PICTURESQUE MIXTEC TALK

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The language of the Mixtecs of the District of Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, is rich in figurative language and humor. The following examples were obtained in the town of San Esteban Atatláhuca, Ranchería Progreso. The principal informants were Cipriano Hernández and his brother, Pascasio.

I. METAPHOR

When a child cries:

Ndúcú i scúun i saū.
seeks child pour-down child rain
The child is wanting to make it rain. Actual meaning:
He's getting ready to cry.

Ni scúun i saū.
completive pour-down child rain
The child made it rain. Actual meaning: He cried.

Jíto ri je věji saū xini yúcu.
see I already is-coming rain head mountain
I see that the rain is coming on the mountain. Actual meaning: I see he's getting ready to cry.

When electing a town official:

Ma cáni yo tée yúcuan chi cahmu de ſuu yó.
will-not place we man that because will-burn he town our
We won't put that man in office because he will burn our
town. Actual meaning: He will not use wisdom in ruling, and will get in trouble with outside officials of the cabecera. Then soldiers will be sent in, they will collect the guns the people have and put people in jail.

When requesting something of a neighbor:

Cuáha ni úū ndiči caji ná, yóhyo váha néváha ní.
Give you two string-beans will-eat I, very good have you
Give me two string beans to eat, for you have lots.
Actual meaning: Give me some of your maguey flowers; you have lots. (Both string beans and maguey flowers are a vegetable; both are long and thin. The person to whom the request is made knows what is meant, since he has no string beans.)

Sell you some toasted-tortillas eat I
Sell me some toasted tortillas to eat. Actual meaning: Sell me some dried corn stalks (zacate) for my animals to eat. (Both toasted tortillas and corn stalks are dry and crackly. Since toasted tortillas are made by each household and never bought from neighbors, the request is not taken literally.)

Won't you sell me a half measure of tortillas? Actual meaning: Won't you sell me a half jug of maguey wine? (Both tortillas and maguey wine are white; both are the principle items of food consumption, giving strength; both quantities mentioned above are half measures.)

Did my little rabbit come to be with your rabbit? (Actual meaning: Is my little boy here with your little boy? (The ‘iso ndiqui’ is the smallest species of rabbit in the area.)

Let's go and grind we
Let's go and grind corn for tortillas. Actual meaning: Let's go and collect maguey juice.
Quihín ri yucu yéjé.
go I mountain bird-food
I am going to the bird-food mountain. Actual meaning:
I am going to go get corn to feed my children. (As a bird goes about hunting seeds and insects to feed its young, so the speaker is going to look for corn to feed his children. The word 'yejé' applies only to food that birds find, never to food for other animals or human beings, except in this metaphorical context.

The above metaphor, "bird-food mountain," is a common metaphorical construction for going on an errand, in the San Esteban dialect of Mixtec. Compare the following:

Quihín ri yucu tújnu.
I am going to the firewood mountain. Actual meaning: I am going to chop firewood.

Quihín ri yucu xúhún.
I am going to the money mountain. Actual meaning: I am going to go and try to collect (or borrow) money.

Quihín ā yucu ndíví.
She is going to the egg mountain. Actual meaning: She is going to buy eggs.

Vēji ri yucu tájna.
I have come to the medicine mountain. Actual meaning: I have come to buy medicine.

When referring to lack of clothing:
Sahma tēe ndāhú cúu niándii.
clothes man poor is sun
The sun is the poor man's clothes. (The function of clothes in this cold climate is to keep one warm, and the poor man does not have sufficient clothing, so must depend on the sun for warmth.

When a cow was about to calve:
Te vijna vácá ndētu ti cuan ti iīn sēhe ti.
and now cow waits animal buy animal an offspring animal
And now the cow is about to buy an offspring. Actual meaning: And now the cow is about to calve.

II. PERSONIFICATION


1. when completive plant people corn under ground and chat corn that. 2. how will-do we with-companions we. 3. and says one: I will-be mazorca (ear of corn). 4. and another: I will-give I corn-silk split-open. 5. and another: not anything will-give I but demonstrative corn-stalk just-that. 6. and another: corn-fungus.

When people have planted corn in the ground, the corn seeds talk: How shall each one of us do? And one says: I will be a mazorca (ear of corn). And another: I will give corn silk only (a head without corn; just a tassel split into three parts). And another I won't give anything; just corn stalk. And another: I'll give fungus (a black fungus covering the ear).

Máá niinandii ni chusúcún iìn sahma te jeë yúán tu nähichi tãca gá sahma.

demonstrative sun completive wrapped a cloth and therefore not re-dry all other cloth.

The sun wrapped himself in a cloth, and therefore the other cloths aren't drying. Actual meaning: The sun is covered over with clouds, so the clothes aren't drying. (This personification is a product of the fertile imagination of Cipriano Hernández, whereas most of the other quotations in this paper are in current usage.)

Cána jniñu.

calls work

My work is calling me.
Cána jnáhan jnūhun.
calls companion word
This word is calling its companion(s), i.e. the sentence requires this addition to be grammatically and/or esthetically correct.

Jíca vāha jnūhun
walk well word
The words walk well, i.e. the sentence is syntactically correct.

Cacu cuēchi síqui de.
will-be-born sin against him
Sin will be born against him, i.e. people will find out about his sin.

Ni cacu cuēchi síqui de ñuu.
completive be-born sin against him town.
Sin was born against him in the town, i.e. the authorities were told or found out about some misdemeanor, sent for him, and punished him.

Ni jnìi cuehyi sāán.
completive grab sickness me
That sickness grabbed me, i.e. I got sick.

Sáha ndevāha cuehyi jiín ní.
does outrageously sickness with you
That sickness is really making a wreck of you.

Cundoho yó cuehyi jéhni yiquí cúñu yō.
will-suffer we sickness kills bone meat our
We will get sick with the sickness that kills our bodies, i.e. our final illness.

Vijna te ma stahú gá nde jnamā sāán.
Now and will-not deceive anymore famine me
Now (that I have corn) the famine won't deceive me anymore.
Tu quíxín jnündóho naaa de.
not sleep disaster will-be-lost he
The disaster of his dying isn't sleeping. (When someone wrongs another, this remark means that he will get his just deserts, ending in death.)

Va jétú te va núu jeé cahán te cuni yó.
why hurt and why if that talk and will-hear we
Why of course they hurt, and if they could talk we'd hear them say so. (This remark refers to wood, trees, rocks, etc. which in this animistic society are considered to feel pain when they receive blows, are thrown, etc.)

III. SARCASM AND SCOLDING

Nacã luu jíto nuu ró.
how pretty looks face your
How pretty your face is! (This is highly sarcastic, but does not reach the point of anger. A common context for the use of this sarcasm is when domestic animals get into the growing crops. They are then penned up in the jail by the village authorities until the proper fine and/or payment for estimated crop loss is decided on and the owner of the animals finds the money to pay.)

Na vé ni ndoho ró jée ni quíxí ró.
what completive suffer you that completive sleep you
What was the matter with you that you slept? (If someone didn't get a field planted or plowed, or was slow to build a house, etc. he is sarcastically accused of having slept.)

1. Núu ni sacuíhná iín ñayuu vehe jnáhan i, te jínú ñayuu nuu tohó jéquin i cuéchi síqui ñáyuu ni sacuíhná ndajníñu i ún. 2. Yúcuán na te jínú ñayuu ún íne i vecáa, te quénda i vecáa cúndaá jníñu i, te tohó cácahán de jún: 3. Najehë cúu jeé sacuíhná ró te íyó váha ró, nasúu jée cuhú ró.
When a person has robbed the house of his friends, they go to the town authorities and accuse the person who robbed their things. Then he arrives (brought by the authorities) and is in jail, and he comes out of jail to be judged, and the authorities say to him: Why do you steal when you are well, you're not sick. And the snake is an animal that is round (has no hands nor feet) and it succeeds in getting food. And you have hands and feet so that you can work well, they say. This means that with great difficulty it (snake) gets its food, with great difficulty it works. Thus they scold the man who robbed.

When people drink (pulque) too much, they no longer realize how much they are drinking, and people scold
them saying: You're like a pig, just drinking and drinking, acting like a pig.


1. When a person talks very-much he regarding a work, like if authority scolds, and when know that thus will-be, and say to companion: 2. Do you that deaf you and let speak demonstrative. 3. And also say: How that have-endurance inside you that talk thus with you. 4. If that I already completive disappeared I.

When a person criticizes very much something (that someone has done), like when an authority scolds, and if (others) know that he will keep on, they say to their friend: Pretend that you're deaf and let him just talk (don't pay attention). And they also say: What a lot of endurance you have (in listening to him) talk like that to you. If it were I, I would already have died from it. (This last verb, literally "disappeared", in this context conveys the meaning "killed and picked up like a rabbit".)

IV. HUMOR

When one wants to mildly ridicule or correct another, he often addresses someone else in the company instead of the one who is being criticized:

**Tu jñíi vāha de cohó de yéji de.**
not holds well he bowl he eats he
He doesn't hold his bowl right while he eats. (This remark is addressed to an adult in the company, and the pronoun is shifted from 'í child to 'de' third person adult, though it refers to a child who has not learned to hold his bowl properly.)

**Ni tu cúu cahán vāha ró.**
neither no can speak well you
You can't even talk well. (The situation in which the statement is made indicates that the person addressed is not the one for whom the remark is intended.)

The person so addressed usually answers:

Te naun tu cáhán rō nuū maá ñayuu ún.
and why not speak you to demonstrative person that
Why don't you speak to the person for whom the remark is intended?

The following tone puns are in common use:

Caji ni yaha návāha ma yáha ní.
eat you chile-pepper so-that not pass you
Eat some chile so that you won't pass by.

Ma cáji rí ndoco chi ndoco rí.
not eat I zapote-fruit because will-get-skinny I
I won't eat the zapote because I'll get skinny.

Caji rí nduvā návāha ma ndúva rí.
eat I greens so-that not fall I
I will eat some greens so that I won't fall.

Ma cáji rí nduvā chi nduva rí.
not eat I greens because will-fall I
I won't eat the greens because I'll fall.

The following strings of tonally different words were largely fabricated by the investigators, but were very amusing to the Mixtecs:

Tú cuiti ticuiti cuísti.
no not-at-all potato short
There are no more short potatoes.

Yáha yáha yaha yáhá.
here will-pass eagle brown
The brown eagle will pass here.

Nuū ñúhun ñúhun ndute ñúhun nuū ñúhūn.
on ground is-in-container water is-in-container on fire
On the ground is the water that is on the fire. (The fire
being on the ground, the water is both on the ground and on the fire.)

Ndōo ndōo ndōo.  
will-remain sugar-cane clean both-of-us.  
The clean sugar cane belonging to both of us will be left.

School boys and others who know the investigators well enjoy joking with them:  
A boy on his way home from school, on asking us the time and being told it was six o'clock, asked:  
¿A cáhiñū jenehén chí cáhiñū jehíni?  
Is it six in the morning or six in the evening?

After unsuccessful attempts by one boy to get us to lower the price for a trinket from ten cents to five cents, another boy said jokingly:  
Cuāha ní jeē ocó te quihíin ná.  
Give it to me for twenty cents and I'll take it.

When we remarked to a young Mixtec friend that two people had already come that day regarding a certain matter, he asked:  
¿A násūū íín ñayuu yósáva ní cuu núu súcuan?  
Oh, then it wasn't one and a half people?

When he was being heckled about some matter, a young man said:  
Tú ndacuí rí cuajnáhan rí jún ró, te na ndúcú rí íín têe ndacuí tají rí de cuajnáhan de lugar maá rí.  
I'm not strong enough to fight with you, but I'll look for a strong man and send him to fight in my place.

RESUMEN  
El lenguaje de los mixtecos de Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, abunda en formas metafóricas. La lingüista, profesora Mak, presenta un estudio y lista de ejemplos que incluye metáforas, personificaciones, sarcasmo, regaños y expresiones de tipo jocoso.