

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I am joined today by Mai Lee Vang who works in the radiology department at UW Health. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me today.

Mai Lee Vang

Hi, you're welcome. Thank you.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah so first to start us off, it'd be great if you could just give us as much as you're willing to an overview of kind of your history where you grew up what your childhood was like, and what languages you interacted with, whether it be in like formal language courses in school, or you spoke it at home, or what that was kind of like when you were younger.

Mai Lee Vang

Okay. So I was actually born in Thailand, I was born in a refugee camp. So I came to the United States when I was three months old. First landed in Sacramento, California. So I grew up there. I lived there for three years. And then, and I think 1995, my parents moved to Wisconsin, and I've lived in Wisconsin ever since. My parents at the time didn't really speak English so we spoke a lot of Hmong at home. We never really spoke English when we were at home, because my parents didn't really like it. They said that, you know, we should try to speak as much Hmong as we can. And at home here we do, I do try to speak what I call Hmonglish, to my kids, because English comes out so much easier. And sometimes when there's no words, in Hmong, I use English words for my kids. But we do speak half and half of each language, you know.

Claire Darmstadter

And I just recently learned this, I would imagine a lot of individuals already know this. But I've kind of learned that the Hmong language is rather circular, perhaps kind of indirect, where it's very difficult to do direct translations between English and Hmong. And especially when you're dealing with specialized areas, whether it be medicine, or whether it be like school terms, for example, like sixth grade math, you might not have the vocabulary for some of those terms. So do you ever kind of try to figure that out? I know you do a little bit of translation work? Can you just talk about how you kind of interact those two languages with one another, if there's not like that perfect direct translation?

Mai Lee Vang

Yeah so sometimes when there's not that direct translation of words, what I do is I try to describe that object or that word as best I can, in home. And if the person that I'm working with still doesn't understand it, then I will try to speak it in English, but then I will also try to find a picture in Google and show them. That's what I'm trying to tell you or you know, that's the word I'm trying to express to you. So I go about different ways trying to get the person to understand what I'm trying to say or translate to them.

Claire Darmstadter

And I know also that since you work at UW Health, you sometimes have instances where you're engaging in Hmong translation, even though you know, the preference is to have someone who's certified or has an official job position that requires that, sometimes you find yourself in that position. So can you kind of talk about what that looks like? How do you interact in that setting? And where sometimes you're like, *Oh, I'm not so sure that I want to necessarily be that person*, if you don't have that formal medical training and language, but how are you still able to help support a little bit?

Mai Lee Vang

Yeah, so when I was in college, I did have a bachelor's degree in Biomedical Science, I did a sub-major in X-ray, you know, so I did go to X-ray school for a little bit. And what I found was that, and you know I'm not like a translator, certified translator. And so sometimes I will try as best as I can. Even I heard that when I hear that word before from other people pronouncing it or you know, speaking to elders, and they say, Oh, this, this is what it means this, you know, and I pick up on that, and then you know, I use that you know, as best I can to describe, you know, or translate when I'm helping a Hmong patient or translating for them. So that's how I go about doing it. I'm not certified, but I try my best because those vocabulary, I try to use it every day at home with my kids and my family. And my parents are really good at that. And they know, you know, Hmong words I don't. So I asked them for reference. And it's really nice how they know like, *oh, this is how you said this, and this is how you use it*, you know, so that's really great.

Claire Darmstadter

And so I know, you mentioned that you have kids that you're raising with a little bit of the Hmong language, and Madison does have a kind of emerging Hmong language immersion program, but many other cities don't. And there haven't been tons of opportunities for many speakers develop really strong literacy skills because know the written language, and it come to be at least in its modern sense until kind of recently so for you, is there a way that you're teaching your kids how to read or write, did you personally have that experience or what does that kind of look like on the homefront?

Mai Lee Vang

Okay, yeah, so, to be honest, when I grew up, when I was in high school, I did, there was a Hmong class I was offered through like an organization, but it, you know, with high school and stuff like that I showed up like one or two classes. And then you know, there were all different ages. So that first attempt was a fail. And then when I went away to college, I did take a course like Hmong Introduction 101 or something. But it was really different because they teach both dialects, the Green dialect and the White dialect. So it can be really confusing because I speak White Hmong dialect. And so when the teacher or the professor taught us Green dialect, I was really confused. So I didn't really pick up on as much as I wanted to, but I could read like little bits and pieces, I can write little bits and pieces here and there. But, you know, I would really like my eight year old, a year old, you know, she, I'm teaching her how to pronounce the tones. And sometimes she doesn't hit those tones correctly, because she speaks so much English that she can't pronounce the words correctly, sometimes I teach her. But I would really like her to take a Hmong class. And I know that there are some that are being offered, you know, or I have one

that I've seen offered, you know, in the Madison area. But due to COVID, and stuff like that, I haven't initiated before her in there yet, I would really like her to learn.

Claire Darmstadter

And I found it really interesting that you brought up the difference between the Green and the White dialect because that's something that I've been trying to learn about a little bit myself. It's very difficult because online, there's kind of conflicting information about who speaks it and what the forms are. So I guess first of all, would you say that they're mutually intelligible as a kind of like American English versus British English where it's pretty simple? Or is it actually pretty separate languages where it's pretty hard to understand the other person? And then is there one that's more spoken by individuals living in the United States or what is the kind of split between the two?

Mai Lee Vang

I think it's split between the two because my mother in law speaks the Green dialect. But she is also really good at speaking the White dialect too. So she's, she does have half. But the thing is she doesn't teach her kids, so they don't know how to speak. And they all speak White Hmong because I think that it's more common, the White Hmong dialect is more common. And I think that the Green Hmong, it's a softer tone versus the White, it comes a little bit harsher. It's more expressive. And I think people like that, because it's easier to learn versus the Green, because sometimes they have different words for different things, that will mean different things. So people don't really learn the Green dialects as much, but I feel that there are still some people that still speak it. And I think the Green dialect is really beautiful. Because if you can, if you listen to it carefully, it's actually very soft. And the words don't come out so aggressive, and they sound a lot nicer. You know. So that's with dialect that I have noticed when my mother speaks to me sometimes or you know, to her kids that I pick up certain words I picked up, on certain words, I have no idea what she's saying. Like I've never heard that before, I don't know what she means. And I'll ask her like, what is that? And like, what is that in White Hmong dialect, like what are you trying to say? And then she'll say, Oh, I mean, this, and this is how we say it in Green Hmong, like so it's good to have her as a reference.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, super interesting. And so I found it really interesting that you mentioned that you lived in California initially. Because you know, I'm pretty embarrassed to admit it. But up until maybe like six months ago, I did not know much at all about the Hmong population Wisconsin, even though we're behind California and Minnesota as having one of the highest amounts of Hmong speakers, and Hmong ethnically identified individuals in the country. So, correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think I'm the only Wisconsinite that is that way. It's sometimes very difficult. Or I guess just the community as a whole doesn't necessarily know too much about the Hmong people. So, can you kind of talk a little bit about the visibility of Hmong in the state? Do you feel like you're treated positively? Is that a negative part of your identity viewed by others? Or what is it kind of like to be a Hmong individual in Wisconsin?

Mai Lee Vang

I would say that, for the most part, I've had pleasant experiences here in Wisconsin my whole life. So, I mean, like, I'm really proud and I'm grateful for being a Hmong Wisconsinite, I think that a lot of other ethnicity or group has learned about, like, when people are, you know, because when I was in high school, I kind of struggle identify myself, because people will ask me, like, oh, like, *Are you Chinese?* And I was like, *no, I'm Hmong.* And they're like, *Oh, what's that?* And I'm like, um, well, we're like a small ethnic group that is from Laos, and we migrated to, you know, Thailand, and we came to America, so it was really hard to explain to people what Hmong is. And I think that, you know, in the state of Wisconsin, I think we have learned or you know, been educating others about it and I think that it has been very pleasant that they understand that and they know that what Hmong is you know so it's nice when people say like oh yeah I know what Hmong is, you know so that's nice when they say that and then you don't have to go to a whole spiel thing while like you know explaining the history behind that so that's really nice. I know that in Minnesota in California there are a lot of Hmong population there too and I think that Wisconsin is like the third largest one that has Hmong population too, but I think that we have gone pretty good pretty good I should say you know as in Wisconsin you know understanding what Hmong is.

Claire Darmstadter

I'm really glad to hear that. I know there's so much work that has to be done for a lot of people, but it is really good to hear that it's been a pretty positive experience. So language can be pretty closely linked to culture so are there any important cultural practices or traditions or holidays you celebrate you could share with us that you're kind of proud that you celebrate?

Mai Lee Vang

Yeah so every year we celebrate Hmong New Year. We usually celebrate right after Thanksgiving, that like the Friday and Saturday you know people that are in the Madison area would know that we have our New Year for two days you know due to the cause and everything. Traditionally we will have it for a few weeks, but because we're here so we have to accommodate to you know availability of the buildings and what's being offered to us, so we do have Hmong New Year, and it's really nice time of the year because you get to meet up with all you know your friends, family, relatives we all get together; we all get dressed up and kind of show off or showcase our traditional clothing and sometimes our clothing represents what kind of clan group we're associated with and that's really nice because it's like the one time of the year you get to showcase like your handmade Hmong clothes and you get all dressed up and you know you show, you can dress up your kids as a family group thing and then you know showcase like hey this is my family, this is what we did this year, and we're just glad that you know we get to dress up and get together like enjoy each other's time and you know eat, party, we do have a night party so that's nice too so it's something that I look forward to every year because I get to meet old high school friends and everybody got has gotten married you know, have had children and not all you know my children and their children could get together and kind of meet so that's really nice and that's one thing that I love the most especially Hmong new year and the food especially the food you know.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, I've heard great things about the food and the outfits look very beautiful as well, so I can imagine it must be an incredible experience. So finally the last question that I ask everybody is we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language, so can you give me one reason, you can answer in Hmong, in English, a mix of both, to whatever you want, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

Mai Lee Vang

Okay so it's super powerful to speak to language because I feel like you represent your — it's like a part of you because you know that you're different, you know you're special when you speak two different language or you know more than two language and it's it's always nicer because sometimes when you speak two languages and it's — I don't know it's kind of hard to explain it to me but for me i wish to say because it defines who you are sometimes you know, and when you speak two languages, you feel like there's there's more opportunity for you out there, you know so it's it's like you have many talents I would say.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, well thank you so much. I know working in healthcare you're very busy right now, and thank you for everything you've done over the past year and even before that as well and for making a little bit of time to talk to me today. So I appreciate it so much and hope you have a great rest of your day!

Mai Lee Vang

You too; thank you!