That's too vague! Ambiguity avoidance with indeterminate attitude predicates

Main Claim: The predicate *tsut* in Secwepemctsín (Interior Salish) is an indeterminate attitude predicate which is compatible with the meanings of 'say', 'think', 'want', or 'intend' (Kuipers 1974; Oliver 2025). The 'say/think' meanings and the 'want/intend' meanings are derived via two different complementizers (*tek* and *e*, respectively). A single instance of *tsut* with conjoined *tek* and *e* complements allows a 'mixed' reading, simultaneously expressing 'think' and 'want' attitudes. At the same time, a *tsut* construction with two coordinated *tek* clauses cannot have a 'mixed' reading (both 'say' and 'think'), despite *tsut tek* being compatible with 'say' and 'think' attitudes. This result is unexpected if the complement clause determines the attitude, because there are two complement clauses and therefore two different attitudes expressed—which could in principle be different. I argue that the lack of a mixed reading with two *tek* complements arises due to pragmatic factors related to avoidance of ambiguity and repetition.

Data: In Secwepemctsín, *tsut tek* p means 'say/think *p*', whereas *tsut e* p means 'want/intend to *p*':

(1) **tsut**=∅ lu7 **tek=** s-geyp-s-t-∅-és re=Julia
ATT=3SBJ REM DC.IRR= NMLZ-anger-CAUS-TR-3OBJ-3ERG DET=Julia
'She **said/thought** that she made Julia mad.'

(2) **tsú<ts>t**=ken **e=** s-t7é<7>y-n[-t]-∅-n re=Julia
ATT<1SG>=1SG.SBJ GDIR= NMLZ-meet<1SG>-CTR-TR-3OBJ-1SG.ERG DET=Julia
'I **want/intend to** meet Julia.'

Oliver (2025) argues that *tsut* has indeterminate semantics based on data like (3), in which a single instance of *tsut* with coordinated *tek* and *e* complements conveys both a 'think' attitude and a 'want' attitude. I label cases like (3) **mixed** readings of *tsut*.

(3) *Context: When she was younger, my grandmother thought Kamloops would be a nice place to visit. She always wanted to visit, but she still hasn't.*
re=n-kyé<y>7e **tsut**=∅ lu7 [**tek=** s-le7-s
DET=1SG.POSS-grandmother<DIM> ATT=3SBJ then DC.IRR=NMLZ-good-3POSS
re=tk̓emlúps] ell [**e=** s-nes-ts t̓kllu7]
DET=Kamloops and GDIR=NMLZ-go-3POSS there.NVIS
'My grandmother **said** that Kamloops is nice and **[wants]** to go there.

Oliver (2025) argues that the result in (3) is incompatible with alternative analyses in which *tsut* entirely determines the attitude semantics. Any such analysis would predict that one instance of *tsut* can express only one attitude, yet (3) shows one instance of *tsut* expressing two different attitudes. Instead, the complement clause must play a role in determining the attitude semantics, and the attitude denoted by *tsut* must be indeterminate. The indeterminate attitude that *tsut* denotes must be simultaneously compatible with a 'think' attitude and a 'want' attitude.

However, *tsut* constructions do not allow all logically possible mixed readings. A *tsut tek* construction can mean either 'say' or 'think'. If the complement clause is responsible for determining the attitude of *tsut*, we would predict that a *tsut* sentence with two coordinated *tek* clauses would allow a mixed reading of 'say' and 'think' simultaneously. However, this mixed reading is ruled out, as I show in (4):

(4) *Context: My brother just came back from a party. I asked him how the party was. He only said that the party was fun, but I know what he actually thought: he thought his sweetheart would come.*

#**tsut=∅** lu7 [**tek=** s-le7-s re=páti] ell
ATT=3SBJ then DC.IRR=NMLZ-good-3POSS DET=party and
[**tek=** me7=s-ts-kitsc-s re=sesí-s]
DC.IRR=NEC=NMLZ-towards-arrive-3POSS DET=sweetheart-3POSS

Intended: 'He said that the party was good and (thought) that his sweetheart would come.'
Elicitor: "Is this okay if he only said the first part out loud?" *Speaker comment:* **"He only thought."** (sf | BD | 11.25.2025)

Analysis: Following Oliver (2025), I place the attitude semantics of a *tsut* construction in the complementizer, in the style of Kratzer (2006, 2013), Moulton (2009, 2015), Bogal-Allbritten (2016), and Grano (2016). *Tsut* denotes only an eventuality of an indeterminate attitude which covers 'say', 'think', 'want', and 'intend': it does not introduce quantification over worlds. The complementizer phrases instantiate CONTENT functions (Grano 2016; Kratzer 2006) which apply to an attitude eventuality and extract the modal background, which consists of a modal base (MB) and an ordering source (OS), compatible with that attitude eventuality. The *tek* complementizer instantiates the function CONTENT_{dox}, which presupposes that the attitude eventuality is compatible with a doxastic modal background (doxastic modal base + stereotypical ordering source). The result is that *tsut tek p* expresses a statement of beliefs; I assume that whether this statement is made out loud ('say') or not ('think') is left underspecified and determined by context. The *e* complementizer instantiates the function CONTENT_{root}, which presupposes that the attitude eventuality is compatible with a priority or dynamic modal background (doxastic MB + priority/dynamic OS), in the sense of Portner (2009). The result: *tsut e p* expresses a desire or intention; again, the modal background is left underspecified, so context determines whether a desire ('want') or intention ('intend') is expressed.

(5) $[\![\text{tsut}]\!] = \lambda e \lambda w.e$ is an eventuality of having an (indeterminate) attitude in w

(6) $[\![\text{tek}]\!] = \lambda p_{<s,t>} \lambda e \lambda w. \forall w' [w' \in \text{CONTENT}_{dox}(e) \rightarrow p(w')]$

(7) $[\![\text{e}]\!] = \lambda p_{<s,t>} \lambda e \lambda w. \forall w' [w' \in \text{CONTENT}_{root}(e) \rightarrow p(w')]$

Examples like (4) call the above analysis into question, however. If *tek* is underspecified between 'say' and 'think', mixed 'say'/'think' readings with two instances of *tek* should not be ruled out, as they are in (4). I argue that pragmatic factors limit the potential interpretations of indeterminate attitude predicates like *tsut*. The attitude expressed by a single *tsut* can only vary when it composes with two different types of complement clause (i.e., a *tek*-clause and an *e*-clause). This is because the attitude expressed by the *tek*-clause is obligatorily different from that expressed by the *e*-clause, and hearers can identify the attitude 'switch' using the different complementizers. When *tsut* composes with two of the same type of attitude clause (e.g., two *tek* clauses), my analysis predicts that each *tek* clause could express a different attitude (either 'say' or 'think'). However, in practice, the result would be unacceptably ambiguous: nothing signals to the hearer which clause carries which attitude (is it 'say' first and 'think' second, or 'think' first and 'say' second?). I argue that the Maxim of Manner (Grice 1975) rules out a mixed reading in cases like (4), resulting in a pragmatic restriction on an otherwise indeterminate attitude construction. Cross-linguistic investigation is needed to see if other indeterminate attitude predicates share this pragmatic restriction.

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