

“Spatial Language in Tarascan: Body Parts, Shape and the Grammar of Location.”

This paper presents a study of the spatial language that describes object location in Tarascan (also known as P’urhepecha), an isolated MesoAmerican language of Central-Western Mexico, spoken today by about 150,000 people. Location in Tarascan is mainly expressed through a variety of body part suffixes, which have been grammaticalized into positional-orientational markers, some of which display a high level of semantic complexity. The body part suffixes involved include the head, mouth, back, face, nose, etc. and appear in combination with verbal roots to encode varied and detailed spatial relationships between objects.

As opposed to Western European languages where spatial location of objects is usually expressed by means of prepositions, Tarascan displays different spatial morphemes incorporated into verbs. The relative orientation of the object acting as ‘figure’ with respect to the one acting as ‘ground’ is obligatorily expressed in the grammatical structure, given that completely different morphemes are used according to object orientation. For instance, *Markadori anats’ikusti mesarhu* ‘The marker is on the table,’ may be more accurately translated into English as follows: “The marker [a longish and rigid object], set in a vertical position with respect to the plane of the table [a flat horizontal surface], is on the head of that surface.” In other words, a speaker cannot fail to mention what the marker’s spatial orientation is with respect to the table’s surface (referred to in Tarascan as its head). By the same token, if the marker is positioned in a horizontal manner, the verbal stem changes: *Markadori icharhukusti mesarhu* ‘The marker is on the edge of the table,’ which can be translated as, “The marker [a longish and rigid object], set in a horizontal position with respect to plane of the table, is on its nose.” Furthermore, different verbal stems are required by the grammar according to the shape of the object acting as ‘figure’, as exemplified by: *Atarakua parhats’ikusti mesarhu* ‘The cup is on the table’, more accurately, “The cup [a container], which is vertically oriented with respect to the table [a flat horizontal surface], is on its head.”

In the above sentences, the semantic information provided in the verbal stem (underlined) relates to the type of object—most crucially with regard to shape—one is dealing with and to how the object is oriented, whereas the spatial suffix (in bold) describes where the object is positioned. To be sure, this type of marking of spatial relationships in the grammatical structure by means of body part nominals does not appear to be an isolated phenomenon in Tarascan, nor to be exclusive to this language (cf. Levy 1999, on Totonac)

All in all, in this paper I hope to offer an overall picture of the grammar of object location in Tarascan and thus contribute to advance our current crosslinguistic understanding of the language of space. Given the great number of different elements involved, beyond a detailed linguistic analysis and description of examples, another intended goal of this paper is to determine and give an account of some of the key aspects in the expression of object location in Tarascan, such as the identification of relevant morphemes, their distributional and permutational properties, (any) grammatical restrictions in their use, and, most importantly, their semantics.

The work of P. Brown (1994), S. Levinson (1994, 1996, 2003), C. Brugman (1983, 1986), L. Talmy (1988) and others informs the present work, and P. Friedrich’s monograph on the Tarascan suffixes of locative space provides a point of departure towards a more complete and detailed analysis than what exists so far regarding these suffixes and the grammar of location in this most fascinating language.