The grammar of zazanilli (Nahuatl word games)

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Abstract

Aim of the talk is to present an analysis of the zazanilli, a Nahuatl discourse genre with data of classical Nahuatl and Guerrero Nahuatl. The structural and cultural data for the understanding of this texts are provided.

Keywords—Uto-Aztecan, classical Nahuatl, Guerrero Nahuatl, word games

Zazanilli\(^1\) is a well defined Nahuatl discourse genre. It is a word game that makes use of metaphors, rhymes, rhythm and repeated structures to describe an object or a character without saying what or who it may be. This word game is addressed to an interlocutor who has to decipher it in order to discover the object or character described and give the answer. Therefore, to be able to create and/or solve a zazanilli in an apparently spontaneous way, it is necessary to have a wide knowledge of the genre, the language, and of the customs of nahua culture. Zazanillis are therefore an oral discourse genre with recurrent structures and strategies that distinguish them from other genres. They have a unique linguistic and cultural richness.


Out of these sources, the present talk presents a structural and a cultural analysis of the genre. For this, I group the zazanillis in the following five groups attending to the content or the syntactic structure. Examples (1) and (2) show the class discovering something in a place.\(^2,3\)

\(^1\)Although the parallel to the English word riddle is evident, I prefer to define the term in their own structural-cultural traits.

\(^2\)Abbreviations: 1,2,3= first, second third person, dist=distal, fut=future, hon=honourific, imp=impersonal, iter=iterative, lig=ligature, loc=locative, n.poss=non possessed, neg=negation, obj=object agreement, obj.indef=indefinite object agreement, pl=plural, refl=reflexive, sg=singular, subj=subject agreement,

\(^3\)The Ahuelicán data come from my own fieldwork, Oapan from (Flores Farfán 2002, 2005), Xalitla from (Ramírez et al. 1992) and the Codex data are taken from (Díaz Cíntora 1995).
(1) See tlakomu-lli pastora: kwa-mi-lli
one ravine-N.POSS shepherdess ***-maizeplant-N.POSS
‘On a ravine there is a shepherdess: the new milpa.’ [Ahuelicán]

(2) Ti-iaa-s iipan see tepee-tl iipan see tlakomoo-lli melaa
SUBJ.2SG-go-FUT LOC one hill-N.POSS LOC one ravine-N.POSS certainly
ø-cha-chapaan-ti-ok miak tlakeen-teh: moox-teh
‘You will go to a hill, in a ravine. A lot of clothes is getting wet: the clouds.’ [Oapan]

Examples (3) and (4) present the class parallel clauses.

(3) Ikwa ø-tlanesi ø-mo-ies-mimiloaa ia de chiotlak ø-mo-ies-mimiloaa:
when SUBJ.3-dawn SUBJ.3-REFL-blood-roll at evening SUBJ.3-REFL-blood-roll
chiil-te-mool-tes
chilli-stone-sauce-HON
‘At dawn, blood rolls down. In the evening, blood rolls down: chiltemoltsin (the stone for the molcajete).’ [Ahuelicán]

(4) Saan ø-tla-kwaa-ti-ka waan ø-no-no-xix-ti-ka:
only SUBJ.3-OBJ.INDEF-eat-LIG-be and SUBJ.3-REFL-ITER-defecate-LIG-be
kweskomaa-tl barn-N.POSS
‘It is only eating and defecating: the barn.’ [Oapan]

Examples (5) and (6) show the class subordination-yuxtaposition.

(5) Maaske x-ti-ki-neki-s maaske ti-kwalaani-s
although NEG-SUBJ.2SG-OBJ.SG3-want-FUT even SUBJ.2SG-get.angry-FUT
pan-cholwi-s kiuawa-teen-tli
up-jump-FUT threshold-edge-N.POSS
‘Even if you don’t want to, even if you get angry, you are going to jump: the edge of the threshold.’ [Ahuelicán]

(6) Maaske maas ti-ki-itta-s-neki x-wel ti-ki-itta-s:
although although SUBJ.2SG-OBJ.SG3-ver-FUT-want NEG-can SUBJ.2SG-OBJ.SG3-ver-FUT
mo-ix-kwa-teh-tl
2sg-face-head-STONE-N.POSS
‘Even you want to see it, you won’t be able: your forehead.’ [Xalitla]

Examples (7) and (8) shows the group presentation and description of a object/character.

(7) Ti-makwil-teh iikniih-teh see-see-neka to-apellido: mapil-teh
SUBJ.1PL-five-PL sibling-PL one-one-here 1pl-last.name finger-PL
‘We are five siblings, each one with our last name: the fingers.’ [Oapan]
(8) See ka-lli melaa istaak x-ø-ki-pia puerta nin one house-N.POSS certainly white NEG-SUBJ.3-OBJ.SG3-have door nor ventana: tootool-teh-tl window bird-STONE-N.POSS ‘A really white house, it doesn’t have doors or windows: the egg.’ [Oapan]

Finally, examples (9) and (10) conform the group verb final.


(10) Quatzocol-tsin mic -tlan on-mati: atla-cui-hua vessel-HON die -place DIST-know water-take-IMPERSONAL ‘A vase knows the place of the dead: The vessel for carrying out water of the well.’ [Florentine Codex]

References


