

Semantic Couplets as an Expression of Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

Semantic couplets in the Nahuatl language can function as discourse markers that have the pragmatic function of building identities among speech communities. The subsistence of these linguistic structures in present day institutional discourses points to similarities, not only in social, religious but also in linguistic practices of speech communities that are distant in time. Semantic couplets are presented as evidence that links modern speech events with those from pre-Hispanic times.

Key words: *cultural identity, semantic couplets, Nahuatl, speech communities*

Introduction

The presence of special linguistic forms is a common feature in ritual languages all over the world. Among the speech traits employed we can point out those embedded in parallelism. Semantic couplets have the structural particularity of having two terms that when juxtaposed construe a complex meaning which sometimes is far from the individual sense of the composing terms. These linguistic structures are employed instead of the more commonplace words in certain types of discursive contexts. Some of the examples of semantic couplets are listed below.

in to:ptli in petlacalli
coffer reed basket
»secret«

in ahtlapalli in cuitlapilli
wing tail
»common people«

icxipachilhuia: tla:tia
step on hide
»to die«

in tonehuain chichinaca
to be in pain to have affliction
»to suffer«

In Mesoamerica these couplets are present in a number of different indigenous languages such as: Otomí, Zapoteco, nearly all the Mayan languages and of course Nahuatl.

The aim of this paper is to account for the presence of semantic couplets, from a

diachronic perspective, in the Nahuatl language, spoken in most parts of Central Mexico, and which at present has nearly two million speakers (INEGI, 2000). It will focus not so much on precise aspects of the development of these linguistic structures but on their pragmatic function as discursive markers. The sole presence of these pairs in similar discursive contexts conveys identity to the textual material in spite of time differences, thus establishing cultural identity among speakers of present day Nahuatl with those from the 16th century.

Three Stages of Semantic Couplets

Couplets have remained as important discourse markers in modern Nahuatl dialects. It is possible to establish three different stages in the presence of couplets from the moment of European contact to the present. Through recuperation of ancient texts of oral tradition during the colonial period, we have evidence for the pre-Hispanic stage.

Pre-Hispanic stage

»*Auh in ie ixqujchtin* in tetcutin in tlatoque in otlatqujco in otlamamaco in *oqujmaviçoco: auh in oqujtimaloco* in petlatl, in jcpalli, in tecujotl, in tlatocaiotl: *auh in ovel mjtzontlatequjlitiaque*, in ovel mjtzonmotlatlatlalilitiaque in titloque in tinaoaque in timoiocia in timoqueque-loa«.

(»And all these lords, these rulers, came to govern, came to marvel at, and came to glory in the realm, the rulership, the government. And they ordered, they

arranged things weel for thee, thou art lord of the near, of the nigh, thou who art Moyocoya, thou art Moquequeoloa«)¹.

The following stage is constituted by the evangelization literature that was produced after contact, especially the *sermonarios* and *doctrinas*. Couplets in this context are a fundamental part of the textual and oral strategies that missionaries and priests employed to shape a new perception of the world that was more adequate to the Catholic paradigm and would be better accepted by the indigenous people.

Colonial stage

»*Yn icuac cacoz in tlein amo qualli yn icpatzinco yn dios ytollo inic chicuitolo monequi niman analoz tzitziquiloç yn tlauelilo, ilhuiloç yn tlapia anoço topille anoço obispo, anoço padre, ynic tzacuilh-tiloç, ynic amo tel quauitl ytech quitoctiz dios yn ahltepetl.*«

(»When one hears said that which is not good about God so there is blasphemy about him, then it is necessary to seize, to take hold of the evil person. To tell the caretaker perhaps the Topil or perhaps the bishop, perhaps the Priest so he (the evil person) can be punished so there is no punishment for the city and it will be protected by God«.)¹

Present time stage

The last stage corresponds to present-day Nahuatl which still has vitality as a language in many communities throughout Mexico, especially in its central region.

Corazón de Maria
Xinechyoltapo
Xinechyolchipahua
 [Xi]nechchipahuili noyollotzin..
 Mah nochi in tein...
 Nochi in tein sueño nicmati.
 Mah nochi *nicmati*.

Corazón de Maria [Heart of Mary]:
 Uncover me at the heart
 Cleanse me in the heart
 Clear for me my heart of hearts [my spirit]
 May everything be that.
 That all that I dream, I know it.
 May I know all.

Mah nochi mah ... nochi niquilnamiqui
parMah amo teh niquilcahua
Tehuatzin Corazón de Maria:
Xinecholytapo
Xinecholychipahua

May everything be...may I remember it all.
May there be nothing that I might forget.
You, Corazón de Maria
Uncover me at the heart
Cleanse me in the heart.

I offer semantic couplets² that belong to the first and third stage included in two different types of speech events, which are to be understood in the way of Hymes as »activities or aspects of activities that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech«³.

Contexts and Texts

It is important to point out that the contexts in which semantic couplets appear in Nahuatl are controlled and can be classified as institutional-ritual. For this reason, discourses uttered during such particular occasions, like many other special types of language, contain couplets as one of their textual traits. These speech events are, among others, wedding petitions, blessing of tools, houses, prayers, mortuary ceremonies, »godfathership«, confirmation, and Holy Communion rituals. In 16th century Mexico these discourses were known by the name of *huehue: tla'to:lli* or »the word of the elders« which are collections of prayers and counsels which constitute the perfect context for the appearance of semantic couplets, these discursive performances stress group consciousness and relate the individual to the overall worldview of the community.

Having said that semantic couplets are triggered by ritual contexts, I will present excerpts from two speech events*: wedding petitions and prayers, just to show how links, from two view points, can be construed for two speech commu-

nities separated by five centuries. The first proposal relates to the use of couplets that refer to the same semantic field in both past and present-day texts and the other is in relation to a similar discursive structure of prayers.

Present time data is identified by the geographic location where it was collected and 16th century data is grouped under the name of *Huehuetlahtolli*, although this does not mean that all the examples come from the same source.

Wedding Petitions and Prayers

Marriage ceremonies nowadays are complex discursive events that tend to last several days, but the period of time between all the visits and announcements is variable in the different regions and also in pre-Hispanic times. In the discourses, which in these speech events can be of variable length with repetitions and different types of couplets exchanged between parents, godparents and the bride and groom, an important character is the go-between who is in charge of addressing the participants in the different speech stages of the ritual. Sometimes this task, which is a long life profession, can be carried out by the godfather or by an important member of the community. In some communities this person is known by the name of *te:tla'tlani* »the one who asks the people« and in others: *huehuechihqui* »the old maker«. There is also the figure of *huehue:tla'to* »the one who

* Examples of speech events include a lecture, a phone conversation, a prayer, an interview etc. In such activities, speech plays a crucial role in the definition of what is going-on that is, if we eliminate speech, the activity cannot take place⁴.

speaks (like) *an old man*' who also delivers other kind of discourses.

Although we do not have a full account of the whole discursive ritual and speech interaction of marriages in pre-Hispanic times, there is a reference to the numerous times that it was necessary to request the hand of the bride¹. The ones in charge of delivering the request to the bride's parents were women called *cihuatlanqui* or *ti:ti:ci'*.

Some texts of the wedding process have survived and they are known as »the counsels given to the young girl and boy who are about to be married«. In today's wedding petitions in Nahua communities this is a discursive event known as »advice to the newly-wed« and it is seen as part of the wedding petition.

The continuity not only of the social aspect of marriage practices but of linguistic practices as well shows the identity between speech communities that are widely separated in time. Here are some of the couplets found as part of wedding discourses that have a similar referent. In wedding petitions there are couplets that make reference to time

Miahuatlán, Puebla⁵

kwale yo:wale kwale tlanextle*
good night good day
»day«

se ome yora se ome yeto:nali
two hours two days
»two complete periods of time«

Amanalco Texcoco⁵

kox in yalwa kox in yewiptla
perhaps yesterday,
perhaps the day before yesterday
»past time«

kox a:xan kox mostla
perhaps (it will be)today,
perhaps it will be tomorrow
»the time to come«

Xalitla, Guerrero⁶

ca yewahli ca tonaltzintli
by night by day
»a whole day«

Huehuetlahtolli A⁷

in moztla in huiptla
tomorrow the day after tomorrow
»the time to come«

There are other couplets that make reference to the parents or to the close family:

Miahuatlán, Puebla

tehwatsi tota tehwatsi tona
you are our father you are our mother
»parents of the bride«

te:ta te:na
the father of someone,
the mother of someone
»parents of the groom«

komo non te:tahme komo non te:nahme
like those fathers of someone,
like some mothers of someone
»parents in general«

komo namehwa komo yeh
like you (all) like he
»other parents or another family«

Amanalco

nikan tla:katsikon nikan sowa:tsikon
men here (present) women here (present)
»all the people present«

ite:ta / wan ite:kolwan
fathers of someone,
grandfathers of someone
»the ancestors«

* I follow the writing conventions of each author where the data is taken.

Xalitla⁶

mawistla:catl mawistlatowa:ni
honored man honored lord
»father of the bride«

Yancuitlalpan^{8*}

notahtsin nonantsin de mi alma
my father my mother of my soul
»parents of the bride«

notahtsitsiwah nonantsitsiwah de mi alma
my fathers my mothers of my soul
»people present at the ceremonies«

Amatlan de los Reyes, Veracruz⁹

nonantsen notahtsen
my mother my father
»parents of the bride«

Olmos Huehuetlahtolli¹⁰

timonanahuan timotahuan
we, your mothers, we, your fathers
»parents of the groom«

in mahuián in motlahuan
your aunts, your uncles
»relatives of the groom«

The discourse is another referent expressed by couplets:

Xalitla⁶

se tlatoli ome tlatoli
One word two words
»the discourse«

Huehuetlahtolli A⁷

cententli cencamatl
a lip a mouth
»the discourse«

In the following couplets, the referents are the daughter or son and although lexemes in modern and ancient couplets have changed, the strategy employed to name the offspring is the same, since it

profiles objects that are precious in order to construct the sense of the pairs.

Amanalco

in tinoma:pil, in tinoyesyo
you are the finger of my hand,
you are my blood
»precious daughter«

Códice Florentino¹

in tinopiltzin in tinocozqui in tinoquetzal
thou who art my child, thou who art my
precious necklace, thou who art my
precious feather¹¹.

in tinotlacachihual in tinotlacatiliz
thou who art my creation,
thou who art my offspring

in tinezio in tinotlapallo
thou who art my blood,
thou who art my color

Olmos Huehuetlahtolli¹⁰

nocuzque noquetzale
my necklace my precious feather
»groom«

The pragmatic function of these couplets in the referred contexts is to establish negotiation among the participants of the wedding ritual. This is accomplished through the creation of an adequate social environment that maintains the principles of social organization, thus constructing identity parameters among community members.

The emission of these discourses constitutes a linguistic practice that enables the speech community to have a somewhat homogeneous view of its culture and religious practices and to maintain, through the presence of semantic couplets in the discourses, a tight relation with similar discursive practices in pre-Hispanic times. I am not proposing the

* In this community the presence of the *huehuetlahto* is discussed between the families since the father makes the petition of the bride. The decision depends on the cost of employing the services of the *huehuetlahto*.

existence of a speech community as a monolithic group where there is no diversity, the use of the same expression does not automatically mean the sharing of the same beliefs⁴. But the linguistic forms I am presenting are involved in a specific type of ritual-institutional discourses where cohesion and commonality stem from the performance of discourse in a prefigured social setting. But more than similarities between couplets, the important issue is the subsistence of these linguistic forms in present-day discourses.

Only extracts from the discourses which are more complex and elaborated, each in its own particular style, are presented here. Since the full texts of speeches delivered in various visits of the parents to the bride cannot be included because of limited space, a full-fledged comparison between discourses is not possible. However, we can see that verbal couplets are employed in describing participant roles as in the following excerpt which refers to the role that the groom must fulfill. The speech is addressed to the parents of the bride.

Xiknankilikan

Answer him

Tikipanos

He will work

Kitlamakas kitlakentes

He will give her food, he will dress her

Amatlah kipolos

she will lack nothing⁹

Other distinctive traits of wedding petitions such as the formulas of politeness that the *huehuechihqui* must express are examples of the complexity and degree of elaboration of these speeches:

»*pus aman yotitexmacac otitexmoma-
ctlahih yewa in momawistlatoltzin*

*pus aman noihqui ticnequisiáyan para
maca tlacua timitzquixtilisqueh tiempo
señor, no ticonixtlalotoqueh ticonixpepe-
toqueh tew no ticpias itla tequitzitzinteh«*

(»well now you gave it, to us, you fixed it with your honoured words sir well we don't want to take more time from you because we are seeing, we are watching that must also have some works«)⁶.

Prayers

In relation to texts addressed to divinities or special beings, the discursive structure can be segmented in two essential parts. The first is an invocation that can be seen as a type of exhortation to establish communication with the intended God or Saint. Although addressed interlocutors are not the same in the past and present contexts, the textual substance is very much the same.

The second part is the petition in which problems that people experience are posed and deities are asked for various kinds of help. Two modern examples from the Puebla region and one from the Florentine Codex, which also comes from the Central Mexico area, follow:

Prayer to the heart of the house

Yancuictlalpan, Puebla

Invocation

*Talticpatzin** de mi alma

Soil of my soul

Talcuechatzin

Wet soil

Talmanictzin

Plain soil

Petition

Mah amo *tahuacto*

May there be not dryness

Mah amo *tahecatto*

May there be not wind

* Words in italics are couplets embedded in a parallel structure.

Mah amo *tahuaqui*
May there be not dryness
Mah amo *tacehui*
May there be not cold¹²

The prayer above is to guarantee the protection for the inhabitants of a house in exchange for »food«, an offering consisting of thirteen ritual objects. A cross made of holy palm, seven little cigarettes made from a whole leaf of tobacco, a candle divided in seven parts, a bit of copal resin, seven *cempoalxochitl* flowers, seven coins, seven maize seeds, seven black beans, seven pipian seeds, seven little balls of sesame seeds, seven dried chilies, seven garlic cloves, the legs and head of a chicken. The whole ritual also consists of thirteen prayers¹².

Prayer to the earth to ask for fortune

Invocation

In Talokan *moman* uan Talokan *Popan*
Mother Talokan and Father Talokan
A Talokan *Virgen* Talokan *Tatekuiani*
To Talokan virgin To Talokan servants

Petition

Maj *tehmakan* nochin *kanachi togracia*
That all the grace be handed to us
Maj *tehmajan* nochin *kanachi topoder*
That all the power be handed to us
Se *totatok maski* amo *ueyika*
A seed even though it doesn't grow much
Pero maj no *itsomolini* maj no *keponi*
But may it also bloom may it also blossom
Uan in *tocentavito* maj *no meya*
And our cents, may they be more
Uan maj *no selia*
May they grow¹³.

A similar prayer can be found in The Florentine Codex.

Prayer to Tezcatlipoca to ask for richness in order not to live a miserable life

Invocation

Tlacatle totecoc
Oh master Oh our lord
Tloquee Naoaque
Oh lord of the near oh lord of the nigh
Ipalnemoanje
Oh thou by whom we live
Ioalle ehecacle
Oh night, Oh wind

Petition

Cententica cencamatica
One lip, one mouth
njmjtznótza njmjtztatzilia
I call you, I cry out to you

Ma oc *xoconmjnecujlti* in *maxcatzin*
in *mococatzin*

May you let smell thy property thy belongings

in *motechpantzinco vitz*
which fall from thee
in *tzopelic in aviac*
that which is sweet, fragrant
in *totonqui in iamanquj*
that which is warm, soft
in *motzmolinca in mocelica*
thy freshness thy tenderness
in *iehoa in icnotlacatl*
to this humble person¹.

The pragmatic function of couplets in prayers also has negotiation as the main objective, but the participants are not hierarchically equal. We have seen from the examples shown above how cultural identity can be identified in at least two ways. The first is by dividing the sequences of the discourses and identifying couplets that have the same function, even though they are not the same. And the other way is to identify the concepts and referents that lie behind couplets. I am not really

suggesting that couplets employed nowadays are the same as those employed in 16th century discourses. I am proposing that a connection can be established in relation to the similarities in the types of couplets employed in ritual discourses.

There are couplets in contemporaneous discourses that do not resemble the ones used in pre-Hispanic times. Since each period had different referents and, as I have suggested elsewhere¹⁴ one of the basic functions of couplets was to designate referents, this is to say couplets were employed to name special or significant referents in Aztec culture.

Finally the important point is that couplets, no matter which referent they invoke, have a well established function, that of creating a cultural identity among the members of a community. Discourses such as the ones I have cited have to be composed according to certain rules that include those for which the insertion of couplets is a must.

One concluding remark is that although couplets are present in ritual discourses, their frequency has decreased as time has gone by. In pre-Hispanic texts this feature is far more frequent than it is in present day texts, as can be seen in the examples of the prayers above. This fact could be evidence of a loss of the distinc-

tiveness of ritual language, so that discourses employed in the events mentioned tend to become less specialized and more commonplace. It is also possible that couplets are acquiring a certain form, so that they are not employed to name special referents with the same strength they used to.

Conclusion

Semantic couplets are distinctive traits of certain types of ritual-institutional discourses. I have given examples of them as a type of discursive markers that have the same referent, but noted that there are also specific couplets which are characteristic of each chronological stage. This brings to mind the denomination function that semantic couplets have: although the structural form has remained, referents have changed throughout time.

The pervasive presence of semantic couplets in the same type of discourses at present time and five centuries ago shows a linguistic pattern that establishes not only a linguistic but a cultural link as well between speech communities over time. Couplets in speech events are a central mechanism in the transmission of knowledge and the reproduction of collective memory.

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SEMANTIČKI KUPLETI KAO IZRAZ KULTURNOG IDENTITETA

S A Ž E T A K

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