

Spanish Impact on the Syntax of Colonial and Modern Nahuatl

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The pioneering research on contact-induced change in postconquest Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan) was done by Karttunen and Lockhart (1976) and further developed by Lockhart (1992), who postulated three phases of adjustment to Spanish. Four general stages along with associated typological changes were also proposed by Jensen (2008). While studies of modern Nahuatl mostly deal with heavily Hispanized varieties and language displacement (see Canger 2001; Flores Farfán 1999, 2008; Hill and Hill 1986), there have been no systematic attempts to relate colonial, contact-induced changes to the structural diversity of modern varieties.

In this paper we discuss some of the results of a long-term research project studying the impact of Spanish on Nahuatl from the colonial era to the present day. We show how syntactic change was already taking place in the colonial period. This has led today not only to specific changes in traditional word order and the organization of discourse, but also to a gradual reduction of the polysynthetic complexity of Nahuatl. Whereas the basic, unemphasized word order in older Nahuatl consisted either of a verb, preceded by particles, adverbs and relational words, and followed by its specified subject and objects, or a noun, preceded by its adjectives, this sequence could be modified by prepositioning topicalized subjects and objects (Lockhart 2001, 81). However, with time, solutions mirroring Spanish word order, such as the unemphasized prepositioning of subjects, and the postpositioning of adjectives, adverbs and relational words, gained preference. For example, instead of the traditional *mohuanya niyaz* ‘with you I will go’, there is preference today toward a solution that would have been less common in traditional Nahuatl:

(1) [modern Huastecan Nahuatl, Chicontepec region of Veracruz]

<i>niyaz</i>	<i>mohuanya</i>
ni-ya-z-∅	mo-huan-ya
SBJ.1SG-to_go-FUT-SG	POSS.2SG-company[RTL]-PPN.3SG
‘I will go with you’	

Spanish impact is also manifest in the development of relative clauses, where pronouns traditionally used to introduce headless dependent clauses (2) started to be employed to form headed relative clauses (3):

(2) [John Carter Brown Library Cod. Ind. 7, fol. 50v, late sixteenth century]

<i>hahuel</i>	<i>neltocoz</i>	<i>in</i>	<i>tlein</i>	<i>tictemiqui</i>
a(h)-huel	∅-nel-toc-o-z-∅	in	tle-in	ti-c-temiqui-∅
NEG-	SBJ.3SG-truth-	SR	what-SR	SBJ.3SG-OBJ.3SG-
to_be_able	to_follow-NACT-FUT-SG			to_dream-SG
‘what you have dreamt about cannot be believed at all’				

- (3) [2013, San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala]
- | | | | |
|--------------|--|-------------|------------------------------|
| <i>huan</i> | <i>toicnitztizihuan</i> | <i>tlen</i> | <i>huitzeh</i> |
| huan | ∅-to-icni-tzi~tzi(n)-hua-n | tlen | ∅-huitz-e-h |
| company[RTL] | SBJ.3PL-POSS.1PL-sibling-PL~small[REV]-
POSS-PL | SR | SBJ.3PL-to_come-
NPRES-PL |
- 'and our brothers who come'

A widespread phenomenon in all modern varieties is the elimination of traditional noun compounding in favor of the Spanish-inspired analytic structure employing *de* 'of':

- (4) [colonial Nahuatl] [1985, Ixhuatlán de Madero, Veracruz]
- | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|----------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| <i>ichcatlaquemiti</i> | | <i>tlaquemiti</i> | <i>tlen</i> | <i>ichcatl</i> |
| ∅-ichca-tlaquemi-tl | > | ∅-tlaquemi-tl | tlen | ∅-ichca-tl |
| SBJ.3SG-cotton-blanket-
ABS.SG | | SBJ.3SG-blanket-
ABS.SG | SR | SBJ.3SG-cotton-
ABS.SG |
- 'cotton blanket' 'blanket of cotton'

Using examples from colonial documents and several modern varieties of the language we show that many syntactic changes in Nahuatl were not based on direct borrowing or copying of foreign structures. Instead, we deal with long-term tendencies favoring the extended use of optional or uncommon grammatical features and usages in the native language that most closely correspond to Spanish and undergo further transformations and assimilations to the foreign grammatical and semantic functions. In addition, such innovations as changes in word order and relative clauses, reduction of compounding, incorporation, elimination of the benefactive, and traditional possessive structures as well as the fossilization of relational words, all modeled on Spanish equivalent structures, suggest a gradual transformation in the polysynthetic nature of Nahuatl toward more an analytic structure. Finally, we argue that these changes are not occurring uniformly in all varieties but rather at different paces and with differing degrees of conservatism.

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