

Positional Verbs in Zaniza Zapotec¹

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This paper provides a descriptive analysis of positional verbs in Zaniza Zapotec.² Positional verbs are divided in two groups, one focusing on the object whose location is being described, and the other on the object in relation to which the location is being described. The first group of ZZ positionals is composed of *zu* ‘stand’, *zub* ‘sit’, and *mix* ‘lie’, and the second of *ub/(b)ib* ‘be on top’, *ngwa* ‘be on top (of multiple objects)’, *ka/ta* ‘be stuck on’, *yu* ‘be inside’, *(b)iny* ‘be inserted in or wrapped around’, *zab* ‘(freely) hang or float’, and *zab-giny* ‘hang’.

1. Introduction

Like most topics of Zapotec grammar, positional verbs were treated for the first time by Fray Juan de Córdova in his *Arte en lengua zapoteca*. Written in an age that had no ready framework for descriptions of typologically diverse languages, Córdova’s discussion of positional verbs is found in a section devoted to the verb ‘to be’, in its Latin garb, where positionals are listed among Zapotec equivalents to the numerous compounds of that verb. As not all of the compounds have a location-related meaning in Latin, only a few of the Zapotec “translations” belong to the class of positional verbs; this includes ‘stand’, ‘sit’, ‘lie’, ‘be below or under’, and ‘be inside’. An example of Córdova’s treatment of these verbs is given below:

“Siguenese agora los compuestos de sum est fuy. . . . El segundo compuesto es. Adsum, estar presente. Este se dize por muchas maneras, v.g., Natija nazobaya, nazonnaaya, silo estoy viendo. Si estoy en pie, naçoa, si assentado, tipeea. Si echado, naaya. (. . .) y assi los diferencias conforme ala postura o asiento de la cosa de que hablan” (Córdova 1578: 42).

[Now follow the compounds of *sum*, *est*, *fui*. . . . The second compound is *adsum*, to be present. This is said in many ways, for example, *natija nazobaya*, *nazonnaya* if I am seeing him/it; if I am standing, *naçoa*, if sitting, *tipeea*, if lying, *naaya*. (. . .) And in this way you vary them according to the position or location of the object in question.]

Although this description may not seem very clear to the modern reader, it does indicate Córdova’s understanding of the reference properties of positional verbs. Moreover, in the paragraph just quoted, Córdova delineates their semantics by reference to their describing the position (*postura*) or location (*asiento*) of the object. This division appears to be adequate for organizing a descriptive analysis of positional verbs in ZZ, a member of the Papabuco branch currently spoken in Sola de Vega, where positional verbs seem to fall into two groups, one

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² The following abbreviations and symbols will be used: ZZ ‘Zaniza Zapotec’; MB ‘Melissa Bowerman’s *Topological Relations Picture Series*’; PV ‘*Picture Series for Positional Verbs*’; PP ‘*Project Pictures*’; SS ‘*Snack Surprises*’; CT ‘*El Cuento del Tlacuache*’; CP ‘*El Cuento del Padre*’; HAB ‘habitual aspect’; POT ‘potential aspect’; COMP ‘completive aspect’; NEG ‘negative verb’; Q ‘question particle’; PL ‘plural’; (-) morpheme boundary; (=) clitic boundary; 1/2/3s/p ‘first/second/third person singular/plural’; animal ‘pronoun that refers to animals’; inan ‘inanimate (pronoun)’; resp ‘(pronoun of) respect’; m ‘masculine’.

focusing on the object whose location is being described (= *figure*), and the other on the object in relation to which the location is being described (= *ground*).³ This paper provides a preliminary semantic characterization of positional verbs in ZZ based on a corpus of around two hundred sentences, most of which represent responses to three sets of pictures specially designed to elicit vocabulary related to spatial concepts (MB, PV, PP), as well as on locative and existential clauses contained in a recorded spontaneous description of a set of pictures in a children's book (SS) and two short traditional stories (CT, CP).

2. Positional verbs focusing on the figure

This group of verbs refers to the position and, to some extent, shape of the object, and is composed of *zu* 'stand', *zub* 'sit', and *mix* 'lie'.⁴

2.1. *zu*

ZZ *zu* 'stand' describes the location of standing people and animals as well as vertically oriented objects without a visible base. More specifically, in the elicited responses and narratives that form the basis for this description, this verb has been used of trees, tables, bottles, fences, a ladder up against a wall, a cork in the neck of a bottle, an arrow piercing an apple, a cigarette in the mouth, hooks in a wall, and sheets of paper on a skewer, e.g.:

(1) Bizh zu=m nyeny mezh (MB: 31)
 cat stand=3s.animal under table
 'The cat is under the table.'

(2) Mezh zu=ny lo=ã
 table stand=3s.inan face=1s
 'The table is in front of me.'

In addition to its locative use, *zu* also means 'live', functions as a general existential predicate,⁵ and is used with content verbs in the Habitual aspect to indicate a progressive type of action,⁶ cf.:

³ Cf. Lillehaugen (2003: 15) and references cited therein.

⁴ As this paper aims at a semantic characterization of positional verbs, most details of their morphology have been omitted, and the verbs are identified by their stems. All ZZ examples are cited in a practical orthography; the phonemic values of the practical orthography signs are as follows:

p	t		k	
b	d		g	
kw /k ^w /		ty /tʃ/		
gw /g ^w /		dy /dʒ/		
jw /h ^w /, (f)	s	x /ʃ/	tx /ʂ/	j /h/
	z	zh /ʒ/	dx /z/	
m	n	ny /ɲ/		
	l, r	ly /ʎ/		
w		y		

⁵ Existential use of this verb is attested in other Zapotec languages as well, for example, in Texmelucan Zapotec:

Bzu cyup areadoor (Speck 1998 :4)
 COMP.be two trail driver
 'There were two trail drivers.'

⁶ A somewhat similar use is attested by Córdova, although his translations seem to indicate that the

- (3) Zu tib lyez (CT: 1)
 be one opossum
 ‘There was an opossum.’
- (4) Bany-bal, a zu=r? -- Zu=ã (CT: 2)
 old lady Q be=2s be=1s
 ‘Old lady, are you at home?’ -- ‘I am.’
- (5) Binya zu=m run=m gal igey zu=y
 woman be=3s.resp HAB.weep=3s.resp and man be=3s.m

 rini=y, “kwe’ gun=r” (PP: 32)
 HAB.say=3s.m NEG POT.weep=2s
 ‘The woman is crying and the man is saying, “Don’t cry”.’

2.2. *zub*

ZZ *zub* ‘sit (of people and animals); be placed (of things)’ describes the location of sitting people and animals, and objects that have a visible base. In the examples I have, this verb refers to trees⁷ as well as boxes, pots, cups, glasses, lamps, etc. on the table and other surfaces, cf.:

- (6) Bizh zub=m nyeny mezh (MP: 31)
 cat sit=3s.animal under table
 ‘The cat is (sitting) under the table.’
- (7) Gal lo mezh zub karton nidy, zub txun bas (SS: 3)
 and face table be placed carton milk be placed three glass
 ‘And on the table there is a carton of milk (and there are) three glasses.’

2.3. *mix*

ZZ *mix* (morphologically the stative of *bix* ‘fall’) describes the location of people, animals and objects lying or thrown on a surface. In the example sentences it refers, e.g., to pots, bottles and books lying on their side; a spoon; balls and (coiled) ropes, cf.:

- (8) Kwit bay-ij=e mix tib kutyar (MB: 24)
 side handkerchief=deictic lie one spoon
 ‘Next to the handkerchief there is a spoon.’

3. Positional verbs focusing on the ground

This group of verbs refers to the manner in which the object, whose location is being described, relates to the supporting surface.

positional verb is used in its literal meaning, cf. *na-ço-nñij=a* ‘I stand speaking’, *na-ço-yago=a* ‘I stand eating’. The possibility that the ZZ construction may have been influenced by the Spanish progressive composed of *estar* plus present participle also needs to be explored.

⁷ Since *zu* is also used to speak of trees, there arises the question of the difference between the two usages. One of the speakers told me that he would use *zu* to refer to trees that have been planted and *zub* to those that have grown naturally.

3.1. *ub/(b)ib*

ZZ *ub, (b)ib* ‘be on top’; this pair of verbs appear to be both morphologically related and synonymous as in many of the responses I have they replace each other without the apparent change of meaning. They can describe the placement of a box, stick, eraser or tablecloth on the table; a pot, stick, sweet potato, or coiled rope on the stump; a band or rope placed across the edges of a basket; a boat on the surface of the water; a ball or stick on top of a rock; a pot on a tree-branch; a handkerchief on top of a spoon, etc., cf.:

- (9) Gu=e rib=ny (ub=ny) ru’ yag-bity (PV: 23)
 sweet potato=deictic (HAB).is on top=3s.inan edge stump
 ‘The sweet potato is on the stump.’

3.2. *ngwa’*

ZZ *ngwa’* ‘be on top (of multiple objects)’ has been said of beans and chewing gum heaped on the table; seed and sugar sprinkled on the cookies; apples, grapes and bananas on the table; empty bottles lying on the table; balls on the ground; and toys on shelves, cf.:

- (10) Del pelote ngwa’=ny lo mezh (PV: 8, 39)
 all ball be on top=3s.inan face table
 ‘All the balls are on the table.’
- (11) Yu’ git-txily kolor kafe, gwa’ bity lo=ny (SS: 6)
 be inside pastry brown be on top seed face=3s.inan
 ‘Inside there are brown pastries with seed on top.’

The exact location of objects can be further specified by incorporating lexical elements, for example, the noun *xurk* ‘row’ (< Spanish *surco*):

- (12) Gu ngwa’-xurk=ny lo yu (PV: 42)
 sweet potato be on top-row=3s.inan face ground
 ‘The sweet potatoes form a row on the ground.’

The causative of *ngwa’* refers to placing multiple objects on a surface; examples given by the speakers include placing pieces of fruit on the table and pieces of meat on the grill.

3.3. *ka*

ZZ *ka* ‘be stuck on, spread on, clinging’ has been used, e.g., to describe the location of a fly, snail or spider on the wall; butter on the knife; chewing gum stuck to the underside of a table; lettering on a T-shirt; image of a person’s head on a stamp; lamp on the ceiling; medallion on a chain; apple(s) in the tree; leaf on the branch; balloon on a stick; flag on the mast; shoe on the foot; band tied around a candle, etc., cf.:

- (13) Tyug-lyeg=e ka=m kwit yu’ (MB: 52)
 snail=deictic be stuck=3s.animal side house
 ‘The snail is on the wall.’

3.4. *ta’*

ZZ *ta’* ‘be stuck on; be painted’ differs from *ka* in that it seems to be used only with mass nouns (or count nouns used as mass nouns, cf. the first example below); the causative of this

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verb means ‘spread’ or ‘paint’. In some instances it has been used interchangeably with *ka*, but the limits of this interchangeability are in need of investigation, cf.:

- (14) Zu tib kubet katx, ta’ bal titx=ny (SS: 1)
stand one pail yellow be painted star back=3s.inan
‘There is a yellow pail with stars painted on top of it.’
- (15) Ur=wi ix ta’=ny (ka=ny) to’ yag (MB: 45)
orange be stuck=3s.inan head tree
‘The oranges are in the tree.’
- (16) Za ta’=ny (ka=ny) lo gis-gib (MB: 12)
butter be stuck=3s.inan face knife
‘The butter is on the knife.’

3.5. *yu’*

ZZ *yu’* ‘be inside’ describes the location of objects in enclosed spaces (cf. 17). Like *zu*, it also can have the meaning of a general existential predicate (‘be’) (cf. 18) and indicate a progressive action when used with the Habitual of a content verb⁸ (cf. 19):

- (17) Almet=e yu’=ny xi gitx-kiw (PV: 60)
bottle=deictic be inside=3s.inan belly basket
The bottles are in the basket.
- (18) Gal kwit=ny zub tib gitxa, yu’ gitxa kolor de rosa, yu’ gayet
and side=3s.inan sit one bowl be bowl pink be inside cookie

kolor de rosa, yu’ asug lo=ny (SS: 6)
pink be sugar face=3s.inan
‘And next to it there is a bowl, there is a pink bowl with pink cookies covered with sugar.’
- (19) Yu’=bi=y ru=y ridx (CT: 3)
be=PL=m HAB.beat=3s.m word
‘They are talking.’

3.6. (*b*)iny

The basic meanings of ZZ (*b*)iny are ‘be inside’ and ‘be wrapped around’. It has been used to describe the location of a variety of objects in baskets, boxes and cups; of a fish in a bowl; a rabbit in a cage; a bird in the hollow of a tree; a house inside a fenced area; a ball caught between the branches of a tree or stuck between the legs of a chair; a spoon wrapped in a handkerchief; a stamp on an envelope; a belt, kerchief and necklace on a person’s waist, head and neck, respectively, cf.:

⁸ As in the case of progressive forms with *zu*, a similar usage is documented by Córdova, cf. *noo-yago=a* ‘I am eating’. Existential use of this verb is attested in other languages as well, e.g., Mitla Zapotec:

Yu’ te behN wiñni te gehj (Stubblefield and Stubblefield 1994: 123)
Be one person went=3s one town
‘There was a man who went to town.’

- (20) Txi-giny riny=m xi yag (MB: 67)
 bird HAB.be inside in=3s.animal belly tree
 ‘The bird is in the hollow of the tree.’
- (21) Tyuny riny nyeny giny? (CP)
 who HAB.be inside in box
 ‘Who is in the box?’
- (22) Bej riny=ny yeny=m (MB: 51)
 necklace HAB.be wrapped around=3s.inan neck=3s.resp
 ‘The necklace is on her neck.’

3.7. *zab & zab-giny*

ZZ *zab* ‘(freely) hang or float’ can refer to objects in air or water; *zab-giny* ‘hang’, morphologically related to *zab*, refers to objects that have been hung, cf.:

- (23) Za zab=ny to’ lo-gi’ (MB: 36)
 cloud float=3s.inan head hill
 ‘The cloud is above the hill.’
- (24) Zab za lo nis-giny
 float fat face broth
 ‘There is fat in the broth.’
- (25) Nyedy zab-giny=ny lo du-gedx (MB: 37)
 clothes hang=3s.inan face rope
 ‘The clothes are hanging on a line.’

4. Adverbials

The manner of placement and/or exact spatial orientation of the object can be qualified by a small set of lexical elements that act as adverbials and can be incorporated in the verbs.⁹ These include, e.g., *dxib* ‘on edge’, *tyily* ‘upside down’, *gwas* ‘on the side’ or ‘inclined’, and *tyeny* ‘propped against’. Some of their uses can be seen below.

tyily ‘upside down’

- (26) Gis rib-tyil=ny ru’ yag-bity (PV: 12)
 pot HAB.be on top-upside down=3s.inan edge stump
 ‘The pot is upside down on the stump.’
- (27) Almet yu’=ny xi gitx-kiw, tap=ny zu=ny,
 bottle be inside=3s.inan belly basket four=3s.inan stand=3s.inan

txun=ny zu-tyily=ny (PV: 60)
 three=3s.inan stand-upside down=3s.inan
 ‘The bottles are in the basket, four of them upright (and) three of them upside down.’

⁹ The exact status of these elements, which seem to be verbs by origin, is in need of further investigation.

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