

Temporal interpretation in Washo, an optional tense language

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Washo (Hokan/isolate; USA) is an optional tense language in the sense of Plungian & van der Auwera (2006): the past tense marker -uɲil is not part of a paradigm of tenses, and morphologically tenseless clauses can also receive a past interpretation. I claim that -uɲil is the morphological exponent of a tense feature [past], which presupposes that the reference time of the clause, denoted by a temporal pronoun, precedes the evaluation time. Meanwhile, morphologically tenseless clauses lack a semantic tense restricting the value of the reference time pronoun. That is, I argue against an analysis whereby morphologically tenseless clauses host a phonologically null tense feature (e.g., Matthewson 2006).

I then discuss temporal interpretation in embedded clauses, and specifically complement clauses of propositional attitude verbs. I argue that the interpretation of embedded tensed and tenseless clauses provides new support for a syntactic "sequence of tense" rule (e.g., Ogiwara 1989) rather than a pragmatic account of sequence of tense phenomena (e.g., Altshuler 2016), and sketch an analysis. Time permitting, we will also make comparisons with other optional tense languages discussed in the recent literature, such as Tlingit (Cable, to appear) and Medumba (Mucha, to appear).