

Post-Verbal PP Complements in Huasteca Nahuatl

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This paper looks at post-verbal PPs in Huasteca Nahuatl (henceforth Nahuatl), an Uto-Aztecan language from Central Mexico, whose original interpretations, ranging from spatial to comitative and benefactive, appear to have been lost. It asks whether post-verbal adpositions of this class have a transitivity licensing function licensing the Case of a verb-internal argument, and how much they formally contrast with adpositional adjuncts. I argue that a class of fully-fledged, Case licensing P heads has emerged in Nahuatl that is structurally distinct from adjunct PPs.

Nahuatl encodes relations of spatiality, temporality, and accompaniment with adpositions whose internal structure consists of a possessive prefix and a lexical base typically derived from a noun (Beller and Beller 1979; Campbell et al. 1986). According to Beller and Beller 1979, in addition to agreeing with their complement for person and number, Nahuatl adpositions can appear before or after their complement, illustrated in (2a). (2b), taken from 2021 field data, contrasts with (2a), such that the adposition following *motemachia* does not display phi-feature agreement with its complement, and must necessarily precede it. Additionally, the original lexical meaning of the adposition *ipan* as ‘in’ in (2b) has been lost, and the complement of *ipan* is interpreted as a Patient or Stimulus, rather than a Locus. Similarly, while in (2c), the complement of *ika*, *ojtatl*, is interpretable as an Instrument, the complement of *ika* in (2d), *ikone*, receives the Theta-role of Stimulus. These contrasts bring into question the structure and function of Nahuatl adpositions.

(2) Nahuatl

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|--|---|---------------------|--------------------|
| a. <i>Ya mij-ki</i> | <i>no-pampa/*i-pampa</i> | <i>na/</i> | <i>na no-pampa</i> |
| he die-PST | 1SG.POS-for/3SG.POS-for | I/ | I 1SG.POS-for |
| ‘He died for me.’ | | | |
| b. <i>Amo motemachia-j</i> | <i>i-pan/*no-pan</i> | <i>na/</i> | <i>*na i-pan</i> |
| NEG trust.PRES-PL | 3SG.POS-in /1SG.POS-in | I/ | *I 3SG.POS-in |
| ‘They do not trust me.’ <i>lit.</i> ‘They do not trust in me.’ | | | |
| c. <i>I-cha</i> | <i>katli ki-j-chito-k-ej</i> | <i>ika ojtatl.</i> | |
| 3SG.POS-house | REL 3SUBJ-3OBJ-make-PST-PL | with bamboo. | |
| ‘A house that they built with bamboo.’ | | | |
| d. <i>No-nana motekipachoua</i> | <i>ika na/i-chichi/i-kone</i> | | |
| 1SG-mother worries | with I/3SG.POS-dog/3SG.POS-child | | |
| ‘My mother worries for me/her dog/her child.’ | | | |

To contrast with the adjuncts in (2a) and (2c), I propose that in (2b) and (2d), Nahuatl post-verbal PPs are indeed verbal arguments licensed by the prefix *mo-* in *motemachia* and *motekipachoua*, a detransitivising, reflexive morpheme characteristic of the verbs that take PP complements. The presence of *mo-* demotes VP-internal arguments from direct objects to oblique objects whose Case is checked with P. This analysis parallels Wood’s 2015 account of Icelandic reflexives licensing PP complements. Additionally, it is supported by language-internal diagnostics of Nahuatl noun incorporation patterns (Bruhn de Garavito et al. 2005) and reduction to the indefinite object clitic *tla-* (Peregrina Llanes et al. 2017). Moreover, the results of these diagnostics suggest that post-verbal PPs in Nahuatl fall into at least three distinct classes: argument-demoting P heads, P heads mediating ditransitive structures, and adjuncts.

In a larger-scale context, this research continues the discussion on the relationship between morphological and structural case both in Nahuatl and cross-linguistically. It also invites questions on the consequences of language contact between European and American Indigenous languages, since Case-licensing prepositions are widespread in Spanish, and many of the verbs taking PP complements in Nahuatl have semantically close Spanish counterparts.

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