

## Standard Negation in Nahuatl of the Northeastern Sierra of Puebla, Mexico

Negation in Mexican languages has been an understudied phenomenon, even in those languages that have attracted significant scholarly interest—such as Nahuatl (Uto-Nahuan). In this regard, the Nahuatl (Nahuatl) variety spoken in the Northeastern Sierra of Puebla (NNOP) presents a case of complete lack of formal studies. Accordingly, in this talk I present a minimalist syntactic analysis of the various forms of standard negation (Miestamo 2000) in this variety. The data discussed in this talk comes from direct elicitation of the Questionnaire for describing the negation system of a language (Miestamo 2019) and translation tasks with two nahua-speakers collaborators.

**Data:** With respect to negation, NNOP diverges from other dialects in that it exhibits three morphemes expressing sentential negation: *kanah*, *amo*, and *kan=*. The first two are free morphemes, while the third is a simple clitic (*sensu* Zwicky 1977). *Amo* and *kan=* can be used in virtually the same standard negation contexts (Payne 1985), whereas *kanah* is excluded from those same contexts:

- 1) a. *Amo cho:katok*  
NEG cry-3p.sg  
'He/she does not cry.'
- b. *Kan=cho:katok*  
NEG cry-3p.sg  
'He/she does not cry.'
- c. *\*Kahah cho:katok*  
NEG cry-3p.sg  
Intended reading: 'He/she does not cry.'

*Amo* and *kanah* may be used as responses to polar questions, whereas *kan=* may not:

- 2) A: *Tikneki tikmahseuas aemol?*  
2P.S-ODEF-want 2P.S-ODEF-eat beans  
'Do you want to eat beans?'
- B: *\*Kahah/amo/kan=*  
'No.'

These items also contrast in their distribution in tag-question contexts, where *kanah* is more acceptable, *amo* tends to be dispreferred, and *kan=* is entirely ungrammatical:

- |                        |                |                 |                |
|------------------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 3) <i>Tikakuaha',</i>  | <i>¿kanah?</i> | <i>*/?¿amo?</i> | <i>*¿kan=?</i> |
| 2P.S-ODEF.eat.PRET     | NEG            | NEG             | NEG            |
| 'You ate, didn't you?' |                |                 |                |

Finally, the two morphemes compatible with standard negation are mutually exclusive:

- 4) \*Yeha            yalwa            **amo**    **kan**-kuikaltihtoya  
       ‘He/she           yesterday       NEG    NEG-was.singing’  
       Intended: ‘He/she was not singing yesterday.’

**Objectives and Hypothesis.** The main objective of this presentation is to propose that *kanah*, *kan=*, and *amo* are all items that encode negation, but that *kanah* and *amo* seem to encode [NEG + i], (where *i* stands for some kind of pragmatic or discourse-related information), whereas *kan=* is realized *in situ* as an exponent of [NEG]. This, in turn, supports the hypothesis that *kan=* is a morphologically reduced variant of *kanah* that cliticizes to the Tense Phrase (TP). In this sense, *kanah* is attracted to higher positions, as it requires ellipsis of TP; as we have seen, it is well-formed as a response to polar questions and in tag questions, and when clause material is present, conversely *kanah* can only appear prosodically left-dislocated. *Amo*, on the other hand, can precede the entire clause it negates without requiring ellipsis or left-dislocation.

The evidence supporting this proposal comes from the pragmatic distribution of these elements: *kanah*, when used as a negative response, is perceived as “*casual, informal, or careless*” and is only used among trusted interlocutors, whereas *amo* is perceived as a “*careful, formal, or respectful*” negation that can be appropriately used in all pragmatic contexts. *Kan=*, in turn, is also considered a “*casual, quick, or informal*” form of negation.

**Consequences of the proposal:** I argue that it is *kanah*, and not *amo*, the piece that contributes the basic meaning of negation in this variety for the following reasons: (i) pragmatically, it is interpreted as careless (i.e., an unmarked or unmodulated negation), and (ii) *kanah* is assembled in the Neg head, as evidenced by its affixal realization in *kan=* when it cliticizes to the verbal complex as in (5).

- 5) [ForceP **kanah** [... [NegP [AmoP **amo**] [Neg [Neg **kanah/kan=**] [TP [...V...]]]]

This suggests that *kanah* and *kan=* may be the same lexical item appearing at different points in the derivation. The first merge of these elements occurs in the Neg head, which in turn takes the TP as complement. When the Force head of the sentence encodes *strong rejection*, this element is attracted to the left periphery, triggering ellipsis of TP (I leave this issue for future work). This becomes evident when *kanah* is used to reject polar questions: it first negates, and then moves to the left periphery to convey emphatic rejection, thus producing the effect of [Neg + i], where in this case *i* = Rejection. *Amo*, in contrast, is merged and typically realized in [Spec, TP]. It remains to be determined whether the lexical item *amo* intrinsically encodes *i*, for instance, some form of politeness.

**Selected references:** Miestamo, Matti. 2000. Towards a typology of standard negation. *Nordic journal of linguistics* 23.65–88. Miestamo, Matti. 2019. Questionnaire for Describing the Negation System of a Language. Payne, John. R. 1985. Negation. *Language typology and syntactic description*, volume I, Clause structure, ed. By Timothy Shopen, 197–242. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Zwicky, Arnold. 1977. *On Clitics*. Bloomington: Indiana University