Modality in Ktunaxa

Application of formal semantic theory to traditionally understudied languages is still in its early stages in compared to research on majority languages, and that is especially true of Ktunaxa (or Kutenai), a language isolate within Southeastern British Columbia and areas of Idaho and Montana (Dryer 1992). With renewed community interest in linguistic documentation and creation of pedagogical materials to assist in language revitalization and language transmission, this project aims to provide a comprehensive sketch of modality within Ktunaxa. Building off work started by Lawrence Morgan (1991) and subsequent graduate field methods courses taught at the University of British Columbia, this study hopes to contribute to the growing cross-linguistic literature on modal systems. It also hopes to provide the Ktunaxa community with accessible and relevant material to implement when teaching how to express possibility and necessity within the language.

Two future markers with modal implications have been described by Laturnus (2011):

*Context:* Your son is several hours late coming home from school, so you’re starting to get worried. A friend assures you your son is probably fine.

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exa-t k-sowsaqanimal-ni ca?tmu-is  
FUT-PRVB SUB-stay.with-IND male.friend-POSS
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“He’ll be with his friends.”

*Speaker comments:* You’re saying he’s probably there.

```
e k-sowsaqanimal-ni ca?tmu-is  
FUT SUB-stay.with-IND male.friend-POSS
```

“He’ll be with his friends.”

*Speaker comments:* You’re sure that’s where he is.

Laturnus’ (2011) analysis suggests a clear semantic difference between *exaš* and *e*, and argues that the difference lays with a weak epistemic future encoding of *exaš* and a strong epistemic future reading of *e*. While her hypothesis goes against previous descriptions where *e* has been described as a shortening of *exaš* with no change in meaning (cf. The Kootenay Culture Committee, 1991; Morgan, 1991; Dryer, 2002, 2007), Laturnus’ refutation of that claim is sound and it is the assumption I am operating under.

Laturnus et al. (2016) also argue for the presence of two other modals *lin* and *tal* which are unambiguously epistemic and unambiguously circumstantial respectively:

*Context:* Mary wasn’t looking well yesterday and now she’s not in class.

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lin sanilxu?-ni mali  
EPIS sick-IND Mary
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‘Mary might be sick.’

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Hu qa tal cinax-i  
1 NEG CIRC go-IND
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*I can’t go out.’

My own research has uncovered another modal not mentioned in Laturnus’s work that appears to have a future flavour.

*Context:* Vi always seems to be singing around this time of day.
It seems like it’s a pattern, but you don’t know for sure whether or not she’s actually singing.

\[ \text{Xma sakil hawasxúmk, Vi.} \]
\[ \text{MOD still to.sing Vi} \]

“Vi should be singing.”

**Context:** You know that Vi has an appointment today with a group of students to sing.

\[ \text{Xma sił hawasxúmk, Vi.} \]
\[ \text{MOD do.something to.sing Vi} \]

“Vi should be singing.”

Little documentation of xma can be found in the Ktunaxa literature apart from a simplified *would/should* translation provided in Morgan’s grammar sketch (1991). It is therefore a particle that’s yet to be fully studied. A storyboard elicitation method was used to collect the following data, with situational contexts aimed at inspiring a future oriented response. Subsequent elicitation sessions were built off that initial storyboard. The absence or presence of xma also seems to contribute to a *think or want* reading in Ktunaxa which has interesting implications for how desire can be expressed cross-linguistically.

\[ \text{Billy qalwini ki?ik.} \]
\[ \text{Billy want-ni ki-eat} \]

“Billy thought he ate.”

\[ \text{Billy qalwini xma ki?ik.} \]
\[ \text{Billy want.ni MOD ki-eat} \]

“Billy wants to eat.”

While more research is required and currently underway, a preliminary look at modality within Ktunaxa reveals a clear distinction between epistemic and circumstantial modality, an interplay between modal and future marking, and a yet to be defined connection between modality and expressions of desire versus expressions of thought that could contribute to the increasing literature on just that divide as argued by Bogal-Allbritten (2016) and others. By continuing to utilize storyboards to create accessible content for the community the equally pressing goal of providing material for learners is also achieved.


