

Clitic (?) Subject-markers in Balsas Valley Nahuatl and the Omnipredicativity Hypothesis

Since the first days of the Spanish occupation of Mexico, even the best descriptions of its languages have frequently languished under grammatical assumptions more appropriate for western languages (see e.g. Lockhart (2001) on Antonio Rincón's grammar of 1595). In this paper, I will claim that previous studies of Nahuatl (e.g. Andrews 2003, Lockhart 2001) that treat morphological subject-markers as straightforward affixes rather than some kind of clitic or something else entirely constitute such a case of mis- or underanalysis, and that one prominent theory about Nahuatl grammar, that of Launey's omnipredicativity hypothesis (Launey 2004), is weakened thereby.

First, some examples, derived from the standard Zwicky-Pullum criterial tests (Zwicky and Pullum 1983). In Nahuatl, subject markers *n(i)-* '1SgSubj' and *t(i)-* '2SgSubj' as in (1) directly precede the verb in the prototypical case and are phonologically fused to them. These markers may vary, as in (2), depending on the phonological properties of the stem: generally if consonant-initial, then the subject marker takes the *ni-/ti-* form, while vowel-initial stems take the *n-/t-* forms. Likewise there are dependencies that hold between the subject and reflexive markers such that one must know which person the verb is to know which reflexive marker to use [(3)]. These factors lend support to an affixal analysis.

However, in a number of respects the subject markers have clitic-like behavior not expected if they were straightforward affixes. There are no arbitrary gaps; or, to put it another way, they are completely productive within their respective domains. The only gaps that do exist are systematic ones, such as their nonoccurrence in zero-place predicates like *to:na* 'be hot', as expected. Nor are there any semantic irregularities that are not predictable based on their scopal positions. If this were all, we might not worry. But more interestingly, in (4) and (5), featuring a regular noun and an adjective respectively, it is clear that they are also capable of separating from their host verb and apparently can attach to hosts of any category and still be interpreted as modifying the verb, both properties more typical of clitics than of affixes. One cannot simply claim these are null-derived verbs, since they cannot take on the future morphology typical of verbs as elsewhere in the data, as seen in (4c) and (5c). These properties of the subject markers, and more that I will discuss in the fuller paper, raise questions about the formal distinction between clitics and affixes and how formal theories of morphosyntax should distinguish between them, if possible, and whether the divergent properties are the result of separate lexical entries or the result of some other poorly understood morphosyntactic operation.

In closing, I will discuss the implications of the clitic analysis for the notion of omnipredicativity (Launey 2004), which suggests that in Classical Nahuatl, a closely related language to that of the Balsas Valley, all words are actually predicates, and there are no forms that are semantic entities, which relies at least implicitly on the assumption that the subject markers are affixes that attach to verbs. If they are in fact not affixes, or at least not clearly so, then such a radical hypothesis is thrown into question.

