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

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0. Introduction

Tarascan—also known as P’urhepecha—is a language isolate and one of the approximately 60 indigenous languages still spoken in Mexico. It is the language of the P’urhepecha people, who originally inhabited an area covering large portions of the states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Guerrero, and Guanajuato in Central-Western Mexico. The P’urhepecha were never conquered by their enemies, the Aztecs, and developed quite an advanced civilization. Tarascan is still spoken today by about 105,000 people, or perhaps more, yet it has not been adequately investigated. To this day, only a few studies exist which deal with this most fascinating language. Tarascan speaking communities may be divided into three major areas: the Lake Pátzcuaro region, the Tarascan Plateau, and the Ravine of the Eleven Towns. The Tarascan dialect under consideration here is that of the Tarascan Plateau, or meseta tarasca, and more specifically that of the town of Angahuan, Michoacán.

Tarascan is an agglutinative type of language with an extremely rich morphology; it is also an inflectional language and has a system of cases, including the genitive, the locative, and the residential (cf. French chez). Where other languages may use adverbs, prepositions or auxiliary verbs, Tarascan employs morphological means to express meanings related to causation, direction, manner, relative orientation, repetition, voice, volition, and many others. As an example of the richness of the system, consider the following example: from the root piré ‘sing’ (infinitive: piréni), it is possible to derive pirépani ‘to go singing’, pirépuni ‘to come singing’, pirépunguani ‘to return singing’, piréchani ‘to feel like singing’, pirékuekani ‘to want to sing’, pirépanchani ‘to wish to go singing’, pirépunchani ‘to wish to come singing’, and pirépireni ‘to sing and sing, to go on singing’, among numerous others.

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1. Tarascan Locative Suffixes and their Meanings

Tarascan is specially known for its abundant and complex spatial morphology. In this language, location is expressed mainly through a wide 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 head, mouth, back, face, nose, etc. and appear in combination with verbal roots to encode varied and detailed spatial relationships between objects or the locus of affect or experience. In Tarascan there are about thirty two locative suffixes (Friedrich 1971:12)—Totonac, for example, has around thirty (Levy 1999:135); most of them possess some corporeal meaning. The suffixes may refer to a single body part such as k’u ‘hand’, a single non-body part such as ru ‘road, street’, or be rather complex like the extremely productive body-part suffixes that extend into several physical and psycho-social domains, such as ērhi ‘face’ or parha ‘back’. Spatial suffixes in Tarascan constitute a formal class of bound morphemes, i.e. they do not function as independent nouns. They combine with verb roots to form more complex verbal bases; in the verbal complex, they usually appear either immediately after the root, or they appear after the root and some type of adverbial suffix (e.g. kua ‘downwards’, pi ‘quickly’, rhi ‘suddenly’), if one is employed. As members of a substitution class, these suffixes are restricted to appear only one at a time in this position. After the spatial suffixes, one of several voice morphemes may be present (ku, kurhi, ra, ta), possibly followed by an adverbial suffix indicating motion, repetition, direction, and so on (pa, pu, ma, mu, pungua, nu, nta). At the end of the morphological chain, there are inflectional suffixes of various kinds (tense, aspect, person, number, and mood, and so forth) (Friedrich 1971).

In this study, I concentrate on the main corporeal suffixes, as these constitute some of the most complex and diversified of all Tarascan morphemes. Also, in the glosses to the examples, the corporeal meaning will be used for simplicity of exposition. We should note that, beyond their corporeal referents, there is an ample range of meanings that these suffixes are able to express.

In the following table, the main body-part suffixes are presented, along with their corporeal signification and, on the second column, some of the other principal meanings they can display:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. a ‘stomach, intestines’</th>
<th>central area, interior, field, yard, body of fruit or vegetable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. ch’a ‘neck, throat’</td>
<td>neck of objects, narrowing, (inner) eaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ch’u ‘buttocks, genitals’</td>
<td>bottom of objects, underside, underneath, roofed passageway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. k’u ‘hand’</td>
<td>hands of objects, tree or plant leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. mu ‘mouth, lip’</td>
<td>opening, orifice, edge, entrance, door, window, language, speaking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. ndi ‘ear, top of shoulder’ ear of objects, handle, inside corner, interior surface of an angle, ground surface, branch, hearing, understanding
7. ndu ‘foot, leg below knee’ base of plants or trees, exterior base, field
8. ya/ye ‘chest, thoracic area’ interior, interior enclosure, cavity
9. ńarhi ‘face, eye’ anterior surface of an object, interior surface, interior wall, flat (frontal) surface, flat area of the chest or of the stomach, shin, facade, emotion, mental states
10. parha ‘back’ posterior surface of objects, exterior surface, outside wall, belly of objects, tree trunk
11. rhu ‘nose, forehead’ point, tip, projection, end of object, edge, fruit, flower, seed
12. t’a ‘leg, side of body’ thigh, side of objects, floor, bounded flat surface
13. ts’i ‘head’ top of objects, above, exterior upper surface

Besides these meanings, as mentioned above, some of these suffixes also participate in numerous extensions into the psycho-social domain, all of which are highly conventionalized. Due to all their extended uses, the productivity of these suffixes is truly remarkable, serving as formatives not only of verbs but of other word classes such as nouns, adverbs, and adjectives, and their combinatorial powers are extensive; as a result, they are found ubiquitously in speech and texts.

The collocational restrictions regarding combinations of verbal bases and locative suffixes are morphotactic as well as semantic and unfortunately cannot be discussed in detail here. Besides the partitive and locational meanings discussed here, body-part suffixes display intricate subtleties of meaning in combination with other morphemes, especially the voice or valence morphemes (ta, ku, and ra). Most complex body-part suffixes occur before both ku and ta to form transitive verbs based on transitive roots; with intransitive stems ta has a causative function while ku denotes state, property or location. An example that shows some of the possible combinations involving ku and ta and a suffix like ńarhi ‘face, eye’ follows: mi-ńarhi-ni ‘to close one’s eyes’; mi-ńarhi-ku-ni ‘to close someone else’s eyes’; mi-ńarhi-ta-ni ‘to close a wall’ (e.g. a hole in a wall).

2 Application of Body-Part Suffixes to Other Entities
Tarascan extends the use of body parts to parts of animals, objects, and locations (that stand in a relation of part to whole with objects). The human body seems to serve as the model upon which Tarascan speakers base their naming of other entities. Animals, in particular, are named as though they were humans on all fours. Also, the canonical vertical orientation and overall configuration of the human body is usually preserved in such transfers. Hence, ts’i ‘head’ typically

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2 For many more examples of body-part suffixes in derivation, see especially Friedrich 1971.
names the highest area or part of an object, ch’u ‘buttocks, bottom’ its bottom, parha ‘back’ its back, and so on. However, there is no rigid imposition of this model upon a given object. For example, ‘face’ is not used to name any part of a pot, even though the possibility of doing so may seem to exist; rather, as discussed below, only ‘back’ is used. This indicates that the system is rather flexible, serving foremost the expressive needs of speakers, given that the parts of an entity do not necessarily preserve the relative location of the analogous human body part with respect to the whole or its specific shape.

As an illustration of how the system works, let us consider some examples of the use of the body-part morphemes as they are applied to an animal, such as a pig, and to different objects. For a pig, the terms used are basically the same as for a human: the pig’s main parts are ts’ï ‘head’, mu ‘mouth’, parha ‘back’, a ‘stomach’, ch’u ‘bottom’, t’a ‘leg’, ndu ‘foot’, and k’u ‘hand’, all corresponding to analogous human body parts. Something to be noticed is the fact that the front legs are referred to as ‘hands’, which lends support to the notion that application of the suffixes is based on the overall configuration of the human body. A common object like a table has a ts’ï ‘head’ (topmost surface), ch’u ‘bottom’ (underside), rhu ‘nose, forehead’ (edge(s)), t’a ‘leg’ (each of the legs), and ndu ‘foot’ (base of the legs). An object such as a pot has a mu ‘mouth, lip’ (mouth), parha ‘back’ (area all around the main body), t’a ‘side’ (area on side(s) of main body), ch’u ‘bottom’ (bottom), and a ŋe/ŋa ‘heart, chest’ (interior). Here notice that parha ‘back’ is the suffix used for the area all around the body of the pot, where perhaps we could have expected ŋarhi ‘face’ as well; in reality, ŋarhi is actually used for the interior wall of the pot. Finally, a fairly featureless object such as a mat, when vertical, has a ŋarhi ‘face’ (front surface), parha ‘back’ (back surface), rhu ‘nose, forehead’ (edge(s)), and ndi ‘ear’ (corner(s)) and, when horizontal, has a ŋarhi ‘face’ (top surface), ch’u ‘bottom’ (underside), rhu ‘nose, forehead’ (edge(s)), and ndi ‘ear’ (corner(s)).

The assignment of part names is object-based in the sense that the orientation of the object or its position does not affect the naming of its parts. However, in the case of a fairly featureless object, such as a mat, or objects with no inherent orientation, part names are instead assigned based on the observer’s perspective: ŋarhi ‘face’, for example, would have to be used to designate the flat surface facing the observer or that the observer can readily see.

3. The Expression of Location in Tarascan

In contrast to Western-European languages, where spatial location of objects is usually expressed by means of prepositions or case endings, Tarascan makes use of the body-part suffixes we have looked at, incorporating them into verbs. Given space constraints, I will focus mainly on the coding of location where there is contact between objects (the figure and the ground) (the case of ‘the book is on the table’), rather than on the expression of location where the objects do not come into direct contact (the case of ‘the tree is behind the house’), although a few remarks on this topic will be provided in a later section.
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Through the intrinsic properties and extensive combinatorial powers of its spatial suffixes, Tarascan provides a wealth of information regarding the geometry of the entities participating in a locative event and the specific locus of the event. The choices to be made are complex and require the construal of events from an all-encompassing spatial perspective; participant entities have to be judged according to their spatial qualities, their shape, their disposition, their orientation, and, consequently, the speaker cannot remain non-committal with respect to all these variables.

For instance, we observe that 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. The function of the body part as spatial morpheme is to delimit the area of the ground where the figure can be located. Furthermore, it is absolutely obligatory to include a spatial suffix as it cannot be left out of the verbal complex. In sentences of the type ‘the book is on the table,’ the figure is always the subject of the sentence, and the ground is the noun marked by the locative case \textit{rhu}. Tarascan explicitly marks the ground using the locative, unlike other Mesoamerican languages, which rely instead on the order of the two nominals involved; however, the ground may actually be left out altogether when its referent is retrievable from the context.

Consider the following sentences (in the first few examples, the verbal root is underlined, while the spatial suffix appears in bold):

(1) \textit{Markadori} \textit{anga-ts'iku-s-ti mesa-rhu} \textsuperscript{3} mesa-rhu

\begin{tabular}{llll}
marker & longish.vertical-head-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 & table-loc & \\
\end{tabular}

‘The marker is on the table.’

(1) 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 [an elevated top horizontal surface], is on top [the head] of this 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).\textsuperscript{4} By the same token, if the marker is not positioned in a vertical but a horizontal manner on the table, the verbal root cannot remain the same:

(2) \textit{Markadori} \textit{icha-rhu-ku-s-ti mesa-rhu}

\begin{tabular}{llll}
marker & longish.horizontal-nose-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 & table-loc & \\
\end{tabular}

‘The marker is (lying) on the edge of the table.’

\textsuperscript{3} Examples are not given in phonetic transcription but in ordinary Tarascan orthography, with a couple of exceptions. Note that \textit{j} = [h/x] and \textit{x} = [ř]; the symbol ‘ after a consonant marks aspiration.

\textsuperscript{4} The top surface of the table as an individuated object is referred to as \textit{kots'ikua}, which also contains the suffix for head, \textit{ts'í}.
(2) conveys something closer to: “the marker [a longish and rigid object], set in a horizontal position with respect to the plane of the table [a top horizontal surface], is on the edge [the nose] of this surface.” In sentence (2), the body-part term has been changed from ts’ï to rhu to illustrate other possibilities of meaning in the language: ts’ï refers to the main part of the topmost surface of the table, whereas rhu designates its edge(s).

Furthermore, different verbal stems are required by the grammar according to the shape of the object acting as ‘figure’, as exemplified by sentence (3):

(3) Atarakua parha-ts’ï-ku-s-ti mesa-rhu
cup container.upright-head-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 table-loc
‘The cup is on the table.’

or, more accurately, “the cup [a non-round container upright], which is vertically oriented with respect to the table [a top horizontal surface], is on the top of this surface.”

As can be appreciated, all the semantic complexity of shape, orientation, location, and dimension combined is coded but in a couple of morphemes.

Further examples follow:

(4) Mikua kapa-rhu-ku-s-ti mesa-rhu
cover container.upside.down-nose-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 table-loc
‘The lid is upside-down on the edge of the table.’

(5) Libru echu-ts’ï-ku-s-ti mesa-rhu
book flat-head-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 table-loc
‘The book is (lying) flat on the table.’

The location of people can also be described in a similar manner:

(6) K’uiripu-echa (sesi) sërihyarhï-ku-s-ti-ksï
person-pl well row-face-intr-aor/pres-asser.3-3pl
‘The people are (well) lined up on the hillside.’

(7) K’uiripu-echa icha-yarhï-ku-s-ti-ksï
person-pl longish.horizontal-face-intr-aor/pres-asser.3-3pl
‘The people are lying on the hillside.’

(8) Ji ana-mu-ku-s-ka k’umanchikua-rhu
I longish.vertical-mouth-intr-aor/pres-asser.1/2 house-loc
‘I am standing at the door of the house.’

In all the previous sentences, the semantic information provided in the verbal root relates to the type of object—most crucially with regard to shape—the speaker is
locating and to how the object is oriented, whereas the spatial suffix describes
where the object is positioned. To be sure, this type of marking of spatial rela-
tionships in the grammatical structure by means of body parts does not appear to be
an isolated phenomenon in Tarascan, or to be exclusive to this language. Other
languages such as Totonac, Mixtec, or Zapotec behave in similar ways (cf.
MacLaury 1989). What is different here is the great extent to which these suffixes
are integrated into the grammar of location in Tarascan and their extensive
interplay with roots denoting shape, disposition, and orientation, as well as their
ample use outside the human-body framework. In contrast, to give but an exam-
ple, according to MacLaury (1989:135), in Zapotec there are only three body parts
(namely, lip or mouth, face, and stomach) which have been extended to name
locations outside the human-body framework; as shown in Table 1, in Tarascan,
most body-part suffixes do so, among them ch'a ‘neck’, mu ‘mouth’, ndi ‘ear’,
ŋarhi ‘face, eye’, parha ‘back’, rhu ‘nose, forehead’, t’a ‘leg, side’, and ts’i
‘head’.

4. The Issue of Shape
An important consideration in Tarascan with respect to shape categories is the
following: Tarascan possesses verbal roots that classify for arguments of a
specific shape, which may also include an orientational or dispositional meaning
component. According to Friedrich (1979:345), “the verbal roots are classifica-
tory… in that the speaker must make decisions about the shape of their referents
and the shape of the referents of the co-occurring subjects and objects.”

Among the most common of these roots we find: aŋa ‘longish, rigid object,
vertically oriented’; icha ‘longish, rigid object horizontally oriented (i.e. maximal
axis oriented horizontally); and, although this information is not provided in the
literature, it also refers to a 3D object, such as a thick book, placed on its spine
(i.e. secondary axis aligned with the vertical); echu ‘flattish object horizontally
oriented’ (maximal axis oriented horizontally); parha ‘(non-round) container or
hollow object upright, or facing away from the surface of contact’; kapa ‘(non-
round) container or hollow object upside-down, or facing towards surface of
contact’; kirha/irha ‘round or oval object, or container with a round base’; sîrhi
‘objects in a row, aligned’; chaki ‘flexible object in disarray’ (e.g. blankets,
clothes, ropes, threads), and xâkui ‘elastic, stretchy object’ (e.g. rubber bands,
springs). Tarascan is also very rich in this aspect of its grammar, and there are
many other such roots. As the glosses provided indicate, the meanings of these
items can certainly get quite specific.

In the domain of numeral classifiers, historical extensions to shape are a dis-
tinct possibility. And, indeed, in Tarascan these verbal roots appear to be related
to the numeral classifiers that at one point were a much more productive area of

5 My semantic characterizations of these roots may differ from those of previous authors. Given
the great importance of accurately characterizing these meanings, some existing definitions were
refined to reflect my consultant’s native speaker intuitions.
the language. In the descriptions of Tarascan made in the middle of the 16th
century (cf. Maturino Gilberti 1987 [1558]), 18 different numeral classifiers were
said to be in use; these referred to shape, dimension, disposition, and other such
features of objects. In the modern language, there has been a great reduction in the
number and use of numeral classifiers. The only functional ones at this point are
the following three: icha for long and rigid objects, echu for flat objects, and
kira/irha for round ones. They are only partly obligatory in the counting of
nominal expressions, as they are often missing in the noun phrase. The classifiers,
if employed, are always accompanied by the nominalizer kua- and appear after
the numeral, as in the following examples: ma ichakua k’erhutakua ‘one finger’;
t’amu irhakua enandi ‘four guavas’; tembini echukua ichuskuta ‘ten tortillas’.
Note that in their use as nominal classifiers all three items refer to a definitional
property of the objects (their shape), rather than to other more relational charac-
teristics, such as their disposition or orientation with respect to other objects.

The combination of these shape-roots and a body-part suffix marks the exis-
tence or presence of an object of that shape at that particular location. Furthermore,
by virtue of the semantics of the body-part suffix, the shape of the location
is also made explicit. A few of these roots were used in sentences (1-8) above. Let
us consider some more examples. Once again, the subject of the sentence repre-
sents the figure, and the noun marked by the locative case rhu is the ground:

(9) Porhechi-cha kirha-ndi-s-ti-ksï
    pot-pl round-ear-aor/pres-asser.3-3pl
    ‘The pots are on the floor.’

(10) Tarheri-ri sîndari-cha ekua-rhu chaki-ndi-ku-s-ti-ksï
    farmer-gen rope-pl patio-loc flexible+disarray-ear-intr-
aor/pres-asser.3-3pl
    ‘The farmer’s ropes are on the ground (in the patio).’

(11) Sîndari ma k’umanchikua-rhu chaki-tsî-ku-s-ti-ksï
    rope a house-loc flexible+disarray-head-intr-
aor/pres-asser.3-3pl
    ‘A rope is on the roof of the house.’

(12) Tsîtsîki ana-ye-s-ti basu-rhu
    flower longish.vertical-heart-aor/pres-asser.3 glass-loc
    ‘The flower is (standing) inside the glass.’

(13) Pisaroni echu-nyarhi-ku-s-ti saloni-rhu
    blackboard flat-face-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 classroom-loc
    ‘The blackboard is on the classroom wall.’
Tsīkiata  parha-ŋarhi-ku-s-ti
basket container.upright-face-intr-aor/pres-asser.3
‘The basket is (hanging) on the wall facing away from it.’

5. Some Remarks about the Structure of Tarascan Locative Sentences

Notice that, in all the examples we have looked at, there is no occurrence of any verb meaning ‘stand’, ‘sit’, or ‘lie’, etc., as it is common in other languages in locative sentences. Rather, this information is recovered from the semantics of the shape root in combination with the body part.

In addition, unlike other languages, such as Totonac or Zapotec, where body parts frequently appear outside the verb complex as part of a genitive NP construction of the type Poss-Part + N (e.g. its-top + house, meaning ‘the roof of the house’), in Tarascan body-part morphemes never appear as independent words in the sentence. They may appear outside the verbal complex but only as formatives in derived adjectives, adverbs, or nouns; derived nouns contain a nominalizing suffix and have meanings that are related to that of the part suffix, for example, the nouns that name body parts. The following are some examples (the body-part suffix in question appears in parenthesis): chukuxukua ‘elbow’ (xu ‘arm’), kondurhakua ‘sole of the foot’ (ndu ‘foot’), konşekua ‘chest’ (ŋe ‘chest’), kanyarhkua ‘face’ (ŋarhi ‘face’), kok’urhakua ‘palm of the hand’ (k’u ‘hand’), tsikat’akua ‘leg’ (t’a ‘leg’), and so on. However, some other body part names do not seem to involve body-part suffixes: anajastakua ‘shin’, jak’i ‘hand’, t’etekua ‘buttocks’.

6. More on Shape and Location

Levy (1999:157-8) explains that in Totonac, in some cases, the presence of the body-part suffix implies not a specific sub-area or location on the object but its overall shape. In Tarascan this reading is also possible. Such is the case in a sentence like the following:

T’u jupa-parha-ku-siŋa
you wash-back-tran-hab+asser.1/2
enandi-ŋi
guava-obj
‘You wash (the body of) the guava.’

This strongly implies that the action is performed on an object of a certain shape, in this specific case, an object of the roundish class. The use of another spatial suffix would mean that an object of a different shape is involved, as we see in:

Ji jupa-ŋarhi-ta-siŋa
I wash-face-tran-hab+asser.1/2
mandani each
uęxurhini year
‘I wash the (inner) wall every year.’

The exact interpretation of such sentences is, of course, also heavily dependent on the context of the speech situation.
Another possibility of meaning brought about by body-part suffixes that should be mentioned is the case where the suffix refers to a part or location on the body of the subject of the sentence; in such case, the action of the verbal root is directed towards or affects the space defined by the body-part suffix. The body part represents the affected entity within a larger location. The part or area of the body may be explicitly stated as a separate noun, in which case it will be again marked by the locative *rhu*, as in the following:

(17)  *Eréndira*  *tsîreri ma-k’u-rha-s-ti  jak’i-rhu*
Erendira corn.dough be.stuck-hand-intr/aor/pres.asser.3 hand-loc
‘Erendira has corn dough stuck on her hand.’

(18)  *Uanochi eŋi kafe jata-ka  porho-ch’u-ti*
6 sack that coffee contain-subj have.a.hole-bottom-asser.3
‘The sack that contains the coffee has a hole on the bottom.’

(19)  *Ch’uru-k’u-s-ka-ni  ma p’ikukua-mbo*
poke-hand-aor/perf.asser.1/2-1 a needle-inst
‘I poked my hand with a needle.’

(20)  *Juchiti piri-mba  aparhi-ndira-s-ti  penchumekua-rhu*
my daughter-poss.3 burn-mouth-aor/perf.asser.3 mouth-loc
‘My daughter burned her mouth.’

(21)  *Aparhi-ndu-s-ka-ni  kondurhakua-rhu*
burn-feet-aor/perf.asser.1/2-1 sole.of.foot-loc
‘I burned the soles of my feet.’

In the case of ambiguous suffixes (with more than one corporeal meaning), the specific location is specified by a noun marked in the locative case:

(22)  *Kiti-ŋarhi-xa-ti  eskua-rhu*
rub-eyes-prog-asser.3 eyes-loc
‘He/she is rubbing his/her eyes.’

In order to indicate that the referent of a given suffix is to be found on the body of a second participant, a valence morpheme, like *ku* or *ta*, is needed:

(23)  *Petu jupa-mu-ku-xa-ti*
Peter wash-mouth-3obj-prog-asser.3
‘Peter washes someone’s mouth.’

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(24) \(I\) \(uichu\) \(katsa-ndu-ku-s-ti\) \(tataka-ni\)
    dem dog bite-foot-3obj-aor/perf-asser.3 boy-obj
    ‘This dog bit the boy’s foot.’

In these examples, the body part clearly constitutes the locus of affect of the
verbal event. Even though the examples shown here favor human subjects, it
should be evident by now that Tarascan can express all sorts of locations on both
humans and objects.

Although this paper concentrates on locative events where there is direct con-
tact between the entities involved, we need to note that these same body-part
suffixes extend their domain of application metonymically from part of an object
to reference to the area in space that projects out from that part, associated with
that subpart, or to relative location in the space surrounding the object. Again, this
is not exclusive to Tarascan but occurs in other Mesoamerican languages (Zapo-
tec, Mixtec, Totonac). This use represents the extension of body-part suffixes as
relational elements in the grammar, since the body part delimits the relative
location of some object with respect to another, as exemplified in:

(25) \(Libru\) \(echu-ch’u-ku-s-ti\) \(mesa-rhu\)
    book flat-bottom-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 table-loc
    ‘The book is lying flat under the table.’

(26) \(Misitu\) \(pi-t’a-ku-s-ti\) \(porhechi-rhu\)
    cat next.to-side-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 pot-loc
    ‘The cat is next to (the side of) the pot.’

(27) \(Uaxantsikua\) \(pi-rhu-ku-s-ti\) \(mesa-rhu\)
    chair next.to-nose-intr-aor/pres-asser.3 table-loc
    ‘The chair is close to the edge of the table.’

Finally, we should observe that, in Tarascan, location can also be expressed using
locative adverbs and the stative verb \(jarháni\) ‘to be located’. Locative adverbials
are also abundant in Tarascan, among them: \(karhakua\) ‘above’, \(ketsekua\) ‘below’,
\(maekandani\) ‘to the side’, \(orhepani\) ‘in front’, \(pexu\) ‘behind’, \(tatsepani\) ‘behind’,
\(i’irek’andani\) ‘to the right’, \(uikixkandani\) ‘to the left’, etc. Nevertheless, body
parts are at play even here, given that some of these adverbials actually contain a
body-part suffix. Friedrich (1971:66) gives these examples: \(jandikutini\) \(\text{(ndi ‘ear’)}\)
‘along the surface of an angle on a vertical axis’, \(jandukutini\) \(\text{(ndu ‘foot’)}\)
‘along the foot or base of’, \(jarhukutini\) \(\text{(rhu ‘nose’)}\) ‘along a projection’. Sentences (28-
30) exemplify the expression of location through locative adverbials:

(28) \(Tasa\) \(porhechi-rhu\) \(maekandani\) \(jarhá-s-ti\)
    cup pot-loc to.the.side be-aor/pres-asser.3
    ‘The cup is to the side of the pot.’
As the number of participants in the event increases, locative sentences can get quite complex, a matter that is certainly worth of further study.

7. Conclusion
Tarascan is a language with no known relatives today, and its careful study should add to the body of work that seeks to provide us with a better understanding of the linguistic strategies used to talk about space and location, both cross-linguistically as well as with respect to individual languages. From this brief survey of such strategies in this particular language, we find that, just as other Mesoamerican languages, Tarascan is thoroughly preoccupied with issues of shape, orientation, and location. Further research will be needed to establish just how idiosyncratic Tarascan is with respect to spatial grammar and how this is reflected in the language. It is interesting to note, for example, the preoccupation of this language with containers and their shapes, which is consistent with the great salience and importance of such artefacts to a culture that has excelled in the domain of pottery. Moreover, we have seen that the use of locative suffixes is pervasive, and Tarascan thoroughly exploits the semantic possibilities associated with part-whole relationships; body-part suffixes have broadly diversified and have gone beyond the mere naming of parts of entities, the lexical realm, to include decidedly spatial-relational uses, in what can very well be characterized as the grammar of location. In such use of body parts, the geometry of events is emphasized and issues of shape, disposition and orientation are paramount. All in all, Tarascan constitutes an excellent example of how space has become grammar.

References

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