

Irrealis Marking In Tlingit

Heather Burge

University of British Columbia

1 Introduction

Tlingit is a branch of the Na-Dene Athabaskan language family, spoken in Southeast Alaska, the Yukon, and parts of northern BC. It's estimated that there are about 200 speakers which includes learners at all levels of fluency (Twitchell 2016). A morphologically complex language, Tlingit possesses what is believed to be an irrealis marker, most commonly apparent in future constructions and verbal negation contexts (Leer 1991). The goal of this paper is to propose a succinct definition for the irrealis marker in Tlingit by identifying the environments in which it occurs, addressing issues in how irrealis has been defined cross-linguistically, and making a generalization about its semantic contribution in Tlingit specifically.

2 Irrealis

Leer 1991 treats the irrealis, *u-*, as being in a dichotomous relationship with an unmarked realis, but a straightforward definition has not been formulated for Tlingit as far as I'm aware. It's present in future, prohibitive, potential, potential attributive and potential decessive verbal constructions, as well as in negative imperfective, negative perfective, and negative perfective habitual constructions, and in a small number of verbs as part of their lexical entries.¹ Example 1a and 1b shows the contrast between an imperfective and negative imperfective verb form respectively, with the irrealis highlighted for convenience.

Example 1.²

- | | |
|--|---|
| a. \underline{x} asa.ée
∅- \underline{x} a-sa-√.ée
∅- \underline{x} a-sa-√.i- Hμ
3O-1S-CL-√cook-VAR
“I cook it; I am cooking it” | b. hél u \underline{x} sa.ee
hél u- \underline{x} - sa-√.ee
hél ∅- u- \underline{x} a-sa-√.i- Hμ
NEG 3O- IRR -1S- CL-√cook-VAR
“I don't cook it; I am not cooking it.” |
|--|---|

3 The Issues

The irrealis has been defined in a variety of different ways cross-linguistically, while most commonly sharing a similar sense of the marker signaling something “not real” or yet to be real (Matthews 2014). While necessary in all negative contexts like example 1b. it's also obligatory in future oriented verbal constructions as well (see example 2) where it appears with two other morphemes to signal a prospective aspectual reading. It's the irrealis ability to appear in a range of different aspectual contexts across the verbal paradigm and interact with other morphemes that makes it a challenge to analyze semantically.

¹ See Twitchell's dictionary draft (2017) for a compilation of those verbs.

² Glossing notes: √= root, 3O= 3rd person object, 3S= 3rd person subject, CL= classifier, CONJ= conjugation, DET=determine, IRR= irrealis, Hμ= stem variation marker MD= modal, PFV= perfective, PST=past tense, REL=relative clause, REP= repetitive, THEM=thematic prefix, VAR=variation (adapted from Crippen 2013 glossing conventions and Twitchell 2016).

Example 2.

a. kukasa.ée
k- u- k- a-sa-√.ée
∅- g- u- g- x-s-√.i- Hμ
3O-g.CJ-IRR-g.MD-1S- CL-√cook-VAR
“I will cook it.”

b. akgwagéet
a- k- g- w- a-∅-√géet
a- g- g- u- a-∅-√git-
Hμ
3O-g.CONJ-MD-IRR-3S-CL-√precipitate-VAR
“It will rain.”

(Adapted from Twitchel
2016)

Syntactic analysis is also a challenge, as the irrealis can appear in a number of linear positions in relation to other verbal morphemes which have stricter linear ordering patterns (as in the difference between example 2a and 2b). Crippen and Déchaine argue for a phonological explanation for any perceived syntactic movement in Tlingit, and that there is in fact no syntactic head movement whatsoever in the language (2016). For that proposal to hold an explanation of the irrealis “movement” will need to be accounted for as well, presenting an interesting puzzle for both syntax and phonological understanding of the language.

4 Conclusion

While it’s unfeasible to have a complete answer to the range of questions raised, this paper hopes to make headway in our understanding of the irrealis role in Tlingit verbal structure by presenting generalizations that account for the irrealis interesting semantic contribution in contrast to its syntactic and phonological relationships.

References

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