Fluid Aspects of Negation in Central Pomo

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It is not unusual for languages to contain multiple markers of negation. In some languages, negation may be accomplished by either a negative particle or an affix, like English not happy and un-happy. In others, multiple markers are used together, as in Mohawk iah te-kenò:wes or French je ne l’aime pas ‘I don’t like it’. Sometimes alternative markers appear in different grammatical contexts. Prohibitives, for example, used in negative commands, often have special forms, as in Mohawk tóhsa sasa nikónhrhen ‘don’t forget!’. Sometimes alternative markers carry different degrees of force, as in French je ne l’aime point ‘I don’t like it at all’. In general, where different negative markers coexist within a language, they fill different functions: grammatical, semantic, and/or pragmatic.

1. Central Pomo čów and and ìn

Central Pomo, a language of the Pomoan family indigenous to Northern California, contains two negatives: čów and ìn. They do not contrast in morphological status: both are independent words. They do not appear in combination: each is a full negative in its own right. They are not distinguished by grammatical context: in many contexts, either would be grammatical. They do not differ in semantic force: additional adverbials are used for reinforcement or mitigation. They are not dialectal alternants: both are used by all speakers. Neither appears to be replacing the other: both appear pervasively in natural speech. Their robust coexistence implies some kind of difference in function.

Examples of the first negative particle, čów, are in (1) below. (Material cited here was drawn from spontaneous conversation. Speakers were Mrs. Frances Jack (FJ) of the Hopland rancheria, and Mrs. Salome Alcantra (SA) and Mrs. Florence Paoli (FP) of the Yokaya rancheria. The conversations were tape recorded then transcribed and translated with the help of Mrs. Jack.)

(1) Negative čów

SA: čów=ya ̀u· mú-þya-ì č’á l wa-q’.  
not=EVID 1.AGT 3.PL-PAT with go-LEVEL.PRF  
‘I didn’t go with them.’
FP: \( \text{\textit{mən}} \ \text{\textit{ə to}} \ \text{\textit{c’al}=k} \text{\textit{əl}} \)
\( \text{\textit{3 COP 1.PAT with=from the}} \)
‘But my sister
\( \text{\textit{čőbw \ řa-č’ó-ya-w \ } \text{\textit{mu-l.}} \)
\text{\textit{not swinging-hit-DEFOCUS-PRF that}}
didn’t get whipped.’

FJ: \( \text{\textit{məl=il ya hli-w mən=da}} \)
\( \text{\textit{that=at 1.PL.PAT go.PL-PRF so=at}} \)
‘When we went over there
\( \text{\textit{?”a \ · \ čá-n-ka-w \ } \text{\textit{čőbw.}} \)
\( \text{\textit{1.AGT run-IMPRF-CAUS-PRF not}} \)
I didn’t drive.’

Examples of the second negative particle \( \text{\textit{f}^{\text{b}^{\text{i}n}}} \) are in (2).

(2) Negative \( \text{\textit{f}^{\text{b}^{\text{i}n}}} \)

SA: \( \text{\textit{məl \ mə-ya \ } \text{\textit{əl čanú \ } \text{\textit{f}^{\text{b}^{\text{edu}} \ · \ } \text{\textit{čanó-n \ } \text{\textit{f}^{\text{b}^{\text{i}n}}.}} \)
\( \text{\textit{that lady the word much talk-IMPRF not}} \)
‘That lady doesn’t talk very much.’

FP: \( \text{\textit{tawhal yhé-t-a ? \ } \text{\textit{f}^{\text{b}^{\text{i}n}=ka.}} \)
work do-MULTIPLE.EVENT-IMPRF.PL not=INFERENTIAL
‘They must not be working.’

FJ: \( \text{\textit{dáy ?u \ } \text{\textit{u- mét’ \ yhé-n \ } \text{\textit{f}^{\text{b}^{\text{i}n}.}} \)
long already 1.AGT such do-IMPRF not
‘I haven’t made that stuff (acorn mush) for a long time.’
2. Central Pomo aspect

As can be seen from the glosses of verbs in (1) and (2) above, Central Pomo contains no past or present tense inflection, but it does exhibit a pervasive perfective/imperfective aspectual distinction. Some verb roots, like yo- ‘go’ and qawí- ‘build’, are basically perfective; they appear with the perfective suffix (-w after vowels, nothing after consonants except final glottalization of stops). Other roots, like wa- ‘go’ and yhé- ‘do’, are basically imperfective; they appear with imperfective suffixes (-an for singulars, -ač for plurals). Still others, like tēte- ‘tell’, can appear with either.

(3) Perfectives Imperfectives
yó-w ‘go’ wá-n ‘go’
qawí-w ‘build’ čanó-n ‘talk’
tēte-w ‘tell’ údáé-n ‘tell’

Aspect may be altered by various derivational suffixes. The semelfactive suffix -č, for example, produces perfective aspect verbs: yhé-n ‘do’, yhé-č ‘happen’. In addition to the derivational suffixes, Central Pomo has developed a rich set of aspectual markers, largely from layers of perfective and imperfective suffixes: yé-h-du-w-a-d-an ‘go-PERFECTIVE-IMPERFECTIVE-PERFECTIVE-IMPERFECTIVE-IMPERFECTIVE’ = ‘go frequently’. The diachronic development of aspectual categories is discussed in Mithun 1991, 2000.

3. Aspects of negation: perfective čhöw and and imperfective f'ln

The perfective/imperfective aspect distinction has been extended into the Central Pomo negative construction. The sentences in (1) above, with čhöw, are all perfective; those in (2) above, with f'ln are imperfective. The aspect of the negation marker is not simply a copy of the verbal aspect. It is the negation itself that is qualified. One day the women were discussing the dangers of angering young men. Mrs. Jack warned that when people annoy you, you should refrain from bringing your frustration home. She used a perfective verb for ‘tell’, a single act to avoid, but the imperfective negative f'ln for habitual refraining.

(4) Perfective predicate, imperfective negation

FJ: čá-l=yo-hi mú-ya-l tēte-w f'ln.
    house-to=go-and 3.PL-PAT tell-PRF not.IMPRF
    ‘Don’t come home and tell them.’
On another occasion, Mrs. Alcantra mentioned that a family had not taken advantage of their land, never building anything. She used a perfective verb for ‘build’, a single task, but the imperfective negative \( f^h \) to focus on the long period over which they had repeatedly failed to accomplish it.

(5) Perfective predicate, imperfective negation

SA: \( Shed \ \?a=\gamma qawí-w f^h \).

be=even build-PRF not.IMPRF

‘They never even built a shed.’

As she mused about the English equivalent of a Central Pomo word, Mrs. Paoli uttered the sentence in (6) below, using a perfective verb ‘hear’ for an event that needed to occur only once, but the imperfective negative \( f^h \) for the many missed occasions.

(6) Perfective predicate, imperfective negation

FP: \( Masán=ya mül sín ši-h-č’i-w \).  
White=TOP that how name-PRF-IMPRF.PL-PRF 1.AGT hear-SML.PRF not.IMPRF

‘I never heard what the White people call it.’

The opposite combination of aspects occurs as well. When Mrs. Alcantra remarked that she does not speak Kashaya, she used an imperfective verb for speaking (a habitual marked by two imperfective suffixes), but the perfective negative \( č bó \).

(7) Imperfective predicate, perfective negation

SA: \( ŋa \ met’ čanó-d-an č bó-w. \)

1.AGT such speak-IMPRF-IMPRF not-PRF

‘I don’t speak that [language].’

The reason behind her choice of the perfective negative \( č bó \) is not obvious until the precise character of the Central Pomo perfective/imperfective distinction is understood. For many other languages, the distinction has been characterized as one between bounded and unbounded events. Perfective events are defined as those viewed as wholes, complete with beginning and end: ‘I built it’. Since inclusion of the endpoint implies completion, perfectives are typically completive. Imperfectives capture only a portion of the activity: ‘I am/was talking’, ‘I talk’. They are thus typically incomplete. The boundedness definition fits most aspectual choices in Central Pomo, but
it conflicts with an important set. States, such as yáq ‘know’ or čōâ- ‘sit, live’, are classified as
perfective.

The Central Pomo perfective/imperfective distinction has a slightly different semantic basis than
those of many other languages. Central Pomo perfectives are those actions or states portrayed
without indication of internal temporal structure. Both single actions and unchanging states may
thus be classified as perfective. Imperfectives, by contrast, are those depicted with internal temporal
texture of some kind. Duratives, continuatives, progressives, habituals, and frequentatives are
classified as imperfective. A difference in Central Pomo aspect sometimes corresponds to a lexical
difference in English. The root čanó– with a perfective suffix is used for ‘sing’ (čanó-w). The same
root is used with an imperfective suffix for ‘talk’ (čanó-n). Singing is portrayed as internally
homogenous, while talking is seen as heterogeneous. Once the nature of the aspectual distinction is
understood, the basis behind Mrs. Alcantra’s choice of the perfective negative in (7) above becomes
clear. The negative expresses a steady lack of knowledge.

Mrs. Paoli used a similar combination in (8), explaining her absence from a picnic. The verb ‘to
walk around’ was imperfective, while the negative čōâw was perfective, describing an unchanging
incapacity.

(8) Imperfective predicate, perfective negation

FP: ʔa· ʔ=na wá-q’ čōâ-w
1.AGT COP-CONTR go-LEVEL not-PRF
‘I didn’t go

ʔidaw ma· wá-ʔw=an= čōâ  čōâ-w ʔ-ń.
really land go-AROUND-IMPRF=INF not-PRF be-AS
because I really can’t walk around too well.’

The interplay of aspectual combinations can be seen in the exchange in (9) below. In Mrs. Paoli’s
question, the verb ‘drink’ is imperfective, depicting recurring multiple events. The negative is
perfective, describing a steady state of abstinence. In Mrs. Jack’s response, the verb ‘drink’ is
perfective, referring to an individual session of drinking, while the negative is imperfective,
highlighting repeated avoidance of such sessions.

(9) Interplay of aspect

FP: q’-ό-ʔ-an čōâ-w ʔ’a· mul?
drink-MULTIPLE.EVENT-IMPRF not-PRF guess that
‘She doesn’t drink, does she?’
She drinks, but not too much.’

4. The role of grammatical context

The choice of negative aspect is not an automatic consequence of grammatical context. Either could be used grammatically in most sentences. After Mrs. Jack commented on a dog that had just rushed by, Mrs. Alcantra replied that she had not seen the dog. She used the perfective negative for the single missed opportunity.

(10) Perfective negative: single missed opportunity

SA:  čʰó-w  ʔa-  mu-  pʰwí-w.  
     not-IMPRF 1.AGT that visually-perceive-PRF  
     ‘I didn’t see it.’

While recounting an experience from her childhood, Mrs. Jack remarked that she had never seen her older sister, because the sister had died before she was born. In the sentence in (11), nearly identical to that in (10), she used the imperfective negative, indicating innumerable missed chances.

(11) Imperfective negative: recurring missed opportunities

FJ  ʔa-  múfu  pʰwí-w  ḋin.  
     1.AGT 3.PAT visually-perceive-PRF  not.IMPRF  
     ‘I never saw her.’ (She died before I was born.)

When Mrs. Paoli was nominated for an office, a certain man was disappointed. His displeasure on this single occasion was expressed with the perfective negative čʰów.
(12) Perfective negative: single occasion of displeasure

FP  Míya· má  dá· 2du-w  čhý-w.
3.POSS father  want-RFL-IMPRF-PRF  not-PRF
‘His father didn’t like it.’

On another occasion, Mrs. Jack recalled that her own father had never liked public events. His assorted habitual dislikes were expressed with the imperfective negative $f^{h}n$.

(13) Imperfective negative: habitual displeasure

FJ:  Hĩnìl  ma·  yhé-t-ä?-ya-w
Indian things  do-M.E-IMPRF.PL-DEFOCUS-PRF
‘Indian celebrations,

$k^{h}e$  me-né-m-a-w
dance  kicking-set-COOP-DEFOCUS-PRF
powwow dances,

ma·  wáyya  ma·  yhé-t-ä?-ya-w
things sacred things  do-M.E-IMPRF.PL-DEFOCUS-PRF
sacred doings,

me$t'$  dá· 2-du-w  $f^{h}n.$
such  want-RFL-IMPRF-PRF  not.IMPRF
he didn’t like those things at all.’

5. The negation of adjectives

There remains one set of constructions in which the expected negative choice is surprising. Given that states are classified as perfective in Central Pomo, we might predict that adjectives would be negated with the perfective $c^{h}ôw$. In fact, adjectives and other modifiers are usually negated with the imperfective $f^{h}n$.

(14) Negation of adjectives: $f^{h}n$

FJ:  q’ó= qì  q’dí  $f^{h}n=ka$  mu$_1$  mā·-tə  %el  %e.
what=even good not=INFER that woman the COP
‘She’s just not any good at all, that woman.’

FP: Yā=andidate ší ʃhi a ʃe mʊ.l. 1.PL=OBL name not.IMPRF COP that
‘That’s not our word.’ (‘The word sīya for ‘chair’ is not ours; it’s from Spanish.’)

SA: Spanish ʃhi a ʃe mʊ.l. not.IMPRF COP that
‘They’re not Spanish.’

The reason behind the choice of the imperfective ʃhi a becomes clear once the origin of the perfective marker ʃhów is considered. Its source is a stative verb ʃhó- ‘be nonexistent or absent’, still used with this meaning. As a state, it appears with the perfective suffix -w.

(15) Source of ʃhó-w: stative verb ‘not exist’, ‘be absent’

SA: Bá-to ʃe ʃa qawí-m-a-w=andidate ʃe ma. ʃhó-w. INDEF-PAT talk.PL-COMITATIVE.APPLICATIVE=INF not-PRF
‘There’s nobody to talk to.’

FJ: Bé=da=kay ʃe ma ʃa qawí-m-a-w=andidate ma. ʃhó-w. this=at=too COP=FAC house build-COOP-DEFOC-PRF=INF land not-PRF
‘Here, too, there’s no land to build houses on.’

FP: Báya ma. ʃhó-w ʃa-ʃt’ó. man nonexistent-PRF guess now
‘She’s got no man now, I guess.’

To distinguish the negation of a property from the negation of the existence of an entity, the negative ʃhí is used. The distinction can be seen by comparing the two remarks in (17) below, uttered by Mrs. Paoli on separate occasions.
(16) Negation of existence versus property

FP: Maŋl-ay čbỳ-w.
old.lady-PL not-PRF
‘There aren’t any old ladies.’

FP: Maŋl ḥn ʔtí.
old.lady not.IMPRF=even
‘She’s not really an old lady.’

6. The fluidity of negative aspect

Although the distinction between the two Central Pomo negatives is essentially semantic, namely perfective versus imperfective aspect, speakers can exploit the difference for pragmatic purposes. This option became apparent as Mrs. Jack and I were transcribing tapes of conversations. I would play an intonation unit, then she would repeat it slowly for me to write, then she would render it in English. Every so often she would use a different negative than the original speaker: sometimes she would repeat an original čbỳw as ḥn, sometimes vice-versa. Of course the full context was always clear. When questioned, she would reply that either was acceptable. A single speaker may even shift negatives from one moment to the next. Mrs. Alcantra and Mrs. Paoli were remarking that people disputing land could not take it with them to the grave. Mrs. Alcantra first used the imperfective negative ḥn, then Mrs. Paoli echoed nearly the same sentence with the perfective negative čbỳw. Mrs. Alcantra then repeated the sentence with the perfective čbỳw.

(17) Shift in negative aspect

SA: Múŋ-ya múl š-dé-ˀn-ma-w= ʁ h
dragging-carry-IMPRF-COOP-PRF=INF not.IMPRF
3-PL that
‘They won’t take it with them.’

FP: Ya š-dé-ˀn-ma-w= ʁ h
dragging-carry-IMPRF-COOP-PRF=INF not-PRF
1.PL ‘We won’t take it with us.’

SA: Múŋ-ya ʔ=muł š-dé-ˀn-ma-w= ʁ h
dragging-carry-IMPRF-COOP-PRF=INF not-PRF
3-PL COP=that
‘We won’t take it with us.’
‘They won’t take it with them.’

The fluidity of negative choice is a result of the semantic relationship between the two aspects. The use of the perfective is an unmarked choice; that of the imperfective is marked. Perfective verbs portray events without internal temporal structure, but the events need not actually be homogeneous; the speaker has simply chosen not to specify internal texture. Imperfective verbs represent a choice on the part of the speaker to specify such structure. Mrs. Paoli and Mrs. Jack were discussing a woman who had brought her children to the community with the intention of returning home after a short time. Mrs. Paoli first used an imperfective negative to highlight the long period over which the woman continually failed to leave. Mrs. Jack then summed up the result as an established fact with a perfective.

(18) Repeated failure versus established fact

**FP:**  
\[ \text{ever=even go-level.PRF not.IMPRF} \]  
‘She never did leave.’

**FJ:**  
\[ \text{ever=even go.PL-RFL-IMPRF.PL-PRF not-PRF} \]  
‘They never moved away.’

**FP:**  
\[ \text{ever=even go.PL-RFL-IMPRF.PL-PRF not-PRF} \]  
‘They never moved away.’

A similar fluidity can be seen in negations of the verb yáq’ ‘know’. This verb often appears with the perfective negative č³hw’, depicting a steady, homogeneous state of ignorance. Looking at an old photograph, Mrs. Paoli used the perfective č³hw’.

(19) Perfective negative with ‘know’: steady state

**FP:**  
\[ \text{so guess 3.PAT know not-PRF} \]  
‘I don’t know her.’
On another occasion, she was describing an incident in which a man ran over a child while backing out of his driveway. Here she used the imperfective ūn with the same verb, a choice that heightened the dynamic immediacy of the moment as the man was backing up.

(20) Imperfective negative with ‘know’: dynamic immediacy

FP: ū–tó hlaw ū’a wa-n yáq’ ūn %e mul.

EMP-PAT behind guess go-IMPRF know.PRF noI.IMPRF COP that

‘He didn’t know he had a child walking behind him.’

Alternations of this kind are not unusual.

7. Conclusion

The two Central Pomo negative particles thus do in fact serve distinct semantic functions: čów is perfective, while ūn is imperfective. Their patterns of use are somewhat obscured by the exact nature of the perfective/imperfective distinction in the language. Central Pomo perfectives portray events without internal temporal structure; imperfectives specify temporal texture. The perfective negative čów is thus used for either a single missed opportunity or a steady, homogeneous absence. The imperfective negative ūn highlights the internal temporal texture of repeated missed opportunities or abstinence. Within a given situation, speakers may chose whether or not to specify such temporal structure, treating an event as a single, established fact, or highlighting the immediacy of an event. The markedness relation thus results in a useful stylistic device, one not commonly expected in the domain of negation.

References
