

## PICTURESQUE MIXTEC TALK

Cornelia Mak

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.

**Jító ri je vēji 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 tēe yúcuān chi cahmu de űuu yō.**

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:

**Cuāha ni űū ndīchi cajī ná, yōhyo vāha névāha 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.)

**xīco ní jecu ticasūn caji ná.**

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.)

**A tu cane sandōo stáā xīco ní caji ná.**

question not appear half-measure tortillas sell you will-eat I

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.)

When looking for a strayed child:

**A tu iso ndiqui ná quée nuū iso ní.**

question not rabbit small my comes to rabbit your

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.)

When going on an errand:

**Quíhōn ndico yó.**

let's-go grind we

Let's go and grind corn for tortillas. Actual meaning:

Let's go and collect maguey juice.

**Quihĩn rĩ 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 'yejē' 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:

**Quihĩn rĩ yucu tújnu.**

I am going to the firewood mountain. Actual meaning:  
I am going to chop firewood.

**Quihĩn rĩ yucu xúhún.**

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

**Quihĩn ña yucu ndíví.**

She is going to the egg mountain. Actual meaning: She  
is going to buy eggs.

**Vēji rĩ 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 ndáhú cúu niándlii.**

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 ndétu ti cuaan ti ĩn 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. Ná ni taji ñayuu nunī chīji ñuhun te cándajñuhún  
nunī ún: 2. Ndese sáha yó jíjnáhan yó. 3. Te  
áchí ñin: Ruhū cuu niñi. 4. Te inga: Ruhū cuāha  
ri isa ndíca. 5. Te inga: Tú na vé cuāha ri chi  
máá ndóo-ni. 6. Te inga: Tícahyā.

1. when complete 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 níāndii ni chusúcún ñin sahma te jeē yúan tu  
náhichī tāca gá sahma.

demonstrative sun complete 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 siqui 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 siqui de űnu.**

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 jñi 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 yiqui 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 jñūdóho naa 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 jeē cahán te cuni yō.**

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

**Nacā luu jító nuū rō.**

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 jeē ni quíxī rō.**

what complete suffer you that complete 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 ñin ñayuu vehe jnáhan i, te jínú ñayuu nuū tohó jéquin i cuēchi siquí ñayuu ni sacuíhná ndajniñu i ún. 2. Yūcuán na te jínú ñayuu ún íne i vecāa, te quéndā i vecāa cūndaā jniñu i, te tohō cácahān de jín: 3. Najehē cúu jeē sacuíhná ró te íyó váha ró, nasūu jeē cuhú rō.

4. Te coō cúu quiiti cátilúú tí te vetū-ni níhín tí jeē yéji tí. 5. Te máá ró chí íyó ndaha ró jéhē rō jeē cuu sájniñu vāha ró, áchí de. 6. Cúni cahān jeē yí ndasí níhín tí jeē cáji tí, yí ndasí cúu jeē sáha tí jniñu. 7. Súcuān cácuXeēn nuū téē ní sacuíhná ún.

1. when completeive robbed a person house companion he, and arrive people to authorities put they sin against person completeive robbed things they that.
2. Then and arrive person that is he jail, and comes-out he jail be-judged work he, and authorities say they to: 3. Why is that rob you and are well you, not that sick you. 4. And snake is animal round animal and alright gets animal that eats animal. 5. And demonstrative you for is hands you feet you that can work well you, say they. 6. Want say that difficult very-much gets animal that eats animal, difficult very-much is that does animal work. 7. Thus scold to man completeive robbed that.

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.

Núu cájihi loco ñayuu, tú cuiti nácani ní i ndé saa coho i, te cácahān nuū i: Na cáa quini cáa ró, vara jíhi ró, vara jíhi ró nándacu ró máá quini.

when drink crazy people, no longer think inside they how much drink 'hey, and say to them: like appears pig appear you, why-just drink you, why-just drink you, resemble you demonstrative pig.

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. Núu ĩn ñayuu cahán ndasí i síquĩ ĩn jniñu, nájnūhun núu tohō cuxeēn, te núu jíní jeē súcuan coo, te áchí jín jnáhan: 2. Sáha ró jeē sohó ró te na cahán maá. 3. Te suni áchí: Na jeē ndeyí ni rō jeē cahán súcuan jín ró. 4. Núu jeē ruhū je ni ndonehen ri.

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 complete 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 jníi vāha de cohō 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 'I' child to 'de' third person adult, though it refers to a child who has not learned to hold his bowl properly.)

**Ni tu cúu cahān 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 ní 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 rī ndoco chi ndoco rī.**

not eat I zapote-fruit because will-get-skinny I

I won't eat the zapote because I'll get skinny.

**Caji rī nduvā návāha ma ndúva rī.**

eat I greens so-that not fall I

I will eat some greens so that I won't fall.

**Ma cáji rī nduvā chi nduva rī.**

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 cuítí.**

no not-at-all potato short

There are no more short potatoes.

**Yáha yāha yaha yáhá.**

here will-pass eagle brown

The brown eagle will pass here.

**Nuū núhun núhún ndute núhún nuū núhún.**

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 ndoō ndoo ndóō.**

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 jehíní?**

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 quihín 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 násūú ĩn 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 ndacuĩ rĩ cuajnáhan rĩ jíin ró, te na ndúcú rĩ ĩn tēe ndacuĩ tají rĩ de cuajnáhan de lugar maá rĩ.**

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.