

Brief report on Nawatl of Huazalinguillo and the Huazalinguillo examples in Merlan 1976
By Una Canger, written in May 2014

I am writing about Francesca Merlan's article, Noun Incorporation and Discourse Reference, from 1976 because the text of the article and the examples are frequently quoted in articles about noun incorporation.

When I read the article many years ago, I found it - above all the examples - a bit strange. Since then I have not gone back to it until last year when I began working on a contribution to the Oxford Handbook of Polysynthesis. My reaction to it now is no different from the one I had when I first read it.

Some of the problems with the examples are:

- the description of the phonology does not correspond to other descriptions of La Huasteca Nawatl, and long vowel is indicated rarely and at random.
- in some of the examples of incorporated nouns a suffix traditionally called the absolutive suffix - which indicates non-possession, and which occurs exclusively in word final position - appears. Thus in ex. 7

ni-mic-mo:š-tj-maka
1SG-2SG-book-give
I'll give you one (a book)

where the expected form would be ni-mic-a:moš-maka. Furthermore, the word for book has an initial a: in that dialect area, (*a:mo š-ti*) as well as in other dialects. In ex. 8B it is even the plural form of the absolutive suffix that is retained,

ni-kwatini-itta
1SG-tree-see
I see trees

the root for 'tree' is kwa(w), and tinih is the regular plural ending for inanimate nouns in Huazalinguillo (cf. Kimball 1980:3). In example 8B, it is assumed that kwatini is the word/root for 'tree'.

Among other comments by Merlan, I was also puzzled by her statement that the speaker, Antonia Osorio Naranjo, observed "that many instances of incorporation could not be discourse-initial".

In other words, I found the examples problematic, and this year I decided to check the dialect myself in order to find out whether there really were/are speakers who speak like that. In March I went to Huazalinguillo which I thought was fairly close to where I was doing field work - in the northern part of the state of Puebla. I was accompanied by a speaker from the community where I work. As it turned out, it took us considerably much longer to get to Huazalinguillo than expected.

It is - according to the most recent census - a village of 545 inhabitants. Not knowing what to expect we simply addressed the first person we saw, a woman washing clothes. I asked her if she knew where Antonia Osorio Naranjo lives. She told us that she does not live in the village, but that Antonia's brother lives just up the hill, and that he comes down to eat at her neighbor's house, and she also said that he is her husband's grandfather. A young man from the neighboring house accompanied us up to Antonia's brother, Francisco Osorio Naranjo, where I interviewed him about Antonia and elicited words from him. I later interviewed a

younger relative of Antonia's and got some phrases and words from him and his son as well. What I learned was that:

Antonia's brother was born in 1932, Antonia who is younger than he, was born at the latest in 1940. She left the village at the age of about 14 to work as a maid in a house in the town of Pachuca. Later she went to Mexico City, also to work in a house. The woman whom she worked for in Mexico City helped her getting into a school so that she got three more years of school. Later she took a typing course and got a job in the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (Ministry of Finance and Public Credit). She worked in their office in Mexico City for 22 years and in the Puebla office for 14 years. Her brother knew about her working in New Orleans (Tulane University), and said that she had asked for a three months leave from her work in order to go there.

The following day the younger relative informed us that she had gone several times to New Orleans, and also that she had come back to the village to inquire about words "the way you are doing": how do you say this and how do you say that.

What I thus found in Huazalinguillo was not only information about how Nawatl is spoken by its inhabitants, but I also acquired information about Antonia, information that I find of importance for my understanding of the examples in Merlan's article.

If Antonia was 14 when she left Huazalinguillo, it must have been about 1954, and she went to Tulane for the first time probably around 1975, at the age of around 35, that is at least 20 years after she had left the village. Today a trip on a first class fast bus from Mexico City to the town closest to Huazalinguillo, Chicontepec, takes 8 hours on one of Mexico's super highways. I get the impression that once she left her hometown she did not go back to visit - except in order to find out more about Nawatl. I imagine that she was ambitious, wanting to have a stable job and having no desire to live in a village in the country.

Her relatives also told me that she visited Huazalinguillo a couple of years ago, but then she spoke Spanish with everyone. She even speaks Spanish - they reported - with her brother on the phone.

My visit to Huazalinguillo confirmed my doubts about the phonology that Merlan's examples display. It also confirmed my view of the examples in the article as problematic and unacceptable to the speakers I interviewed.

Back in Mexico City I talked with Karen Dakin about the article which she also considers problematic. In addition she could tell me that she had heard about Antonia Osorio Naranjo in New Orleans where Karen studied in the 1970ies. She reported that Antonia had served as an informant at Tulane a number of times, every second year after 1975.

To sum up, in 1975 Antonia was a weakly competent speaker of her mother tongue.

With this background story of Antonia I wish to point to some other problems with Merlan's article:

Personally I find it difficult to elicit - even if it is through "discourse- and text-oriented elicitation" with one speaker (whatever that is) - noun incorporation.

Some of the contexts are certainly not based on village life: no one in Huazalinguillo would cut bread with a knife (examples 10-12) in the 1940s-50s, nor would they today. Nor do I find it particularly likely that someone should want to read a book (ex 7).

I do not question the possibility of having an incorporated noun being referred to later in the text. However, I expect such a situation to refer solely to a generic object, and cannot imagine the incorporated object to be a definite item.

Of the first, I have an excellent example from Sierra de Puebla Nawatl which I am going to cite in my article for the Oxford Handbook of Polysynthesis,

wa:n achto:pa ni-k-welita-ya demela:w ni-xo:no:-ehke:wa-s
and first S1SG-O3-like-IMPF really S1SG-jonote-flay-FUT

ni-k-a:-pachoa se: ki:nse dias
S1SG-O3-water-soak

and formerly I really liked to flay the jonote (strip the bark off of a certain tree; the bark comes off in lengths as long as the tree is tall and is used to make rope) off the tree, I soak it some 15 days in water

The object prefix -k- in ni-k-a:-pachoa refers back to the incorporated xo:no:, [tx11_07:223]

I have no desire to discredit Merlan as a linguist; I assume she knew little about doing field work back in the early 1970s. Neither do I want to expose Antonia Osorio who undoubtedly did her best. But I do wish to make known that the examples in Merlan's article are problematic and that they do not reflect the language spoken in Huazalinguillo.