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TONE PUNS IN MIXTECO

KENNETH L. PIKE

SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS

1. Orientation
2. Text
3. The Puns Analyzed

1. Orientation. One day in San Miguel el Grande, a Mixteco Indian town high in the mountains of Southern Mexico, I stepped out of my log cabin for a few minutes to attend to some business in the central market place. Old Narciso Mecerías, supreme storyteller of the village, was left behind laboriously grappling an unwieldy pen with awkward fingers while his dim eyes watched the ink flow on one more of the dozens of pages of stories which he was writing. His cousin Angel, over a generation younger, sat across the room likewise intently absorbed in writing; he had learned to spell Mixteco quite accurately, and to write the tones (something which the old man had never been able to do), so he would take Narciso's crude draft and fill in missing letters and tone marks to make preparation of the final copy much easier.

Soon I returned. The house was in an uproar; work had been forgotten. Narciso, Angel, and two other neighbors, with tears pouring down their faces, were rocking with unrestrained laughter. It was obvious that during my absence something had occurred which to them was excruciatingly funny.

Inquiry disclosed that Narciso, tired with the unaccustomed labor, and moved to mirth by the thought of one of his own tales (which came to mind while he worked on a more serious one) thought to share it surreptitiously with his colleagues; but its humor proved contagious, and would not be hid. Months later, any mention of the story served as a spark to powder to explode

the house into laughter again. The story itself is presented below, as Narciso told it, but recorded by Angel as best he could from memory of this occasion on which he first heard it. The humor of the story consisted in puns complicated by tonal differences between the pertinent words.

Now words which are pronounced the same but have different meanings, like *sea* and *see*, *bite* and *bight*, *seal* (animal, noun) and *seal* (a stamp, noun) and *seal* (verb), are not restricted to English. Presumably homonyms occur in all languages; Mixteco is no exception. Thus, *žaà* meaning *ashes* is homonymous with *žaà* meaning *music*; *žokò* meaning *vapor* is homonymous with *žokò* meaning *hornet*; further examples are *stá?àn* to *light*, *stá?àn* to *show* or *teach*, *stá?àn* to *insult*; *haa* *loud*, *haa* to *swell*; *kačì* *cotton*, *kačì* to *speak*. Just as puns occur in English, therefore, puns can occur in Mixteco even though the language is tonal (the sign ['] indicates a high tone, [˘] a low tone, and unmarked vowels have a mid tone¹).

Mixteco contains many words which are identical in so far as their consonants and vowels are concerned, but which have differ-

¹ The symbols for tones, consonants, and vowels are the same as used by Kenneth L. Pike in *Analysis of a Mixteco Text*, IJAL 10.113-38 (1944). As there, so also here, any item which is not phonetically independent—that is, for Mixteco, any item which does not have two vowels—is linked by a hyphen to some other item. The symbol [č] is to be read approximately like *ch* in English change; [ž] as *z* in azure; [ʰ] as *nj* in can joke; [š] as *sh* in ship, with a slight added whistle; [ʔ] as the catch in the throat in the middle of Oh Oh!; [ə] as the vowel of book, but with the lips spread apart; [n̄] after a vowel, as the nasalization of that vowel.

ent tones. Possibly fifty per cent of the vocabulary is composed of word groups nearly homonymous in this way. The first ten words of the text have the following near-homonyms: žà'á *this*, žá'á *brown*, žá'a *here*, ža'a *pepper*, ža'á *soot*; kú- (or kúu) *is*, ku- (or kuu) *will be*, kuu *about*, kuù *will die*, (ko'ò) kúù *incense (cup)*; k'wé'dú *story*, k'wé'dù *liar!*; ?əən *one*, ?əèn *nine* sutù *priest*, sùtù *priest!* (as a call); hífn *and*, hífn *lazy* (nearly obsolete); čàa *man*, čaa *will write*, čáa *is writing*, čàà *will come*, čàà *is coming*; nì- (niì) *complete*, ní- *unfortunately not completed*; sá'a *to do*, sa'a *a cooperative or a company*, sa'á *the piles* (alternate pronunciation of sá'a is sáa which then is nearly homonymous with sáá *that time*, saà *bird*); biko *feast*, bikò *cloud*, bikó *overcast*, (nuù) bikó *overcast (face)*, i.e. *cataracts*. In addition, many of these words have alternate tone forms which give further near-homonyms.²

Near-homonyms give opportunity for near-puns. The word play may occur between any two of the words differing only by tone; it is this type of word play, which I have here called "tone puns," that gives the basis for the humor in the present text.

The effect of the tone contrast in the puns themselves is heightened because in each case a foreigner³ mispronounces the tones of

² Tones of certain words cause the tones of words immediately following them to change if the second word is of the requisite type. Of the words given, all those of tones mid mid, low high, and low mid may become respectively high mid, high high, high mid; tones mid low may become either mid high or high low. See IJAL 10.123-4 for further details. See also discussion of the fifth pun, and footnote five.

³ There is no religious significance in the fact that a priest is the foreigner concerned. Any person whatsoever who ventures to learn a language with rules for tone change as highly intricate as those of Mixteco will inevitably make grievous errors—as I well know from experience. It so happens that after the conquest the first students of this language, as well as others of Mexico, were members of religious orders. In Mixteco their most important works were *Arte de La*

one word of each pair, and the natives deliberately choose to misunderstand him, replying with a near-homonym instead of the word which the context requires.

The foreigner's errors presumably have a further important linguistic interpretation: the Mixtecos are, in general, completely unaware that tonal differences exist in their language; intrusion of an error into the system would have produced an artificial contrast which brought such differences to their attention and evoked a deliberate mocking error in return, but an error of a sharply different linguistic type. Whereas the error of the foreigner was failure to use the requisite tones upon certain words, the error of the natives was in replying with the wrong words, that is, with words which had perfect tonal pronunciation but which had meanings that did not make sense in those contexts. The precise nature of these differences will appear in the commentary on the puns, in section three.

Evidently the story originated in some region of the Mixteca other than San Miguel el Grande. One of the puns (number four) contains [d] where the dialect of San Miguel el Grande would use [s]. The story might possibly have come from near the large ancient monastery of Yanhuitlan, about 50 miles to the northeast of San Miguel el Grande; this town was important in Mixteco history during the period directly following the conquest; Mixteco is no longer spoken in the town, but place names of near-by towns

Lengua Mixteca, by Fray Antonio de los Reyes (Mexico, 1593; reprinted in 1888 by H. de Charencey, Alençon, in *Documentos para Las Lenguas de Mexico*, by S. Léon Reinsch, Vol. 2, *Actes de La Société Philologique*, Vol. 18 [1888]), and *Vocabulario En Lengua Mixteca*, by the Padres de la Orden de Predicadores, finished by Padre Fr. Francisco de Alvarado (Mexico, 1593; copy in the Library of the National Museum of Mexico). These publications, written two centuries before the development of modern linguistic science, now are chiefly valuable for their historical interest rather than for technical finesse or descriptive information.

give evidence that the requisite pronunciation was probably in vogue there at that time—but any such location of the story constitutes a hazardous guess.

Another of the words (*ñuù* *craw*, in pun number five) is now obsolete in San Miguel el Grande, at least, and may indicate that the story is quite old.

2. Text

1. žàʔá kú-kʷeʔdú
2. ʔəən sutù
3. hífn čáa nì-sáʔa biko.
4. nì-sáʔa-tu ʔəən sutù
5. ʔíó tùʔun-de
6. hà-máni hikán-de
7. ti-ñúú kée-dé
8. nù-táká čaa ká-sáʔa biko
9. te-tú-žáhi ʔdóʔa-de-tè
10. čì-máni hačá-de šini-té
11. ʔdaʔa-té
12. hitè-tè
13. ñuù-té
14. ʔdi-žúú-té
15. sta-hàʔá-té
16. te-ʔdóo
17. má-ñña-nà
18. kùñu žáhi-dé
19. te-nì-kà-hinì
20. čaa ká-sáʔa biko-ún
21. te-nì-ka-ʔdà-tùʔún-de
22. te-tuká-ní
23. háʔa nós-de-tè nù-sutù-ún
24. čì-máni hačá saba-tè
25. te-nì-kà-sá-bàʔa máá-de-tè
26. te-nì-ʔdoo tàká hà-hačá sutù-ún
27. nì-kà-žee-dé
28. te-nì-ka-hàʔa-de má-kùñu-nà nuù ní-žee
29. te-nì-kačì hífn-de
30. ʔdé-na šini-tè
31. žáʔa-nì háni šini-té hi-toʔò
32. ʔáči-de híni sutù-ún
33. te-nì-kaʔàn tuku sutù-ún
34. ʔdé-na ʔdáʔa-tè
35. ʔda-žúnu-ún-nì tá-ʔdaʔa-té hi-toʔò
36. ʔdé-na hitè-tè
37. žáʔa-nì háʔnù hité-tè hi-toʔò
38. ʔdé-na ʔdi-žódò-tè
39. ʔda-žúnu-ún-nì žóso-té hi-toʔò
40. ʔdé-na ñúù-tè
41. sa-mižéèl ñuù-tè hi-toʔò
42. ʔdé-na stà-háʔa-tè
43. suni ʔda-žúnu-ún-nì híta háʔá-té hi-toʔò
44. ʔdé-na túùn-tè
45. kuu kani tuun-ná-tè hi-toʔò
46. žúan-na te-nì-kaʔàn sutù-ún hífn-de
47. haber [Note: This should be, a ver] qué cosa es kuu kani tuun-ná-tè
48. te-nì-kiʔin-de-tè
49. ní-sú-ʔgòo-de

žùù-té nuù mesá 50. te-nì-hani tuun-de-tè

51. te-nì-hakù sutù-ún nì-kà-sáʔa-de

52. žúan-na te-nì-kaʔàn sutù-ún hífn-de

53. a qué tonto indio, 54. ʔáči hífn-de

55. te-nì-kà-kaʔàn tuku-de hífn sutù-ún

56. čaa toʔdó iʔdyú ká-kuu-ná

57. ko-bài ʔčaka-ná ti-ñúú kée-ní

58. te-kú-taʔù-nì bà-nù-háán-ní

59. ʔáči-de nì-kà-kaʔàn-de hífn sutù-ún

60. žàʔá kú-əən tùʔun ʔdžžè

61. hà-nì-kà-sá-kátá-de nuù sutù-ún

62. hà máni hačá saba ti-ñúú

63. te-tuká ní-ká-hàʔa ʔdəʔə-de-tè nuù sutù-ún

64. te-nì-kà-na-kiʔin-de ʔiči

65. ká-noʔò-de

66. te-ká-hakù-de

67. hà-nì-kà-sáʔa-de hífn sutù

68. te-nì-kuu

69. nì-hinu kʷeʔdú

70. hà-nì-kà-sá-kátá-de nuù sutù

71. nì-ʔdəʔə

Free translation:

1. This is a story 2. of a priest 3. and [some] men who made a feast. 4. Once upon a time a priest did [the following], 5. the report goes about him: 6. he just kept asking 7. [for] chickens to eat 8. from all the men who made feasts; 9. but he did not eat the entire animal, 10. since he just threw away its head, 11. its feet, 12. its entrails, 13. its craw, 14. its gizzard, 15. its liver, 16. and [all that was] left 17. [was] only the actual 18. meat itself that he ate.

19. And they saw [it] 20. those men who made the feasts, 21. and they talked it over, 22. and no longer 23. did they give the entire animal to the priest, 24. since [he] just kept throwing away half the animal. 25. Then they themselves prepared the animal 26. and there remained [for themselves] all that that priest kept throwing away, 27. and they ate [it], 28. and they gave only the meat itself to [him], [and he] ate [that].

29. Then [he] said to them, 30. "Where is its head?"

31. "Right here it is turning summer-saults, master," 32. they said to that priest. [Pun one]

33. Then the priest said again, 34. "Where are its feet?"

35. "[On the] branches of that tree right there it is getting married, master." [Pun two]

36. "Where are its entrails?"

37. "Right here its knees keep giving under it [while walking], master." [Pun three]

38. "Where is its gizzard?"

39. "The animal is mounted on the branches of that tree right there, master." [Pun four]

40. "Where is its crow?"

41. "San Miguel is its town, master." [Pun five]

42. "Where is its liver?"

43. "The animal is dancing on the branches of that tree right there, also, master." [Pun six]

44. "Where are its feathers?"

45. "We're able to stand it upright, master." [Pun seven]

46. Thereupon the priest said to them, 47. "To have what thing this is [Note: this should be, Let's see what this is, i.e. what does this mean], 'kuu kani tuun-ná-tà.'" [Final pun, unintentional]

48. Then [one] man took the animal 49. [and] sat it down on its rump on the table 50. and placed it [sitting] upright. 51. And they made the priest laugh.

52. Thereupon the priest said to them, 53. "How dumb Indians [are]!" 54. says he to them.

55. Then they said further to the priest, 56. "We're dumb Indians, 57. but we're bringing a chicken for you to eat; 58. and you are receiving it as a gift—why you're not buying it," 59. say they, [as] they spoke to the priest.

60. This is a joke [word of jest] 61. [with] which they mocked the priest 62. due to the fact that he just kept throwing away half of the chickens. 63. And they no longer gave the entire animals to the priest.

64. Then they hit the trail, 65. going

home, 66. [and these folks were] laughing 67. at the way they mocked at the priest.

68. And it is finished. 69. The story is ended, 70. the way they mocked the priest. 71. [It is] done.

3. The puns analyzed

First Pun (everything but the crucial words of the pun itself is enclosed in parentheses; brackets enclose material which does not occur in the text):

Foreigner's mispronunciation (Phrase 30):
(ⁿdé-na) šínì(-tà)

Correct pronunciation (Cf. phrase 10):
([ⁿdé-če k^wá?àñ]) šínì(-tá) ([*where has the animal's*] head ([gone])?)

Native's reply (Phrase 31):

(žá?á-ni) háni šíní(-tá hi-to?ò) (*Right here it is turning summersaults, (master).*)

The foreigner intended to enquire, *Where is the animal's head?* The correct tones occur in the introduction to the story, phrase ten, šínì-tá; instead, he used incorrect tones, pronouncing the first syllable too high and the last one too low: šínì-tà. This change of tone was almost certainly caused by the superimposition of Spanish intonation upon the phrase, instead of Mixteco tones. The Spanish intonation seems to have been a falling one, somewhat like the falling melody of the corresponding English sentence. However, in telling the story, Narciso did not repeat the Spanish intonation, but interpreted it as a sequence of Mixteco tones used incorrectly. Specifically, then, the pronunciation šínì-tà involved a double error: the foreigner ignored Mixteco tones and utilized Spanish intonation whereas the native storyteller re-pronounced the unfamiliar Spanish intonation in the three-tone system familiar to him, but with a specific series not pertinent to that context. Angel, in discussing this pronunciation, said of the foreigner, "na-sù čáa ní-káku híñ sái saú kú-de" *he is not a man born to the native language*; and, again, "ká?àñ stéte-de əñ tí?ì" *he has a slight impediment in his speech.*

The context indicates that the natives understood the foreigner clearly enough, but decided to have a bit of fun; he had abused the tones, so they would also; they replied with a near-homonym—*šíní*—which used two high tones instead of a mid tone and a low one. The Mixtecos delight in jokes of all kinds; they play innumerable tricks on one another. Once let the first man play a practical joke on the second (such as placing a lizard inside his shirt, or rubbing ashes on his face) and the second immediately jumps up to outdo the first, whether in jest or in anger; he will labor hard to “go the first fellow one better.” This type of interchange is frequently reflected in their conversation, which has an ample vocabulary to describe it. Angel, for example, said to me: “*nú-nì-hà-ⁿjaà-ná əən kà-šíní-de te skáⁿda-ná kiⁿ šínì bé^e, te má-de k^wá-ⁿjaà-de kà-šíní-ná tə-kàšì-ná taan-dé ⁿinì ⁿdučá; šaàn sáká čaa kú-de bíⁱ-ká nì-sáa-de*” *If I should grab his hat and toss it on the roof, then he might snatch my hat and my blanket and dump them in the water; he’s a terrific jokester, he goes you one better.* So it is in this story: in every instance that the foreigner allows an unconscious error to creep into his tonal usage the natives exaggerate the result of this error by deliberately substituting the tones of a word which contains the same consonants and vowels but which presents a ludicrous picture instead of a serious one in that context.

The word *šíní* is derived from the cognate regular noun *šínì* which serves as a subject or object in the sentence, but is used in a special way here so as to modify the verb *háni*. Instead of meaning *head*, like the basic noun, the derived *šíní* means *in vague relationship to the head or to some characteristic of the head*. The verb *háni* normally means *hitting*, when it is used by itself or without a modifier, but with a modifier its meaning may be changed somewhat. The combination *háni šínì*, i.e. of predicate plus object, would mean *hitting the head* [or, figuratively, *thinking*], but the combination

which appears here, *háni šíní*, means *turning summersaults*. When asked, “Where is its head?” the natives replied, then, with the cognate, “Here it is turning summersaults.” (For further discussion of tonally-derived forms see IJAL 10.135.)

A further difficulty is present in the phrase *ⁿdé-na šínì-tə*. The words *ⁿdé-na* seem to be used infelicitously here. In San Miguel el Grande the customary form is *ⁿdé-čì k^wáⁿ šínì-tə* where *has its head gone*, in which *ⁿdé* is a modified form of *ʔoⁿdè* at which point, *-čì* or *-če* is abbreviated from *ʔičì* road but with special meaning of *direction* in this place in the sentence (see IJAL 10.129–30 for detailed analysis of the semantic changes dependent upon sentence position), *k^wáⁿ* has had its first tone of the basic form *kaⁿ* go perturbed mechanically to high pitch by the preceding word *-če*. In a brief question as a reply to a statement the *ⁿdé-na* may, however, occur. Angel illustrated this by saying: *‘ná-bàⁿa-ná ʔəən žučì, ʔáčì ʔəən čaa káⁿ;* te *ʔəngà-de, ⁿdé-na ná-ⁿdéó* ‘I’ve got a knife,’ says one fellow who speaks; then another fellow, ‘precisely where, let’s see.’ The foreigner did not use the phrase correctly, then, unless the dialect in which the story originated differed from that of San Miguel el Grande; regardless of its origin, the phrase contributes a foreign impression to Narciso and Angel.

Second Pun:

Foreigner’s mispronunciation (Phrase 34):

ⁿdé-na) ⁿdáⁿà(-tə)

Correct pronunciation (Cf. phrase 11):

([ⁿdé-če k^wáⁿ]) ⁿdaⁿa(-tə) (Where have) the feet (gone)?

Natives’ reply (Phrase 35):

ⁿdaⁿa (žúnu-ún-ni) tá-ⁿdaⁿa(-tə hi-toⁿ)
(In yonder tree’s) branches (he) is getting married (master).

The tones used by the foreigner here, and in all his later utterances, are the same as used for his first statement, even though the Mixteco words are by no means supposed to

be pronounced with the same tone combinations: *šinì* should have been different from *daʔa* and *tùun*, but he pronounces all three with the tones which represent a single type of falling intonation.

In Mixteco the word *daʔa* means either *hand* or *foot*, and, since there is no plural, *hands* or *feet*; by metaphor the meaning is regularly extended to include *a branch* or *branches* of a tree. In the first part of their reply, therefore, the natives do not have to substitute a near-homonym for their word play, but actually use the word which the foreigner had intended. The joke consists in using it in a specialized context, with the word *tree*, which forces a semantic interpretation which he had not intended; the question, *daé-na daʔà-tè*, an incorrect pronunciation for *Where are its feet?* is answered with *daʔa žúnu-ún-ni* (*In the branches of yonder tree right there. . .*

The joke does not end with this item, however, but is augmented by the immediate employment of the identical word, with the identical tones, in a different place in the sentence but in a grammatical position which gives it special meaning. In the first pun the basic noun could be made to modify a verb and thereby take on special tone and special meaning; in this second pun *daʔa* modifies a preceding verb *tá-* and the combination has special meaning, but there is no differentiation of the tone of *daʔa*; the meaning of the combination *tá-daʔa* is *getting married*; the meaning and form of *tá-* in isolation is obscure and at the moment it cannot be related to a regular two-vowel verb.⁴ *Where are its feet?* asks the foreigner;

⁴ All full words have two vowels—neither more nor less, and just one grammatical part (morpheme). An expression like *tá-daʔa*, therefore, gives the appearance of a compound, since it has a third vowel and two obvious grammatical parts. Such an analysis would be somewhat inconvenient, however, because of many other expressions which have similar relationships between their parts, but in which the separate elements each have two-vowel forms and clearly distinct meanings—as, for example, *kani tuun* in pun seven—and the order

In the branches of yonder tree it is getting married, master, reply the natives.

Third Pun:

Foreigner's mispronunciation (Phrase 36):

(*daé-na hitè(-tè)*)

Correct pronunciation (Cf. phrase 12):

([*daé-če kʷáʔàn*]) *hitè(-tè)* ([*Where have*] *the animal's*) *entrails* ([*gone*]?)

Natives' reply (Phrase 37):

(*žáʔa-ni háʔnù hitó(-tè hi-toʔè)*) (*Right here its*) *knees* (*keep giving under it* [*while walking*], *master*).

In this third joke a full pun is concealed by a series of complicated special tone changes: for *hitè entrails* the homonymous word *hitè shin bone* is substituted, but in the special tonal form *hitó* which in conjunction with the preceding verb which it modifies means *to walk with the knees bending slightly, or giving under one, at each step*. The normal tones can be seen in the phrase, *ʔúʔù hitè-ná my shin hurts*. Now this word may be used as a verb modifier, just as was *šinì* in the first pun; if it occurs thus, the identical type of tone change takes place, and it receives high tones on both of its syllables, as in *kaka hitó-ná I am going to walk on my shins* (as, for example, on the last stage of a pilgrimage). After a word whose syllables are respectively mid and low toned, however, the derivative change does not force both syllables to high, but the first to low and the second to high; in *deʔè šíní* this can be seen when *šinì* becomes *šíní* (instead of *šiní*) as a special derived modifier of the noun *fruit*, with the meaning of *the last fruit remaining on top of a tree after a full crop*. It is this subtype of derivative change which has forced *hitè* to become *hitó*. A further explanation is

and position of these elements in the sentence may be changed. For a more complete discussion of the problem, see IJAL 10.124-5.

Present marriage ceremonies in the Mixteca might lead one to guess that historically the meaning of *tá-daʔa* was *to strike hands in matrimony*, but linguistic evidence to support such a conjecture is at the moment not available.

necessary: the word preceding *hitè* must have basic mid and low tones to force this change, but the tones of the word in the requisite position here are actually high and low respectively; the basic form of *há?nù*, however, is *ka?nù*, which fulfills the necessary conditions; *ka?nù* has had its [k] changed to [h] and its first tone changed to high because of the change of its aspect ("tense") from incomplete (or "future") to continuative (or "present progressive"), but in so far as it affects its mechanical action upon the tones of following words, *há?nù* acts precisely like the basic *ka?nù* from which it is derived.

Fourth Pun:

Correct pronunciation for the dialect of San Miguel el Grande (Cf. phrase 14):
 ([ⁿdé-še k^wá?àn]) ⁿdi-žúú(-té) (*[Where has] the animal's gizzard [gone]?*)

Foreigner's mispronunciation of a dialect other than that of San Miguel el Grande (Phrase 38):

(ⁿdé-na) ⁿdi-žódò(-tè)

Natives' reply, in the dialect of San Miguel el Grande (Phrase 39):

(ⁿda?a žúnu-ún-ni) žóso(-tá hi-to?ò) (*On the branches of that tree right there it is mounted, (master).*)

The pun in this fourth instance is obscured by two dialectal differences between the place where the story originated and Narciso's home town.

In San Miguel el Grande (in the district of Tlaxiaco) the expression for *gizzard* is ⁿdi-žúú. The second element, *žúú*, is derived from *žuù* *stone* by the process already discussed for the first pun; it modifies the noun element ⁿdi-, in such a way as to indicate that it has something to do with stones (i.e. for the grinding material in the *gizzard*). The full two-vowel form of the first element, and its meaning apart from this combination, are unknown. In the other dialect, the one upon which the pun is based, the expression for *gizzard* appears to

have been something like ⁿdi-žódó; probably the foreigner pronounced the vowels and consonants correctly, as in the other puns, but failed to use the proper tones; what this other dialect was, or the precise tones which would have been correct for that dialect, we do not know. Of the two dialectal difficulties involved, then, the first is the impossibility of reconstructing the correct tones of one of the words of the pun; in the previous puns, the correct pronunciations could be obtained by asking the speakers from San Miguel el Grande to pronounce the words, or by finding these expressions already given for that dialect in the introduction to the text, but for the expression *gizzard* this method does not work since a different word is substituted in the San Miguel dialect.

The second difficulty is caused by a change of sound from one dialect to the other. Where the originating dialect uses [d], San Miguel el Grande pronounces words with an [s]. In all the other puns, the consonants and vowels are retained unchanged; in this case, the pun is obscured by the relationship of *žódò* to *žóso*; undoubtedly this difference of consonant did not occur in the story when it was first told. About fifty miles to the northeast of San Miguel el Grande, in the district of Nochistlan, near the town of Yanhuitlan mentioned earlier, is a village named Magdalena Yodocono; the second part of this name is a Spanish adaptation of the early Mixteco pronunciation of that region, but retains the [d] used there; this town is called *Madalená žoskúnu* by the people of San Miguel el Grande—a pronunciation which reflects the correspondence of [d] to [s] (the y and [ž] are phonetically equivalent, as are the c and [k]); it is just possible that the story began somewhere on this Nochistlan plain. However that may be, the presence of [d] in one part of the pun but [s] in the other part conceals the fact that originally the word play was either a full pun or pun with only the tones differentiating its elements.

The word *žóso*, which constitutes the

crucial part of the pun in substitution for *žódò*, means *to be mounted upon*, or *resting upon* (as, for example, of a man on a horse), so that in reply to the question, *Where has the animal's gizzard gone?* the natives said, *Right on yonder tree it is mounted, master.* *žóso* is in the continuative aspect ("present progressive tense"); the incomplete aspect ("future tense"), from which it is derived, has the form *coso*.

For each of these first four puns, and for all but one of the remaining ones, it may be noted that the query is concerning an independent noun whereas the answer is given either with an independent verb, as in this fourth pun, or with a verb phrase which includes a modifier derived from a noun, as in puns one to three and six to seven. Thus, *head* (1) was replaced by *turning summer-saults*; *feet* (2) by *getting married*; *entrails* (3) by *knee flexing*; *gizzard* (4) by *mounting*. The only exception to this technique appears in the next pun.

Fifth Pun:

Foreigner's mispronunciation (Phrase 40):
(^hdé-na) ñúù(-tè)

Correct pronunciation (Cf. phrase 13):
([^hdé-če k^wá?àn]) ñúù(-tè) ([*Where has the animal's*] *craw* [*gone*]?)

Natives' reply (Phrase 41):
(sa-mižéèl) ñúù(-tè hi-to?ò) (*San Miguel* [*is*] *the animal's*) *town*, (*master*).

If one disregards the mispronunciation by the foreigner, and considers only the pronunciations used by the natives, ñúù *craw* and ñúù *town* are completely homonymous and form a perfect pun. To the query, *Where has its* *craw* *gone?* the natives reply, *San Miguel is the animal's home town, master.* Each of the two words of the pun are independent nouns; the second word is not made into a verb modifier as is the second word in the other puns.

The normal word for *craw* in San Miguel el Grande is *žehà*, borrowed from Spanish *molleja* after shortening the word by

dropping the first syllable (a frequent practise). The only instance in which *Angel* has heard the word ñúù with this meaning is in this particular story as it was told by *Narciso*; there is no evidence to prove that previously the word was in current usage there.

It should be noted that the -tè has a high tone after *craw* but a low one after *town*, so that the phrases ñúù-té and ñúù-tè are not homonymous even though the nouns themselves are pronounced alike; there is nothing in -tè *animal*, *it*, to cause this change. Now in the earlier puns, -tè was high toned after *šinì* (1), *háni šínì* (1), ^hda?a (2), tá-^hda?a (2), ^hdi-žúú (4), and *žóso* (4), but was low toned after *hitè* (3) and *há?nù hité* (3); it is the word which precedes -tè which determines whether its tone will be high or low. In part, this is determined mechanically: after words whose two syllables are both basically high, -tè is changed to high also. After words whose two syllables are basically high and low respectively, or mid and high, or low and mid, -tè always remains low. After certain other sequences of basic stem tones—specifically, after high mid, mid mid, mid low, and low high—the word -tè sometimes retains its low tone and sometimes is changed to a high tone. Merely by looking at the consonants and vowels of such a word one can never predict how it will affect a following -tè. In fact, two words with identical consonants and vowels and one of these latter tone sequences may affect -tè differently, in precisely the manner seen with ñúù *craw* and ñúù *town*.⁵

⁵ Mixteco has many other mechanical and arbitrary tone rules similar to the ones which modify the form of -tè. Compare, for example, the rules applying to -de:

The word -de, like -tè, never has its tone changed following two-vowel words which are basically mid high, or low mid, or high low (for -de after mid low see examples in phrases 5, 28, 49). If the word which precedes -de or -tè has its own tones changed mechanically, the previous statement remains the same, and the words are still unperturbed (no examples occur in this text).

Sixth Pun:

Foreigner's mispronunciation (Phrase 42):

(^ˈdé-na) stà-há'á(-tè)

Correct pronunciation (Cf. phrase 15):

([^ˈdé-èe k^ˈá'àn]) sta-hà'á(-tá) ([*Where has] the animal's liver* ([gone])?)

Natives' reply (Phrase 43):

(suni ^ˈda'a žúnu-ún-ni) híta há'á(-tá hi-to'ò) (*Likewise right in the branches of yonder tree the animal*) is dancing, (master).

This pun differs from the others by the fact that the noun expression in the query is complex. The first element of *sta-hà'á liver* is the word *staà bread* (or, more accurately, *corn cake, tortilla*); one can reconstruct the second vowel of the full unabbreviated

two-vowel form as being low, since otherwise the tone of *há'á* would have been *há'á* according to the mechanical tone rule described for *hitá* in the third pun; the word *staà* is in common usage. The second element, *há'á*, is a derived modifier of the first noun element and has a tone sequence of a derived modifying type; the basic word from which it is derived, or its meaning, is unknown to native speakers like Narciso and Angel for whom the isolated meaning has long been lost; it is probably the same word as found in the expression *nuni hà'á lime-softened corn*, in which *nuni* is the normal word for *corn* but *há'á* evades separate semantic analysis.

The analysis of the reply is less difficult. The over-all meaning of *híta há'á* is *to be*

After some two-vowel words with basic tones high mid, mid mid, and mid low respectively, -tè and -de remain unchanged (for -tè after mid mid, see phrase 24; after mid low see 12 and 41; for -de after high mid see 51 and 67; after mid mid see 48, 50, 55, 63, and 64; after mid low see 65, 66, and second occurrence in 59). If the word which precedes -tè or -de has its own tones changed mechanically (or in continuative aspect) the previous statement remains the same (for -de after a basic mid mid changed to high mid see 9; after a basic mid low changed to mid high see 6, 10; after a basic mid low changed to high high see 32 and the first occurrence in 59).

After certain other two-vowel words with the same basic tones as mentioned in the previous paragraph, both -tè and -de are changed to high (for -tè changed to -tá after mid mid, see 11 and 35; after mid low see 10, 13, and 49; for -de changed to -dé after mid mid see 27). Here also the tones of the preceding word may first be changed without affecting the change of -tè to -tá and -de to -dé (for -tè changed to -tá after a basic mid mid which itself is changed to high mid see 39; for -de changed to -dé after a basic mid mid changed to high mid see 7 and 18).

After two-vowel words with basic high high tones, -de is never changed (as in phrases 23, 25, 29, 46, 52, 54, 61, and 70). In the same circumstances, -tè is changed to -tá (the only instances in this story are of -tè changed to -tá following words which have high high tones in the position in which they modify a noun or verb after they are derived by tone change from a basic noun; for these, see 14, 31, and 43).

After two-vowel words with basic tones low high, -de is never changed to high whereas -tè after certain of them remains low but after others is changed to high (for -de after a derived low high see 21; for -tè after a derived low high see 37; for -tè changed to -tá after a derived low high see 15).

After certain words in their abbreviated one-vowel enclitic form, -de remains mid toned and -tè remains low toned; after other enclitic forms -de and -tè are both changed to high (for -tè after -ná see 45; for -tè after -de see 9, 23, 25, 48, 50, 63; no instances occur in this text of -de or -tè changed to high after abbreviated forms; compare, however, *nì-sí-žú'ú-tè-dé the animal scared him*, in which -tè causes -de to change to -dé but is not itself changed by žú'ú since this latter word is basically low high žú'ú *to be frightened* changed by the preceding *sí-cause to be*; if -tè had been changed to -tá, however, it could then not have affected -de).

The enclitics -i *child* and -ña *woman* have tone rules similar to those for -de; the enclitics -ri *I, my, me* (familiar) and -žà *sacred personage* have rules similar to -tè; the enclitics -ná *I, my, me* (polite) and -ní *you, your* (polite) differ from them both, since they always remain high; the enclitics -rò *you, your* (familiar) and -žò *we* (including the speaker) have a more complicated set of rules than any of those previously mentioned, but these need not be given here. The illustrations with -de and -tè are sufficient to indicate the types of changes encountered in Mixteco—and the Herculean labors which would be necessary to learn to speak the language flawlessly.

dancing, so that to the question, *Where is the animal's liver?* the reply given was, *The animal is dancing in the branches of yonder tree right there, master.* The word *híta* is in the continuative aspect ("progressive tense") as are all the other verbs of the replies; the basic form is *kata to sing* in the incomplete aspect ("future tense"). The second element, *há'á*, is derived from something—probably from *ha'á feet*, and hence, by metaphor, *singing in relation to feet* becomes *dancing*; compare *híka há'á to travel on foot* from *kaka to walk* and *ha'á feet*.

In the second and fourth puns, and now in the sixth one, reference is made in some way to the animal's action in the branches of a tree. He evidently is getting married in that tree, sitting there, and dancing there all at once. Reference to the branches obtained its start as one element of the second pun; it continues as a unifying factor of the series and a decided contribution to the sustained ludicrousness of the plot; it helps to prevent the story from becoming merely a list of unconnected incidents by picturing a single scene to which all the actions can be related.

Seventh Pun:

Foreigner's mispronunciation (Phrase 44):

(ⁿdé-na) tũn(-tè)

Correct pronunciation:

[[ⁿdé-çe k^wá'án) tũn(-tè)] [*Where have the animal's feathers (gone)?*]

Natives' reply (Phrase 45):

(kuu) kani tuun(-ná-tè hi-to'ò) (*We can stand (it) upright, (master).*)

In the seventh pun the near-homonymous pair is *tũn feathers* and *tuun upright*, so that to the question, *Where have the animal's feathers gone?* comes the reply, *We can stand the animal upright, master.* The word *tuun* is an adjective modifying the verb *kani to hit or to place*. No tonal change is involved in this modification by a word which is inherently adjectival rather than an adjective derived from a noun.

The phrase *tũn-tè* does not occur in the introduction to the story, according to Angel: *çi-tũ-ká-žee-dé . . . bé-ún kèbè çi-má-sutũ kũ-à hiá tũ'ún because they don't eat [feathers] . . . it enters below because he is the one who asks [about it].* Some of the other parts of the chicken's anatomy which do receive mention in the introduction are used for food only in part, after very special preparation, and then only by *čaa tú-kini 'inĩ folks who are not squeamish.*

At this point, the foreigner suspects that the reply which he has received does not answer his question. He asks for a demonstration or interpretation of the meaning of their last statement. They answer him by slapping the plucked chicken onto the table in an upright position. Startled, he exclaims, *A qué tonto Indio, How dumb Indians are!*

From this general situation a further element of humor may be observed which has no direct relation to the puns themselves: This is the sly manner in which the natives trick the foreigner into mistaking simulated dullness for actual stupidity. The Mixtecos were a conquered race and their new masters often treated them haughtily, demanding respectful and immediate compliance to their demands. One weapon which remained to the Mixtecos, when they had no desire to conform, was to pretend that they did not understand—concealing this hoax under the most polite phrases that the language afforded. Although this ruse often succeeded, it did so at the cost of making them appear very obtuse. In the present story, they delightedly admit the charge of dullness since it was a compliment to themselves, proving as it did the success of their strategem.

Final Pun (Unintentional):

Mixtecos' (or Angel's) mis-writing or misunderstanding (Phrase 47):

Haber qué cosa es! [*aber ke kosa es*]
To have what thing it is!

Spanish speaker's intention:

A ver qué cosa es! [a ber ke kosa es]
To see what thing it is! (That is, *Let's see what this phrase means!*)

The foreigner who reads this story has the last laugh. In the very story in which they mock incorrect vernacular, the Mixtecos demonstrate their failure to master, in their turn, Spanish. Specifically, in recording the story, Angel wrote, *Haber qué cosa es to have what thing it is*. Upon questioning him, it became evident that he had failed completely to understand the phrase since he had confused it with a homonymous

Spanish expression, *A ver qué cosa es, Let's see what this thing means*. While enjoying hugely the puns in his own language, he unknowingly fell into the trap of an unintentional Spanish pun of Narciso's.

Even this, when it was called to his attention, did not surprise Angel too much—after all, Narciso had also told them a story of two Mixteco brothers who were thrown into jail because of the most unfortunate use of the only three Spanish expressions which they—almost—knew, and by which they confessed a murder they had never committed.