li* as *at all* throughout.

- (4) a. kuv **tsis** tshum koj (**li**).  
1SG not provoke 2SG LI  
‘I did not provoke you (at all).’
- b. kuv tshum koj (**\*li**).  
1SG provoke 2SG LI  
‘I provoked you (\*at all).’
- (5) a. lawv cia li ua tau **tsis** tau kev pab los ntawm cov txheeb ze (**li**).  
3PL DM-UNEXPECTED do able not get way help from CL relative LI  
‘They were able to do it without help from relatives (at all).’
- b. lawv cia li ua tau tau kev pab los ntawm cov txheeb ze (**\*li**).  
3PL DM-UNEXPECTED do able get way help from CL relative LI  
‘They were able to do it with help from relatives (\*at all).’

Negative quantifiers such as *nobody* and *not many NP* do not appear to have direct nominal counterparts in Hmong.<sup>2</sup> They are generally expressed with the existential verb *muaj* ‘have’ preceded by the sentential negative *tsis/tsi*.

*Tsis/tsi* in such sentences may license the emphatic particle *li*.

- (6) a. **tsis** muaj leej twg pom nws (**li**).<sup>3</sup>  
 not have person any see 3SG LI  
 ‘Noone saw him/her (at all).’
- b. muaj leej twg pom nws (**\*li**).  
 have person any see 3SG LI  
 ‘Someone saw him/her (\*at all).’
- (7) a. **tsis** muaj neeg coob hais tias lawv yuam kev (**li**).  
 not have people many say that 3PL wrong LI  
 ‘Not many people say that they are wrong (at all).’
- b. muaj neeg coob hais tias lawv yuam kev (**\*li**).  
 have people many say that 3PL wrong LI  
 ‘Many people say that they are wrong.’

Negative quantifiers like *no more than n NP* also have the option being expressed with the existential verb *muaj* ‘have’ as in (8a). As in previous cases, the negative *tsis/tsi* can license the emphatic *li*.

- (8) a. **tsis** muaj tshaj ob tus xibfwb ntseeg Maiv (**li**).  
 not have more two CL professor believe Maiv LI  
 ‘No more than two professors believe Maiv (at all).’
- b. muaj tshaj ob tus xibfwb ntseeg Maiv (**\*li**).  
 have more two CL professor believe Maiv LI  
 ‘More than two professors believe Maiv (\*at all).’

There are variations among speakers in whether *no more than n NP* can be expressed with a nominal expression.<sup>4</sup> With this configuration, the negative *tsis/tsi* can marginally license the emphatic *li*.

<sup>2</sup> This is not an uncommon property in the world’s languages (Haspelmath 1997, Huang 2003).

<sup>3</sup> *twg* is glossed as an indefinite *any* in this context, though it can be a *wh*-element elsewhere as in *leeg twg* ‘who/which person’ and *qhov twg* ‘where’. The sentence is unacceptable without *twg*.

<sup>4</sup> That *tsi dhau ob leeg* ‘no more than two professors’ is a nominal expression is supported by the fact that it can appear in an object position.

(i) Maiv ntseeg cov tub kawm tsi dhau ob leeg.  
 Maiv believe CL[PL] student not more two person  
 ‘Maiv believes no more than two students.’

- (9) a. xibhwb **tsi** dhau ob leeg ntseeg Maiv (?**li**).  
 professor not more than two person believe Maiv LI  
 ‘No more than two professors believe Maiv (at all).’
- b. **tsi** dhau ob leeg xibhwb ntseeg Maiv (?**li**).  
 not more two person professor believe Maiv LI  
 ‘No more than two professors believe Maiv (\*at all).’
- (10) xibhwb ntau dua ob leeg ntseeg Maiv (**\*li**).  
 professor more than two person believe Maiv LI  
 ‘More than two professors believe Maiv (\*at all).’

In addition to the sentential negator *tsis/tsi*, the negative marker used in imperatives *txhob* or *tsis/tsi txhob* also can license *li*.

- (11) a. (**tsis**) **txhob** txhawj txog lawv (**li**).  
 not not (IMP) worry about 3PL LI  
 ‘Don’t worry about them (at all).’
- b. txhawj txog lawv (**\*li**).  
 worry about 3PL LI  
 ‘Worry about them.’

### 2.1.2 *li* in yes/no questions

The emphatic *li* is licensed in pragmatically neutral yes-no questions, namely yes-no questions formed with *puas*, alternative questions and A-not-A questions.

#### Yes-no questions formed by *puas*:

The emphatic particle *li* is licensed in a yes/no question formed by *puas*, which appears before the verb or the auxiliary when one is present.

- (12) a. koj **puas** pom nws (**li**)?  
 2SG Q see 3SG LI  
 ‘Did you see him/her (at all)?’

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(ii) Maiv ntseeg tsi dhau ob leeg tub kawm.  
 Maiv believe not more two person student  
 ‘Maiv believes no more than two students.’

- b. koj pom nws (\*li).  
2SG see 3SG LI  
'You saw him/her (\*at all).'
- (13) a. koj puas yuav tuaj mus tham hluas-nkauj (li)?  
2SG Q FUT come go chat girl LI  
'Are you going to go and chat with girls [courting] or not?'
- b. koj yuav tuaj mus tham hluas-nkauj (\*li).  
2SG FUT come go chat girl LI  
'You are going to go and chat with girls [courting].'

With an existential sentence introduced by *muaj* 'have', the question particle appears in a sentence initial position before the existential verb.

The yes-no question particle *puas* in a sentence initial position behaves the same as *puas* before the verb or auxiliary in its ability to license the emphatic particle *li*.

- (14) a. puas muaj leej twg ntseeg Fred (li)?  
Q have person any trust Fred LI  
'Is there anyone (at all) who trusts Fred?'
- b. muaj leej twg ntseeg Fred (\*li)?  
have person trust Fred LI  
'There is someone who trusts Fred (\*at all).'

Alternative questions formed by *los* 'or':

Alternative questions formed with *los* 'or' also can license the emphatic particle *li*. These alternative questions contain the negative marker *tsis/tsi* in one of the conjuncts.

- (15) a. Maiv hau kuas coffee los tsis hau thaum yav sawv ntxov (li)?  
Maiv drink liquid coffee or not drink when time morning LI  
'Does Maiv drink coffee or not in the morning (at all)?'
- b. Maiv hau kuas coffee los kuas tea thaum yav sawv ntxov (\*li).  
Maiv drink liquid coffee or liquid tea when time morning LI  
'Maiv drinks coffee or tea in the morning (\*at all).'

A-not-A questions:

Hmong has a form of yes-no questions formed by the reduplication of the auxiliary with *tsis/tsi* 'not'. This type of yes-no questions is comparable to A-not-A questions in Mandarin Chinese,

though its occurrence in Hmong seems more restricted compared to that in Mandarin Chinese, which readily admits A-not-A questions with reduplicated verbs.<sup>5</sup>

- (16) a. koj **yuav tsis yuav** tuaj mus tham hluas-nkauj?  
2SG FUT not FUT come go chat girl  
'Are you going to go and chat up some girls?'
- b. \*koj **mus tsis mus**?  
2SG go not go

Like other yes-no questions, A-not-A questions can license the emphatic particle *li*.

- (17) a. koj **yuav tsis yuav** tuaj mus tham hluas-nkauj (**li**)?  
2SG FUT not FUT come go chat girls LI  
'Are you going to go chat up some girls at all?'
- b. koj yuav tuaj mus tham hluas-nkauj (**\*li**).  
2SG FUT come go chat girls LI  
'You are going to go chat up some girls (\* at all).'

Non-neutral questions formed by *puas yog*:

A pragmatically non-neutral yes/no question such as a confirmation seeking question formed by the sentence initial *puas yog* cannot license *li*:

- (18) **puas yog** nws tshum koj (**\*li**)?  
Q right 3SG provoke 2SG LI  
'Is it true that s/he provoked you (\*at all)?'

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<sup>5</sup> Mortensen (2019: 637) notes that A-not-A questions are less common than *puas V* questions in Green Hmong/Mong Leng. A-not-A questions with a reduplicated verb is possible in the dialect Mortensen describes.

(i) Koj moog tsi moog?  
2SG go not go  
'Are you going?'

2.1.3 NPI environments that do not license the emphatic particle *li*

The emphatic *li* is not licensed in sentences with downward entailing quantifiers not overtly marked by *tsis/tsi*, conditionals, *more-than* comparatives, wh-questions and sentences with *tsuas* ‘only’ or *xwb* ‘only’.

A downward entailing expression not overtly marked by *tsis/tsi* ‘not’, such as *tsawg NP* ‘few NP’ and *tau tshaj* ‘at most’, cannot license *li*.

- (19) a. **tsawg tus tub kawm ntawv** pab Maiv (\***li**).  
 few CL (male) student help Maiv LI  
 ‘Few students helped Maiv (\*at all).’
- b. **tau tshaj ob tus tub kawm ntawv** pab Maiv (\***li**)  
 able most two CL (male) student help Maiv LI  
 ‘At most two students helped Maiv (\*at all).’

A conditional statement cannot license the emphatic *li* in either the antecedent or the consequent.

- (20) a. **yog koj xav tias kuv ntseeg nws** (\***li**), koj yuam kev.  
 if 2SG think that 1SG trust/believe 3SG LI 2SG wrong  
 ‘If you think that I trust him, you are wrong.’
- b. **yog koj xav tias kuv ntseeg nws, koj yuam kev** (\***li**).  
 if 2SG think that 1SG trust/believe 3SG 2SG wrong LI  
 ‘If you think that I trust him, you are wrong.’

A *more-than* comparative construction also cannot license *li*.<sup>6</sup>

- (21) a. **kuv hlub koj tshaj qhov kuv hais tau** (\***li**).  
 1SG love 2SG more than/that 1SG say able LI  
 ‘I love you more than I can say.’
- b. **Nws khwv dua/dhau koj** (\***li**).  
 3SG tired more 2SG LI  
 ‘S/he is more tired than you.’

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<sup>6</sup> I show later that a *more* comparative contrasts with a *more-than* comparative in its ability to license the emphatic *li*. Different comparatives have been shown to differ in their ability to license NPIs. Among the *more than* comparatives, there is a distinction between clausal comparatives and nominal/prepositional comparatives in that the former license NPIs but the latter do not (Progavac 1994: 71; Hoeksema 1983).

Both regular and rhetorical wh-questions cannot license *li*.

(22) **leej twg** ntseeg Fred (**\*li**)?  
who trust Fred LI  
'Who trusts Fred?'

(23) **leej twg** yuav ntseeg tau Fred (**\*li**) (mas) (**\*li**)?<sup>7</sup>  
who FUT trust to Fred LI DM LI  
'Who would want to trust Fred?'

Neither *tsuas* 'only' nor *xwb* 'only' can license the emphatic *li*.

- (24) a. **tsuas** muaj ob tug tub kawm ntawv pab Maiv (**\*li**).  
only have two CL (male) student help Maiv LI  
'Only two students helped Maiv (\*at all).'
- b. ob leej tubkawm pab Maiv **xwb** (**\*li**).  
two person student help Maiv only LI  
'Only two students helped Maiv (\*at all).'

## 2.2 The emphatic particle *li* in (positive) contexts of intensification

In addition to certain NPI environments, the emphatic particle *li* can also appear in a (positive) context of intensification, "licensed" by a degree adverb or the reduplication of an adjective, verb or quantifier that strengthen the force of the expression.

The emphatic *li* can also appear in *more* comparatives (as opposed to *more-than* comparatives) and superlatives.

### 2.2.1 Degree adverbs

The emphatic particle *li* may be licensed by an intensifier such as *kawg* 'very', *heev* 'very', *ua luaj* 'so/very' modifying an adjective.

- (25) a. koj hais tau zoo kawg/heev/ua luaj (**li**).  
2SG say it well very LI  
'You said it (very) very well.'
- b. koj hais tau zoo (**\*li**).  
2SG say it well LI  
'You said it well.'

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<sup>7</sup> The sentence is more natural with the discourse marker *mas*.

### 2.2.2 Reduplication as a strengthening strategy

The particle *li* can also be licensed by the reduplication of an adjective, a verb or a quantifier.

The reduplication of an adjective intensifies the degree of the state described by the adjective (Mortensen 2019).

- (26) a. Maiv **txawj-ntse**.<sup>8</sup>  
Maiv smart  
'Mai is smart.'
- b. Maiv **txawj-txawj-ntse**.  
Maiv smart-RED  
'Mai is very smart.'

The reduplication of an adjective licenses the emphatic particle *li*.

- (27) a. Maiv **txawj-txawj-ntse (li)**.  
Maiv smart-RED LI  
'Mai is (very) very smart.'
- b. Maiv txawj-ntse (**\*li**).  
Maiv smart LI  
'Mai is smart.'

The reduplication of a verb signals multiple occurrences of the event/situation described.<sup>9</sup>

- (28) a. koj **tshum** kuv.  
2SG provoke 1SG  
'You provoke me.'
- b. koj **tshum-tshum** kuv.  
2SG provoke-RED 1SG  
'You always provoke me.'

A reduplicated verb also licenses the occurrence of the emphatic particle *li*.

- (29) a. koj **tshum-tshum** kuv (**li**).  
2SG provoke- RED 1SG LI  
'You (always) always provoke me.'

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<sup>8</sup> Mortensen (2019) refers to such items as stative verbs.

<sup>9</sup> Mortensen (2019) notes that the reduplication of a non-stative verb may signal intensification or contribute to a durative aspect.

- b. koj **tshum** kuv (**\*li**).  
 2SG provoke 1SG LI  
 ‘You provoke me.’

The reduplication of the quantifier *ntau* ‘many’ expresses a higher quantity than the non-reduplicated form, while the reduplication of *tsawg* ‘less’ expresses a lower quantity than the non-reduplicated form.

- (30) a. kuv xyau BJJ ib lub lwm-tiam twg **ntau** zaug.  
 1SG practice BJJ one CL week each many time  
 ‘I train BJJ many times each week.’
- b. kuv xyau BJJ ib lub lwm-tiam twg **ntau-ntau** zaug.  
 1SG practice BJJ one CL week each many-RED time  
 ‘I train BJJ many many times each week.’
- (31) a. peb hmoob tseem **tsawg**.  
 1PL Hmong still less  
 ‘We Hmong are still few in number.’
- b. peb hmoob tseem **tsawg tsawg**.  
 1PL Hmong still less-RED  
 ‘We Hmong are still very few in number.’

These reduplicated quantifiers can license the emphatic particle *li*.

- (32) a. kuv xyau BJJ ib lub lwm-tiam twg **ntau-ntau** zaug (**li**).  
 1SG practice BJJ one CL week each many-RED time LI  
 ‘I train BJJ many many times each week.’
- b. kuv xyau BJJ ib lub lwm-tiam twg **ntau** zaug (**\*li**).  
 1SG practice BJJ one CL week each many time LI  
 ‘I train BJJ many times each week.’
- (33) a. peb hmoob tseem **tsawg tsawg (li)**.  
 1PL Hmong still less-RED LI  
 ‘We Hmong are still very few in number.’
- b. peb hmoob tseem **tsawg (\*li)**.  
 1PL Hmong still less LI  
 ‘We Hmong are still few in number.’

In the contexts of intensification with the reduplication of an adjective, verb or degree adverb, in addition to appearing at/towards the end of the sentence, the particle *li* may appear in between the reduplicated form.

The appearance of *li* in between the reduplicated forms is associated with a more negative tone or emotional response to the situation. The speaker is sometimes considered to speak in a sarcastic and less polite manner. These effects vary in degrees depending on the contexts.

- (34) a. Hmoob Miskas noj tau ntau-ntau li!  
 Hmong American eat able much-much LI  
 ‘Hmong Americans can eat a lot!’ [Neutral]
- b. Hmoob Miskas noj tau ntau-li-ntau!  
 Hmong American eat able much-LI-much  
 ‘Hmong Americans can eat a lot!’ [Negative]
- (35) a. koj tshum-tshum kuv li.  
 2SG provoke/poke 1SG LI  
 ‘You are provoking me!’ [Neutral]
- b. koj tshum-li-tshum kuv.  
 2SG provoke/poke LI provoke/poke 1SG  
 ‘You are provoking me!’ [Negative]

This discourse effect, though present, is less prominent with the following example.<sup>10</sup>

- (36) a. Maiv ntse-ntse li. [Neutral]  
 Maiv smart-smart LI  
 ‘Maiv is very smart.’
- b. Maiv ntse-li-ntse. [Negative]  
 Maiv smart-li-smart  
 ‘Maiv is very smart.’

### 2.2.3 Intensification adverbs

Intensification adverbs such as *tiag* or *tiag tiag* ‘really’, *xwb* or *xwb xwb* ‘really’ or *cia* or *cia li* ‘really’ may also license the emphatic particle *li*.<sup>11</sup>

- (37) a. kuv mob **tiag (tiag) (li)**.  
 1SG hurt/sick really-RED LI  
 ‘I am really hurt/sick.’

<sup>10</sup> The possibility for *li* to appear in between the reduplicated adjectives seems quite general and applies to *yuag-yuag* ‘skinny’ and *nkees-nkees* ‘tired’ as well. However, there seem to be some exceptions, as *zoo-zoo nkauj* ‘beautiful’ does not allow *li* to appear within the reduplicated form (*\*zoo-li-zoo nkauj*; *\*zoo-zoo-li nkauj*).

<sup>11</sup> *Xwb* may also mean ‘only’ in other contexts, as seen earlier.

- b. kuv mob (\*li).  
1SG hurt/sick LI  
'I am hurt/sick.'
- (38) a. Kuv xav kom koj nrog peb mus **xwb (xwb) (li)**.  
1SG want to 2SG with 1PL go really-RED LI  
'I really want you to go with us.'
- b. Kuv xav kom koj nrog peb mus (\*li).  
1SG want to 2SG with 1PL go LI  
'I want you to go with us.'
- (39) a. nws **cia/cia li** mus nrog Bill tham (**li**).  
3SG really go with Bill talk LI  
'He/she really (unexpectedly) went to talk with Bill.'<sup>12</sup>
- b. nws mus nrog Bill tham (\*li).  
3SG go with Bill talk LI  
'He/she went to talk with Bill.'

#### 2.2.4 *li* in *more* comparatives and superlatives

Unlike a *more-than* comparative, a *more* comparative expressed with the morpheme *tshaj* 'more/most' can license the emphatic *li*.

The sentence with *li* is interpreted as expressing a degree higher than the sentence without *it*.

- (40) a. Maiv ntse **tshaj (li)**.<sup>13</sup>  
Maiv smart more LI  
'Maiv is (even) smarter.'
- b. Maiv ntse (\*li).  
Maiv smart LI  
'Maiv is smart.'

Superlative constructions also can be expressed by the same morpheme *tshaj* 'most/more' or *tshajplaws* 'most'. The emphatic *li* is licensed in such constructions.

<sup>12</sup> The use of *cia li* 'really' here implies a sense of surprise or a situation that is out of the ordinary and unexpected.

<sup>13</sup> There are variations among speakers on whether *tshaj* can also mean 'very'. A speaker reports that (40a) means 'Maiv is very smart' and does not have a comparative reading. A comparative meaning of *tshaj* appears only in *more-than* comparatives as in (i), which does not license the emphatic *li*.

(i) Maiv zoonkauj tshaj Jenny (\*li).  
Maiv beautiful more Jenny LI  
'Maiv is more beautiful than Jen'

- (41) a. Maiv yog tus ntse **tshaj (li)**.  
 Maiv be CL smart most LI  
 ‘Maiv is the smartest.’
- b. Maiv yog tus ntse **tshajplaws (li)**.  
 Maiv be CL smart most LI  
 ‘Maiv is the smartest.’
- (42) a. Maiv muaj lub tsev zoo **tshaj (li)**.<sup>14</sup>  
 Maiv have CL house nice more/most LI  
 ‘Maiv has a (even) nicer/the nicest house.’
- b. Maiv muaj lub tsev zoo **(\*li)**.  
 Maiv have CL house nice LI  
 ‘Maiv has a nice house.’

### 2.3 The emphatic particle *li* in free choice contexts

The emphatic particle *li* can also be licensed in a sentence with a free choice expression.

A free choice expression is contrasted with an indefinite in an imperative below.

- (43) a. xaiv **phau ntawv twg los** tau **(li)**.<sup>15</sup>  
 choose book any any able LI  
 ‘Choose any book (at all).’
- b. xaib ib phau ntawv **(\*li)**.  
 choose one book LI  
 ‘Choose a book (\*at all).’

A free choice expression *tus twg* ‘anybody’ is contrasted with a proper name in a modal construction below.

- (44) a. John yuav nrog **tus twg** tham tau **(li)**.  
 John FUT with CL anybody talk able LI  
 ‘John may talk to anybody (at all).’
- b. John yuav tham tau nrog Maiv **(\*li)**.  
 John FUT talk able with Maiv LI  
 ‘John may talk to Maiv (\*at all).’

<sup>14</sup> For the speaker who does not allow *tshaj* to appear in *more* comparatives, but only in *more-than* comparatives, the sentence means ‘Maiv has a (very) very nice house.’

<sup>15</sup> Speakers vary with respect to whether *los* is required in this context.

### 3. Ordering restrictions in relation to *thiab* ‘too/also’ and *lawm* ‘now/already’

The emphatic particle *li* in NPI, intensification and free choice contexts exhibit the same ordering restrictions with the adverb *thiab* ‘too/also’ and the discourse/aspectual particle *lawm* ‘now/already’.

When the adverb *thiab* ‘also/too’ is present, the particle *li* must precede it and may not follow it, whether it appears in NPI, intensification or free choice contexts.

- (45) a. nws puas tshum koj (li) thiab?  
3SG Q provoke 2SG LI also  
‘#Did s/he provoke you (at all) also?’
- b. \*nws puas tshum koj thiab li?  
3SG Q provoke 2SG also LI
- (46) a. koj hais tau zoo kawg (li) thiab.  
2SG say PERF well very LI also  
‘You said it well also.’
- b. \*koj hais tau zoo kawg thiab li.  
2SG say PERF well very also LI
- (47) a. John yuav nrog tus twg tham los tau (li) thiab.  
John FUT with CL anyone talk to able LI also  
‘John may talk to anyone also.’
- b. \*John yuav nrog tus twg tham los tau thiab li.  
John FUT with CL anyone talk to able also LI

The same is true with the discourse/aspectual particle *lawm* ‘now/already’. The particle *li* must precede *lawm* ‘now/already’. This is the case whether or not *li* is in NPI, intensification or free choice contexts.

- (48) a. nws tsis pom koj (li) lawm.  
3SG not see 2SG LI now  
‘He cannot see you at all now.’
- b. \*nws tsis pom koj lawm li.  
3SG not see 2SG now LI

- (49) a. nws khwv heev (li) lawm.  
3SG tired very LI now  
'S/he is very (very) tired now.'
- b. \*nws khwv heev lawm li.  
3SG tired very now LI
- (50) a. John yuav nrog tus twg tham (los) tau (li) lawm.  
John FUT with CL anybody talk to able LI now  
'John may talk to anyone (at all) now.'
- b. \*John yuav nrog tus twg tham (los) tau lawm li.  
John FUT with CL anybody talk to able now LI

Preliminary analysis: The ordering restrictions may have a syntactic explanation.

Assumption: *lawm* occupies the same position as its counterpart in Mandarin Chinese (namely sentential *le*), which has been argued to occupy a position below TP, in a clause medial area where discourse particles are found (Soh and Gao 2006; Erlewine, to appear, 2017).<sup>16</sup>

*li* occupies a position below *lawm*. *thiab* 'also' occupies a position in the vicinity of *lawm* or above it.

- (51) [CP [TP [XP [YP li] lawm] ]]

#### 4. Some notes about the semantic effects of the emphatic *li*

##### 4.1 The domain widening property

The particle *li* has a domain widening property (Kadmon and Landman 1993).

Kadmon and Landman (1993): NPIs extend the contextually restricted domain of quantification.

As Kadmon and Landman (1993) explains, a context of utterance sets up a domain of quantification, from which certain things may be excluded.

In the given context, such as the one with the following exchange, rotten potatoes may be excluded because they are irrelevant.

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<sup>16</sup> Sentential *le* has been argued to be below TP and above Mod<sup>NEP</sup>, a modal projection for non-epistemic modal above vP). It is unclear if the emphatic *li* is above or below Mod<sup>NEP</sup>.

- (52) A: Could we make some French Fries?  
 B: I don't have potatoes.

Thus A can accept that what B says is true even if they know that B has a few rotten potatoes.

Suppose that A continues with the utterance in (52) and B replies with *any* (especially when it received emphatic stress), the effect is that even things that could previously be disregarded as irrelevant (such as non-cooking potatoes), are no exception to the claim.

- (53) A: I feel like French fries. Do you have cooking potatoes today?  
 B: I don't have ANY potatoes!

Thus, the effect of *any* is to widen a previously given domain of quantification.<sup>17</sup>

- (54) a. I don't have potatoes.  
 b. I don't have any potatoes.

Like *any*, the emphatic *li* has a domain widening property.

In (55), the appearance of *li* makes the domain of quantification bigger than what would be expected otherwise.

With the use of *li*, the speaker denies having seen the addressee in the contextually restricted domain (e.g., at her office desk), as well as a wider domain (e.g., in the hallway, at the office kitchen etc.).

- (55) kuv tsis pom koj (li).  
 1SG not see 2SG LI  
 'I did not see you (at all).'

The domain widening effect is also observed in superlatives in (56) with the use of *li*.

With the use of *li*, there is a sense that Maiv is the smartest, not only in the contextually restricted domain (e.g., in this class), but that she would be the smartest in a domain larger than contextually restricted domain (e.g., in the whole school).

- (56) Maiv yog tus ntse tshaj (li).  
 Maiv be CL smartest LI  
 'Maiv is the smartest.'

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<sup>17</sup> Kadmon and Landman (1993) propose that domain wideners (like *any*) must strengthen the statement they occur in. This forces the utterance with NPIs to be stronger than its non-NPI alternatives, with 'stronger' defined in terms entailment:

...any is licensed only if the statement it's in on the interpretation induced by its widening effect entails this same statement as it would be interpreted without widening. (Kadmon and Landman 1993: 369)

The combination of the widening effect and strengthening constraint determines the distribution of *any*.

## 4.2 Negative bias in questions

Certain NPIs give rise to negative bias in questions, in that the speaker expects a negative answer (Borkin 1971, Chierchia 2013).

These NPIs (e.g., minimizers) are considered “actually emphatic NPIs” in Chierchia (2013), as opposed to “potentially emphatic NPIs”.

- (57) a. Did John sleep a wink last night? [Negative bias]  
b. Who lifted a finger to help you? [Negative bias] (Chierchia 2013: 152)

The use of the emphatic *li* is associated with a negative bias.

In a context where the speaker expects a negative answer, the question with the emphatic *li* is preferred.

- (58) Context (Negative bias): A, B and Maiv are sisters. B has recently moved to the same city as Maiv. A knows that Maiv does not like to help people. A asks B if Maiv helped B move:

- Preferred A1. Maiv puas pab koj li?  
Maiv Q help 2SG LI  
'Did Maiv help you (move) at all?'
- A2. Maiv puas pab koj?  
Maiv Q help 2SG  
'Did Maiv help you (move)?'

When the situation is neutral, the question without the emphatic *li* is preferred.

- (59) Context (Neutral): A, B and Maiv are sisters. B has recently moved to the same city as Maiv. A asks B if Maiv helped B move:

- A1. Maiv puas pab koj li?  
Maiv Q help 2SG LI  
'Did Maiv help you (move) at all?'
- Preferred A2. Maiv puas pab koj?  
Maiv Q help 2SG  
'Did Maiv help you (move)?'

Further support from *puas yog* confirmation seeking questions:

The negative bias associated with the emphatic *li* in questions may explain why *li* is not licensed in confirmation seeking *puas yog* questions like (60).

- (60) *puas yog nws nyiam koj (\*li)?*  
Q right 3SG nyiam 2SG LI  
'Is it true that s/he likes you (\*at all)?'

In a *puas yog* question like (60), the speaker expects a positive answer. This expectation is in contradiction with the speaker's expectation associated with the use of the emphatic *li*. As a result, a *puas yog* question where the speaker seeks to confirm a positive statement is unacceptable with *li*.

This explanation predicts that when the speaker expects a negative answer, a *puas yog* question is acceptable with the emphatic *li*.

- (61) *puas yog nws tsis nyiam koj (li)?*  
Q right 3SG not like 2SG LI  
'Is it true that s/he does not like you (at all)?'

There is thus no inherent restriction against a *puas yog* question with the emphatic particle *li*, though we do not have evidence that *puas yog* can license an emphatic *li* given that the emphatic *li* is licensed by *tsis* in (61).

One may wonder if the unacceptability of *puas yog* questions with *li* like (60) is not related to a conflict in speaker expectations, but rather have a structural explanation, perhaps that *puas yog* questions have a bi-clausal structure, like the English translation (\*Is it true that s/he likes you at all?)

- (60) *puas yog nws nyiam koj (\*li)?*  
Q right 3SG nyiam 2SG LI  
'Is it true that s/he likes you (\*at all)?'

There is evidence that *puas yog* questions do not involve biclausal structures.

While statements with *yog* can have a negative marker preceding it, *puas yog* questions cannot have a negative marker preceding *yog*, suggesting that *puas yog* is a grammatical unit, and that *yog* in *puas yog* questions is not a verbal element.

- (62) a. (tsi) yog (tias) nws nyiam koj  
 not right that 3SG like 2SG  
 ‘It is (not) that s/he likes you.’
- b. (\*tsi) puas (\*tsi) yog nws nyiam koj?  
 not Q not right 3SG like 2SG  
 ‘Is it (\*not) true that s/he likes you?’

## 5. Conclusions and Questions

### 5.1 Summary

The emphatic particle *li* in Hmong requires “licensing” and it is licensed in negative polarity, (positive) intensification and free choice environments.

#### Environments that license the emphatic *li*:

- sentences with an overt negative marker
- pragmatically neutral yes-no questions
- superlatives
- *more* comparatives
- sentences with a degree adverb or the reduplication of an adjective, verb or quantifier that strengthen the force of the expression
- sentences with a free choice expression

#### Environments that do not license the emphatic *li*:

- sentences with quantifiers not overtly marked by *tsis/tsi*
- conditionals
- *more-than* comparatives
- wh-questions
- sentences with *tsuas* ‘only’ or *xwb* ‘only’

The particle *li* must precede *thiab* ‘too/also’ and *lawm* ‘now/already’ in negative polarity, intensification and free choice environments.

The emphatic *li* has a domain widening property and it gives rise to a negative bias in questions.

5.2 The lexical meaning of the emphatic particle *li* and its possible connection with adverbs *tamusli/tasli/musli* ‘constantly/all the time/always’

Descriptive generalizations:

The use of the particle *li* signals **a higher degree** or **a wider domain of quantification** than the sentence without the particle *li*.

In environments involving intensification and comparatives (both with explicit reference to degrees in the form of a degree modifier and a comparative marker), the use of the particle *li* signals **a higher degree** than the sentence without the particle *li*.

- (63) a. koj hais tau zoo **kawg/heev/ua luaj (li)**.  
2SG say it well very LI  
‘You said it (very) very well.’
- b. Maiv ntse **tshaj (li)**.  
Maiv smart more LI  
‘Maiv is (even) smarter.’

In environments involving superlatives, negative sentences and yes/no questions, the use of the particle *li* signals **a wider domain** of quantification than the sentence without the particle *li*.

- (64) a. Maiv yog tus ntse **tshaj (li)**.  
Maiv be CL smartest LI  
‘Maiv is the smartest.’
- b. kuv **tsis** pom koj **(li)**.  
1SG not see 2SG LI  
‘I did not see you (at all).’

The emphatic *li* is likely to be connected to *tamusli/tasli/musli* ‘constantly/all the time/always’, with the adverbs serving as a source for the development of the emphatic *li*.<sup>18</sup>

- (65) a. kuv mus ua-hauj-lwn **tasli**.  
1SG go work always  
‘I always go to work.’
- b. puas-yog nws tshum koj **tasmusli?**  
Q -yes 3SG provoke 2SG constantly  
‘Is it true that s/he provokes you constantly?’

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<sup>18</sup> Chierchia (2013: 161) notes that English adverbial *at all* and Italian *affatto* ‘at all’ have a historical stage where they are used as some sort of maximizers, meaning ‘totally’ or ‘thoroughly’. It is suggested that a reanalysis occurs where the highest point is reanalyzed as the lowest point in these cases (“scale reversal”).

- c. nws khwv heev **musli**.  
 3SG tired very constantly  
 ‘S/he is very tired constantly.’

A reduction in form can be seen amongst the adverbs. A further reduction would yield the emphatic *li*, with a more generalized meaning that is not restricted to event frequency.

- (66) tamusli, tasli, musli → li  
 ‘a high degree of event frequency’ ‘a higher degree’/ ‘a wider domain’

Hmong may be considered in a stage of development where the reanalysis is in progress, with the source forms appearing alongside the reduced form.

### 5.3 Cross-linguistic patterning

It is not uncommon to find items across languages that are licensed in NPI and Free Choice contexts (Haspelmath 1997); e.g., English *any* (Fauconnier 1975).

While many items that appear in NPI and Free Choice environments are nominals, it is unclear whether adverbial NPIs are commonly found in free choice contexts.

Horn (1972: 161, 2000) notes that English adverbial NPI *at all* can appear in both NPI and free choice contexts (with a free choice expression) (see also Fauconnier 1975:359)

- (68) a. I didn’t see anybody **at all**.  
 b. Anybody **at all** can come to the party.  
 c. If anyone **at all** can swim the channel, I can.

Hmong emphatic particle *li* patterns like *at all* in that it can be found in NPI and free choice environments in the presence of a free choice expression.

The combination of environments observed with Hmong emphatic particle *li* (that includes in particular contexts of intensification) has not been commonly documented or considered together.

The pattern raises questions about the extent to which contexts of intensification has something deep in common with NPIs and/or free choice contexts.

English NPI *much*:

English NPI *much*, which is considered an attenuating NPI in Israel (2001), has more in common with Hmong emphatic particle *li* than at first glance.

- (69) a. \*I like him **much**.  
b. I **don't** like him **much**.

The appearance of *much* can be said to be licensed by degree adverbs such as *very*, *too* and *so*.<sup>19</sup>

- (70) a. \*I like John **much**.  
b. I like John **very/so/too** much.

*Much* can also appear in comparatives (see Rett 2018, Bresnan 1973).<sup>20</sup>

The appearance of *much* in comparatives can be said to be “licensed”, parallel to the case of Hmong emphatic *li*.

- (71) a. \*John is **much** tall.<sup>21</sup>  
b. John is **much** taller.

However, *much* is not “licensed” in superlatives.

- (72) a. \*John is **much** tall.  
b. \*John is **much** tallest.

Hindi enclitic *-hii*:

The emphatic *li* resembles the Hindi enclitic *-hii*, most clearly with its intensification use (Bajaj 2016).<sup>22</sup>

The enclitic *-hii* contributes an interpretation like *very very* when attached to a degree adverb or when appearing in reduplicated adjectives (Bajaj 2016).

- (79) a. jon bahut-hii lambaa hai.  
John very-hii tall be-PRES.3.SG  
'John is extremely tall.' (Bajaj 2016: 16)
- b. sundar-hii-sundar  
beautiful-hii-beautiful  
'very/extremely beautiful' (Bajaj 2016: 150; citing Montaut 2004: 290)

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<sup>19</sup> Compare *He relies much on his parents* (Corver 1997: 153). See Corver (1997) for an extensive account of the distribution of *much* in English.

<sup>20</sup> Bresnan (1973) argues that *more* is a suppletive form of [much+er] and *most* is a suppletive form of [much+est].

<sup>21</sup> Rett (2018: 13, citing Doetjes (1997)) notes that constructions like *\*much tall* are likely prohibited across languages because of morphological reasons.

<sup>22</sup> Many thanks to Diti Bhadra for bringing this work to my attention.

In addition to intensification, *-hii* has qualities in common with *only* and *even* (Bajaj 2016).

(80) jon-ne-hii miThaii khaayii.  
John-ERG-hii sweets eat-PRF.F

‘Only John ate dessert.’

‘Out of the people who ate desserts, John ate dessert and nobody else ate desserts.’

‘John of course ate dessert.’

‘Out of the people who could have eaten desserts, the speaker had high expectations of John eating desserts.’

Although *-hii* is not an NPI, there are close connections between *even* and *only* meanings and NPIs (Chierchia 2013).

The combinations of properties associated with *-hii* thus seem more connected to that of the emphatic *li* than at first glance.

The fact English *much* and Hindi *-hii* also pattern like Hmong emphatic *li* in their occurrence in intensification contexts, suggests the connectedness of these contexts with NPI environments.

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