The diachrony of the Zapotec perfect
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Zapotec is large family of languages indigenous to Oaxaca, Mexico, and is part of a larger Otomanguean stock. This paper focuses on the diachrony of the morphology and semantics of the perfect in Central Zapotec, comparing forms found in Colonial Valley Zapotec (as attested in 16th - 18th century documents) and in modern Central Zapotec languages.

Modern Central Zapotec languages have a periphrastic perfect, formed by a /a=/ or /ba=/ clitic before a verb inflected for perfective aspect.¹ (Ex 1) Zapotec perfects have a 'current relevance' reading (Dahl 2000).

Though periphrastic perfects frequently have verbal or adpositional sources diachronically, this paper will argue that the origin of the /a= ~ ba=/ lies in an epistemic marker meaning 'φ is true at T_s' (where φ is a state of affairs and T_s is time of speech). The development of epistemic (inferential) readings from perfects is well attested (Haugen 1972, Izvorski 1994), but the Zapotec development suggests that perfects may also develop from epistemic morphemes.

Evidence for this account come from a.) cognate epistemic particles in other branches of the family², b.) a few modern Central Zapotec languages where /ba=/ continues to have both perfect and epistemic readings, and c.) a diverse range of readings associated with this clitic in colonial texts.

1. Cognates outside Central Zapotec. Central Zapotec is the only branch of the family with a perfect, but several languages in other branches have particles wa or ba with the meaning 'φ is true at T_s'. The Northern language Macuiltianguis Zapotec, for example, has a particle ba with this epistemic sense. However, such particles in Northern Zapotec languages are not used to form a perfect. This argues that the epistemic sense is prior and that the evolution of the perfect is an innovation of Central Zapotec. The perfect reading, in this scenario, evolves via pragmatic inference from the epistemic sense (cf Nishiyama and Koenig 2004).

2. Modern Central languages. The dialect of Guevea de Humboldt is geographically separated from its closest relatives and preserves a number of archaic features. In this variety of Zapotec, ba is used to form the perfect, but also has an epistemic reading of truth at speech time.

3. Colonial Zapotec. The perfect in Colonial Valley Zapotec is marked with a clitic /wa(y)=/, typically spelled <oa(y)-> or <hua(y)-> in early texts. (Ex 2, 3). Careful examination of the contexts of use show that /wa(y)=/ has both a perfect reading and an epistemic reading, as in modern Guevea de Humboldt.

Thus the likely diachronic development is that Core Zapotec ba 'φ is true at T_s' develops an additional perfect reading in Central Zapotec. These readings are supported by colonial texts and are both still present in one modern dialect. The Zapotec perfect thus shows a diachronic path distinct from the better-documented languages of Western Europe.

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¹ Dialects differ on whether the clitic is /ba=/ or /a=/.
² See figure 1 for the classification of Zapotec languages
³ /y/ is epenthetic before a vowel-initial root. The phonetics of the first consonant are not completely certain, but inferred from the orthography to be [β~w].
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Data

1. Chi a=b-dxial=tî=by, gul=tixee loa=a...
   when PERF=PFTV-find=2pl=3 PL:IMP=tell to=1s
   'When you have found him, tell me...' (Guelavía dialect)

2. ... huay=anna=ca=ni, huay=ooni=ca=ni tolla gueche layoo.
   PERF=know=EMPH=3 PERF=do=EMPH=3 sin world
   ‘...she had already known, she had already done the sins of the world.’ (Aguero 1666:f26)

3. Oa=tij=ca=xa Dios
   EPIS=exist=EMPH=EMPH God
   'God truly exists' (Cordova 1578:51v)

Figure 1 Zapotec language family

References


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4 Examples use the following abbreviations: EMPH=emphatic, EPIS=epistemic, IMP=imperative, PERF=perfect, PFTV=perfective, PL=plural,