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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.) Duffner (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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¹ Ad 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.

² Many 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.

³ The 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.

<i>ag ni-</i>	ladrar, eructar	bark, belch
<i>burr ni-</i>	sonar un abejerro o catzo	a beetle buzzing
<i>bus ni-</i>	sonar un mosco al volar	a fly buzzing in flight
<i>charr-charr ni-</i>	llorar un pollo maltón al cogerlo	a young chicken shrieking when caught
<i>chiu-chiu ni-</i>	piar un pollito	a hatchling peeping
<i>chulis-chulis ni-</i>	hacer el cuy un sonido	the noise of a guinea pig
<i>ishak-ishak ni-</i>	llorar un pollito al cogerlo	a chick shrieking when caught
<i>kanish ni</i> ⁵	ladrar	bark
<i>karr-karr ni-</i>	llorar una gallina al cogerla	a chicken shrieking when caught
<i>kukuruku ni-</i>	cantar el gallo	a rooster crowing
<i>miyau ni-</i>	maullar el gato	a cat meowing
<i>tak-tak-tak-taray ni-</i>	cacarear una gallina al poner un huevo	a chicken cackling when she lays an egg
<i>tak-tik-tik ni-</i>	cacarear una gallina	a chicken cackling
<i>tarak-tarak-tarak ni-</i>	cacarear una gallina	a chicken cackling

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

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’.

<i>ag ni-</i>		ladrar, eructar	bark, belch
<i>allilladi ni-</i>	ok like this say	hacer chiste, bromear	make a joke, jest
<i>a-ni-</i>		bostezar	yawn
<i>ari ni-</i>	yes say-	confirmar	affirm
<i>Disulupay ni-</i>	God will pay you say	dar gracias	thank
<i>jatsi ni-</i>		estornudar	sneeze
<i>jig/jikug ni-</i>		hipar	have the hiccups
<i>taka-sh ni-</i>	hit-1FU say	reprender, amenazar	scold, threaten

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

<i>chus ni-</i>	derretirse	spill
<i>gulun/kulun ni-</i>	tronar, sonar con estruendo	thunder, sound with a bang
<i>putatrás ni-</i>	detonar con un reventazón múltiple	explode with multiple bursts
<i>putrás ni-</i>	detonar con un reventazón singular	explode with a single burst
<i>zalog ni-</i>	sonar con golpe estruendoso	sound with a big bang
<i>zas ni-</i>	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:

<i>ingu ni-</i>	mostrar flexibilidad	bend	ingu 'curved, twisted'
<i>p'ala ni-</i>	brillar, resplandecer	shine, glow	p'ala 'brilliant'
<i>p'unlla ni-</i>	hacer luz	(it is) daylight	p'unlla 'day(light)'
<i>t'iki ni-</i>	avanzar despacio, casi sin poder	move forward slowly, almost without force	t'iki 'slow'
<i>tsantsa ni-</i>	tambalearse	totter, wobble	
<i>walin ni-</i>	oscilar	oscillate, swing	
<i>zau ni-</i>	estar entumecido	feel pins and needles (in your hands)	

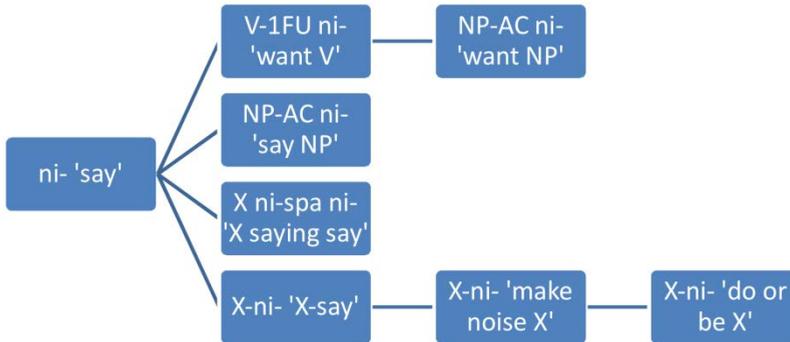


Figure 1: The different uses of 'say' in Salasaca Quechua

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).⁶ 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.

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

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