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Function Becomes Meaning: The Case of Nawatl *tla-*

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ABSTRACT

The Nawatl prefix *tla-* is one of a series of pronominal prefixes which indicate the person, number, and honorific status of a verbal object. Its basic function or meaning is to indicate a non-human object which, for one reason or another, is left unspecified. Non-specification is useful for a number of communicative purposes, some of them opposed to each other. For instance, it can be used to mark either an insignificant object or an object which is so obvious that it does not need to be specified. It can mark an object too holy to mention, or one too gross to mention.

In an impressive series of semantic extensions, *tla-* has come to designate a normal object, then a normal kind of action or process, or a general or widespread object, then a general action or process, and even a general subject. With such meanings it is sometimes used with intransitive verbs which do not accept other object prefixes. It also has come to function as a postpositional object, and as a nominal possessor.

In all of these morpho-semantic developments, specific cases which can be understood in more than one way are seen to play an important part, and meaning, usage and grammar clearly proceed hand-in-hand, each influencing the other.

1 Functional explanation

Scott DeLancey (1995, see also 1997) has claimed that a major difference between formalist and functionalist linguistics is that formalists don't really want to know "why?" about many phenomena where to functionalists that is the really interesting question. Perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest that the two schools differ in what kinds of answers to the question they find most interesting, where they expect to find them and thus where they prefer to look for them.

There are of course different kinds of formalist theories. In some older structuralists' view the question "Why?" does indeed seem to have been irrelevant. Thus Martin Joos (1957:v) represents Bloomfield's view as being that statement is all that is needed, and: "If the facts have been fully stated, it is perverse or childish to demand an explanation into the bargain." In the Chomskian tradition "explanatory adequacy" is an important concept (Chomsky 1964), but explanations tend to be sought wholly within the language system, particularly in the postulated hard-wiring of a black-box "language faculty" in the brain, and any phenomena that are not explainable in that way tend to be thought linguistically uninteresting.

Functionalists, DeLancey suggests, rather seek explanations in other areas. He speaks of two great engines of explanation which functionalists first look to: *motivation* and *diachrony*. Motivation is functionalism in the purest sense: language is (obviously enough) the activity of people trying to communicate with each other, and much of language can be explained from that fact. Grammar is a tool adapted to its use, and its form follows its function. The other explanatory engine beloved of functionalists is diachrony, which closely involves the ideas of automatization or entrenchment, and grammaticalization.

We can paraphrase by saying that the two major answers to the question "Why do we talk the way we do?" are (1) "It's useful" (motivation) and (2) "That's the way we've done it before" (diachrony).¹ Of course, it's useful to do it the way we've done it before, so diachrony itself is motivated. And we generally started doing it that way because it was useful, and that original usefulness generally continues on for some time, so motivation and diachrony are anything but contradictory to or exclusive of each other. Rather, diachrony should be seen as involving cycles of motivated changes followed by consolidation and habit-formation, after which the newly entrenched structure can become the basis for a new extension.

DeLancey suggests thinking of a language as a collection of tools and raw materials which one can use for communication. For a particular conversational or communicative purpose it is always possible to construct a new tool, but it is

¹A third answer, surprisingly relevant in many cases but awkward if not impossible of accommodation or expression in most theories, would be, (3) "Because it was fun." A fourth, again more relevant than most theories would allow, is (4) "By accident." Fun may well itself have some sort of usefulness (although such explanations of it tend to be no fun), and allowing a certain amount of slop (accidents) also serves a useful function.

difficult and costly. It is much handier to grab a preassembled tool off the rack, and use it, even if it was designed for something a little different. You use a Phillips screwdriver on a Torx screw, rather than building a Torx screwdriver from scratch. Or you may use something for a quite different purpose than it was originally designed for; using a screwdriver to pry a paint can open,² or to stick a hole in a carton.

A refinement of the model is necessary, however, and that is to conceive of these tools as self-adaptive. Using a Phillips screwdriver to drive Torx screws will tend to alter its shape so that it will be perfectly appropriate for Torx screws as well, and this without necessarily losing its fitness for Phillips screws in the process. You can, if you like, think of the phonological form as the handle by which you can grab hold of this super-screwdriver, and the business end is what interacts with other meanings and forms. Some tools seem to be content to last their lifespan with only one basic kind of function and thus only one kind of tool head; others seem to sprout a large number of different tool heads on the same handle, like a Swiss Army knife. As you might expect, since it is usage that develops these new toolheads, it is the more frequently used tools that tend to have the most of them. (And, of course, since the multi-purpose tools will be useful in more situations, they tend to be used more.) This kind of process is the major producer of polysemy, and we can expect grammatical morphemes and constructions, since they are so common, to be among the most fiercely polysemic structures in a language.

This conception stands the old performance/competence distinction on its head. As often presented and understood, competence was the core of language, and performance was peripheral, only fitfully and imperfectly reflecting the pristine and platonically perfect beauty of competence. The largest effect performance might be expected to have on competence (other than filling in the lexicon, which is fairly negligible or at best uninteresting) would be to clue a child's competence in to which way it ought to flip the switches on whatever parameters the black box would allow to be set; aside from that you are better off as a linguist to ignore performance and concentrate on competence instead. Of course, this has the great practical advantage of allowing troublesome data to be dismissed as matters of performance (and therefore inconsequential) instead of matters of competence (and therefore of great linguistic import).

In contrast, in functionalist models, it is precisely performance, that is usage, that determines what shape the language, including the grammar, takes. The functional tools which constitute the competence of language speakers are formed, refined, and elaborated precisely through using them to perform particular tasks; and those tasks motivate the shapes the tools assume.

²This analogy was suggested by Matthew Dryer.

As a sort of case study of the results of this sort of process, I'd like to present one of the Swiss Army knife forms just mentioned, the Nawatl unspecified object marker *tla-*.³

2 How and why to avoid specifying an object

Nawatl, like English and just about every other language, has many handy tools in the form of transitive verbs, verbs which make room for and expect a second important participant, i.e., they have an object besides their subject. It is not uncommon to find, in the process of communication, a situation which such a verb would fit very nicely except that for one reason or another we would just as soon not specify the object.

Languages deal with this functional pressure in various ways. In English we usually just go ahead and use the transitive verb without an object. Instead of saying *Adam ate the apple*, we simply say *Adam ate*. If we do this often enough (i.e., given persistent performance of this sort), that portion of our linguistic competence which constitutes our knowledge of the meaning and syntactic frame of the verb *eat* changes, lessening the salience of the thing eaten and adding to the repertoire the capability of easily appearing without an object. You could, if your language had one, use an antipassive affix or construction, that would signal that you had chosen to use *eat* without specifying its object. Another possibility might be to get a different verb, one which would have a similar meaning but not expect an object. With this technique you might say something like *Adam lunched (at 11 o'clock)*. A fourth possibility would be to use a “cognate object,” one which does not specify any more than is already known from the meaning of the verb: using this tool one could say *Adam ate food*. A fifth strategy would be to use an object whose meaning consists in not saying what it is. Thus one could say *Adam ate something*. A parallel to this last strategy is the normal way to achieve this function in Nawatl; instead of a separate word Nawatl uses the prefix *tla-*, which may often be translated as ‘something’ or ‘stuff’.

Nawatl has a whole paradigm of object prefixes, which appear between a subject prefix and the transitive verb stem; *tla-* is one of those prefixes. Some examples with the verb stem *kuā* ‘eat’ are in (1a-d).⁴

³The data presented are from the author's investigation of Orizaba Nawatl. This is a variant or dialect of Aztecan; it is spelled in this article with a *w* instead of in the traditional form (“Nahuatl” or “náhuatl”) to follow the most widely used orthography for this dialect. Similar data are easily found in other variants.

⁴The following abbreviations are used: 3ps = ‘third person singular (subject)’ hum = ‘human’, obj = ‘object’, rdp = ‘reduplication’, refl = ‘reflexive’, subj = ‘subject’, unspec = ‘unspecified object’.

- (1a) **ni-k-kuā** 'I eat it'
I-it-eat
- (b) **∅-mo-kuā** 'it is eaten (lit. it eats itself)'
3ps-refl-eat
- (c) **ti-tla-kuā-h** 'we eat (food/something)'
we-unspec-eat-pl
- (d) **tē-kuā-ni** 'wild animal (lit. people-eater)'
unspec.hum-eat-nominalizer

Among these object prefixes *tla-* is especially closely related to the less freely productive *tē-* 'people/someone', i.e., 'unspecified human object' and the almost moribund *ne-* 'unspecified reflexive/reciprocal'.

So using *tla-* instead of some other object prefix lets Nawatl speakers avoid specifying the object of a transitive verb stem, just like our English pattern of using transitive verbs with no object lets us do. But why do we, or the Nawatl speakers, want to leave the object unspecified? It might be for any of various reasons.

We might not know exactly what was eaten; and that might be because of something about the object itself (perhaps it was something too small to see from where we were, or perhaps it is something so dispersed and varied as to be hard to specify as a single thing, etc.). Perhaps it just isn't important to us what it was. We and our addressee may already both know what it is, or it might be so easy to figure out that we'd just as soon not specify. We might want to hang on to the information until later, perhaps to introduce it at a point in the discourse where it will have more impact. We might just as soon our addressee didn't know what the object was. It might be something that it would scare us, or gross us out, to mention. It might be any of these reasons, or a combination of them.

Since *tla-* performs all these functions, Nawatl speakers have gotten used to having it do so. That is, the motivated historical use of *tla-* for these purposes has, through the diachronic processes of entrenchment and routinization, established different versions of *tla-* which are exactly adapted to such uses. The screwdriver has turned into a Swiss Army knife. Let's look at some of the specifics.

3 The schematic 'unspecified object' sense of *-tla*

Sometimes when *tla-* is used it is difficult or impossible to specify any one of these particular motivations. For instance, in example (2) *ō-ni-tla-kowa-to* means 'I went and bought something' or 'I went shopping'.

- (2) **ō-ni-tla-kowa-to** 'I bought something/
past-I-unspec-buy-went and did I went shopping'

The speaker might be avoiding telling what was bought for any of the reasons mentioned above, or any other you can think of:⁵ the form itself doesn't bring with it any strong expectations that it be one and not another. The most likely reading will be what we will discuss below as the "normal object" sense of *tla-*, a sense paraphrasable as 'the usual'. With this reading it might be best to translate the verb as 'I went and did the shopping'. But even so the *tla-* construction is presumably chosen because the speaker considers more specific information about what was bought (from among the normal possibilities) to be insignificant, or non-desirable for any of the other reasons mentioned.

Note that we are here discussing things more from the hearer's perspective. The speaker presumably knows at some level what he is trying to accomplish by not specifying the object, but the hearer, at least unless there is something else in the larger context to guide him, does not. Of course, this usage is possible because of the pattern of former usage, it results from the fact that *tla-kowa* is used for non-specification of the object for different reasons on different occasions, some of them never made clear to the hearer. The meaning that most strongly gets entrenched from this process is the abstract or *schematic* meaning, the generalization that includes all the rest, i.e., the meaning that simply is 'unspecified object'. And just as varied meaning produces this sort of structure, the structure in turn sanctions further such varied meaning; a speaker can use *tla-* for any of the reasons we mentioned and be reasonably certain he will be understood, or at least not badly misunderstood.

This can be diagrammed as in figure 1. In the style of Ronald Langacker's Cognitive grammar model (1987), the generalization or schema is represented in the top box, with its subcases or *elaborations* in lower boxes, and with arrows representing the schematicity relationship from the schema to the specific cases. Here we represent the schema as more strongly *entrenched* than the subcases, by boldfacing the box enclosing it. The handle of our Swiss army knife, the phonological structure, is connected by links of varying entrenchment to the different senses. For the sake of simplicity (and since all the diagrams are also of meanings of *tla-*), I do not include this phonological structure in other diagrams in this paper.

⁵Presumably the speaker at least at one time knew what he bought, so the motivation from the speaker's ignorance is less likely in this particular form; but he may well no longer remember what it was, and of course for non-1st person forms ignorance might well be expected.

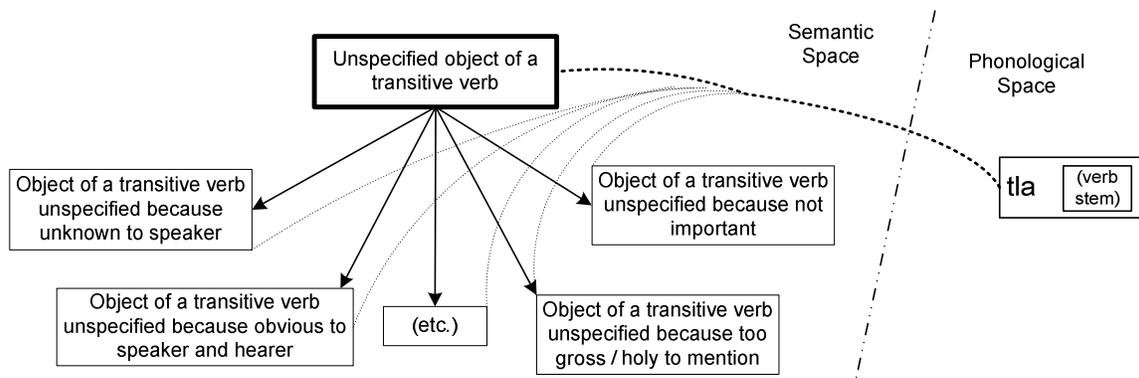


Figure 1.

The effect of usage on this structure is that, as any particular subcase is used by a speaker, or understood by a hearer, that particular subcase is entrenched just a little more, becoming just that much more firmly habitualized, and so is its connection to the phonological structure. However, it is in the nature of things that activating a subcase activates secondarily any schemas which closely dominate it; thus any case of activating, say, the ‘object unspecified because unimportant’ sense will entrench that sense but will also activate the superordinate ‘unspecified object’ sense, entrenching it and its connection to the phonological structure, to a somewhat lesser degree. Since, however, that schematic sense will be activated when other subcases are used as well, and since it may sometimes be used by itself, it is likely to be extremely well entrenched, more so than many of its more elaborated subcases.

We will not examine all these subcases individually in this paper: we will concentrate on some of the most prominent of their derivatives. I will make just one comment about how two of them interact. The ‘obvious object’ meaning includes as a subcase ‘obvious in the current discourse context’, and can thus be used for objects very high in topicality. This is particularly common in procedural texts. On the other hand, *tla-* can also mean ‘object unimportant in the discourse context’ which of course implies that the object is low in topicality. This interesting paradox can be paralleled in intransitive usage in English as well. For example, the verb *bake* may be used intransitively in a recipe: *bake at 350° for 45 minutes*. In this case the object of *bake* is the topic of the recipe, and thus need not be specified. On the other hand *bake* may be used intransitively in a sentence like *She told me she had been baking when the telephone rang*, where the speaker may not know, and in any case presumably does not care to specify, what she had been baking (perhaps because it is irrelevant to the topic).

4 The ‘normal object’ sense of *-tla*

Not all verbs are as flexible as *kowa* in the range of meanings they allow to *tla-*. *Tla-kuā* ‘eat’ in (1c), for instance, specifies pretty strongly that what is eaten is the normal or expected object for the verb, i.e., food. If it were reported to me

that Adam was eating, and it should turn out that the speaker knew he was eating worms or paper, I would be startled, but I don't think I'd accuse the speaker of lying to me. In Nawatl it would be more nearly a lie to say *tla-kuā* in such a situation.

This is extremely similar to the typical case of *tla-kowa* mentioned in (2), where the object is the normal thing one would shop for. This can be left unspecified because both speaker and hearer know well enough what it is. We can view it then as sanctioned by the 'unspecified because obvious' subcase of the unspecified object schema. Note that there is probably some sanction from the meaning 'unspecified because unimportant' as well—it is obvious what sort of thing one is likely to shop for or to eat, but what is obvious is a general class rather than any specific item, and there is here a refusal to specify anything within that class, presumably because it is unimportant.

There are very many other cases where this 'normal object' sense is strongly expected rather than simply being one of a number of equally possible interpretations. And in some of them the nature of the object is specified quite closely in the process. Thus *ni-tla-tzakua* (3) and its opposite *ni-tla-tlapowa* (4) take the windows or doors of a house or shop, or the gate of a corral, as their objects. In both cases the range of objects is restricted to many less than the number of things that can actually be opened or closed. Even greater restrictions show up, almost amounting to specific designation, in *ni-tla-sowa* [I-unspec-spread] 'I make the bed (i.e., spread the blankets on it)' (5) or its reduplicated form *ni-tla-soh-sowa* [I-unspec-rdp-spread] 'I lay out the clothes (to dry)' (6). Similarly *ni-tla-tla-witeki* [I-rdp-unspec-strike] means 'I knock (at the door)' (7), and so forth.

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| (3) | ni-tla-tzakua
I-normal.obj-close | 'I close up the house/shop/corral,
close the windows/doors/gates' |
| (4) | ni-tla-tlapowa
I-normal.obj-open | 'I open up the house/shop/corral,
open the windows/doors/gates' |
| (5) | ni-tla-sowa
I-normal.obj-spread | 'I make the bed' |
| (6) | ni-tla-soh-sowa
I-normal.obj-rdp-spread | 'I spread the wash out (to dry)' |
| (7) | ni-tla-tla-witeki
I-rdp-normal.obj-strike.a.blow | 'I knock (at the door)' |

Of course what counts as being "normal" is very much a cultural question. In the American (U.S.A.) culture one might wonder what would be the expected object of a verb like *heat* or *grind coarsely*, but to one who knows the importance to Nawatl culture of corn and the food products made from it, it should not be surprising that *ni-tla-totōnia* [I-unspec-heat] means 'I (re)heat tortillas' (8), or that *ni-tla-payana* [I-unspec-grind.coarsely] means 'I grind corn coarsely' (9). The effect that *tla-* has on *kow-ia* [buy-applicative] 'buy for someone' (10) is also somewhat surprising to us, but much more natural to the members of the Nawatl

culture, for whom the buying of clothing for a godchild is a highly significant event.

- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| (8) | ni-tla-totōnia
I-normal.obj-heat | ‘I (re)heat tortillas, [in Rafael Delgado] I dry flower bulbs, [in e.g., Oztotitla] I dry coffee’ |
| (9) | ni-tla-payana
I-normal.obj-grind
coarsely | ‘I grind corn coarsely’ |
| (10) | ni-k-tla-kow-ia
I-him-normal.obj-
buy-applicative | ‘I buy a wedding/baptismal garment for him/her (a godchild)’ |
| (11) | ni-k-tla-tolo-ltia
I-him-normal.obj-
swallow-causative | ‘I administer the Host to him’ |
| (12) | ni-tla-kix-tia
I-normal.obj-emerge-
causative | ‘I dig up flower bulbs (with a shovel)’ |

Even within the Orizaba Nawatl speaking area there are cultural differences that find reflections in the usages of *tla-*. In the town of Rafael Delgado many people raise flowers, particularly gladiolas and Easter lilies, and there are many forms with *tla-* having to do with that enterprise, including another meaning for *ni-tla-totōnia* [I-unspec-heat], namely ‘I dry flower bulbs (in the sun)’ (8), or *ni-tla-kix-tia* [I-unspec-emerge-caus] ‘I dig up flower bulbs (with a shovel)’ (12), and so forth. For towns like Oztotitla that raise coffee instead, *ni-tla-totōnia* (8) has a third meaning, namely, ‘I dry coffee (in the sun)’. To make things more complicated, of course, speakers from one town are likely to have as part of their linguistic system the usages from neighboring towns, as well as their own, appropriately identified as such, of course.

These usages of *tla-* are tied in to the previously described network in quite complex ways. As already mentioned, some are pretty straightforward elaborations of the ‘object unspecified because obvious’ sense, with or without some influence from the ‘unspecified because unimportant’ notion. But some are so specific that it is hard to take them as subcases of the ‘unspecified object’ sense any more at all: it is hard to equate something as specific as “clothes” or ‘the Host in Mass’ (11) with the notion ‘unspecified object’. Schemas should also be posited for the meanings ‘corn’ and (in Rafael Delgado) ‘flower bulbs’, since there are whole families of forms with those meanings. The forms having to do with administering the Mass (11) and with the godparental relationship (10) probably receive some sanction from the positive end of the “tabu” sense, i.e., the ‘too holy to mention lightly’ sense. Some of these relationships are diagrammed in figure 2.

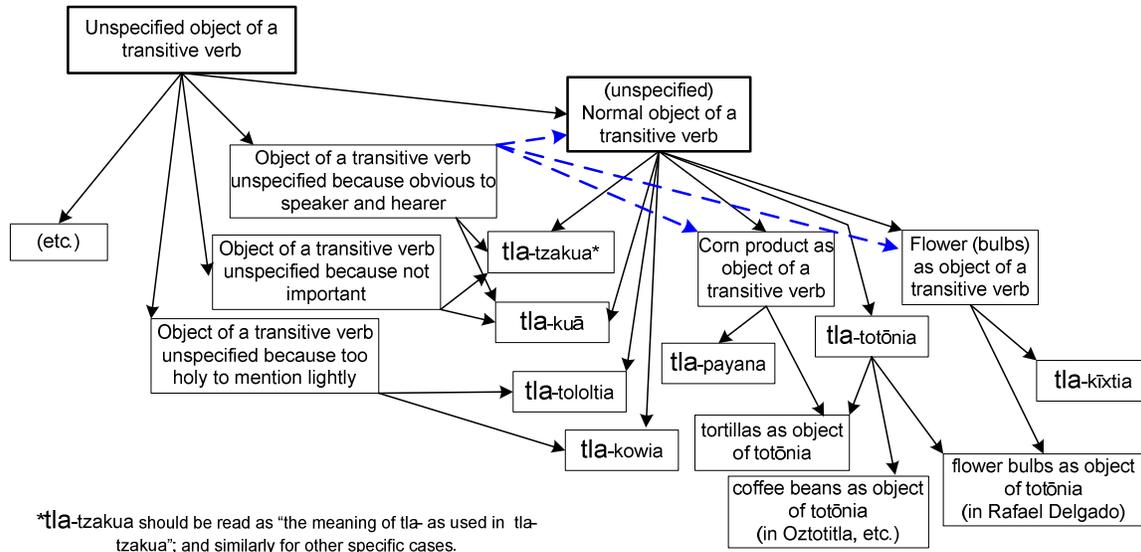


Figure 2.

Figure 3a represents a very common and very important configuration, in which one cognitive structure is compared with or extended to another. This relationship is represented graphically by the dotted arrow of similarity or partial schematicity. When this happens, as Langacker illustrates repeatedly (e.g., 1987:74, 382–386), it is natural that a schema be extracted which embodies what is common to (and in that sense is fully similar, though not identical, to) the two compared structures. Of course if such a schema already exists, the process will further entrench it as part of the structure of the language in question. Such a schema is by definition a superordinate structure, and the compared structures are subcases in the category it defines. Although most of them are not represented in figure 1, we may be sure that speakers have made many comparisons among the subcases represented there, in the process of extracting and establishing the schema that categorizes them. The dotted arrow in figure 2 from the notion of an obvious object to that of a normal object, represents such a comparison and extension, within the category of unspecified objects defined by the highest-level schema represented.

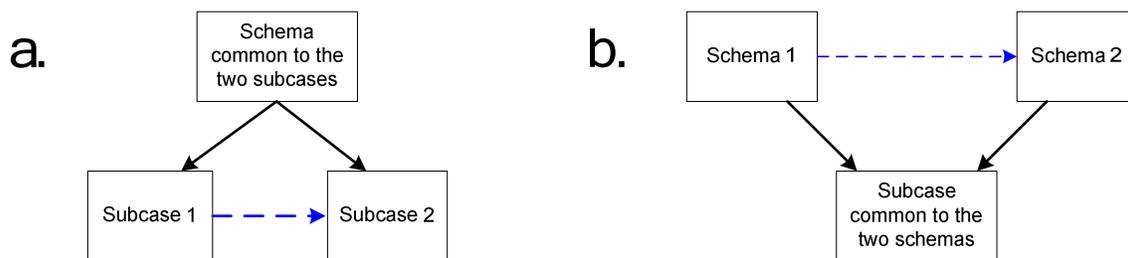


Figure 3.

Less frequently described, perhaps, but no less important to language, is the configuration in Figure 3b, in which the extension of one schema to another⁶ is mediated, prompted, and enhanced by the existence of a common subcase or subcases. This configuration can be found repeatedly in figure 2 (and figures 4 and 5). I am claiming by it that the existence of subcases which can be analyzed under both schemas in question is crucially involved in the new schemas becoming established (new senses developing) historically, as well as in the synchronic coherence of the category in question, namely, the meaning(s) of the prefix *tla-*.

5 The ‘canonical action’ and ‘customary action’ senses of *-tla*

Very closely tied to the ‘normal object’ sense of *tla-* is a sense of canonical or normal action. More often than not, when a normal object is expected, it is also expected more or less strongly that the activity designated by the verb will be done to that object in the normal way. Sometimes that seems to go without saying, but other times it seems to need specifying. We saw something of the sort with *tla-kix-tia* ‘dig up flower bulbs with a shovel’: not just a normal object, but a normal way of doing the verb on that object was specified. (*Tla-kix-tia* contrasts with *tla-wiwitla* [normal.obj-yank.up] ‘pull up flower bulbs by hand’.) *Tla-payana* brings some degree of expectation (much less now than it was years ago) that the grinding will be done with a *metlapil* (‘long cylindrical grinding stone’ held by the ends) on a *metate* (‘stationary grindstone’). Other forms make this expectation stronger, to the point where in some cases it seems to be the primary meaning of *tla-*.

This becomes especially clear with verb stems which expect a human object, and if an unspecified object was desired, you would expect *tē-* ‘someone/people (unspecified human object)’ to be used. Some of these verbs can take *tla-* instead of *tē-*, and the meaning is more ‘do the verb (in the normal way)’ than ‘do the verb to someone’. See the examples in (13a-c), (14a-c), and (15a-c):

- | | | |
|-------|---|--------------------------------------|
| (13a) | ni-k-avisarowa
I-him-warn/announce.to | ‘I announce to him’ |
| (b) | ni-tē-avisarowa
I-unspec.hum-warn/announce.to | ‘I announce (to people, to someone)’ |
| (c) | ni-tla-avisarowa
I-normal.action-warn/announce.to | ‘I do announcing (for the town)’ |

⁶All linguistic structures, according to Cognitive grammar, are schematic in some degree. That is, they are patterns, not totally specific occurrences. Practically, it makes little sense to talk of a schema unless a subcase is in mind (or a subcase unless a schema is in mind), but the subcases are by nature themselves schemas covering a range of yet more specific subcases.

- (14a) **ni-k-mik-tia** ‘I kill him’
I-him-die-causative
- (b) **ni-tē-mik-tia** ‘I kill (someone, people)’
I-unspec.hum-die-causative
- (c) **ni-tla-mik-tia** ‘I murder, am a murderer’
I-unspec-die-causative
- (15a) **ni-k-nankilia** ‘I answer him, talk back to him’
I-him-reply.to
- (b) **ni-tē-nankilia** ‘I answer, talk back (to people,
I-unspec.hum-reply.to to someone)’
- (c) **ni-tla-nankilia** ‘I reply (in a conversation)’
I-normal.action-reply.to

A strongly attested sub-type of this meaning is the meaning ‘do customarily/characteristically/professionally’; the example *ni-tla-mik-tia* ‘I am a murderer’ in (14c) is an example, and there are many others. A number of deverbals denoting professionals who do the verb thus come to have *tla-* on them: (16d) is an example.

- (16a) **ni-k-pah-tia** ‘I heal him, treat him
I-him-medicine-verbalizer (medically)’
- (b) **ni-tē-pah-tia** ‘I heal (people, someone)’
I-unspec.hum-medicine-verbalizer
- (c) **ni-tla-pah-tia** ‘I do healing, I am a doctor’
I-normal.action-medicine-verbalizer
- (d) **tla-pah-ti-h** ‘healer, doctor’
normal.action-medicine-verbalizer-
nominalizer

To the extent that *tla-* in these constructions means ‘do characteristically/professionally’ rather than ‘do to something/things/stuff’, it ceases to be an object marking prefix, and becomes more adverbial. Yet it usually retains its detransitivizing function. We can say that in this regard it shows itself to have been originally designed for avoiding specifying the object. Nevertheless, in a few cases it allows a different object marker to be used along with it. Nawatl has quite complex patterns of double-object formations which ease this transition, which we don’t have time to go into, but consider (17), where the incorporated object *ā* ‘water’ is apparently the object of the transitive (‘not, as expected’, intransitive) complex verb stem *tla-kui* ‘take up (in the normal/expected way)’.

- (24) **∅-tla-xoxowi-ya** ‘the sky turns blue/the earth turns green’
3ps-general.occurrence-grue-
inchoative
- (25) **∅-tla-tlasoh-ti** ‘there is scarcity/famine/dearth’
3ps-general.occurrence-dear-
inchoative

7 The ‘unspecified subject’ sense of *-tla*

Many of these ‘general occurrence’ cases could also be thought of as ‘general’ or ‘unspecified subject’ cases. Thus *tla-nēsi* in (21) could be thought of as ‘things (all over) appear’; (24) could be ‘things turn green’, and (25) could be ‘things become dear/scarce’. There are a few examples where this meaning is clearer, where the action is not so generalized, but the subject of the intransitive verb is unspecified. Examples (26)-(28a-c) illustrate this.

- (26) **(∅-)tla-aki** ‘it (stuff) fits’
(3ps-)unspec.subj-fit
- (27) **(∅-)tla-kalaki** ‘lots of stuff comes/goes in’
(3ps-)unspec.subj-enter
- (28a) **ni-k-itta** ‘I see it’
I-it-see
- (b) **ni-mo-tta** ‘I look (good/bad), am seen’ (also ‘I see myself’)
I-refl-see
- (c) **(∅-)tla-mo-tta** ‘there is light, things are/become visible’
(3ps-)unspec.subj-refl-see

Some of the relationships we have discussed, tying these construals of *tla-* with those we have seen before, are diagrammed in figure 4. Note again the multiple instances of the configuration diagrammed in figure 3b; it is the shared sub-cases that may first prompt, and certainly continue to mediate, the extensions to the relatively new or unusual meanings.

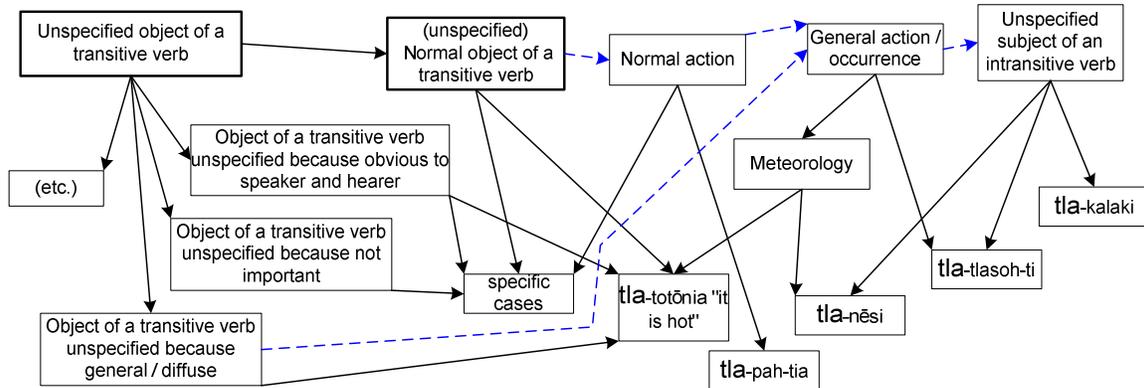


Figure 4.

8 Non-verbal usages of *-tla*

Nawaatl allows *tla-* to function as a prefix on certain non-verbal stems as well. Perhaps the most natural, and certainly the most prevalent and nearly productive, of these usages is as object of a postposition, as in examples (29a-b) and (30a-b). *Tē-*, by the way, also occurs in this kind of construction, as in example (31), and *ne-* also does so marginally, but none of the other verbal object prefixes do. (Postpositional objects, other than *tla-*, *tē-* and *ne-*, are cognate rather with possessive prefixes.) *Tla-* also occasionally occurs on nouns, as in example (32)—(*tē-* is much more frequent in this usage), and it also appears on a good many adjectives, as in examples (33) and (34). On the nouns it seems to be an extension from the postpositional use, and to have a sort of ‘unspecified possessor’ sense.⁷ On the adjectives it seems rather to be an extension from the ‘unspecified subject’ sense.

- | | | |
|-------|---|------------------------------------|
| (29a) | no-ihti-k
me/my-belly-locative | ‘inside me’ |
| (b) | tla-ihti-k
unspec-belly-locative | ‘inside (adv.), on the inside’ |
| (30a) | no-kuitla-pah
me/my-excrement-on | ‘behind me, in back of me’ |
| (b) | tla-kuitla-pah
unspec-excrement-on | ‘back, behind (adv.), at the back’ |
| (31) | tē-kuitla-pah
unspec.hum-excrement-on | ‘behind (the) people/someone’ |

⁷Unlike normal possessors, it co-occurs with the absolutive suffix.

- (32) **tla-ten-tli** ‘the edge/rim (of something)’
 unspec.possr-lip/edge/rim-absolutive
- (33) **tla-kual-tzin** ‘(it’s) pretty (here)’
 unspec.subj-good-diminutive
- (34) **tla-weli-k** ‘(everything’s) delicious’
 unspec.subj-delicious-adjective

Figure 5 gives a diagrammatic overview of some of the relationships we have alluded to. Once again, the occurrence of multiple common subcases (i.e., multiple cases of the configuration diagrammed in figure 3b) is crucial for the establishment and coherence of the different extended meanings of *tla-*.

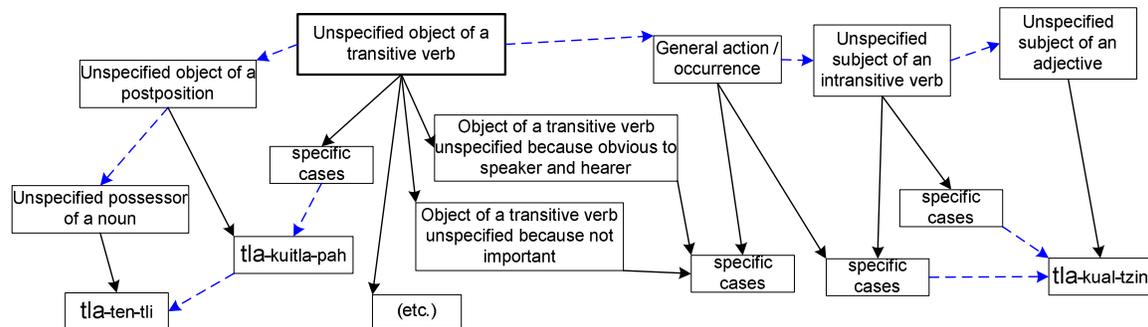


Figure 5.

9 Summary and conclusion

It should be clear why *tla-* can be compared to a Swiss army knife. It is a sort of do-everything tool with a whole repertoire of standard functions. To return to our original question: “Why does *tla-* have this extremely complex, less than fully predictable pattern of polysemy?” In DeLancey’s terms: motivation and diachrony give us the answer: Nawatl speakers over many centuries made useful choices, using *tla-* for functions it had not previously performed, and those choices established new patterns, which in turn served as the bases for further extensions. The results of this process we now see before us.

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