



Locative and orientation descriptions in Tarascan: Topological relations and frames of reference

Alejandra Capistrán Garza *

División de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, Av. San Rafael Atlixco 186, 09340 México, DF, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of the use of locative and orientation descriptions in Tarascan, a language isolate spoken in Michoacán, Mexico. The article describes the use of topological relations and spatial frames of reference (FoRs) in Tarascan, as well as the speakers' preferences regarding FoR types when describing spatial configurations. The data show that relative FoRs are not preferred. Despite the existence of variation among speakers, it is attested that speakers of Tarascan, in addition to object-centered FoRs, favor geomorphic and/or landmark-based FoRs in locative descriptions. However, in orientation descriptions the direct FoR is dominant under specific conditions.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze the descriptions used in Tarascan for encoding locative and orientation relations, which are either “perspective-free” (topological) or “projective” (involving a perspective or frame of reference), and their frequencies in discourse. In these static relations an entity (figure) is either located or oriented by reference to another entity (ground), which defines a search domain for the interpretation of the spatial description (cf. Talmy, 1983). The data presented here allows us to establish the spatial frames of reference (FoRs) available in this language. Frames of reference (FoRs) are coordinate systems that can be employed to define spatial regions that serve as search domains for the location and orientation of objects (Jackendoff, 1983; Levinson, 1996, 2003; Pederson et al., 1998; Majid et al., 2004). It is worth noting that the main linguistic means for coding topological relations and coordinate systems in Tarascan discourse have not been explored until now. The analysis of the data reveals that topological descriptions—where proximity is the core notion—can be distinguished from projective ones, which require some lexical item that introduces a coordinate system. Contrary to what can be understood from the Tarascan data discussed by Friedrich (1971a), I offer evidence to support the following argument: spatial suffixes are excluded from object-centered FoRs, therefore body part suffixes, which are a subgroup of the spatial suffixes, are not involved in such projective descriptions.

In this paper the analysis of the use of FoRs in orientation and locative descriptions of objects located in tabletop space is based on the classification used in the NSF-funded project Spatial Language and Cognition in Mesoamerica, MesoSpace for short (PI J. Bohemeyer), of which this research is a part (see Bohemeyer, 2011; O'Meara and Pérez Báez, 2011). It is shown that Tarascan speakers make little use of the relative FoR, both in orientation and locative descriptions. Even though, there is not an absolute FoR available to Tarascan speakers, a geomorphic one is commonly used by most speakers in spatial descriptions. In order to analyze the different strategies employed by Tarascan speakers in spatial descriptions, I will consider two

Abbreviations: 1/2/3, 1st/2nd/3rd person; APPL, applicative; DIM, diminutive; ENF, emphatic; EXPL, explicative; FOC, focus; GEN, genitive; HAB, habitual; IND, indicative; LOC, locative; LOC.EXP, locative expansion; NMLZ, nominalizer; NF, non-finite; OBJ, object; PL, plural; POSS, possessive; PRF, perfect; PROG, progressive; PRS, present; REL, relative; SBJ, subject; SBJV, subjunctive; SG, singular; STA, stative.

* Tel.: +52 55 55684104.

E-mail address: ale_capistran@hotmail.com

aspects: first, the percentage of use of each FoR in orientation and locative descriptions produced by native speakers that participated in the Ball & Chair task, which is explained in Section 3; and second, the variation among speakers with respect to their use of different FoRs. The data show that Tarascan speakers favor object-centered, geomorphic and/or landmark-based FoRs in locative descriptions. Meanwhile, in orientation descriptions the direct FoR is dominant under certain conditions. The data regarding FoR preferences is in line with a central hypothesis of the MesoSpace project, which predicts that languages, which make pervasive use of meronyms (object part terms), as is the case of Mesoamerican languages, show a lack of preference for relative FoRs in spatial descriptions. The idea supporting this hypothesis is that in employing relative FoRs speakers must ignore the geometry of the ground on which meronyms are based (see Bohmeyer, 2011; O'Meara and Pérez Báez, 2011).

The article is organized as follows: Section 2 provides relevant information about Tarascan and its speakers. In Section 3, I present the methodology and tasks used to collect the data and the FoR classification adopted in interpreting it. In Section 4, a general overview of how locative and orientation relations are encoded in Tarascan is presented. Section 5 contains the discussion of the results regarding FoRs in discourse. Finally, Section 6 summarizes the findings of this research and offers some concluding remarks.

2. Tarascan and its speakers

Tarascan or *p'orhépecha* is a language isolate spoken by nearly 100,000 people in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. The region where Tarascan is spoken is situated in three main areas: the lacustrine zone of Pátzcuaro Lake, the western mountains (Sierra or Meseta Tarasca), and a small valley at the north of the Sierra, known as *La Cañada de los Once Pueblos*. Dialectal variation is found across villages, nevertheless there is a high degree of intelligibility among Tarascan speakers (see Friedrich, 1971b, 1975).

Tarascan is a completely suffixing, agglutinative language, highly inflecting and dependent-marking. It has a case system: subjects are unmarked, *-ni* is the suffix for objects of transitive and ditransitive clauses, *-nkuni* marks comitative, *-mpu* marks instrumental, *-eri/-iri* marks genitive and *-rhu* marks locative (this last suffix conveys information about any location or direction 'to', 'at', 'in', 'by', 'on', etc.). Morphologically related to the instrumental case, there is a postposition *ximpó*, which can convey different meanings including a locative one.¹ The ordering of phrases within a sentence is pragmatically determined and does not convey basic grammatical information. Verbal arguments are marked in what is typically identified as a morphological nominative/accusative pattern and there are no verbal pronominal suffixes to reference them. Verb inflection includes morphemes of tense, aspect and mode. In the indicative mode the third person subject (*-ti* '3IND') is differentiated from first/second (*-ka* '1/2IND'), while in the interrogative and subjunctive modes person is not differentiated. Nonfinite verb forms are marked by the suffix *-ni*. Verbs so inflected are commonly used as main predicates within a narrative context; otherwise they exhibit infinitive and gerundive functions. Moreover, this suffix (*-ni*) occurs in forms that have been considered subject participles (cf. Foster, 1969, pp. 57, 83; Wares, 1974), mainly with verbal themes including the stative suffix *-ri/-ti* (in dialectal variation with *-re/-te*). Some of these participial forms are used as heads of postpositional phrases, like *wératini* 'away from' (*wérani* 'to go out').² The language has an essive copula as well as a verb that codes location and existence (*nompé xarháni* 'there is nothing', *ishó xarháni* 'to be here'), *xarháni*. This verb can also function as an auxiliary signaling atelicity or as a stage level predicate in complex verb forms: *washákani xarháni* 'to be sitting down', *washákatini xarháni* 'to be seated down' (*washákani* 'to sit down').

In order to understand spatial constructions in Tarascan, it is important to consider certain morphosyntactic characteristics of verbal stems in this language. The most extensive paradigm of Tarascan's verbal suffixes is the set of more than 40 spatial or locative morphemes, whose basic function is to locate the event expressed by the verb (see Foster, 1969; Friedrich, 1971a; Monzón, 2004). These morphemes that are widespread in the language can be considered lexical affixes in many ways similar to those of the Salishan languages (Anderson, 1985; Bach, 1993; Mithun, 1997; Gerds, 2003). As is the case in Salishan languages, the space or area that Tarascan spatial morphemes refer to can be environmental, such as a yard, road, and water, or a part of a larger whole, as in the so-called body part suffixes. In any case, there is no formal relationship between the spatial suffixes and the nominal terms with similar meanings; for example, compare *-mi* 'liquid, water' and *-ts'í* 'head, top' with the nouns *itsi* 'water' and *ép'u* 'head'. With most of the body part suffixes the area denoted is always limited to the body of the predicate's subject (*kwakáts'íni* 'to wet one's head'). In these cases, in order to transfer the locus of the action to the body of another participant, further suffixation is required: the suffixes *-ku* and *-ta*,—in Foster's terms "locative expansions", fulfill this function (*kwakáts'íkuni* 'to wet another head'). These body part suffixes form a productive set of meronyms or object part morphemes assigned on the basis of the geometry of the object and the shape of its parts.

The last relevant fact about Tarascan verbs, for the topic at hand, is the existence of a set of verbal roots, usually called classificatory roots. These morphemes exhibit specific meanings that convey shape, configuration, orientation, and other properties mainly related to the shape and/or disposition of entities (see Foster, 1969; Friedrich, 1970). Such roots seem to fit into the type of "dispositionals" discussed by Ameka and Levinson (2007), consisting of a set of more than 25 members

¹ There are two more mono-morphemic postpositions: *xinkóni*, which is a free variant of the comitative case, and *anápu*, whose main function is to indicate the place a person or thing are from.

² An important characteristic of the language is the fact that most of Tarascan's lexical roots are verbal, from which words with diverse syntactic functions are constructed or derived.

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