

## TARASCAN VERB INFLECTION

Alan C. Wares

1. Non-finite verb forms
2. Finite verb inflection
3. Irregular verbs
4. Compound verb phrases

Tarascan<sup>1</sup> morphology is characterized by suffixation as its predominant

---

1. Tarascan is the native language of some 60,000 inhabitants of the state of Michoacan, Mexico. There are a number of mutually intelligible dialects, among them the dialect spoken in the region of Lake Patzcuaro, chiefly to the west of the lake; that spoken in the area of the Mexico-Guadalajara highway, in the vicinity of Carapan; and that spoken in the highlands south of the highway. The writer's acquaintance with the language extends over a period of 20 years, with a speaking knowledge acquired during several years of residence at the beginning of that period and retained by occasional visits. I am indebted to Maxwell D. Lathrop, of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who first introduced me to Tarascan grammar, but the present analysis does not necessarily reflect his own at all points.

Informants for the data on which this paper is based were Juan Villa A. and Gabriel Ascencio A., both native speakers of the western lake dialect, but now residents of Cheran, in the highlands.

---

feature. Tarascan verbs in particular exhibit this characteristic which enables the speaker to express in one word a variety of meanings depending upon the combination of suffixes that he uses. These suffixes fall into two groups: derivational (or "thematic")<sup>2</sup> and inflectional. The former consti-

---

2. Mary L. Foster, The Tarascan Language (1969), p. 90 ff. Although this monograph includes a chapter on verb inflection, the present writer feels that Foster's analysis can be improved upon; hence this paper.

---

tutes the first major suffixial class following the verb stem, and the latter the second. Within each major group there are minor groupings whose order of occurrence is fixed;<sup>3</sup> inflectional suffixes, for example, are aspectual,

---

3. Foster states that "order of suffixation is not completely fixed" (ibid., pg. 90), but presents no clear evidence to support this statement.

---

temporal, and modal in that order. Person and number are indicated by enclitics which may be suffixed either to the verb itself or to a preceding noun or pronoun, or even to the conjunction or relative pronoun that introduces the verb phrase. This paper will be concerned mainly with inflectional suffixes and will deal only in passing with derivational suffixes and enclitics.

1. Verb forms are either finite or non-finite. The former are inflected for aspect, tense, and mode; the latter are not. Non-finite forms include the infinitive, the durative, perfect, and past participles, the imperative, and the hortative.

1.1. The simplest form of the Tarascan verb is the non-suffixed stem,

which is the same as the singular imperative of many verbs: ní 'go!', atá 'hit it!' Not every verb stem can be used alone as an imperative, however; semantic factors make it necessary for many stems to be followed by a derivational suffix in order to be meaningful. This may be illustrated by the following imperative forms: k'aráta 'sweep!', k'aráhpa 'sweep the floor!', k'aráhcuta 'sweep the porch!'. A comparison of these forms shows that the stem is k'ará- (homophonous with k'ará 'deceive!'), but that it is not used alone as an imperative form.

The imperative form of the verb 'to be' is há and its plural is hé. In several dialects of Tarascan the imperative plural of other verbs is formed by the verb stem followed by hé: kurá hé 'listen!' (The imperative singular can be formed in the same way with há, and seems to be an emphatic imperative: kurá há 'listen!') In the dialect spoken on the islands and to the east of Lake Patzcuaro, the separate morpheme hé seems to have lost its aspiration and its stress and to have taken on the character of a suffix.<sup>4</sup>

---

4. Cf. Foster, *ibid.*, p. 58.

---

1.2. The infinitive is formed by affixing -ni<sup>5</sup> to the stem or to deriva-

---

5. This morpheme is homophonous with the -ni of the objective case of substantives and with the enclitic -ni that indicates first person singular subject.

---

tional suffixes following the stem. The infinitive in Tarascan is frequently translated by an infinitive in English: hí no wáka huřáni 'I am not able to come', imá tantiárisindi tembućani 'he is thinking of getting married'.

There is, however, a special use of the infinitive in Tarascan which might be termed a narratival infinitive. In narrative context where a finite verb has already been used, the next occurrence of a verb can be an infinitive if the actor is the same as that of the preceding finite verb. The following extract from a text will serve as an illustration: ka pawándimakwa nintaspti irétaru, ka eyáŋguntani iméri témbani, ka ařini... 'and the next day he returned to the village and told [the news to] his wife, and said....' Here eyáŋguntani 'to notify', 'to tell' and ařini 'to say' are both infinitives, used instead of the finite forms eyáŋguntaspti and ařispti. On the basis of this special usage one might like to consider the infinitive as a mode, as does Foster in her monograph,<sup>6</sup> but since none of the usual modal suffixes are

---

6. Cf. Foster, *ibid.*, p. 57; she calls it the "participial mode".

---

used, I prefer to consider the infinitive as a non-finite form and the narratival infinitive merely a special function of it.

As the imperative may consist in some cases of the verb stem followed by an imperative form of the verb 'to be', so the hortative may consist of another form of the verb 'to be' followed by an infinitive: hawé atáni 'let us strike', hawé pireni 'let's sing'.

1.3. There are three participles which are non-finite verb forms. The durative participle, made by affixing -rini to the stem or to a derivational suffix following the stem, indicates action in progress at the same time as that of the finite verb in the same clause. The durative participle is illustrated in the sentence, imá terékwařisti isi ešérini 'he laughed at seeing it thus'. The seeing (ešérini) and laughing were simultaneous actions.

In many cases the durative participial suffix is used with the derivational suffix -pa immediately preceding. In ordinary usage, this suffix -pa (which is homophonous with -pa (sudden action), but occurs at a different location in the order of derivational suffixes) means 'action in progress while the actor is going along'. When used with the durative participial suffix it reinforces the notion of contemporaneous action, without necessarily implying physical motion; thus, imá tánantaspti wá·ni sapi·čani, ariaparini eska niarapiringa 'he gathered many youngsters, telling them that they should go'. Here the telling (ariaparini) occurred at the same time as the gathering (tánantaspti).

The perfect participle is formed by affixing -tini to the verb stem, with or without a derivational suffix following the stem, and refers to action preceding that of the main verb in the clause: šaḡátatasramti burruni paraka no kwatáratini niarapiringa irétau 'he used to let the donkey walk so that it wouldn't arrive tired at the village'. The participle kwatáratini is literally 'having become tired', an action that precedes that of arriving (niarapiringa).

Besides this adverbial usage of the perfect participle, there are several participial forms that are commonly used in postpositional phrases. Some of these forms are: hamúkutini 'on the edge of', paríkutini 'on the other side of', píritini 'beside', 'nearby', wératini 'away from'. Their use is illustrated in the following examples: haponda hamúkutini 'on the edge of the lake', himá píritini 'there nearby', 'near there', tanimi kilómetru iréta wératini 'three kilometers from the village'.

The past participle is formed in the same way as the other participles, using the suffix -kata. Unlike the durative and perfect participles, it is passive in sense: atákata 'struck, stricken', k'arátakata 'swept'. The past participle is frequently used with inflected forms of haráni 'to be' to express what might be termed an existential passive: imá atákata harásti 'he is stricken', 'he exists in a stricken condition'. There is a nuance of meaning difference between this and the verb form using the passive derivational suffix -ḡa: imá atáḡasti 'he has been struck'.

This participle has a substantival usage as well. Thus, karákata (<karáni 'to write') is used for 'that which is written', 'the writing', 'the Scripture'; yawárukata (<yawári úni 'to make hard') is 'mud brick', 'adobe'; hurámukata (<hurámuni 'to order', 'to command') is 'an order', 'a command'. The suffix -kata is far from being the most common nominalizing suffix, however.

2. Description of finite verb inflection, being much more complex than the foregoing, is probably best presented in a matrix display<sup>7</sup>. Such a

---

7. "By a linguistic matrix we mean a table of language elements; rows and columns represent significant properties of a structural system or subsystem; and--preferably--the rows and columns are ordered so as to show in the most effective way possible the relation of semantic properties of the system to groups of entries in the table." Kenneth L. Pike, Tagmemic and Matrix Linguistics Applied to Selected African Languages SILPLRF No. 23 (1970), p. ix.

---

matrix is shown in Table 1, using as a model the verb atani 'to hit', 'to strike'. The entries in the matrix are the forms of the verb taken from the

verb phrases with their meanings that are listed in the following paragraphs:

imá atáspti 'he struck', 'he had struck', imá atásiramti 'he used to strike', imá atášapti 'he was striking', imá atášamamti 'he was about to strike'; imási atápti 'he is the one who struck', imási atá·mti 'he is the one who used to strike', imási atáni hápti 'he is the one who was striking', imási atani hamamti 'he is the one who was about to strike'; imá atáspi<sup>o</sup> 'did he strike?',

8. Or atáspi imá; likewise with other interrogatives, the verb may precede the pronoun. In fact, this is probably the more common order.

'had he struck?', imá atásirambi 'did he used to strike?', imá atášapi 'was he striking?', imá atášamambi 'was he about to strike?'; enáhki imá atápi 'it seems that he had struck', enáhki imá atámbi 'it seems that he used to strike', enáhki imá atáni hápi 'it seems that he was striking', enáhki imá atáni hamambi 'it seems that he was about to strike'; himbóka imá atáspka 'because he struck', 'because he had struck', himbóka imá atásiramka 'because he used to strike', himbóka imá atášapka 'because he was striking', himbóka imá atášamamka 'because he was about to strike'; eka imá atápka 'when he struck', 'when he had struck', eka imá atá·mka 'when he used to strike', eka imá atáni hápka 'when he was striking', eka imá atáni hamamka 'when he was about to strike'.

A: Past tense

M O D E

	Indicative		Interrogative		Subjunctive	
	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak
Perf	atáspti	atápti	atáspi	atápi	atáspka	atápka
Hab	atásiramti	atá·mti	atásirambi	atámbi	atásiramka	atá·mka
Dur	atášapti	atáni hápti	atášapi	atáni hápi	atášapka	atáni hápka
Inc	atášamamti	atáni hamamti	atášamambi	atáni hamambi	atášamamka	atáni hamamka

B: Present tense

M O D E

	Indicative		Interrogative		Subjunctive	
	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak
Perf	atásti	atáti	atáski	atáhki	atáska	atáka
Hab	atásindi	atáhti	atásini	atáhki	atásinga	atáhka
Dur	atášatí	atáni hatí	atásakí	atáni hakí	atášaká	atáni haka'
Inc	atášamti	atáni hamti	atášambi	atani hamahki	atášamka	atáni hamka

C: Potential action

M O D E

	Indicative	Interrogative	Subjunctive
	Fut	atá·ti	atá·
Cond	atápirindi	atápirini	atápiringa

Table 1. Inflectional forms of the verb atáni 'to hit', 'to strike'.

imá atásti 'he struck', 'he has struck', imá atásindi 'he strikes', imá atášatí 'he is striking', imá atášamti 'he is about to strike'; imásí atátí 'he is the one who has struck', imásí atáhti 'he is the one who strikes', imásí atáni hatí 'he is the one who is striking', imásí atáni hámti 'he is the one who is about to strike'; imá atáski 'has he struck?', imá atásini 'does he strike?', imá atášakí 'is he striking?', imá atášambi 'is he about to strike?'; enáhki imá atáhki 'it seems that he has struck, enáhki imá atáhki 'it seems that he strikes', enáhki imá atáni hakí 'it seems that he is striking', enáhki imá atáni hámahki 'it seems that he is about to strike'; himbóka imá atáska 'because he has struck', himbóka imá atásinga 'because he strikes', himbóka imá atášaká 'because he is striking, himbóka imá atášamka 'because he is about to strike'; eka imá atáka 'when he has struck', eka imá atáhka 'when he strikes', eka imá atáni haká 'when he is striking', eka imá atáni háamka 'when he is about to strike'.

imá atá·ti 'he will strike', imásí atá·ti 'he is the one who will strike', imá atápirindi 'he would strike', imásí atápirindi 'he is the one who would strike'; imá atá·'will he strike?', enáhki imá atá· 'it seems that he will strike', imá atápirini 'would he strike?', enáhki imá atápirini 'it seems that he would strike'; himbóka imá atá·ka 'because he will strike', eka imá atá·ka 'when he will strike', himbóka imá atápiringa 'because he would strike', eka imá atápiringa 'when he would strike'.

2.1. There are three clearly defined modes: indicative, interrogative, and subjunctive. The final inflectional suffix on the verb in the third person identifies the mode: -ti is the suffix for the indicative mode, -ki, -i, or zero<sup>9</sup> for the interrogative, and -ka for the subjunctive. The

---

9. The suffix -ki is used in the present tense, -i in the past, and -∅ (zero) in the future and conditional; the present habitual and inceptive strong forms present anomalies.

---

morphophonemic rule of voicing of stops following a homorganic nasal accounts for the occurrence of b,d, and g in certain of the entries in Table 1.<sup>10</sup>

---

10. A presupposition of this analysis is that voiced stops are phonemic in Tarascan. They contrast with their voiceless counterparts after nasals in native Tarascan words and in other environments in borrowed words.

---

The reason for choosing the final suffix of the third person form of the verb as diagnostic of the modes is that for the first and second persons, the verb forms of indicative and subjunctive are identical. Except for this change of form in the indicative, the inflected form of the verb (apart from pronominal enclitics which can optionally follow the inflectional suffixes) is invariable for all persons, singular and plural, for any given tense and aspect. This is illustrated by the paradigms in Table 2.

	Indicative ( <i>'I have struck,' etc.</i> )	Interrogative ( <i>'have I struck?,' etc.</i> )	Subjunctive ( <i>'because I have struck,' etc.</i> )
sg. 1	hí atáska(ni)	hí atáski	himbókani hí atáska
2	t'úri atáska	t'úri atáski	himbókari t'ú atáska
3	imá <sup>ll</sup> atásti	imá atáski	himbóka imá atáska
pl. 1	hučáks <sup>i</sup> atáska	hučáks <sup>i</sup> atáski	himbókaks <sup>i</sup> hučá atáska
2	čáhcs <sup>i</sup> ataska	čáhcs <sup>i</sup> atáski	himbókahcs <sup>i</sup> čá atáska
3	c'imáks <sup>i</sup> atásti	c'imáks <sup>i</sup> atáski	himbókaks <sup>i</sup> c'imá atáska

Table 2. Present tense paradigms of atáni 'to strike'.

11. There are alternative forms of some of these pronouns, used in various dialects. In the Canada (the area of the Mexico-Guadalajara highway), indé 'that one' is commonly used instead of imá in the 3rd person singular; elsewhere, the 3rd person plural morpheme is imé·ča or c'í. In Cuanajo, an almost monolingual village several miles east of the town of Patzcuaro, the 1st and 2nd person plural pronouns are the reverse of what they are elsewhere, with čá being 1st person and hučá 2nd person plural. In some dialects, the 1st person plural enclitic is -či.

2.2. Past tense is indicated by the suffix -p. A morphophonemic rule that following a nasal the first segment of a cluster of two stops is elided, accounts for the non-occurrence of such sequences as -mpti and -mpka. The presence of what appears to be this same suffix in the present inceptive interrogative is an anomaly; it may be an innovation based on analogy with the past tense form of the same aspect and mode. The future suffix is -a (see 3.5); the present tense is unmarked.

2.3. Aspect suffixes are not quite as easily identifiable, on the whole, as the past tense suffix, although it seems clear from the strong forms of all three modes that the perfective suffix is -s. The perfective aspect refers to action already complete at the time to which the speaker has reference. Due to the fact that the present perfective aspect of many verbs is often translated by a simple past in English (e.g. imá atásti 'he struck'), the suffix -s is easily mistaken for a past tense suffix, but its use in such verb forms as imá mítisti 'he knows' and imá harásti 'he is', which are clearly present tense forms (in contrast with imá mitispti 'he knew' and imá haráspti 'he was'), indicates that its function is aspectual rather than temporal.

The habitual aspect suffixes are -sín in the present tense and -síram in the past, although there is a good deal of dialectal variation in the latter, with more than a dozen different forms of the suffix observed in as many Tarascan villages. Its use implies repetition of the action of the verb, although not in the same sense as the derivational suffix -nta does (as in imá atántasti 'he struck again', 'he painted'; imá pántasti 'he took [it] away again'). There is in the use of the habitual aspect some notion of the action having been performed at an earlier time as well as at the time referred to by the speaker. In this respect it has a semantic factor in common with the perfective aspect.

The durative aspect suffix is -ša, with the additional prosodic feature of stress on the following syllable in the present tense. Its use implies incompleteness and progression or continuity of action of the verb.

The inceptive aspect suffixes are -šam in the present tense and -šamam in the past. The use of this aspect implies that the action of the verb has not (or had not) yet begun at the time to which the speaker has reference.

3.4. As may be seen in the matrix in Table 1, there are two forms listed for each mode. These have been labelled "strong" and "weak". The weak forms seem to have dropped the aspectual suffixes altogether or at least to have modified them considerably. In the case of verb forms that describe uncompleted action (whether already begun or not), they are all compound forms, with the infinitive followed by the form of the verb 'to be' that corresponds to the aspect and mode of the strong verb form.

The weak form of the indicative mode is used when the enclitic -sî has already been used previously in the clause, suffixed to either subject or object. This enclitic draws attention to the substantive to which it is affixed, and may be translated 'is the one who': hîsîni atâka 'I am the one who struck [it]', imânisî atâkani 'he is the one whom I struck'.

The weak form of the interrogative mode is used when enâhki 'apparently' introduces the verbal phrase: enâhki k'wirîpu mâ âki 'apparently someone (lit. a person) ate it'. Rather than consider this a distinct mode, it seems preferable to consider it a modification of the interrogative mode, just as the forms that follow -sî are a modification of the indicative mode.

The subjunctive mode is used in verbal constructions introduced by certain conjunctions or relative pronouns. The strong form follows himbôka 'because' and êska 'that': imâ no kâni úsiramti ešeni, himbôka bieni kâpindispka 'he was not able to see much because it was quite dark'; arîsîndiksî êska Zamora anâpueska 'they say that he is from Zamora'. The weak form follows éka 'when', 'if' and énga 'who', 'which': imâ hurâspti éka bieni kâpindipka 'he came when it was quite dark'; hi uandâhpaska indêni ačâ·ti énga Zamora anâpueka 'I greeted that man who is from Zamora'.

2.5. The foregoing paragraphs relate to verb forms that have to do with action as realized, whether in the past or present. There are two sets of verb forms dealing with potential action that seem to pattern as aspects in Tarascan. The first is the future, which is formed by affixing -a to the verb stem or to derivational suffixes following the verb stem: imâ atâ·til2

---

12. When the future suffix is added to a stem ending in -a, the result is a long vowel, which is indicated here as -â.

---

'he will strike', hî t'iréaka 'I will eat (a meal)' (<t'iréni 'to eat [a meal]'>); himbôka imâ atâ·ka 'because he will strike'.

The second set of verb forms dealing with potential action is the conditional, the suffix for which is -pirin: ima atâpirindi 'he would strike'; êkani hî t'irépiringa 'if I would eat'.

As the matrix of Table 1 shows, the strong and weak forms of potential action are identical for each mode, which is another argument for considering these as sub-classifications of the three modes rather than as three additional modes.

The suffixes discussed in the foregoing paragraphs are listed in Table 3. In addition there are two features of verbal inflection that are not overtly marked: one is the present tense and the other the interrogative mode in verb forms denoting potential action. This lack of a suffixial element may conveniently be considered a zero allomorph of the temporal and aspectual suffixes respectively.

Aspect	Tense	Mode
-s Perfective	-p Past	-ti Indicative
-sin/-siram Habitual	-∅ Present	-ki/-i/-∅ Interrogative
-ša Durative		-ka Subjunctive
-šam/-šamam Inceptive		
-∅ Future		
-pirin Conditional		

Table 3. Suffixes for Aspect, Tense, and Mode in Tarascan verbs.

3. Four slightly irregular verbs with monosyllabic stems and delayed stress<sup>13</sup> require a derivational suffix in the infinitive and in all verb forms

13. Cf. Foster, *ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

dealing with action as realized. These verbs are: aráni 'to eat (something)', haráni 'to be', huráni 'to come', and nirani 'to go'. In the imperative form of these verbs, the stress falls on the stem: á 'eat (it)!', há 'be!' hú 'come!', ní 'go!'. In the future tense, an epenthetic -w- comes between the stem and the future aspect suffix, which takes the stress: nóri awá 'won't you eat (it)?', himbóka imá išú hawáka 'because he will be here', pawáni huwáti 'tomorrow he will come', t'uri niwáka yasí 'you will go today'. In the conditional aspect of these same verbs, the stress falls on the first syllable of the suffix: hí nipíringa 'I would go', ékari t'u apíringa... 'if you would eat (it)....'

4. This paper does not exhaust all possible verb phrases in Tarascan. In addition to the compound verb phrases using the infinitive with inflected forms of the auxiliary verb haráni 'to be', there are also, as was mentioned in 1.3, existential passives, using the past participle with the same verb, and there are verb phrases using inflected forms of hamani 'to go around', 'to behave' as another verbal auxiliary: ásí háma miríkwarini 'don't go forgetting', ékani hí méntku határiní háma-ka, kwatára-ti hučiti burru 'if I always go around mounted, my donkey will get tired'. These verbal auxiliaries are inflected in the same way as atáni 'to strike', 'to hit', the model used here, except for some of the aspects of the verb 'to be' which have semantic limitations.