On the avoidance of abstract nominalizations

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“Beauty is truth; truth, beauty”
– that is all you need to know...
Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

“Nii naa nchiia’ nii naa laihny; nii naa laihny nii naa nchiia’”
– ndeenn naa ra’ta’ nii naa pahr gacbèu’...
(Tlacolula Valley Zapotec)

“Chokma’sikat álhlhi, álhlhikat chokma’si”
– yammakillaho ithána chibanna...
(Chickasaw)

“Skeegkam ’o ud: vohokam, vohokam ’o ud: skeegkam” –
heg ’apt ’am o va’i smaaced:...
(Pima)

There are languages with no, or almost no, abstract nominalizations. This paper analyzes data from two such languages, Tlacolula Valley Zapotec and Chickasaw, unrelated (and typologically very different) indigenous American languages that do not have productive strategies for producing abstract nominalizations, although they do have regular ways of producing various other nominalizations and have no difficulty expressing the abstract ideas. In Tlacolula Valley Zapotec, abstract nominalizations are either headless relative clauses (which remain transparently analyzable to speakers) or loanwords (usually well assimilated). In Chickasaw, there are no abstract nominalizations at all; such ideas are expressed with complex sentences using switch-reference subordination. This paper, then, is offered to broaden our understanding of nominalization typology – but it does not mean that lack of abstract nominalization is a feature characteristic of languages of the America, as briefly discussed data from Pima illustrates.”

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1. Overview

This paper considers how abstract nominal ideas – especially abstract deverbal nominalizations – are expressed in two typologically very different languages with few if any native abstract nominalizations. The two languages are Tlacolula Valley Zapotec (TVZ), a Zapotecan (Otomanguean) language spoken in central Oaxaca, and Chickasaw, a seriously endangered language of the Muskogean family spoken in south-central Oklahoma. In the case of TVZ, we have the benefit of extensive data on an earlier stage of the language, Colonial Valley Zapotec, a language documented in 16th to 18th century descriptions and writings. For both languages I’ve worked on quite extensive dictionaries (Munro & Lopez et al. 1999; Munro & Willmond 1994), which provided data considered in this paper.

The inspiration for this paper was the translations into TVZ and Chickasaw of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 1998), a document that is full of abstract concepts. The idea that these are not expressed with native noun words in either language seems a bit shocking.

As part of my work on this paper I asked speakers to translate Keats’s famous lines above into their language; these are included as epigraphs at the beginning of this paper, along with a translation of the lines into a third language, Pima, a Uto-Aztecan language of central Arizona. Like TVZ and Chickasaw, Pima is a language used for daily communication among members of a shrinking speech community, without a standard written form in ordinary use by speakers.

As an introduction to our topic, let’s look first at how Pima, a language with very free word order and second-position clitic auxiliaries, expresses the first part of Keats’s lines:¹

(1) “S-keeg-kam ’o ud: voho-kam; voho-kam
STAT-beautiful-NMR AUX.3.IMP COP true-NMR true-NMR
’o ud: s-keeg-kam”... 
AUX.3.IMP COP STAT-beautiful-NMR
“Beauty is truth, truth is beauty”...’ (Pima)

Despite their considerable typological differences, Pima and English express this thought very similarly, using nominalized forms of adjectives to express the abstract concepts ‘beauty’ and ‘truth’. It’s thus certainly not the case that a lack of abstract nominalizations is
characteristic of indigenous languages of the Americas, or that we should expect that a language without a long written tradition necessarily cannot use such a morphosyntactic strategy.

However, this is not true of either of the two languages we’ll focus on in this paper.

First, TVZ:

(2) “Nih nàa n-chììa’ nih nàa là=ihny;² nih nàa là=ihny nih nàa n-chììa’”

“They which is beautiful is that which is true; that which is true is that which is beautiful”…’ (TVZ)

In this language, almost all depredicative nominalizations are expressed using headless relative clauses; there is no single native word for ‘beauty’ or ‘truth’.

Next, Chickasaw:

(3) “Chokm-a’ri-kat³ áhlhi; áhlhli-kat chokm-a’ri”

“For it to be beautiful is for it to be true; for it to be true is for it to be beautiful”…’, “Being beautiful, it is true; being true, it is beautiful”…’, “It is beautiful and true; it is true and it is beautiful”…’

(Chickasaw)

As the multiple translations given for (3) indicate, it is much more difficult to give a literal expression of the Chickasaw into English. But, as in TVZ, there is no noun that means either ‘truth’ or ‘beauty’.

Thus, both TVZ and Chickasaw express Keats’s idea without using nouns that mean ‘beauty’ or ‘truth’.

2. Zapotec

2.1. TVZ and its nominalizations

Tlacolula Valley Zapotec (TVZ: Munro & Lopez et al. 1999; Lee 2006; Munro, Lillehaugen & Lopez in preparation) is a VSO language of central Oaxaca, Mexico. The language has no case marking, as exemplified in (4), and generally all arguments of a clause must be overt:
Most deverbal nominalizations in the language are expressed as (headless) relative clauses beginning with the relativizer *nih*, as in the expressions for ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’ in (2). Since there is no case marking, many such relative constructions can be ambiguous (the head can be either subject or object):

(5) bùunny nih gw-àa'izy bèe’cw

‘the man who hit the dog’ / (perhaps also) ‘the man the dog hit’

Such *nih* relative clauses work like nouns in some ways, but not in others. Like nouns, for example, these relative clauses may be preceded by quantifiers such as the plural marker *ra*:

(6) Chiru’ nu’=gza’ ra nih r-culoh zhi’iilly

then NEUT-be.in=also PL REL HAB-take.care.of sheep nehzga’ih...

‘At that time there were also shepherds [those who take care of sheep] nearby…’

Like nouns, they may be followed by a periphrastically expressed possessor, as in

(7) nih r-luu’b làa’ny-yu’uh x:tèe’n=a’

REL HAB-be.swept inside-house of=1S

‘my broom [that with which the inside of the house is swept]’

But, unlike nouns, they may not have a morphologically expressed possessor, with the possessed prefix *x:-* preceding the whole *nih* phrase:

(8) *x:-nih r-luu’b làa’ny-yu’=a’

POSS-REL HAB-be.swept in-house=1S intended: ‘my broom’

*Nih* relative “nominalizations” are clearly always viewed by speakers as analyzable. Thus, ‘invention’ is

(9) nih r-bèe’eh-gue’ihcy bùunny

REL HAB-take.out-head person

‘invention [what a person takes out of his head]’

but ‘my invention’ must be
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(10) nih b-lèe'eh-gue'icy=a'  
rel perf-take.out-head=1s  
‘my invention’, i.e. ‘what I took out of my head’

with perfective rather than habitual marking and a first-person singular subject clitic pronoun on the verb (because ‘I’ must have invented whatever it is at some point in the past).

There are two morphological nominalizers in TVZ, a prefix w- and a proclitic gahll=. The prefix w- (which is not productive) often appears to have an agentive meaning when added to a verb stem:

(11) a. w-gyàa'ah  
NMR2®-dance ‘dancer’

b. w-bwààa'n  
NMR2-steal  ‘thief’

Gahll= is the only (apparently) productive deverbal nominalizer, used to express a meaning like that of an English gerund when prociliticized to a habitual verb.

(12) R-yu'lààa'z  Gye'eihlly  gahll=r-gyàa'ah.  
HAB-like Mike NMR=HAB-dance  ‘Mike likes dancing’.

This seems like a regular morphosyntactic construction, but it’s not really clear how productive it is. Only two examples of this type of gahll= nominalization appear in 200 pages of analyzed narratives about the immigration experience (Lopez & Munro (eds.) in preparation):

(13) Chiru’ b-èi'ny=a’ zèè'i'ny làa’any restaura’aann gahll=r-guìi’by  
then PERF-do=1s work in restaurant NMR=HAB-wash  
plàa’d=zhi’.  
dish=END  
‘So I worked in a restaurant washing dishes’. (Lopez & Munro (eds.) in preparation)

(14) N-u’=rih todo el7 tye’eemm r-tèi’dy=rih  
NEUT-be.in=3P.DIST all the time HAB-pass=3P.DIST  
canzàa=rih ladca’i, n-u’=ih gahll=r-ìi’ah ra  
stroll=3P.DIST street NEUT-be.in=3.DIST NMR=HAB-drink PL  
serbe’s=ih…  
beer=that
'There are some that spend all the time hanging out in the street, there’s some drinking those beers…' (Lopez & Munro (eds.) in preparation)

Most gahll= nominalizations in these texts, and all those in the dictionary (Munro & Lopez et al. 1999), however, are lexicalized, and sometimes, as with gahll=r-zyàa’ah in (15), it’s not even possible to identify a verbal source for them:

(15) R-u’ëng gahll=r-zyàa’ah x:u g-unyëng zèëì’ny
    HAB-be.in=3s.PROX NMR=HAB?=? how IRR-do=3s.PROX work
    o çàà ne’ehhz y-riàa’ mìuully.
    or where IRR-leave money
    ‘He was worried [in (a state of) worry] about how to find work and where money would come from.’ (Lopez & Munro (eds.) in preparation)

In some of these lexicalized cases, the element following gahll= is not verbal, as in (16), and the meaning may seem quite abstract. Generally, though, as (17) suggests, such derived forms denote specific instances of such apparent abstractions:

(16) gahll=mìlàagr
    nmr=mìracle ‘miraculousness’

(17) Loh x:-cahll=mìlàagr Dyooz b-ìe’d Cria’st loh gax:lyuh.
    to poss-NMR=mìracle God PERF-come Christ to earth
    ‘Through God’s miraculousness Christ came to earth.’

Unlike nih relatives, both gahll= and w- nominalizations are full-fledged nouns: they may be freely morphologically possessed, for example, as in (17). The nih relative clause strategy is the one that speakers use productively, however: for instance, when asked to name an unfamiliar object or to talk about a quality like ‘truth’ or ‘beauty’.

2.2. Colonial Valley Zapotec

Zapotec has been written for more than 400 years: a grammar and dictionary were prepared by the Spanish missionary priest Juan de Córdova (1578a, 1578b). Colonial Zapotec data in this paper come from these sources and from Feria’s Doctrina (1567) and various archival manuscripts written by native speakers from the 16th to the 18th centuries and analyzed by the UCLA Zapotexts group.
The two TVZ nominalizers we just saw both have ancestors in Colonial Zapotec. A hue- nominalizer usually has an agentive or subject-related meaning and is used much more often than the TVZ w- As in TVZ, it never seems to have an abstract meaning:

(18) a. hue-yàa
   nmr\textsuperscript{2}-dance
   ‘baylador’ (1578a: 50v) (‘dancer’)

b. huè-ni
   nmr\textsuperscript{2}-do
   ‘hazedor’ (1578a: 215) (‘doer’)

Even more frequently used is the quela= nominalizer, which may have the same activity sense as its descendant, TVZ gahll, but also frequently appears to express an abstract meaning:

(19) a. quela=t-àgo
   nmr=HAB=eat
   ‘comestacion…el acto de comer’ (1578a: 81) (‘eating…the act of eating’)

b. quela=t-ápa
   nmr=HAB=have
   ‘possesion’ (1578a: 323) (‘possession’)

Córdova’s dictionary contains some 500 entries with quela= translations of Spanish words ending in -ción. This would suggest that quela= nominalizations were considerably more common in Colonial Zapotec than in modern TVZ, but a few caveats are in order. We don’t know as much as we’d like to about how the dictionary was compiled, so it is possible that at least some of these quela= words are forced or nonce translations that might not have been used in ordinary speech. Their use in our analyzed documents is largely confined to two areas. First, they occur in fairly formulaic expressions at the beginning of testaments, as in (20):

(20) r-apa=ya quela=ri-jene quela=r-acaapea xteni=ya
    HAB=have=1s nm\textsuperscript{2}=HAB=understand nm\textsuperscript{2}=HAB=know of=1s
    ‘I have (my) understanding and knowledge’ (Te675b: 2)

As in TVZ (16), but much more commonly, there is another puzzling use of the same morpheme, before borrowed nouns, often denoting instances of abstractions:
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(21) c-oni=ni quela=casado...
   \text{IRR-do}\text{=3s} \text{NMR}\text{=married/husband}
   \text{(if/when) he marries (i.e., “does marriage”)…’}
   \text{(Feria 1567, marriage section, 1: 20-21)}

(22) ti-niyopeya=tono quela=Justiçia, qui-ropa=tono alldes
   \text{HAB}\text{-command}\text{=1P} \text{NMR}\text{=justice} \text{IRR-two}\text{=1P} \text{alcaldes}
   ‘We order justice, we two alcaldes’ (Te568:19)

2.3. Expression of abstract nominalizations in TVZ

So, then, here’s the question: if modern Zapotec does not use \text{gahll= nominalizations to express abstract concepts, how does it}
express them? Answer: with Spanish loanwords.

    Below, for example, is another way (in addition to (2)) to express
Keats’s line:

(23) “Beye’s nàa verdaa; verdaa nàa beye’s”…
   \text{beauty cop truth truth cop beauty}
   “Beauty is truth, truth is beauty”…’

    Of the 13 nouns in our TVZ dictionary defined with English
nouns ending in -\text{tion}, all but one are Spanish loans. Many more
such borrowed nouns occur in the narratives in Munro & Lopez
(eds.) \textit{in preparation} and other free narratives in Zapotec; these
are not included in the dictionary, however, because my collabora-
tor feels they are not genuine Zapotec words. For example, consider
(24) (from our narrative collection), in which the speaker plays on
the similarity between one fully assimilated loan \textit{(liberasyoony ‘fre-
dom’, from Spanish liberación)} and the unassimilated \textit{libertinaje}
‘libertinage’:

(24) B-yu’làa’z=a’ re’n’n, tye’n’n n-u’uh-dùa’x liberasyoony
    \text{PERF-like}\text{=1S} here because \text{NEUT}\text{-be.located-much freedom}
    re’n’n n-u’uh. Chiru’ \textit{después} nìi g-uhc zi’cy
    here \text{NEUT}\text{-be.located and later thatPERF\text{-be like}
    te’ihby \textit{libertinaje} pahr nà=a’.\text{one libertinage for \textit{PRON}=1S}
    ‘I liked it here because there was a lot of freedom here, there was.
\textit{Later} that [freedom] became like \textit{libertinage} for me’

    Further, consider the TVZ translation of the Universal
Declaration of Human Rights (Lopez & Munro 1998),¹² whose 1947
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English original contains numerous abstract nouns. These too are typically translated into TVZ with Spanish borrowings, as in the extracts in (25) and (26), where we first give the English original, then the TVZ expression, and then a translation of the Zapotec.

(25) “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world…” (Preamble)

Zi’cy nàa dignidaa deree’ch=nah x:tèe’ ra’=ta’ bùunny
thus COP dignity right=CONJ of all=EMPH person
gax:lyuh nìh nàa que’ihty z-ìie’d libertaa, justi’isy, cèhnn
world REL COP where INC-come liberty justice and
pa’=s nàa pahr g-a’c=rih reconoseer, ...
peace COP for IRR-be=3p.DIST recognize
‘Since the dignity and rights of all the people of the world, which is where liberty, justice, and peace come from, must be recognized,…’

(26) “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person”. (Article 3)

Ra’=ta’ bùunny r-àa’p deree’ch pahr y-baany bùunny,
all=EMPH person HAB-have right to IRR-live person
libertaa, cèhnn seguridaa x:tèe’ bùunny.
liberty and security of person
‘All people have the right to live, [to] liberty, and [to] security of person.’

Since we prepared this translation my collaborator has become a Zapotec language teacher, and he now has very proscriptive feelings about teaching his students recent Spanish loans. Thus, for example, he now greatly prefers the Keats version in (2) to that in (23).

3. Chickasaw

3.1. Chickasaw and its nominalizations

Chickasaw is an SOV language that is definitely verb-centered, as we’ll see below. The language has no adpositions (Munro 2000, 2006). However, it has plenty of nouns, and uses an accusative case marking system in examples like

(27) Hattak-at ofi’(-a) isso-tok.
person-NOM dog(-ACC) hit-PT
‘The man hit the dog.’
There are two commonly used nominalizers. One, -ka’, appears only in some 30 items in our dictionary (Munro & Willmond 1994), a number of which are not fully analyzable. Two of these appear in (28). The scarcity of such nouns in the dictionary suggests that –ka’ is not productive, and indeed attempts to use it to make up new nouns fail. However, examples like (28c) (presumably a fairly recent calque from English) suggest that it is not fully fossilized.

(28) a. obya-ka’
   be.evening-NMR2
   ‘evening’

b. nanna=aa-ashshachi-ka’
   something=LOC-sin(v.)-NMR2
   ‘hell’ (‘place of sinning’, ‘place of sinners’)

c. bala’bolbo’ahoob-a’si-ka’
   bean kidney resemble-DIM-NMR2
   ‘kidney beans’ (‘beans that kind of look like kidneys’)

The meanings of –ka’ nouns seem not to be abstract.

The more common nominalizer, a ’ (glottal stop) suffix, derives concrete deverbal nominalizations, as in

(29) a. hilha-’
   dance-NMR
   ‘dancer; dance’

b. abika-’
   be.sick-NMR
   ‘sick person; sickness’

c. taloowa-’
   sing-NMR
   ‘singer; song, singing event’

d. to’li-’
   play.ball-NMR
   ‘ball player; ball game’

e. impa-’
   eat.intr-NMR
   ‘eater; food’

There are over 1800 main entries for ’ nominalizations in our Chickasaw dictionary (Munro & Willmond 1994). Typically, such nominalizations can be interpreted as referring to the subject of the source verb, as well as to that verb’s conceptual object, even in the case of completely intransitive verbs such as abika ‘be sick’ or impa ‘eat’, which cannot be used transitively – thus, as shown in (29),

"abika’ means ‘sickness’ and ‘impa’ means ‘food’. Sometimes these -’ nominalizations may refer to a specific event involving the verb, as with taloowa’ ‘singing event’ (rural Oklahoma churches host “all night singings”, especially in summer) or to’li’ ‘ball game’.

Such nominalizations can include applicative clitics or prefixes, such as instrumental isht- in (30a); loosely incorporated and/or compounded nouns, as in (30b); or nanna / naa ‘something’, as in (30c):

(30) a. isht=achifa-’
   insulated=wash-NMR
   ‘washcloth, soap’
   b. lowak (is) toba-’
   fire  become-NMR
   ‘matches’
   c. nann=ashshachi-’
   something=sin(v.)-NMR
   ‘sinner; sin’

Speakers use the -’ nominalization strategy very freely and productively. There are over 1800 main entries for -’ nominalizations in our Chickasaw dictionary (Munro & Willmond 1994). Typically, however, these have only concrete reference – even a noun like nann-ashshachi’ ‘sin’ would normally be interpreted to refer to a specific action, not a general concept of evil.

The dictionary contains only four items that are translated with English nouns ending in -tion:

(31) a. Illi-t Falama-t Taani-’
   die-PRT return-PRT rise-NMR
   ‘the Resurrection [dying, returning, the rising]’
   b. Nann=oktani-’
   something=appear-NMR
   ‘Revelation [book of the Bible] [something’s appearance]’
   c. naa=holhtina-’
   something=be.counted-NMR
   ‘arithmetic (problem), calculation [something’s being counted]’
   d. naa=alhtoka-’
   something=be.elected-NMR  ‘election [something’s being elected]’

Each of these refers to a specific item or event rather than an abstract concept (for example, naaholhtina’ ‘arithmetic’ generally is used to refer to something like ‘arithmetic homework’, rather than referring the abstract field of study).
3.2. Clausal expression of abstract concepts in Chickasaw

Chickasaw, then, does not use nouns to refer to abstract concepts. English abstractions are consistently translated with verbal structures using switch-reference, a syntactic system in which all subordinate clauses are marked for whether their subject is the same as (ss) or different from (ds) the subject of some higher reference clause. (Different pairs of switch-reference markers express different types of subordination). Thus, my Chickasaw teacher offered two ways to express the English sentence in (32), one of a number of cases where I tried to elicit translations of more-or-less abstract nouns. In (32a), the subject of both taloowa ‘sing’ and chokma ‘be good’ is the same third person (I’ve arbitrarily used a plural translation). In (32b), on the other hand, the subject of ‘sing’ is a singer or singers, while the subject of ‘be good’ is the fact of the singing.

(32) “Singing is good”.
   a. Taloowa-kat chokma.
      sing-CMP,ss be.good
      ‘They sing and they are good.’, ‘Singing, they are good.’
   b. Taloowa-kma chokma.
      sing-IRR,DS be.good
      ‘If they sing, it’s good.’

(32) uses the same type of construction as in (3) (the Keats translation), repeated below as (33):

(33) “Chokm-a’si-kat  álhlhi;  álhlhi-kat chokm-a’si”…
     be.good-DIM-CMP,ss be.true be.true-CMP,ss be.good-DIM
     ‘For it to be beautiful is for it to be true; for it to be true is for it to be beautiful’…’, “Being beautiful, it is true; being true, it is beautiful”…’, “It is beautiful and true; it is true and it is beautiful”…’

Since ‘be true’ doesn’t make sense with a human subject, we assume that the subject here is some ‘it’, which is also beautiful.

Example (34), translated on the model of a verse from the Choctaw New Testament ([Byington] 1848), contains a noun, nanni-hollo’ ‘love’, which looks like a true abstract noun. Again, the subject is some unnamed “it”:

(34) “The greatest of these is love.” (I Corinthians 13)
     Nanna móma immayya-kat nann-i-hollo’.
     something be.all,DS be.greater.than-CMP,ss something-DAT-love-NMR
     ‘It is greater than everything; it’s love.’
Chickasaw speakers, however, consider nannihollo’ a “Bible word”, an expression used only when talking directly about Biblical concepts using the language of the Choctaw Bible. The Chickasaw and Choctaw languages are very closely related (some consider them only dialects), but the Bible was only translated into Choctaw, and the Choctaw Bible has traditionally been used in both Choctaw and Chickasaw services. (Consequently, Chickasaw speakers tend to be more familiar with Choctaw and Choctaw words – and Bible expressions – than vice versa.) It’s certainly possible that Chickasaw speakers of 150 years ago used more such abstract nouns. But, as in the case of the Colonial Valley Zapotec dictionary data, it is also possible that Byington’s collaborator/translators on the Choctaw Bible were using words that were not fully natural.

There are ten verbs meaning ‘to love’ in our dictionary, but the noun nannihollo’ doesn’t appear there (though perhaps it should have, since it is familiar to speakers). It can’t freely be used, even in a Biblical context, as the impossibility of (35b) (which follows Chickasaw’s normal ‘NOUN is NOUN’ copular structure) shows:

(35) “God is love.”
   a. Chihoow-aat nanna móma i-hollo.
      God-NOM something be.all.DS DAT-love
      ‘God loves everything.’
   b. *Chihoow-aat nann-i-hollo-.’
      God-NOM something-DAT-love-NMR

(36)-(37) present some more examples of Chickasaw sentences that in English would be translated with abstract nouns:

(36) “I’m afraid of death.”
   Illi ik-sa-bann-o.
   die HYP-1sII-want-NEG
   ‘I don’t want to die.’

(37) “Life is precious.”
   a. Okcháa-cha holítto’pa.
      be.alive-CONJ,SS be.precious
      ‘It’s alive and it’s precious.’
   b. Okcháa-kmat holítto’pa.
      be.alive-IRR,SS be.precious
      ‘If it’s alive, it’s precious.’

As we saw for TVZ, the Chickasaw Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Willmond & Munro 1998) provides numerous examples of English abstract nouns translated without nominalizations:
“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” (Article 3)

Hattak-at hattak yoka’sh-cha ab-a’ni-kat
person-NOM person imprison-COND SS kill-MOD-CMP SS
im-alhpi’sa ki’yo.
DAT-be.right not
‘It’s not right for people to imprison or kill people.’

Hattak-at holitto’pa bíyyi’ka.
person-NOM be.precious eternally
‘People are truly sacred.’

“Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State.” (Article 13, section 1)

Kaniya’-o aya chi-banna-kmat ish-iyy-a’hi bíyyi’ka.
anywhere-FOC.ACC go 2sII-want-IRR SS 2sI-go-shall eternally
Kaniya’-o ánta chi-banna-kmat ish-ánt-a’hi bíyyi’ka.
anywhere-FOC.ACC live 2sII-want-IRR SS 2sI-live-shall eternally
‘You should truly be able to go anywhere you want to go.
You should truly be able to live anywhere you want to live.’

“Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country...” (Article 21, section 2)

Kana-haat naa=alhtoka’ nanna-ho
someone-INT-NOM something-be.elected-NMR something-FOC.ACC
malili banna-kmat malil-a’ni.
run want-IRR SS run-MOD
‘If someone wants to run in some kind of election he or she can run.’

3.3. ‘Something’ nominalizations

One of the few apparent abstract nouns I know of in Chickasaw is nannayya ‘peace’, as in (42):
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(42) Nannaayya-kat míyyî’t-a’chi.
   (be?)peace-CMP.ss come-will
   ‘Peace is coming.’

In this sentence, ‘peace’ is the subject. But it is marked not with the ordinary nominative case marker -at or -aat seen in many sentences above, but with a same-subject switch-reference marker. This indicates that ‘peace’ is not, in fact, a noun, but rather a verb (‘be peace?’): thus, the sentence must literally mean something like ‘It will be peace and it will come’.

The odd behavior of ‘peace’ is exceeded by the strangeness of the word nanna ‘something’ (probably a component of ‘peace’), which we’ve seen used as an incorporated proclitic in (30c), (28b), and (31b-c), as a free argument in (39), and as some kind of modifier in (41). Clearly, ‘something’ seems as though it ought to be a paradigmatic member of some kind of (pro)nominal category – but in Chickasaw, it really isn’t.

(43) Nanna-kat ilhko’lì-ka pìs-li-tok.
   (be?)something-CMP.ss move-CMP.ds see-1sI-PT
   ‘I saw something moving.’

(44) Nanna-kà isht=anompoli-ka ithâna-li.
   (be?)something-CMP.ds INST=talk-CMP.ds know-1sI
   ‘I know they were talking about something.’

Not only can nanna ‘something’ take verbal subordinating (switch-reference) morphology instead of ordinary case marking, just as ‘peace’ does (something other nominal indefinites, like ‘someone’ and ‘somewhere’, do not do), it can even be used as a verb (!), expressing the idea of ‘maybe’ or ‘whether’. Thus, (45) might literally mean something like ‘it was something like she went’.

(45) Aya-kmà nanna-tok.
   go-IRR.DS (be?)something-PT
   ‘Maybe she went.’

(46) Aya-kmà nann-a’chi-kà ak-itha’n-o.
   go-IRR.DS (be?)something-will-CMP.ds 1sN-know-NEG
   ‘I don’t know if she is going to go.’

What a puzzle!
4. Conclusion (?)

The purpose of this paper is to present information on a little recognized type of language, one without native abstract nominalizations. The first case we looked at, TVZ, makes very little use of abstract nouns or nominalizations, preferring relative clause constructions or (increasingly) Spanish loanwords – which means that, in fact, TVZ speakers are not really avoiding the use of abstract nouns, just expressing them without using native nouns. The second, Chickasaw, however, is very different, since Chickasaw really uses almost no abstract nouns or nominalizations of any type, preferring explicitly verbal constructions. Both languages have potential evidence of earlier stages in which more abstract nominals were used, but in both cases the evidence is somewhat suspect: the abstract nominalizations might be translation artifacts.

In fact, although the translations of the Chickasaw passages in which verbs are used look very different from the corresponding English ideas containing abstract nouns, the meanings involved are not that different. Chickasaw seems to be following sound advice by English teachers, e.g.

Instead of boring your readers with a lot of abstract nouns (such as those formed by a verb root + “-tion”), revise your sentences in order to make your verbs do the work... Nominalized sentences may be grammatically and factually correct, but vague. Most humans learn best when they can form specific, vivid mental images – and verbs are more vivid than nouns. (Jerz 2000)

In fact, Minkoff & Katz (1973) argue that readers have trouble processing abstract nouns and nominalizations, and that sentences with verbs are easier for them to read.

So maybe Chickasaw speakers have the right idea!

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Notes

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On the avoidance of abstract nominalizations

Academic Senate of UCLA, to whom I'm most grateful. I also thank the speakers who contributed the narratives in Lopez & Munro (eds.) in preparation, some of which are quoted below, and to audiences at the UCLA American Indian Seminar and the Conference on Nouns Cross-Linguistically for helpful comments. Data on Colonial Valley Zapotec comes from Córdova (1578a, b) and from archival documents from the 15th-17th centuries written in Zapotec and analyzed by the UCLA Zapotexts group, whose current members include Xóchitl Flores Marcial, Michael Galant, Maria Ornelas, Aaron Sonnenschein, Lisa Sousa, Kevin Terraciano, and myself. Earlier group members who have contributed to the work include Christina Esposito, John Foreman, Brook Lillehaugen, Felipe Lopez, Olivia Martinez, Julie Morgenlender, and Diana Schwartz. Thanks to all. Finally, great thanks to Virgil Lewis for the Pima data, and to Marcus Smith for helpful discussion.


2 The TVZ expression for ‘true’ here is an idiom literally meaning ‘be it’, using the reverential pronoun for ‘it’.

3 In Chickasaw, ‘be beautiful’ is expressed as a diminutive of ‘be good’.

4 Lee (2006) has argued that nih is a complementizer rather than a relative pronoun (though in contrast to English that, nih is not used to introduce full clauses).

5 Constructions like (8) are fine if a noun precedes the relative clause (Munro 2002):

x:a-nchàa’ nih zuubì=a’
poss-dish REL NEUT.crack=1s

‘my cracked dish (my dish that is cracked)’

6 I use “NMR2” in both TVZ and Chickasaw for the less productive of two nominalizers; “NMR” is used for the more productive one.

7 Unassimilated loanwords and their translations are italicized.

8 Colonial Zapotec spelling was not standardized, even in Córdova’s own work; all data here are as in the original, and my discussion of specific forms uses the spellings in the quoted items.

9 This analysis (by the late Thomas Smith Stark) was brought to my attention by Brook Lillehaugen.

10 Córdova’s dictionary is organized only from Spanish to Zapotec, and clearly some words are probably repeated (but many of the 500 entries in fact include two or more Zapotec quela= words). This search would not have been possible without Smith Stark et al. (1993).

11 References like this one are to analyzed archival Colonial Zapotec documents. The “675” here means that the document dates to 1675, and so on.

12 The TVZ and Chickasaw versions were prepared for the fiftieth anniversary of the original Declaration. The online TVZ version (Lopez & Munro 1998) regrettably uses a now outdated orthography. Note that the language code used by the United Nations to refer to TVZ, ztu, is incorrect. The correct code is zab.

13 Some nouns derived with the hyphen, not dash suffix’ also include an additional glottal stop before the final consonant of the verb. It’s not clear in what types of words this second ‘i’ is added. In some cases there is a contrast between two nominalizations, one with the extra ‘i’, one without. Two examples derived from nosi-chí, the causative of nosi ‘to sleep’, for example, are nosi’chí ‘witch who can put you to sleep and then come into your house’ and nosi’chí ‘anesthesiologist’.

14 Some Chickasaw verbs lexically distinguish singular and plural subjects, but most do not.
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