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.

The first register of zazanillis was made under commission of Fray Bernardino Díaz de Sahagún ([1577] 2006), (Díaz Cíntora 1995), in the 6th book of the Florentine Codex, where he translated 46 of these texts. Ramírez et al. (1992) published a compilation of 18 zazanillis taken from the Codex plus 14 gathered with fieldwork in Xalitla Guerrero, Flores Farfán (2002, 2005) has also published other compilations. Amith (1997) compiled 126 zazanillis gathered in a period of 4 years in Ameyaltepec and San Agustín Oapan, also in central Guerrero. In 2009, I further collected 14 zazanillis from Ahuelicán Guerrero (Rodrigúez Villarruel 2009).

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]

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[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=honorific, 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
     SUBJ.3-ITER-get.wet--LIG-lying a.lot cloth-PL   cloud-PL
     '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-tsin
     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   kiaawa-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]

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(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.*

(9)   *Xoxouhqui xical-tsin-tli   mumuchi-tl   ø-on-temi: ilhuica-tl*
      blue/green bowl-HON-N.POSS popcorn-N.POSS SUBJ.3-DIST-fill sky-N.POSS
      'A little blue bowl fills in with popcorn: the sky.' [Florentine Codex]

(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]

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