Fear and Sasquatches: Apprehensional Uses of *ṅ̓ǔva* in Haíłzaqvḷa

Haíłzaqvḷa or Heiltsuk language (ISO 639-3: hei) is an Upper Northern Wakashan (UNW) language spoken in the communities of Bella Bella and Klemtu (Gessner, Herbert & Parker, 2022, p. 58). In this paper, we present analyses of *if*-constructions that feature *ṅ̓ǔva* 'if, when' or 'lest, in fear that, otherwise'. We use storyboards and semantic fieldwork techniques (e.g., back-translation, felicity judgement task) to investigate how *ṅ̓ǔva* can (or cannot) be used based on different local contexts to encode an apprehensional reading (Caldecott & Koch; 2014; Strang & Matthewson, 2015).[1] Apprehensional constructions encode a negative prospective epistemic modality (Anderbois & Dąbkowski, 2025). That is, they are used to express something bad possibly happening in the future. Fluent speakers resist producing the previously documented method of subordination in the literature used to encode a timitive ('for fear of') apprehensional reading for *ṅ̓ǔva*. However, they do find this form acceptable when presented it. When *ṅ̓ǔva* is in a complement clause, it can express either positive or negative prospects. This indicates *ṅ̓ǔva* is an apprehensional morpheme in some grammatical contexts but is not limited to apprehensional usage. We also uncover different preferences in *if*-morpheme use across speakers who express prospective epistemic modality through the temporal conjunction *gáma/gála* 'first, before, when (if)'. With these insights, this research fills a gap in semantic analyses in UNW languages and will contribute to future familial comparisons (Menzies, 2011).

The 'lest, in fear that', otherwise' form of *ṅ̓ǔva* is difficult to elicit with contemporary speakers who disprefer the embedded bi-clausal structure (1) and rather split the targeted apprehensional construction into separate independent clauses (2):[2]

(1)	[*ḳ̓úsnúgva*	*laíłíx̌sda*	[*ṅ̓ǔváy̓así*	*q̓íṇṃxsíla*	*h̓skáníqs*]]	
	kus=núkʷʰə	ləéɪɬ-eíχstə	ʔnχʷə́=ʔjə=sí	q̓éɪṇṃ-xsílə	ʔɦskʰǽníqʰs	
	NEG=1SG.SBJ	go.inside-want	if=DET=CONN	many-too	mouse	
	'I don't want to go inside for fear of lots of mice'				(jf | GJ 17 Nov 2025)	

(2)	[*ḳ̓úsnúgva*	*lákáix̌sda*	*la*	*qúqv*]	[*wáusnúgva*	*qṇ*
	kus=núkʷʰə	lákʲʰ-eíχstə	lə	qʰʌ́qʷʰ	wóʊs=núkʷʰə	qʰṇ
	NEG=1SG.SBJ	go.toward-want	PREP	there	scared=1SG.SBJ	for

ɬ̓áy̓iáx̌i]
t͡ɬ'á=ʔjiə=χeɪ
black.bear=DET=DET

'I don't want to go there. I am scared because of the bears' (vf | GJ 13 Nov 2025)

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[1] *Ẇálas ğiáxsix̌a* qṇ *wáɬdṃaqvs* Gilbert Jackson (GJ) *du* Shirley E Windsor (SEW)! Your insights and taking the time to share your knowledge with us are invaluable. This work has been financially supported by a Jacobs Research Fund Individual Grant and Graduate Travel and Research Awards from Simon Fraser University.

[2] Gloss abbreviations: 1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; DIST = distal; SG = singular; SBJ = subject; DET = determiner; PREP = preposition; CONN = connective; NEG = negation; STAT = stative; INCH = inchoative; AUG = augmentative; acute accents denote high tones. Transcriptions are provided in the community orthography in the first tier and the International Phonetic Alphabet in the second tier for the morphemic breakdown.

ṅx̌va must head an adjunct clause with the preposition *=yis* or related adjunct connector morpheme (i.e., =sí) like in (1) to take on the intended apprehensional meaning (Rath, 1981, p. 452; Anderbois & Dąbkowski, 2025, p. 3). That is [*p*[ṅx̌va … *q*]] wherein the negative consequent *q* is embedded within the antecedent *p* (Anderbois & Dąbkowski, 2020). Otherwise, *ṅx̌va* simply encodes epistemic possibility regardless of a preferred outcome (simply $p \rightarrow \Diamond q$):

(3) [*súqvsnúgva*] [*ṅx̌vái* *ḥáqa* *mátḷáẏáx̌i*]
súq^{wh}s=núk^{wh}ə ʔnχ^{w}é=ɪ ʔɦəq^{h}a mát^{h}ḷə=ʔjə́=χeɪ
thankful=1SG.SBJ if=3.SBJ.DIST arrive plane=DET=DET
'I will be happy when/if the plane comes in'

Comment: 'when the plane comes in, if the plane comes in' (vf | SEW 14 Nov 2025)

Example (3) shows that *ṅx̌va* is not restricted to a negative prospect. Speakers can express a positive evaluation with *ṅx̌va* too. In sum, the subordinated adjunct *ṅx̌va* form expresses a precautioning reading, not a timitive one. Timitives characteristically are mono-clausal and incorporate nominal arguments while (1) is bi-clausal. Outside this specific construction, *ṅx̌va* expresses precautioning apprehensional readings or a positive interpretation. Precautioning apprehensionals encode an avoidable dispreferred situation (avertive) or a situation with negative *implied consequences* for which to prepare (in-case). Anderbois & Dąbkowski (2025) find that apprehensional morphemes are often polyfunctional in different languages, so this versatility is expected typologically. Through our investigation, we also find that there are multiple *if*-morphemes used to express prospective events. We identify another *if*-construction using *gáma* (variant: *gála*), which is under-documented as possessing an apprehensional reading (Rath, 1981, p. 242):

Context: You run into a *łála* 'sasquatch' in the woods. What advice would you give to someone?

(4) *(ṅx̌vá/gámasu)* *húmíł* *łáłáḳauẇa* *ksu* *ḳs* *wáusʔitsṭú(kv)*
ʔnχ^{w}ə́/kǽmə=su ɦóumíł łáłá=ḳaʊʔw=ə k^{h}=su ḳs wóʊs-ʔit-sṭóʊ(k^{wh})
if=2.SBJ hear sasquatch=AUG=DET and=2.SBJ NEG scared-INCH-STAT
'If you hear a sasquatch, do not get scared' (vf | GF 13 Nov 2025)

Some speakers substitute it interchangeably for *ṅx̌va* while others restrict *gáma/gála* to only its temporal 'first, when' meaning. Both *if*-morphemes can be interpreted with negative possibility and fit the minimal apprehensional situation criteria: I – future 'hearing a sasquatch', II – possibility 'if', III – negative evaluation 'what is implied if the warning is not followed' (Anderbois & Dąbkowski, 2025, p. 4). Semantically, (4) involves an in-case precautioning reading: if *p* is obtained ('you get scared'), then *r*, which is a negative consequence (inferably related to the sasquatch) of *q*, may occur: $p \rightarrow \Diamond (r(q))$ (Anderbois & Dąbkowski, 2020, as cited by Phillips, 2021, p. 32). Since the apprehensional adjunct construction is difficult to elicit, whether *gáma* is acceptable in an adjunct clause like *ṅx̌va* has not been verified yet. Further research also will address if *gáma/gála* and *ṅx̌va* encode apprehensional sentiments to the same degree. These findings inform our ongoing documentation and analyses of Haíłzaqvḷa with the remaining Elders and how apprehensionals develop and grammaticalize typologically.

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