

Pejorative morphology and proper names in Tzocohuite Nahuatl

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The status of proper names as predicates or as referential expressions has long been a central debate in linguistics and philosophy (see, among others, Frege, 1960; Kripke, 1980; Matushansky, 2008; Russell, 1956). This paper looks at this discussion from the angle of pejorative morphology in Tzocohuite Nahuatl (TZN).³ In TZN, the suffix *-sosol* conveys a pejorative meaning ‘damn/fucking’ when it attaches to animate nouns (1a) and anthroponyms (1c). In this regard, note that both *-sosol* and the appreciative complex morpheme *pil-...-tsi* cannot modify a correferring expression in the same utterance, which explains the unacceptability of the follow-ups in (1b) and (1d). In this paper, we suggest that *-sosol* encodes an expressive content, since it passes the tests usually employed in the literature to identify expressivity, such as *at-issueness*, *projection*, *descriptive ineffability*, *perspective dependence* and *non-displaceability* (Potts, 2004, 2007; Tonhauser, 2012).

(1) Context: My neighbor José has a dog. José always leaves his door open and his dog unattended. José’s dog always poops in my field. This annoys me a lot.

- a. ne: **chichi-sosol-i** nochipa mo-xi:xa ipan
dem.dist dog-pej-a always refl-poop on.that
no-mila
posr.1sg-field
‘That damn dog always poops on my field.’
#pero como ne: **pil-chichi-tsi** tlawel tlakahetsi
but as dem.dist aprec-dog-aprec very obedient
ax-ne:ch-kwalaniya
neg-o.1sg-make.angry
‘But, since it is an obedient lovely dog, it does not bother me.’
- c. ne: Jose-sosol-i nochipa ki-malahate:wa
dem.dist Jose-pej-a always o.3-release.when.he.is.out
i-chichi
posr.3sg-dog
‘That damn Jose always leaves his dog unattended when he is out.’
#pero ne: **pil-Jose-tsi** kwali no-kalchane:wa
but dem.dist aprec-dog-aprec good posr.1sg-neighbor
‘But that amazing Jose is a good neighbor.’

However, *-sosol* cannot convey this pejorative meaning when attached to an inanimate noun, as shown in (2–4). In this case, *-sosol* behaves as a regular descriptive modifier that restricts a noun denotation to old or worn-out individuals.

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³According to Beller and Beller (1979, p. 203), TZN belongs to the dialect group known as Eastern Huasteca Nahuatl, whose ISO is [nhe] (Eberhard et al., 2024). See Martínez Martínez and Peralta Ramírez (2021) for a sketch of TZN phonology and grammar, and Beller and Beller (1979) for an overview of Huasteca Nahuatl. Eastern Huasteca Nahuatl is an Uto-Aztecan language (see, for instance, Canger, 1980, pp. 13–24; Eberhard et al., 2024).

(2) Context: I sold my house, which was old and ugly.

ni-namakak **no-kal-sosol**
s.1sg-sell.pst posr.1sg-house-pej
'I sold my house, which was old and worn'

(3) Context: You sold your house, which was new and pretty.

#ni-namakak **no-kal-sosol**
s.1sg-sell.pst posr.1sg-house-pej
'I sold my house, which was old and worn.'

(4) Context: Last night I woke up to go to the bathroom. Since it was dark, I did not see my bed and hit my little toe against it. My bed is new.

#yalwaya ni-mo-makilihi ika **tlapech-sosol-i**
yesterday s.1sg.refl-hit.pst with.ith bed-pej-a
'Yesterday I hit myself with the bed, which is old and worn.'

Note, that *-sosol* does not necessarily convey this descriptive meaning 'old, worn' if it attaches to an anthroponym (5) or an animate noun (6).

(5) Context: My neighbor Juana is a student. She is young and pretty, but I do not like her because she throws parties every day and does not let me sleep.

Juana-sosol-i nochipa ki-chi:wa ilwipakilistli
Juana-pej-a always o.3-make party.a
'That damn Juana always throws parties.'

(6) Context: Somebody gave my neighbor a beautiful puppy dog as a present. Yesterday the puppy cried all night and did not let me sleep.

ne: **chichi-sosol-i** kwayocho:kak nochi yewali
dem.dist dog-pej-a howl.pst all night.a
'That damn dog howled all the night.'

Bear in mind that *-sosol* can attach to an anthroponym or an animate noun even when they occur in a predicate position. For instance, in (7) the anthroponym *Pedrososoli* 'fucking Pedro' occurs as the predicate of a naming construction.

(7) Context: I do not like Pedro.

mo-tata-wa mits-to:kaxtih-eh **Pedro-sosol-i**
posr.2sg-parent-pos.pl o.2sg-name.pst-s.pl Pedro-pej-a
'Your parents named you fucking Pedro.'

The behavior of *-sosol* clearly aligns anthroponyms with animate nouns and opposes them to inanimate nouns. For this reason, we argue that in TZN anthroponyms are just a subset of animate nouns. Hence, semantically anthroponyms in TZN should be treated as predicates, just as any other (animate) noun. In this way, the TZN data constitutes new cross-linguistic evidence in favor of the predicate approach to proper names. Finally, it is worth noting that the behavior of *-sosol* in TZN seems to be characteristic of other areally related languages. For instance, in Ch'ol, a Mayan language, the nominal class marker *x-* can convey

honorification only when it attaches to a proper name or a human noun (Arcos López, 2009, §3.5.1). This points to the behavior of expressive morphology as a fruitful ground for identifying the semantic type of anthroponyms in other Mesoamerican languages.

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Abbreviations

a = absolute state, aprec = appreciative, dem = demonstrative, dist = distal, neg = negation, o = object, pej = pejorative, pl = plural, pos = possessed, posr = possessor, pst = past, refl = reflexive, s = subject, sg = subject, 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person