

Calif. Hmong community launches online translator

March 25 2012, By GOSIA WOZNIACKA , Associated Press

(AP) -- When Phong Yang, a Hmong refugee from Laos, landed in California's Central Valley - via stops in Thailand and France - he was 14 years old. He learned to speak Hmong from his parents, but today he has a hard time teaching the language to his children, who are distracted by cell phones and computers.

Many Hmong are losing their language, Yang said, leading to fears that their cultural identity will be lost.

A new technological tool may help bridge generation gaps and encourage preservation of their language among the Hmong. The community in Fresno, in partnership with researchers at Microsoft, has launched an online Hmong translator.

It's a significant step, community leaders say, because the language that withstood assimilation efforts throughout history is now at risk of being lost. Hmong - an ancient language, whose oral tradition goes back thousands of years - developed a written form only 60 years ago.

"It tells our elders and our children, your language is important, it's on the map now," said Yang, a teacher of Hmong at California State University, Fresno who served as coordinator for the project. "And you can have fun while using it."

The [Central Valley](#) has been home since the 1970's to one of the largest communities of Hmong - an Asian ethnic minority group - who had fled

their mountain villages in Laos and languished for years in Thai refugee camps. Approximately 33,000 Hmong live in Fresno, according to census figures, the second largest Hmong population in the country. A total of 260,000 Hmong reside in the United States.

The history of the Hmong has been marked by persecution. But while the Hmong were uprooted many times and do not have a country of their own, they never lost their language. Now, as thousands of Hmong have resettled in [western countries](#), the language is facing new challenges.

"All these years, the language has been preserved, despite efforts to eradicate it," said Will Lewis, a Microsoft program manager who worked on the Hmong translator. "Now, the irony is that in the United States, a country where they're free to speak it, the thing that never happened in Hmong history is happening; some children are not learning Hmong."

The translator uses a statistical model to find patterns and assign probability to words in context. Since November, when the project started, community members and researchers have fed a computer with hundreds of documents in the two languages, as well as with entries from an online Hmong-English dictionary. Since dictionaries offer no context, community members entered sentences for each word.

A similar concept could be applied to benefit other minority and indigenous languages, most of which aren't covered by automatic translators such as Microsoft's Bing Translator or Google Translate, Lewis said. Less than 100 languages - mostly the dominant, widely-used ones - are currently covered, out of the more than 7,000 languages world-wide.

The technology, said Hmong elder Chue Her, will help both older Hmong who don't speak English and U.S. born youngsters who speak

little Hmong. Smart phone apps that use the translator are now also available.

Using the Microsoft translator, Hmong elders can translate web sites, documents and even use the translator to communicate with children and grandchildren.

But the biggest benefit will be to Hmong youth, Yang said. At home - where immigrant children were traditionally exposed to their parents' language - young people now spend their time in front of computers.

"When the kids are at home, instead of spending time with their parents and speaking in Hmong, they use the Internet and talk to their friends on Facebook. And it's all in English," Yang said.

Because written Hmong is new, there are few Hmong textbooks. The hope, Yang said, is that the translator will fill the void and make the language interesting and cool to learn.

"The translator makes it more fun than just giving the children books. Now parents can tell them, look, you can still socialize with your friends, but you can do it in Hmong," Yang said.

And the language can support more than just communication, [community members](#) said.

"Along with learning the language, the children get immersed in the culture and that promotes their identity," said Vicky Xiong, a second grade teacher in the Clovis Unified School District. "The language will give them pride in themselves and their people."

Xiong said she realized the importance of teaching the language when her U.S. born 6th grader son - now a freshman at Fresno State - told her,

"Mom, I don't want to be Hmong anymore. Let's speak only in English." She enrolled him in a language class offered by Stone Soup, a Fresno Hmong nonprofit, but few such classes are available, she said.

Joshua Lor, Xiong's son, said he eventually realized the importance of the language.

"My grandpa told me stories about the Hmong, about how he served in the war, and how they moved from Laos to Thailand to America," Lor said. "The [language](#) opened my eyes to the history of Hmong culture. It's exciting that the [translator](#) can help kids do that."

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