Pastness as a presupposition: the nłeʔkepmxcín clitic *ƛ̓əm̓*

Overview: nłeʔkepmxcín (Northern Interior Salish) contains a clitic *ƛ̓əm̓* that has previously been analyzed as a 'completive' aspect (Thompson & Thompson 1992, 1996). Evidence from clauses with positive polarity containing *ƛ̓əm̓* suggest that it could be an optional past tense with a strong decessive implicature, along the lines of the analysis that Bochnak (2016) proposes for Washo -*uŋil* (see also Cable 2017 on Tlingit and Gatchalian 2025 on Kanien'kéha, a.o.).

I argue for an alternative analysis, namely that *ƛ̓əm̓* is a pragmatic operator that parallels the English negative polarity item (NPI) '(not) anymore' – that is, *ƛ̓əm̓,* like '(not) anymore', presupposes that an eventuality held prior to utterance time (see Krifka 2000). In addition to its presuppositional content, which survives under negation, I show that *ƛ̓əm̓* also contributes a defeasible implicature of completion (i.e., *ƛ̓əm̓* implicates that the eventuality no longer holds at utterance time).

Data: A clause with positive polarity containing *ƛ̓əm̓* implies that the eventuality in the clause has occurred prior to utterance time, and is no longer occurring at utterance time (in the case of an event) or no longer holds at utterance time (in the case of a state). Consider the comments provided by consultants in the contexts in (1) and (2), where *ƛ̓əm̓* encliticizes to the eventive predicate *ʔúpis* 'eat' and to the stative predicate *ʔes* 'have', respectively.

(1) Context: You see your friend eating some sc̓wén (wind dried salmon). You think:

ʔúpi-[n]-t-Ø-s=(# **ƛ̓əm̓**)	e=sc̓wén
eat-CTR-TR-3OBJ-3ERG=**ƛ̓əm̓**	DET=wind.dried.salmon

Intended reading with *ƛ̓əm̓*: 'He's eating *sc̓wén*.' [SF]
Consultant comment on the version containing *ƛ̓əm̓*: "Sounds like he's not eating *sc̓wén* anymore."

(2) Context: You went to visit your friend and his two dogs yesterday. I ask you what you did yesterday. You tell me:

nés	k̓ʷéṅ-[n]-[t]-Ø-[e]ne	n-snúk̓ʷeʔ
go	look.at-CTR-TR-3OBJ-1SG.ERG	1SG.POSS-friend
	ʔes-sə~séyeʔ=(# **ƛ̓əm̓**)	t=e=sqáqx̣aʔ
	have-AUG~two=**ƛ̓əm̓**	OBL=DET=dog

Intended reading with *ƛ̓əm̓*: 'I went to visit my friend. He had two dogs.' [SF]
Consultant comment on the version containing *ƛ̓əm̓*: "Sounds like he doesn't have two dogs anymore."

The above results are in line with what one might expect from a completive aspect, or an optional past tense. However, I argue that the 'pastness' in the above examples is a presupposition, based on the interaction between *ƛ̓əm̓* and negation. In a language such as nłeʔkepmxcín, where negation takes wide scope over tense and aspect, we would expect a negated clause containing a completive aspect to give rise to the interpretation that the eventuality is not completed (i.e., that it is ongoing at utterance time). Similarly, a negated clause containing an optional past tense would give rise to the interpretation that there is a past time at which the eventuality did not occur, or that there is no past time at which the eventuality occurred.

A negated clause containing *ƛ̓əm̓* does not give rise to either the interpretation we would expect for a completive aspect or the interpretation we would expect for an optional past tense. Instead, a negated clause containing *ƛ̓əm̓* gives rise to the same implicature as a non-negated clause containing *ƛ̓əm̓* – namely, that the eventuality has occurred, but no longer holds at utterance time. Consider the negated clauses in (3) and (4), where *ƛ̓əm̓* applies to an eventive predicate and a stative predicate, respectively.

(3) Context: Your friend was eating a plate of sc̓wén. He got a call, so he stopped eating and left his half-finished plate on the table. You see the plate and the empty seat, and your friend on the phone, and you think:

te=**ƛ̓əm̓**=Ø=téʔe	k=x=s=ʔúpi-[n]-[t]-Ø-s	
NEG=***ƛ̓əm̓***=3SBJ=NEG	D/C=IPFV=NMLZ=eat-CTR-TR-3OBJ-3ERG	
ɬ=sc̓wén		
DET.REM=wind.dried.salmon		

'He's not eating *sc̓wén* anymore.' [SF]

(4) Context: A window broke in my office over the weekend. Someone came in to fix it. Today, I go into my office and see that the window is fixed. I think:

te=**ƛ̓əm̓**=téʔe	k=s=máʕt=s	ɬ=n-k̓^{w}eṅ-ús-tn
NEG=***ƛ̓əm̓***=3SBJ=NEG	D/C=NMLZ=break=3POSS	DET.REM=1SG.POSS-look.at-face-INST

'The window isn't broken anymore.' [SF]

Analysis: Given that the presupposition of *p* being true prior to utterance time survives negation, it cannot be part of the asserted content of *ƛ̓əm̓*. I argue that to assert an utterance of the form *(¬)ƛ̓əm̓(p)* amounts to asserting *(¬)p* – that is, *ƛ̓əm̓* does not contribute at-issue content. Instead, *ƛ̓əm̓* presupposes that *p* was true at a moment prior to utterance time. In utterances with positive polarity, *ƛ̓əm̓* further implicates that *p* no longer holds at utterance time.

The implicature that *p* no longer holds at utterance time is defeasible – that is, it is possible to refer to an eventuality that is ongoing at utterance time with *ƛ̓əm̓*. Consider the felicity of (5).

(5) Context: You see your friend outside his house having a cigarette one morning as you're driving to town. As you're coming back from town, you see him outside again having another cigarette. You ask him: "Weren't you smoking earlier?". He replies:

heʔéy	ʔéx=kn=**ƛ̓əm̓**	méṅx-m	ʔeɬ	ʔéx=kn=ʔiʔ
yes	IPFV=1SG.SBJ=**ƛ̓əm̓**	smoke-CTR.MID	and	IPFV=1SG.SBJ=still
méṅx-m				
smoke-CTR.MID				

'Yes, I was smoking and I'm still smoking.' [SF]

Conclusion: In sum, I propose a novel analysis of the second-position clitic *ƛ̓əm̓* contra the 'completive' label and contra an optional past tense. Under my analysis, *ƛ̓əm̓* presupposes that *p* held prior to utterance time, and implicates that *p* is no longer true at utterance time. Furthermore, this work provides tests which can distinguish between completive aspects, optional past tenses, and morphemes with *ƛ̓əm̓*-like meaning contributions. More research is needed to see whether elements similar to *ƛ̓əm̓* are found cross-linguistically.

References

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