

On turning sixty from a Tlapanec perspective

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It is not only celebrities like Elton John, Arnold Schwarzenegger, David Letterman, Salman Rushdie, or Bernard Comrie who turn sixty this year. Turning sixty is something that happens to most of us, even if not this year, and it probably gives rise to certain reflections for all those who experience it.

Let us look at how a particular Tlapanec man from Azoyú, Guerrero, Mexico, describes this sort of mid-life+ situation. Rufino Zavaleta Roque introduced the first interview he gave with me back four years ago as follows:¹

- (1) a. *šéhkô* *ni-ʔgì* *mahǎʔ* *šabù* *ra* *wahǎʔ*
be.like.that.INAN PFV-put.3PL.ERG be.good.INAN people TOP anterior
‘Thus the people of earlier times arranged things well,
- b. *šéhkô* *ni-ʔgì* *mahǎʔ* *iki* *maʔ*
be.like.that.INAN PFV-put.3PL.ERG be.good.INAN there already
thus it was arranged well there already,
- c. *šéhkô* *ni-niyǎʔ* *ɸinû*
be.like.that.INAN PFV-leave.3PL.PEG tradition
thus they left behind the traditions.
- d. *goʔd-ǒ* *maʔ* *yʉʔ* *biʔi* *ik-ǔʔ*
have-1SG.PEG already many day PRON-1SG.ABS
I have already [lived] many days.
- e. *mb-àhɸu* *skiyʉʔ* *ɸigùʔ* *goʔd-ǒ*
one-three.INAN twenty year have-1SG.PEG
I am sixty years old.
- f. *ì-ʔgiʔ* *maʔ* *dàka* *dì* *ik-ǔʔ* *dì-hy-ùʔ*
PFV-be.INAN already when SUB.INAN PRON-1SG.ABS PFV-wake.up-1SG.DAT
They [the traditions] were already in place when I woke up [were born],

¹ The superscripts indicate tone: á high, a mid, à low, ǎ low-mid rising, â mid-low falling, ǎ mid-high rising, â high-mid falling. For a few of the words cited tonal shapes have not been verified. ‘PEG’ stands for ‘pegative’. Other abbreviations are standard.

- g. *ni-maʔt-ǒ* *id-ùʔ*
 PFV-open-1SG.PEG eye-1SG.DAT
 [when] I opened my eyes.’

The discourse revolves around traditions, and in Zavaleta’s case turning sixty involves an increased awareness about the responsibility for maintaining old traditions, more specifically such traditions as how to decorate traditional altars in the pre-Columbian style using the right flowers and bundling them in the right way. Certainly sixty is a significant age, perhaps something to be proud of. In any case, it turns out that Zavaleta was actually not being exact about his age—he hadn’t quite turned sixty yet. As he says a little later:

- (2) a. *mb-àhçu* *skiyuʔ* *çigùʔ* *goʔd-ǒ* *maʔ*
 one-three.INAN twenty year have-1SG.PEG already
 ‘I am already sixty years old.
- b. *má* *imbà* *ahçí* *gùʔ* *maʔ* *tégóʔ*
 just another three.ANIM month already lack.INAN
 Only three months lack.
- c. *i-ʔkà* *mayû* *huyû*
 PFV-come.INAN May June
 [when] May and June have come,
- d. *huyû* *ma-ràm-ɯʔ*
 June FUT-turn.years-1SG.DAT
 in June I’ll turn [sixty] years.
- e. *tía* *gìʔša* *ej-òʔ*
 look gray.INAN head-1SG.DAT
 Look, my head is gray,
- f. *tàh-ǔʔ*
 small-1SG.ABS
 [and] I am small,
- g. *daʔkǎ* *šu* *ahmbǎ* *yɯʔ*
 not very old.man very
 [but] I’m not [yet] a very old man.

Apart from the month names, Zavaleta manages to convey all information relating to his age in Tlapanec. This language imports meaning to the discourse that would not have been present in a Spanish rendering. For instance, we see that the word *gù?* is animate, triggering animate agreement on the numeral *ahçí* ‘three’. This is because the word means ‘moon’ in addition to ‘month’, and ‘moon’, like other heavenly bodies triggers animate agreement, just like mountains, as well as the entities that ‘Westerners’ think of as animates. Indeed, Tlapanec months are also somewhat more agentive than ours months, even if their designations are borrowed from Spanish. Thus, ‘May 23’ would be rendered as ‘23 it-works month May.’ Moreover, the fact that ‘sixty’ is expressed as a multiplication of ‘three’ and ‘twenty’ makes this a rounder sort of number than Spanish *sesenta*.

Today the old Mesoamerican calendrical system, which would have involved a 13*20-day cycle and a 18*20+5-day cycle with individually named days, unique combinations of which would recur every 52 years, is long gone. But the base twenty, which was important to the calendrics, is largely retained in the numeral system. ‘Forty’ is two times twenty, and ‘sixty’, as we have seen, is three times twenty. Similarly ‘eighty’ is four times twenty. There are unique numbers from one to eight. ‘Nine’ is *mihná-guwà?* and ‘ten’ is *(mba-)guwà?* ‘(one-)ten’. This suggests that *mihná-*, which does not occur elsewhere in the lexicon, means something like ‘one towards’ or ‘one minus’. The numerals eleven to fifteen consists of additions of one, two, three etc. to ten. The numerals sixteen to nineteen add one, two, three etc. to ten+five, and the system continues in this way, combining a base twenty with a base ten (see Appendix). Only the word for ‘fifty’ has a peculiar behavior. During the recording of (1-2) above, the younger brother of Rufino was also present. Shortly after (2), he interrupts the discourse of his older brother with the following statement.

- (3) *nì-nohng-ò?* *támû* *ahkù* *rùmi* *çigù?*
 PFV-pass-1SG.DAT a.little four *rùmi* year
 ‘I have passed a bit 50 years.’

We have seen that *mb-àhçu skiyu?* is $1*3*20 = 60$ (the inclusion of *mb-*, the reduced form of *mba* ‘one’, is optional). Now we see that $50 = 4*rùmi$. So how much is a *rùmi*? Cool reason dictates that this be 12.5, and, indeed, it is. It takes a bit of arithmetic and history to figure out how such a unit could come about. In many languages of Mesoamerica one finds the word *tomín* borrowed with the meaning ‘money’. In Colonial Mexico the minimal monetary unit was a *maravedí*.² A *tomín de oro*, introduced in 1526,³ was worth 62.5 *maravedís*, and a *peso de oro*, the largest monetary unit, was worth 500 *maravedís*. (The *peso de oro* continued to be used till the beginning of the 20th century, see fig. 1 for a specimen.) Thus, 8 *tomínes de oro* was equivalent to one *peso de oro*. So far, so

² <http://educacion.jalisco.gob.mx/dependen/Cedetec/Softwareeduc/sfthistoria/misc/monedas2.html>.

³ M. L. Seeger, “Media of exchange in 16th century New Spain and the Spanish Response”, *The Americas* 53.2, 168-184.

good. But how does the Tlapanec word *rùmì*, which cannot be but the borrowed form of *tomín*, acquire the value 12.5? Currently, the monetary system only operates with *pesos* and *centavos*, where a *peso* is 100 *centavos*. Now, if 8 *tomines*, in this system, is still going to be equal to one *peso*, a *tomín* would have to be equivalent to 12.5 *centavos*. Between the early Colonial period and modern times is of course a large gap, where the meaning of *rùmì* could have undergone various transformations, but I would like not to involve an excess of Mexican numismatics, which turns out to be a very complicated area, in this brief greeting. For part of the 20th century, *ahkù rùmì* would have been a way of referring to 50 *centavos*, but 50 *centavos* would eventually become an amount of money not worth mentioning. When I first visited Azoyú in 1991, *ahkù rùmì* was the normal way to refer to 50,000 *pesos*. Not too long after, there was a devaluation—“*quitaron los ceros*”—and *ahkù rùmì* became the normal way to refer to 50 *pesos*. But the basic meaning has lost direct reference to monetary units, and *ahkù rùmì* now simply means ‘fifty’, and can be used to refer to years, as we saw in (3) or, indeed, to any other object. I have not recorded its use for counting people, though. Perhaps in this case 2*20+10 should be preferred, because a numeral used with people should agree in animacy, and *rùmì* probably does not have an animate form, although this remains to be investigated. In actual fact, what Tlapanec people do most is simply to use Spanish words for numerals above five.



Fig. 1. A Mexican *peso de oro* from 1874

An interesting twist to the story is that *tomín* apparently was also borrowed as a verb. In (4) this verb is illustrated.

- (4) *šú?kì e-?ké màri ni-rum-ǔ?*
 then PFV-come.3SG.GIVEN already PFV-collect.money-3SG>1SG.DAT
 ‘Then he came and charged me money.’

Etymologically, *nirumǔ?* would mean something like ‘he moneyed me’. The verb is the Tlapanec translation equivalent of Spanish *cobrar*. It behaves in all respects like a normal Tlapanec verb, for instance undergoing vowel harmony such that the vowel of *rum* changes to *o* when a suffix vowel *o* follows, and it is regularly inflected.

Let us return to the numerals. Given that numerals above five tend to fall out of use, we are clearly dealing with an endangered numeral system. An impression of the state of deterioration

is provided by a small survey which I carried out in the early 1990's. The survey was intended to discern whether the rather surprising amount of lexical and phonological differences in the speech of my two main consultants, one of whom had introduced me to the other, were somehow representative of larger patterns of variation in the small community of no more than 500 speakers. In the survey of different word meanings I had included the words for 'seven', 'twelve', and 'seventeen', since my two main consultants disagreed on the phonological shapes of these. In a sample of the survey which I have examined for the present purposes, there are eight speakers. All have similar forms for 'seven'. And all recall the word for 'twelve'. There is quite a lot of variation in their pronunciations: *gwahmàmò* / *gwihmùmù* / *guwàehmàmù* / *gwehmàmù* / *gwehmàmò*. This kind of variation, however, is typical of Azoyú Tlapanec, and such variation is not necessarily indicative of the attrition of a language or a subsystem of a language, but may be found in languages without a written or prestige norm. When we come to the word for 'seventeen', however, strong signals of attrition are encountered. Two speakers could not remember the word. One suggested *guwà-ahwà-mù?* (10-7-plus) and another *guw-ahwà* (10-7), while the presumably correct form, given by three speakers in the varying phonological shapes *guwà-niç-ihmà-mù*, *guwà-niçu ihmà-mò*, and *guwà-niçu ehmà-mò*, combines 10, 5, and 2. The youngest speaker recorded was fifteen years old. He was one of a few exceptional cases of children learning the language (presently there are a few others). At the time I interviewed him, one of his legs had been amputated and he did not attend school. For this reason he had learned Tlapanec from his relatives at home. (Unfortunately, he passed away a few years later). This boy suggested the form *guwa-niçu-mbò?*, which correctly combines 10 and 5, but lacks 2, and has a deviant element *-mbò?* in lieu of *-mù* or *-mò*. While there is only a very small phonological load associated with the contrast between *o* and *u* and a lot of fluctuation between these vowels among speakers, a *mb ~ m* variation is unexpected. I interpret the form as indicative of a memory lapse of a speaker who is not fully competent. The little survey, then, provides examples of how radical changes both in structure and phonology may occur in a situation of language death.

A major motivation for the continued use of Tlapanec is the expression of ethnic solidarity. It also works as a kind of secret language, and the numerals are particularly important in this regard, since one can talk about important issues of financial negotiation in Tlapanec and exclude *ladinos* from understanding what is going on.

The situation is one that I can relate to, as my own native language is something I use almost exclusively to talk to my family and friends.

Så hermed nogle afsluttende ord specielt til dig, Bernard. Du har betydet meget for mig gennem årene. Og jeg er kun én blandt et utal af lingvister som ladet sig inspirere af dig, er blevet strejft af din opmærksomhed overfor alt hvad der rører sig i lingvistikken eller har nydt godt af din generøsitet i alle praktiske forhold. Din spændvidde og dit storsind er uforlignelige.

Tillykke med de tres! Eller, hvordan er det nu, tillykke med de tresindstve...?

Appendix. Azoyú Tlapanec numerals (inanimate)

mbõ / mba '1'

ahmà '2'

àhçu '3'

ahkù '4'

wiçu '5'

màhñù '6'

hwà '7'

miñgiyù? '8'

mìhnà-guwà? '9'

guwà? '10'

guwà-embà-mò '11' (10-1-plus)

guwà-ihmà-mò '12' (10-2-plus)

guwà-içù-mù '13' (10-3-plus)

guwà-ihkù-mù '14' (10-4-plus)

guwà-niçu '15' (10-5)

guwà-niçu embà-mà '16' (10-5 1-plus)

guwà-niçu ihmà-mò '17' (10-5 2-plus)

- etc. -

mba-skiyù? '20' (1-20)

mba-skiyù? embà-mò '20' (1-20 1-plus)

- etc. -

mba-skiyù? wiçu '25' (1-20 5)

mba-skiyù? màhñù '26' (1-20 6)

- etc. -

mba-skiyù? guwà? '30' (1-20 10)

mba-skiyù guwà? wiçu '35' (1-20 10 5)

(mba-)hmà-skiyù? '40' ((1-)2-20)

ahku-rumi '50' (4-12.5)

(mba-)hçù-skiyù '60' ((1-)3-20)

(mba-)hkù-skiyù '80' ((1-)4-20)