

Future in a supposedly tenseless language

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Introduction. Many languages lack overt morphological distinctions between present and past tense. Recent theoretical research often argues that such languages lack any tense morpheme in the syntactic representation (see e.g., Bohnemeyer 2002 on Yukatek Maya, Bittner 2005 on Kalaallisut, Lin 2005 on Chinese, Ritter and Wiltschko 2005 on Blackfoot and Halkomelem Salish). In this paper we argue for the opposite point of view, based on investigation of Gitxsan (Tsimshianic; spoken in British Columbia, Canada). We argue that in spite of displaying superficial differences from an English-type tense system, Gitxsan is a tensed language. Our evidence comes mainly from a future morpheme *dim*, whose behavior is comprehensible only under an analysis of the language as possessing a covert non-future tense morpheme. The Gitxsan future data also provide cross-linguistic evidence in support of Copley's (2002) analysis of *be going to* vs. *will*, according to which the former is a progressive version of the latter.

***Dim* is a future morpheme.** Sentences which lack any tense indicators in Gitxsan may be interpreted as either present or past, as illustrated in (1). They may *not* be interpreted as future. Nor is a future-time adverbial sufficient to license a future interpretation, as shown in (2). For a future interpretation, *dim* is both necessary and sufficient, as indicated in (3). We thus see the first major problem for a tenseless analysis of Gitxsan: it is difficult to see how to prevent (1), and even more particularly (2), from having a future interpretation, unless we appeal to a covert tense morpheme which is restricted to non-future times.

It is tense, not mood. We cannot avoid a tensed analysis by appealing to the notion of 'realis' to account for (1) and (2). The idea would be that *dim* marks irrealis, and that realis contexts as in (1-2) are by necessity non-future (since an event cannot be 'realis' if it has not happened yet). Evidence against a mood analysis is that not only realis constructions, but all *irrealis* constructions are also by necessity non-future, unless *dim* is present. This is shown in (4) for sentences containing negation. The inability of (4a) to be interpreted as future clearly does not derive from realis status.

***Dim* must co-occur with covert tense.** *Dim* allows 'past-future' readings parallel to those of English *would*, as illustrated in (5). In this example, the event time of Diana's going to Winnipeg is before the utterance time, but follows the reference time set up by the matrix clause. In English, such constructions are standardly analyzed as involving the co-occurrence of a (possibly modal) temporal ordering operator *woll* with a present or past tense (cf. Abusch 1988, among others). The same analysis straightforwardly applies to Gitxsan, with the twist that in Gitxsan, there is no morphological contrast between past and present, but instead a single non-future tense which picks out a (possibly contextually salient) non-future reference time. *Dim* directly instantiates *woll*, and co-occurs with the non-future tense to give rise to either plain 'will' readings as in (3), or past-future 'would' readings as in (5). This analysis is summarized in (6) and (7). Again, it is difficult to see how a tenseless analysis could account for the appearance of 'past-future' readings; appeal to a past reference time seems unavoidable when dealing with (5).

Consequences for the analysis of *be going to* vs. *will*. Copley (2002) proposes that English *be going to* involves the future *woll* plus progressive aspect, while *will* under one of its readings is bare (aspectless) *woll*. Copley's analysis accounts for several differences between *will* and *be going to*, including the fact that only *will* is good in offering contexts, as shown in (8), and that only *be going to* is possible in present-temporal-input cases such as (9). Gitxsan possesses a progressive morpheme *yukw* (Rigsby 1986, Jóhannsdóttir 2006), and the interaction of *yukw* with *dim* provides striking support for Copley's analysis. We see in (10) that only *dim* is possible in offering contexts, and in (11) that only *yukw dim* is possible in present-temporal-input contexts. Not only do the Gitxsan data provide cross-linguistic support for Copley's analysis of English, they provide further support for the analysis of *dim* as a future operator paralleling *woll*. Only under the assumption that *dim* instantiates *woll* do we have an account for the parallels between *dim* and *will* on the one hand, and *yukw dim* and *be going to* on the other.

Consequences for 'tenseless' languages. The evidence presented here shows that (a) tenselessness can *not* be assumed merely because of the absence of obligatory overt tense morphemes, or the absence of a distinction between past and present; (b) there are striking similarities in the way unrelated languages deal with future (*woll* combining with tense, aspectless vs. progressive futures). These deep similarities merit future cross-linguistic investigation, and have the potential to reveal properties of Universal Grammar.

- (1) yookw-t James (2) * yookw-t James jita hla_{xw}
eat-CONNECT James eat-CONNECT James tomorrow
‘James ate / James is eating.’ ‘James will eat tomorrow.’
≠ ‘James will eat.’
- (3) *dim* yookw-t James (jita hla_{xw})
FUT eat-CONNECT James (tomorrow)
‘James will eat (tomorrow)’
- (4) a. nee dii maadim b. nee *dim* dii maadim
NEG CONTR snow NEG *FUT* CONTR snow
‘It’s not snowing / It didn’t snow.’ ‘It won’t snow.’
≠ ‘It won’t snow.’
- (5) gibi-hl ganutxw-hl dat mahl-i-s Diana *dim* will yee-t go-hl
two-CONN weeks-CONN when tell-TRN-CONN Diana *FUT* COMP go-3SG to-CONN
Winnipeg ama k’i’y-hl ganutxw
Winnipeg in one-CONN week
‘Diana said two weeks ago that she would go to Winnipeg after one week.’
- (6) $[[\textit{dim}]]$ = $\lambda P \in D_{\langle i, st \rangle} . \lambda t . \lambda w . \exists t' [t < t' \ \& \ P(t')(w) = 1]$
- (7) $[[\text{NON-FUT}_i]]$ ^{g,c} is only defined if no part of g(i) is after t_c. If defined, $[[\text{NON-FUT}_i]]$ ^{g,c} = g(i).
- (8) A sign seen (and one not seen) on the highway:
a. We’ll change your oil in Madera.
b. # We’re going to change your oil in Madera.
- (9) a. # Oh look! It’ll rain!
b. Oh look! It’s going to rain!
- (10) A sign seen (and one not seen) on the highway:
a. *dim* jam-‘m-hl wiineex lun goohl Ansbayax
FUT make-we-CONN meal for.you PREP Kispiox
‘We’ll cook your dinner in Kispiox.’
b. # *yukw dim* jam-‘m-hl wiineex lun goohl Ansbayax
PROG FUT make-we-CONN meal for.you PREP Kispiox
‘We are going to cook your dinner in Kispiox’
- (11) a. gy’a! *yukw dim* wis b. # gya’a! *dim* wis
see *PROG FUT* rain see *FUT* rain
‘Look! It’s going to rain!’ ‘Look! It will rain!’

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