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Item Type	article;article
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Download date	2025-08-27 23:38:35
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/36888

Past Tense on Nouns as Death, Destruction, and Loss¹

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There are certain languages in which tense-markers attach to nominal as well as verbal projections. This paper is a semantic analysis of the use of the past-tense marker on nouns in one such language, Halkomelem, which is a Salishan language spoken on the Northwest Coast of North America. See Suttles (1987), Gerds (1988), and Galloway (1980, 1993: 382ff) for detailed discussions of this phenomenon (and for examples of future on nouns, which is not addressed in this paper).

On verbal projections, the past tense marker in Halkomelem simply marks past. But when the same marker is put onto a noun, it is used to mark any of three different things, as follows:

- (1) (i) Past on N may be used to mark that the referent of the NP is deceased, or
- (ii) Past on N may be used to mark that the referent of the NP has been lost, and/or
- (iii) Past on N may be used to mark that the referent of the NP has been destroyed.

Which of those three readings is available for a particular *past*-marked noun varies depending on the semantic nature of the noun, in ways that we will discuss in detail below.

Significantly, the pattern in (1) is not found in Halkomelem alone: there is cross-linguistic consistency in what N+PST means for languages which allow the past-tense marker

1

I would like to thank my consultant, Rosaleen George, for her help and patience in providing the Halq'eméylem data presented in this paper. This data is presented here with her permission and with the permission of the Stó:lo Nation. Thanks also to the Stó:lo elders Elizabeth Herrling, Tillie Guitierrez, and Shirley Norris, for consultations, discussions, and help writing down the same material. Thanks also to Hamida Demirdache, Henry Davis, Donna Gerds, Martina Wiltshko, and audiences at the UBC colloquium and NELS 27 for helpful comments. All errors are the sole responsibility of the author.

on nouns.

First, all three of the readings in (1) are associated with a preterite marker which attaches to nouns (as well as verbs) in Ojibwe (Nichols, 1980: 49ff). Second, the *deceased* and *lost* readings noted are also associated with N+PST in a number of other Coast Salish languages (M.D. Kinkade, p.c.; it is unclear whether the *destroyed* reading occurs here also, but see discussion below.)

Given this pattern, and also the existence of a cross linguistic consistency in interpretations for N+PST noted, two basic questions arise:

(2) (a) First, can we give a unified account for the past-tense marker for verbs and nouns in a tensed-nominal language like Halkomelem?

(b) And second, in so doing, can we explain why it is that these three particular readings --*death*, *destruction*, and *loss*-- are consistently associated with N+Pst?

Those are the issues addressed in this paper. The answers to these question turn out to have implications for several more general issues. Specifically, we will see: (i) these facts support Enc's (1981, 1986) proposal that nouns are associated with an independent temporal argument (in contrast to classical analyses of tense as a sentential operator); (ii) the facts raise questions related to Kratzer's (1988) account of the stage vs. individual level contrast, here extended to the nominal system; and (iii) the phenomenon raises interesting issues for general theories of the semantics of possession and the temporal interpretation of noun phrases.²

1. Examples

In this section we will look at some examples of each of the readings for the past-tense morpheme outlined above, using data from the Upriver dialect of Halkomelem.³

2

This paper assumes the existence of the Noun/Verb distinction in Salish, at least at the morphological level. See van Eijk and Hess (1986) and Matthewson and Demirdache (1996). The previous accounts in the literature on Halkomelem do not, to my knowledge, discuss the *destroyed* reading in (1) as a separate meaning for N+Pst, but the speakers very consistently give it as an alternative. Some other readings, essentially meaning "former", will come up in the discussion. I will not discuss future-marked nouns here, which also occur in Halkomelem, but the facts appear to fit with the analysis developed below

3

Ms. George, the consultant who provided these forms, is a 77-year old native speaker, born in Chehalis B.C. The data is given in the Stó:lo orthography. "e" is shwa, with allophonic variation, "a" is a low front vowel, and "lh" is a voiceless lateral fricative. See Galloway (1980) for detailed correspondences. See the sources in fn. 2, above, for more detailed discussion and examples of this phenomenon. Note that Ms. George's forms use a different *determiner* from the other sources in the literature; given the degree of variation in Upriver determiner usage (see Galloway, 1993: 386), this is not surprising.

Some examples of the deceased reading are shown first, in (3).

(3) Examples of the The Deceased Reading

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|---|
| a) | tel má:l
my father | tel má:l-elh
my father-PST (my late father) |
| b) | tel si:le
my grandfather | tel si:lalh
my grandfather-PST (my late grandfather) |
| c) | te sqwemá:y
the dog | te sqwemá:y-elh
the dog-PST (the dead dog) |

The use of the past-tense marker for deceased individuals appears to be fully productive. Obviously, only animate nouns are compatible with this reading.⁴

Some examples of the loss-of-possession reading for past-marked nouns are shown in (4). See also Gerdts (1988: 120). Again, this appears to be a productive use of the past-marker, at least for inanimates. (Nb., 4a is more generally "writing device".)

(4) The Loss-of-Possession Reading

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------|--|
| a) | tel xeltel
my pencil | tel xeltel-elh
my pencil-PST (my former pencil; used to be my pencil) |
| b) | tel pukw
the book | tel pukw-elh
my book-PST (my former book; used to be my book) |
| c) | tel kopú
the coat | tel kopú-lh
my coat-PST (my former coat; used to be my coat) |
| d) | tel lálem
my house | tel lálem-elh
my house-PST (my former house; used to be my house) |

4

The vowel-change with si:le may be due to a general phonological process, as Galloway (1993) suggests. Two other minor points: (i) si:le actually means "grandparent"; it is use of the non-female determiner which marks it as male; (ii) definite translations for the determiner, throughout, are slightly inaccurate: Salish does not distinguish definite vs. indefinite (see Matthewson, 1996).

For each of the examples in (4), Rosaleen George offered an alternative translation in each case, where PST on the NP was read not as meaning that the referent was lost, but rather that it had been destroyed. For example, when I snapped my pencil in two during a discussion, Ms. George then added the past-marker to the noun in referring to it. Each example in (4) above was given an alternative translation in a parallel fashion, to be read as "destroyed pencil", "destroyed book", "destroyed coat", and "destroyed house", respectively. Ms. Herrling agreed with these judgements in each case (though in a later elicitation session the destroyed reading for "house+Pst" was rejected by all three consultants, though not for the others; pragmatic and discourse factors strongly influence the readings, precisely as the analysis here will predict). Thus it appears that inanimates are ambiguous between a loss-of-possession reading and a destroyed reading, at least for certain cases.

The examples above presented the NPs in isolation. (5) now shows two examples of past-marked NPs embedded in sentences. (Halkomelem is normally, as in these cases, VSO.)

- (5) (a) slelikw ta' xeltel-elh
broken your pencil-PST = "Your (destroyed) pencil is broken"
- (b) kw'étlexwes tel má:l-elh te sqwemá:y
see my father-PST the dog = "My (late) father saw the dog"

Note that in the examples in (5) the verb itself bears no tense. In those examples the temporal interpretation of the verb is fixed by contextual (in (5b), also pragmatic) considerations.⁵

To finish this section, let us quickly look at one example of tense-marking on verbal projections. With verbs, the same tense-morpheme, (/lh/) appears on a pre-verbal auxiliary, as in the example in (6). Here, the past-tense marker disambiguates the otherwise ambiguous temporal interpretation of the verb, giving a clearly past-tense reading. See the sources cited above for detailed discussion.

- (6) i-lh imex tel si:le
AUX-PST walk my grandfather "My grandfather walked"

It is possible to have both a PST-marked noun and a PST-marked verb in the same sentence, and it appears that the tenses can conflict. However, I will not attempt to address such cases in this paper, for space reasons.

5

Gerds (p.c.) has argued that past-tense on the noun does not and cannot take scope over the verb, precisely what we find in examples like (5a), where the verb is read (in the relevant context) as present tense. The relation between overt verbal and nominal tense, though a significant and interesting issue, is outside the scope of this paper.

2. Analysis

The analysis to be developed here is as follows. The past tense morpheme, I will argue, whether attached to a noun or a verb, always marks the same thing: that the time at which a predicate holds of an argument is in the past.

Attached to verbs, the time that PST locates is the time-interval when the relevant action took place (or state held, etc.). Attached to nouns, the time that PST locates is the time when the referent of the NP was an N. That is, past on nouns marks as past the time when the referent had the property denoted by the head noun. For the possessive cases, I will argue that PST put into the past the time at which the possessive relation within NP holds, rather than locating the time of the temporal coordinate of the head N. This leads to a uniform account for all uses of tense, in that, by this account, all uses for PST locate an interval of time. Summarizing, PST can locate in the past: (a) time a verbal action/state holds, (b) the time the referent of NP has the property denoted by N, and (c) the time the possessive relation holds between the referent and the possessor. In each case, this comes down semantically to locating the interval when a particular predicate holds of an argument.

The various readings shown above for past-tense on referential nouns follow from that strictly time-related semantics, in conjunction with pragmatic factors. I will argue that this semantics alone is adequate, and that there is no need to posit a pattern of metaphorical extension or semantic drift in the meaning for "PST" at work here. The semantics/pragmatics interaction here follows a line of reasoning developed in Musan (1995), for "lifetime effects" in English and German.

To show how the readings follow, I first briefly clarify the background assumptions, and then show how the approach derives the various readings.

Assumption One: Intersective Interpretation of NPs

This analysis assumes a fairly standard formal-semantic approach to the interpretation for NPs, which is as in (7).

(7) (a) A sentence of the form [_sNP V] is interpreted as saying two things:

- i) Some individual was an N, and
- ii) That individual did the action (was in the state, etc.) V

(b) For example, *A President walked* is interpreted as saying really two things:

- i) Some individual was a President, and
- ii) That individual walked.

That is, we treat *A President walked* as asserting that $(\exists x)[\textit{President}'(x) \ \& \ \textit{walk}'(x)]$. On the (profound) motivation for such an intersective or conjunctive interpretation of NPs, rather than eg. seeing the NP as directly referential, see the historical overview in Heim (1991).

Other determiners, and transitive verbs, of course, intersect in different ways, but these matters are not immediately relevant to the analysis developed here. The important point is simply that we will treat (common) nouns as denoting properties predicated of a referent.⁶

Assumption Two: Possession as a Modifying Relation

Possession, which becomes relevant in deriving certain examples with the past-marker, will be treated here semantically as a relation holding between the possessor and the referent of the NP. This is essentially following the proposal in Higginbotham (1983). (8) gives an example of this approach.

- (8) Mary's dog
 = (the x)[x is a dog and x and Mary stand in a possessive relation]

Using R_{pos} to mark this relation, simply to be briefer, we get a representation for possession as in (9).

- (9) Mary's dog
 =(the x)[x is a dog & $R_{\text{pos}}(x, \textit{Mary})$]

For our purposes here, the precise semantic content of the possessive relation is not crucial, and these assumptions will suffice. (In fact, the possessive relation is essentially without fixed semantic content, as Higginbotham and many others have pointed out).

Assumption Three: Nouns Also Take Temporal Arguments

In the approach to NP-interpretation so far outlined, temporal interpretation has been ignored. Let us turn to that matter.

We have divided a sentence like *A President walked* into essentially two propositions (or propositional functions), making two different statements about one individual. In the interpretation, then, we will have two different things which may be temporally located, as follows:

⁶

See also Gerdts (1987), who argues that nouns are predicates, based on evidence from Halkomelem and other languages.

- (10) (a) The time at which the referent walked, (call this t_{verb});
 (b) The time at which this (same) referent was President (call this t_{noun})

In classical formal semantic theories of tense, no separate time of evaluation was represented in the interpretation for t_{noun} the time at which the referent was an N. Classical theories instead treat PST as a sentential operator; if an NP occurs outside the scope of that operator, then it is predicted to be essentially evaluated as present tense. However, as Enc (1981, 1986) shows, based on a detailed study of the temporal interpretation of NPs and their scopal interactions with tense, that approach is inadequate. Rather, the time at which $N(x)$ is understood to hold can and should, at least for certain cases, be seen as an independent variable. In other words, we need to recognize a potentially separate time of evaluation within the sentence for the time when "x is an N".

To capture this, Enc (1986) proposes that both nouns and verbs can be associated with temporal arguments in the semantics. So, for example, just as verbs may be treated as functions taking a temporal (or spatio-temporal) argument in the semantics (eg., $walk'(x,t)$), so at least some nouns can and should be treated in this way. Thus, for example, *A President walked* above can be treated as in (11) (still setting aside the past-tense, momentarily):⁷

- (11) A President walked. = $(\exists x)[President'(x, t_{\text{noun}}) \ \& \ walk'(x, t_{\text{verb}})]$

The analysis to be developed here follows that same approach: not only verbs but also nouns are associated with a time of evaluation in the interpretation, which we can represent as a temporal argument associated with the predicate, whether nominal or verbal.⁸

How This Derives the Readings

The proposal here, as noted above, is that the PST morpheme is uniformly a function which locates an interval associated with a predicate in the past.

For *past* applied to verbs, as in "The President walked", this gives us an interpretation as in

7

I set aside entirely the issue of how these temporal variables are closed, or whether they may be treated as referential.

8

The crucial point here is the existence of a temporal argument associated with nouns, not its independence from that of the verb. Musan (1995) and Burton (1995) both discuss how in certain contexts the temporal interpretation of the NP is bound to that of the verb, and Musan argues that it is only with certain determiners that a distinct temporal interpretation for nouns is possible. Demirdache (1996) shows that in at least some Salish languages the temporal interpretation of NPs is never free, she relates this to a difference in the determiner systems.

(12), below, ie. "x walks at some time, and this time is in the pas:⁹

- (12) A President walked.=
 $(\exists x)[\text{President}'(x, t_{\text{noun}}) \ \& \ \text{walk}'(x, t_{\text{verb}}) \ \& \ \text{PST}(t_{\text{verb}})]$

However, now having posited the presence of a temporal argument associated with nouns, our assumptions give rise to another possibility: if, morphologically, a past-tense morpheme could be put into a position to compose semantically with a noun, then our system would allow for a semantic interpretation in which it is the time of t_{noun} which is located by the past-tense morpheme, as in the hypothetical example in (13):

- (13) A President-PST walked =
 $(\exists x)[\text{President}'(x, t_{\text{noun}}) \ \& \ \underline{\text{PST}}(t_{\text{noun}}) \ \& \ \text{walk}'(x, t_{\text{verb}}) \ \& \ \text{PST}(t_{\text{verb}})]$

While tense on nouns is impossible in English, this approach extends straightforwardly to Halkomelem, where that is a morphological possibility. What we will get, then, looking just at the nominal part of the interpretation, is as in (14): x was an N at some t, and this t is in the past. (I set aside the interaction between tense on noun AND the verb, as in 13), for space reasons, as noted earlier; hence we look for now just at the noun with tense).

- (14) (a) ...sɪ:lalh... ...grandparent'(x, t_{noun}) & PST(t_{noun})...
 grandparent-PST
- (b) ...kopù-lh... ...coat'(x, t_{noun}) & PST(t_{noun})...
 coat-PST

In other words, we derive representations which in effect say "the referent is a house/grandfather, etc. at some time, but this time is in the past".

This does not yet explain why past on nouns should have the interpretations noted (death, destruction, and loss). What we will now see is that this follows from the interaction between representations as in (14), combined with pragmatic considerations.

One final note, before we begin: in the derivations, it will be assumed that if we have an interpretation which says that "x was an N at some time, and this time is in the past", then this will be interpreted as holding only in the past. Thus, if we say eg. *house-PST*, it will be understood that the referent is a house only in the past. This 'only in the past' clause actually follows from an inference of maximal informativeness, not from the bare semantics, as Musan

9

Presumably the *Past* function actually relates the time of the verb to a reference time such as the time of utterance, hence may take two temporal arguments, but for simplicity I do not show this.

(1995) discusses in detail. That point becomes important at certain points.

Deriving the Deceased and Destroyed Readings

Consider a sentence like (15a) which, under the assumptions here, receives an interpretation as in (15b), ie. "Some individual was my grandfather at a past time, and that individual walked (at some time)".

- (15) (a) imex tel si:lalh
walked my grandfather-PST "My grandfather walked"
- (b) $(\exists x)[\text{my-grandfather}'(x, t_{\text{noun}}) \& \text{PST}(t_{\text{noun}}) \& \text{walk}'(x, t_{\text{verb}})]$

Note that in (15b) the verb, since tense is not marked on the verb, PST here makes a statement only about the time of being a grandfather; the time of walking is fixed only by context (precisely the inverse of English, then, in this particular case). But the crucial point about (15b) is that it includes the assertion: *the time at which x was my grandfather is in the past*. The claim here is that this is all that the semantics derivable from lexical meaning tells us. How does the deceased reading arise, then? In the following way.

Recall that the assumption here is that $N(x)$, marked as Past, is understood to hold *only* in the past. It follows from the past-marking, then, that the referent x has ceased to be a grandfather. However, pragmatically, once a person has become a grandfather, there is no way to stop except by ceasing to exist: it is a property which, once begun, remains with you as long as you exist, or what Musan calls a "lifetime property". So, if the semantics (with the maximality inference) tells us that x has ceased to be a grandfather, we can infer that he has ceased to exist. Hence, by a chain of reasoning, the deceased reading follows from a purely temporal semantics. By exactly parallel reasoning, we derive the *deceased* reading for N+Pst for kinship terms in general, and for other examples such as dog+Pst, etc.

Now, in deriving the *deceased* reading for inanimates in this indirect way, this approach makes a prediction which distinguishes it from a theory which would treat the PST-marker (-lh) as simply accidentally homophonous on nouns and verbs (or as having changed its meaning historically, to mean, on nouns, the equivalent of *late* in English).

The difference from an ambiguity approach is that the approach here predicts that a *deceased* reading will arise only when the noun names a pragmatically uncancellable property. For any property which an individual can, as a practical matter, lose without ceasing to exist, the prediction is that *deceased* should be only one possible reading. Another possible interpretation, predicted under this approach, will be simply "x has ceased to be an N". As it turns out, this is correct: those animate nouns which name cancellable properties (I mean, properties you can lose without dying) do *not* force (though they allow) a *deceased* reading. Some examples are shown below (Hamida Demirdache and Peter Jacobs, p.c., found a parallel pattern of interpretation with similar examples past-marked in Squamish):

- (16) a) stó:les-elh
wife-PST =dead wife OR ex-wife
- b) swáqeth-elh
husband-PST =dead husband OR ex-husband
- c) siyó:ye-lh
friend-PST =dead friend OR ex-friend
- d) skw'iyeth-elh
slave-PST =dead slave OR ex-slave

In each case, precisely when the N names a cancellable property, other readings become available, as predicted by the hypothesis here, but not as predicted by a homophony or metaphorical extension model of PST tense on nouns.

The *destroyed* readings, discussed in examples in earlier sections, follow, then, in an exactly parallel fashion. The only difference is that, for inanimates, it is destruction of the object, rather than death, which goes along with its "ceasing to be an N".

Deriving the Loss-of-Possession Readings

Let us consider now the third reading discussed for Past-tense nouns, the loss-of-possession reading. Under the proposal here, the crucial point is that, by our assumptions, an NP with a possessive potentially contains not one but two distinct temporal arguments. These two arguments are: (i) a temporal argument associated with the head-noun, and (ii) a temporal argument associated with the possessive relation. For example, the past-tense form of *pencil* (17a) will have an interpretation representable as in (17b) or (equivalently, in natural language) (17c).

- (17) a) ...ta' xéltel-elh...
your pencil-PST
- b) ...pencil'(x, t_{noun}) & R_{poss}(x, you, t_{poss})...
- c) x is a pencil (at some time, t_{noun}) AND you possess x (at some time, t_{poss})

Now, we have said that PST locates an interval in the past. Here, even *within* the NP, we have two distinct intervals which the PST-function could potentially be associated with: the time of x's being a pencil, or the time of x's being possessed. Thus, from these two associations, we predict two distinct readings, as in (18):

- (17) (a) ...pencil'(x, t_{noun}) & PST(t_{noun}) & R_{poss}(x, you, t_{poss})...
(=the pencilhood is in the past; gives the *destroyed* reading)

- (b) ...pencil'(x,t_{now}) & R_{poss}(x,you,t_{poss}) & PST(t_{poss})...
 (=the time of your possession is in the past; gives the *lost* reading)

As we noted above, inanimates normally allow precisely these two readings: either loss-of-possession or destruction. Compositionally, the two readings may be derived in various different ways (which, obviously, I am glossing over); however, the point stands, that the hypothesis of two distinct temporal arguments within the NP correlates exactly with the two distinct readings for PST-marked inanimates. I take this as evidence supporting the hypothesis that not only the head noun, but also the possessive relation, introduces a temporal argument into the interpretation.

Concluding Remarks

The particular phenomenon of past-tense marking on nouns which we have been looking at, and the account given here, touch on a number of general issues.

First, the simple fact that nouns can take overt morphological tense strongly supports Enc's model, and more generally theories which associate a (spatio-)temporal argument with nouns. If tense were, as classical theories would have it, a sentential operator, it is very unclear why tense should be occurring within the NP constituent. On the other hand, given Enc's reasoning in favour of positing a temporal argument associated with nouns, tensed-nominal systems like Halkomelem are something we might expect, rather than not. This leaves open the question of why Halkomelem allows morphologically fortense on nouns, something which I take to be a morphological issue (presumably related to differences in the categorial system, or to syntactic issues raised in the work of Eloise Jelenik) rather than a semantic one.

The evidence that all nouns take temporal arguments, including nouns naming apparently very Individual-Level properties, such as *pencil* or *grandfather*, appears slightly surprising, given Kratzer's (1988) analysis of the stage vs. individual level distinction. Nothing discussed here actually directly contradicts Kratzer's account, because her system explicitly allows any I-level noun to switch to an S-level predicate, and in fact she sees past-marking as a way of forcing this. However, the pervasiveness of the availability of spatio-temporal arguments with nouns of all kinds is worth noting. Another point relates to Kratzer's use of a distinct mechanism to derive the "deceased" reading with past-marked I-level nouns (in discussion of English predicate-nominals). The approach outlined here (very directly based on Musan, 1995, as I have noted) gives us the deceased reading without positing such a mechanism, which may be worth noting in considering Kratzer's approach.

Finally, the fact that *possession* can be put into the past by a morphological past-tense marker both gives evidence, as noted, for the claim that the possessive relation has a potentially independent temporal argument within NP.

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