Chapter 3
Orthography

Writing is the "most important sign system" ever invented (Coulmas 1989: 3). Every society utilizes speech for communication, but not all societies have writing. It is common to find no writing in a society, so according to Coulmas (1989) it is considered a "cultural achievement" if a society has writing (Coulmas 1989: 3). Writing is a recent invention (Goody and Watt 1968, Hockett 1963) which emerged late in the "cultural and societal history" (Coulmas 1989: 4). Writing serves many functions, one of which is broadening the range of communication, making communication not dependent on the person who wants to communicate the message and beyond the immediate moment (Rogers 2005).

The other functions of writing are "memory supportive" functions (Goody 1977: 78, Ong 1982: 96) or what Coulmas called "mnemonic functions", "reifying function, social control function, interactional and aesthetic" (Coulmas 1989:11). Writing also creates a more complex society, allowing for the development of written records and manuals that can be kept and referred to. Also, there is less opportunity for written information to be manipulated, though the reverse could also be said (Rogers 2005).

In Southeast Asia, although there are several ancient scripts such as those used for Mon and Kammuang, many of the orthographies for minority languages were developed in the 19th and 20th centuries by Western missionaries who did not always have proper linguistic training. These orthographies are still in use today and the people using them have strong attachments to them (Benson and Kosonen 2010).

3.1 Definition of terms

Before discussing the Hmong orthography in Thailand, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of several key terms.

3.1.1 Alphabet

An alphabet is a writing system characterized by a "systematic mapping relation between its signs (graphemes) and the minimal units of speech (phonemes)" (Coulmas 1999: 9). It has a set of symbols representing the phonemes of a language (Crystal 1999). The term "alphabet" applies to consonant scripts such as Hebrew and Arabic as well as to segmental scripts which use graphemes for both consonants and vowels, like Greek, Roman, Mongolian and Thai. Alphabetic writing systems vary in complexity and in the type and regularity of letter-sound correspondence. Decisions regarding symbol choice for alphabets may be based on phonological, morpho-phonological or lexical level factors (Coulmas 1999).

3.1.2 Orthography

In the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems* (1999), orthography is defined as the "correct spelling and that part of grammar that deals with the rules of correct spelling" (Coulmas 1999: 379). An orthography is a selection from the possibilities of a script for writing a particular language in a uniform and standardized way. All orthographies are language specific and are often "codified" by official decree (ibid). Coulmas, in his book *Writing Systems* (2003:35), reiterated that orthography is the "standardized variety of a given, language specific writing system". This is also the definition given in Crystal's *Dictionary of Language* (1999) in which the word "orthography" also means "a prescribed system of spelling and punctuation" (Crystal 1999: 244).

Some older orthographies are based on writing conventions that have evolved over time and which often involved a variety of structural principles of linguistic representation, making it difficult to codify the spelling of that language with just a set of rules. Orthographic codes consist of the set of rules and a word list, which can be an orthographic dictionary for languages with a long literary tradition (Coulmas 1999).

With the definitions of various authors in mind, orthography is defined in this paper as a prescribed system of spelling and punctuation of a specific language.

3.1.3 Script

According to Coulmas (1989, 2003), a script is the "graphic" form of the units of a writing system. A script is developed in the context of the language in which it is to

be used. Crystal (1999) states that this term is used in a general way to include the properties of different systems: hieroglyphic writing, syllabaries and alphabets. In this paper, I will use the definition of "script" by Coulmas (2003) which is the "graphic form of the units of a writing system" (Coulmas 2003: 35).

3.1.4 Writing system

According to Rogers (2005), writing system is a "system for graphically representing the utterances of a language" (Rogers 2005: 299). Coulmas (1999) defines "writing system" as a "set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in a system way, with the purpose of recording messages which can be retrieved by everyone who knows the language in question and the rules by virtue of which its units are encoded in the writing system" (Coulmas 1999: 560).

There are two senses to the meaning of writing system. It can refer to the basic graphic systems of representing a language, such as logographic and logosyllabic systems, or to the spelling of a language. In the second sense, writing system can be used interchangeably with orthography (Coulmas 1999).

3.2 The Hmong orthography in Thailand

William Smalley, in consultation with G. Linwood Barney and Father Yves Bertrais-Charrier, drew up a suggested orthography for the Hmong in Laos in 1953. This orthography is Roman-based (known as Romanized Popular Alphabet or RPA) and has been in use since that time. Father Bertrais translated and wrote using this orthography, and there are several thousand Hmong who use this orthography in Laos (Smalley 1990). Around the time this orthography was developed, missionaries who came to Thailand to work with the Hmong adopted it for the Hmong Daw and Hmong Njua in Thailand. It was found that the orthography from Laos was "fully applicable" to both Hmong groups in Thailand (Smalley 1976: 87). There was less interest among the Hmong in Thailand in learning the orthography than in Laos (Smalley 1976, 1990).

In 1958, there was an experiment to see what would be involved to develop a Thai-based orthography for Hmong. However the experiment was not a success because the "problem of transcription was not sufficiently thought out" (Smalley 1976: 88). Then in 1965, a Thai-based orthography was developed by Whitelock. After being tested and modified it was introduced in one village in Thailand. It was better

received than the Roman script. Whitelock and her Hmong Daw assistants transcribed some of the Hmong literature into the Thai script for use in this village. However, there was no widespread interest in learning to read among the Hmong in Thailand unlike in Laos (Smalley 1976: 88). The interest was usually localized in one area.
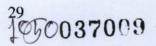
The Hmong orthography used in the four schools participating in the Hmong MTBMLE pilot project is based on the Whitelock Thai-based orthography, but changes were made to several sound-symbol correspondences. Apart from the teachers from the four schools, no one else is able to read and write using this newly revised orthography. A list of the differences between the Whitelock Thai-based orthography and the newly revised orthography is shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Table of old and new Thai-based orthographies (Dooley 2010)

RPA	Old Thai-based orthography	New Thai-based orthography
h	ฮ	ห
hl	ฬ	ฮล
hn	ณ	ฮน
nk	งก	นก
nkh	งค	นค
nph	ภ	นพ
nq	งข	นข
nqh	งฆ	นฆ
nr	ดร	นตร
nrh	ฏ	นทร
nts	ฐ	นฌ
z	ร	ยช

3.3 The TAs' views on Hmong orthographies

Interviews with twenty two Hmong TAs from the four schools were conducted and their responses were recorded. There were two TAs who were not interviewed as

they were on medical leave during the period of interview, and the newer TAs were not included in the interviews. This section presents an analysis of these interviews.

During the interviews the TAs were asked about their Hmong language literacy ability using the two different orthographies, the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) and newly devised Thai-based orthography. They were also asked about their perception of the Thai-based orthography and the difficulties they faced when using it. Finally, the TAs were asked how they learned to read and write using the new orthography since there were no classes conducted to teach them to read and write it.

3.3.1 The TAs' Hmong language literacy skills

3.3.1.1 Skills in Romanized Popular Alphabet

Most of the Hmong TAs in the four schools reported that they are literate in the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA). They learned it from their parents, older siblings or informal classes conducted by someone in the village. The male TAs usually had more experience using the RPA than did the female TAs. The TAs said they use it to correspond with friends and relatives in different parts of Thailand and overseas via letters and emails.

The TAs who are literate in the RPA reported that they help their parents read letters from their relatives. Some of the TAs who worked away from home said that they wrote letters home using the RPA.

One of the four project schools conducts literacy class for the Grade 9 students who are interested in learning to read and write RPA. The school has an exchange programme with Hmong students from the United States, and conducts Hmong literacy classes using the RPA so that their students can correspond with the Hmong students from the United States. One of the TAs in the school teaches these students to read and write. One of the new TAs learned to read and write Hmong through these classes.

Some of the TAs reported that they are not confident using the RPA because they never took classes but learned to read and write the RPA on their own. Their

foundation in using the RPA is not strong and they also have not had opportunities to use it enough to gain fluency.

3.3.1.2 Skills in Thai-based orthography

All the Hmong TAs learned the Thai-based orthography when they started working in the pilot project. Their reported confidence in their ability to use the orthography varied. The TAs who joined the project recently were not confident using the Thai-based orthography. They were not sure which letters to use when they wanted to spell a word.

During the interview, when asked how well they were able to read and write using the Thai-based orthography, almost all the teaching assistants said that they were able to use the orthography in class without any problem. They had no issues and/or problems in using the orthography. Only one TA said that he was not confident in using the orthography, but this may have been because he was very new to the project.

From the kindergarten classroom observations that I conducted in the schools, the teaching assistants from the KG 2 classes were fluent in their writing when they wrote the children's experience stories on the board. The stories that the TAs wrote on the board were short and simple. In the classes that I observed, all the TAs read fluently when they read listening stories, big books and small books aloud to the children. The TAs who had been in the project longer said they had experience reading these stories aloud to the children for a year, so they were able to read them fluently. The TAs who had just joined the project for a few months said that they prepared before class by practicing reading the stories and asking the more experienced TAs for help if they were not sure how to read the words.

3.3.2 Perceptions of the TAs regarding the Thai-based orthography

One of the interview questions for the teaching assistants asked them to give their opinion of the Thai-based orthography. The first impression that they had of the orthography was that it was difficult to read when they first encounter it. Without any instruction, they tended to pronounce the letters of the alphabet using Thai pronunciation, and they had to guess to read the Hmong words. They also felt awkward using the Thai-based orthography to read Hmong. However, after having

used the orthography to teach and to develop materials, most of the TAs thought that the Thai–based orthography was easy to use and learn. Some of them thought that it was even easier than the RPA. A small group of TAs, however, expressed the opinion that the orthography would be difficult to learn for those who were not familiar with the pilot project and for those who were not literate in Thai. This is because of the perception that the Thai-based orthography is not easy and the foundation in Thai is not there for the transfer of literacy to be done between old and new orthographies.

As the TAs gained experience using the Thai-based orthography in their teaching, they said they became more fluent using this orthography than using the RPA. They said they did not get to use the RPA often.

The TAs said that using the Thai-based orthography to write Hmong will help the children to "learn Thai easily" (TA I) and "help children to understand Thai better with the orthography" (TA M). Some of them said that the children will not be confused between the two orthographies because they speak Hmong as their mother tongue. The children would be able to differentiate the sounds of the two languages when reading and writing them. However, another group of TAs were concerned that the children would be confused with the same script. They think that the children would either not be able to differentiate the sounds of the letters for the two languages or that they would not be accurate in their pronunciation when using the same type of script to read Thai and Hmong.

When the TAs were asked to describe any problems they may have had using the orthography, said they had difficulty spelling words with consonant clusters. Most of the times they had to refer to the alphabet chart or ask their fellow TAs for help in spelling words with consonant clusters as they were not sure which letters to use for the sounds.

The TAs attributed the ease of learning the Thai-based orthography to the fact that they were already literate in Thai, so transferring this knowledge to Hmong was not a problem for them. Also, they said that because Hmong is their mother tongue, learning to write it using another script was easy and did not pose any problems for them. Below are several quotes from TAs expressing their views.

those who are literate in Thai, they will be able to read and write the Thai-based orthography, no need to learn and will be able to read. Only a few sounds are different. Will be able to read the first time seeing it though may not be clear in pronunciation (TA I).

…not difficult to learn…learn Thai already, easy to adjust the sounds (TA Q).

easier to use Thai-based. Learn Thai first so easy to learn Thai-based orthography (TA D).

The ability to embrace the new orthography by the TAs made it feasible for the orthography to be accepted in the wider community when it is introduced to the community at a later stage. Even though the Hmong teaching assistants had some initial reservation in using the orthography, they were willing to give it a try. Also the perceived ease of transfer to reading and writing Thai for the children in higher grades is one motivation for the TAs to accept the orthography.

3.3.3 Learning the Thai-based orthography

When the TAs were asked how they learned to read and write the Thai-based orthography, all replied that they learned it on their own. Those who were already literate in RPA would compare the Roman letters with the Thai letters and then memorize the Thai-based equivalent of the RPA letter. The teachers were given the alphabet chart (see Appendix E) and they also memorized letters from the chart. If they were not sure which letter of the alphabet to use in their spelling, they would ask their fellow TAs at school.

One of the Hmong teaching assistants, W, came to see himself as the "expert" in the orthography because he was involved in the orthography development process from the beginning. He was always willing to help other TAs if they had a problem using the orthography. Through the interviews, I learned that the other Hmong TAs regarded him as someone they could go to for help. The TAs who had been with the project longer were also willing to teach the newer ones how to read and write Hmong using the Thai-based orthography.

The transfer of literacy is quite easy for bilingual speakers of languages using the same script (Smalley 1994) and between different writing systems (Kenner 2004). Being literate in the national language, Thai makes the transfer to learn Hmong

using the same script easy for the TAs. They are able to differentiate the sounds for the same letter and adjust the pronunciation accordingly. The writing skills that the teachers have acquired when they learn Thai are then transferred to learning the new Thai-based Hmong orthography (Kenner 2004). Their fluency and competency in the orthography will also improve when they use it every day. There must also be plans to bring their competency to a higher level as the vocabulary they are currently using in their teaching is limited to the kindergarten level.

The availability of help from friends and colleagues is an advantage for the teaching assistants as they learn to read and write Hmong using the new orthography. They can learn and correct each other's work and help each other to gain proficiency in the orthography.

3.4 Summary

Orthography is the system of spelling and punctuation for a specific language. In the Hmong MTBMLE pilot project, the revised Thai-based orthography that is being used is considered "new" because it was developed not long before the implementation of the project. The research data shows that the initial concern that the Thai-based Hmong orthography would be difficult for the Hmong teaching assistants to use in their teaching does not seem to be an issue for the TAs themselves. Although it is considered a new Hmong orthography and no one else in the villages knows how to use it, the teaching assistants were willing to accept it and use it. Being literate in Thai and the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet make the transfer of literacy to the Hmong Thai-based orthography easy. This is because literacy skills can be transferred between different writing systems (Kenner 2004). There is maximum motivation (Smalley 1964) for the teachers to learn and teach using the orthography because of the perceived ease in transferring the literacy skill to Thai in the later grades for the children.

The availability of help from the other teaching assistants allows the teaching assistants gain proficiency in their ability to read and write Hmong using the Thai-based script. They can learn together and from other teachers in areas that they are not good in and by teaching others, they improve in their own proficiency too.