Never say: Too old to learn

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Never say: too old to learn.¹ I was preparing a short paper on the language of emotion for Ad Foolen in the Quechua (or Quichua) variety of Salasaca, province of Tungurahua, Central Ecuador. This variety was spoken near where I lived (in Salcedo) from 1974 to 1976, and where I have returned several times since. It was also documented in an unedited typescript vocabulary by a gifted Peace Corps volunteer, Hugh (Hubert J.) Dufner (1972).² Its main special features are described in a short grammar sketch in Adelaar with Muysken (2004, pp. 237-242).

Salasaca, as mentioned, is very close to the principal variety I had used for my dissertation (Muysken, 1977), in fieldwork done about 40 years ago. People have often accused me of not being a specialist of anything, but I have often consoled myself thinking that at least I am a specialist in the Quichua or Quechua spoken in central Ecuador,³ and then for those varieties, in verbal complexes.

I started going through Duffner’s detailed word list to look for words and expressions related to emotion, and compiled an interesting pile of these. However, my eye was caught by a series of expressions containing

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¹Ad Foolen and I differ about 120 hours in age (me being the younger one) so I am close to being in the position to cheer him up in this respect.
²Many of the words in this vocabulary, though not all, were later incorporated in Stark and Muysken (1977), a vocabulary comparing the lexicon in ten Ecuadorian highland Quechua varieties.
³The first time I was introduced to the great Noam Chomsky he asked me somewhat facetiously: “Oh do you study North Quechua or South Quechua?” I thought right away, no: Central Quechua!, and took an instinctive dislike to the man.
the verb *ni*—‘say’. Sitting with my nose on top of it, to use the Dutch expression, I had been blind to this forty years ago, although it is quite interesting.4

One frequent way in Quechua of using the complex expressions with *ni*- is to imitate the sounds made by animals. This is something we see much more often, of course, in the languages of the world.

| ag *ni-* | ladrar, eructar | bark, belch |
| burr *ni-* | sonar un abejarro o catzo | a beetle buzzing |
| bus *ni-* | sonar un mosco al volar | a fly buzzing in flight |
| charr-charr *ni-* | llorar un pollo maltón al cogerlo | a young chicken shrieking when caught |
| chiu-chiu *ni-* | piar un pollito | a hatchling peeping |
| chulis-chulis *ni-* | hacer el cuy un sonido | the noise of a guinea pig |
| ishak-ishak *ni-* | llorar un pollito al cogerlo | a chick shrieking when caught |
| kanish *ni-* | ladrar | bark |
| karr-karr *ni-* | llorar una gallina al cogerla | a chicken shrieking when caught |
| kukuruku *ni-* | cantar el gallo | a rooster crowing |
| miyau *ni-* | maullar el gato | a cat meowing |
| tak-tak-taray *ni-* | cacarear una gallina al poner un huevo | a chicken cackling when she lays an egg |
| tak-tik-tik *ni-* | cacarear una gallina | a chicken cackling |
| tarak-tarak-tarak *ni-* | cacarear una gallina | a chicken cackling |

It is also used with humans, to convey communicative acts:

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4Even more embarrassingly, I did discover another expression involving the verb *ni*-‘say’ to mean ‘want’, as in *miku-sha ni-ni* [eat-1SG.FU say-1SG] ‘I want to eat, lit. I say I will eat.’

5Literally: ‘I will bite say’.
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ag ni- ladrar, eructar bark, belch
allilladi ni- ok like this say hacer chiste, bromear make a joke, jest
a-ni- bostezar yawn
ari ni- yes say- confirmar affirm
Disulupay ni- God will pay you say dar gracias thank
jatsi ni- estornudar sneeze
jig/jikug ni- hipar have the hickups
Taka-sh ni- hit-1FU say reprender, amenazar scold, threaten

Third, it used with objects and natural phenomena involving some kind of noise:

chus ni- derretirse spill
gulun/kulun ni- tronar, sonar con estruendo thunder, sound with a bang
putatrás ni- detonar con un reventazón múltiple explode with multiple bursts
putrás ni- detonar con un reventazón singular explode with a single burst
zalug ni- sonar con golpe estruendoso sound with a big bang
zas ni- sonar al romperse tela sound of tearing cloth

Finally, and most interestingly, it is used for processes that objects may undergo or even some states:

ingu ni- mostrar flexibilidad bend ingu ‘curved, twisted’
p’ala ni- brillar, resplandecer shine, glow p’ala ‘brilliant’
p’unlla ni- hacer luz (it is) daylight p’unlla ‘day(light)’
t’iki ni- avanzar despacio, casi sin poder move forward slowly, almost without force t’iki ‘slow’
tsantsa ni- tambalear totter, wobble
walin ni- oscilar oscillate, swing
zau ni- estar entumecido feel pins and needles (in your hands)
Thus, the verb *ni-* has grammaticalized into a light verb with a range of meanings, often quite far away from sounds, but covering the domain of ‘do’ in some other languages. The schema in Figure 1 represents the different uses of ‘say’ in Salasaca Quechua. The developmental chain on the top was briefly alluded to in footnote 4: where ‘say’ turns into ‘want’. The chain illustrated at the bottom is one discussed in this paper. The two uses in the middle are the ones directly involving the literal meaning of the verb *ni-*.

In the grammaticalization literature there is of course extensive discussion of the verb ‘say’ turning into a complementizer (e.g. Heine & Kuteva, 2002). Less frequent is the type of development sketched in this paper, which finds parallels in East Africa, as argued by Cohen, Simeone-Senelle, and Vanhove (2002).

One moral of this story is that looking at word lists and dictionaries carefully can really teach us a lot about a language, and about Language. They often contain the less well-structured bits of information, and the bits which may be the seeds of innovation. The other moral is that even terrain which you think you know thoroughly can contain surprises: Never too old to learn.

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*6 It should be noted that we do find the verb ‘say’ used as a complementizer in Lowland varieties of Ecuadorian Quechua.*
References


