

Realis and irrealis in Oceanic

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Realis and irrealis

“Realis”: referring to the actual past/present.

Definitions of irrealis:

- Cristofaro (2012): “unrealized states of affairs”
- Elliott (2000):
 - possible events;
 - conditionals;
 - events qualified by modality;
 - directives;
 - (negation)
 - (habitual aspect)
 - (questions)

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 - The concept has been said to be ill-defined.
 - Its application to markers in different languages is too inconsistent to be meaningful.
- Oceanic linguists generally agree that the realis/irrealis distinction is meaningful and useful in the context of Oceanic languages ([Bugenhagen, 1993](#); [Roberts, 1990](#); [Elliott, 2000](#); [Barbour, 2011](#); [Lichtenberk, 2016](#)).

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- Certain irrealis functions, such as imperatives, prohibitives and negative purpose clauses (*lest*) are sometimes expressed by more specialized expressions, which block the use of an irrealis marker.
- The label *realis* is sometimes assigned to a form that is in fact neutral with respect to modality and tense.

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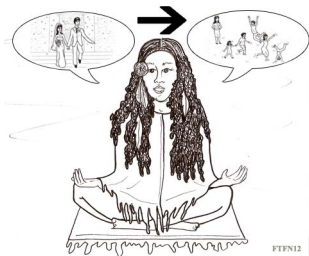
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- **Description-based** comparative work on 60 Oceanic languages so far.

Subdomains of irrealis in Oceanic: North Ambrym “irrealis”



- (1) *Jon, bone fō ktu, lo mwen-amrō teere nyer*
 John time 2SG.**IRR** take then GEN.CL-2DL.POSS child PL
e-ve lol.
 POT-COP.**IRR** plenty
 “If you marry John, you will have many children.”
 (ib1-fortune-na.35)

compare von Prince et al. (2018)

Subdomains of irrealis in Oceanic: North Ambrym “counterfactual”



- (2) *ō to yene Adam lo mwena-mrō mane te*
 2SG **CTF** marry Adam then POSS.CL-2DL.POSS money NREC.PST
lam.

big

“If you had married Adam, you two would have been rich.”

(at1-fortune-na.24)

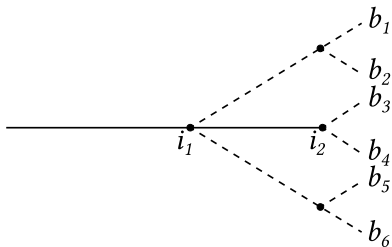
Subdomains of irrealis in Oceanic: Sinaugoro “irrealis”

- (3) *Bere b-e-re daro-a nai [tu], kurabo ġitaġita-na*
 if R-3SG-IRR sweep=3SG time TOP floor appearance-3SG
b-e-r-e namo.
 R-3SG-IRR good
 “If she had swept, the floor would have been clean.”
 (Tauberschmidt, 1999, 81)

Interim

- The North Ambrym “irrealis” refers to the future;
- The Sinaugoro “irrealis” refers to the counterfactual past/present, like the North Ambrym “counterfactual”.
- The “irrealis” markers of the two languages do not overlap in meaning.

Modelling irreality with branching time

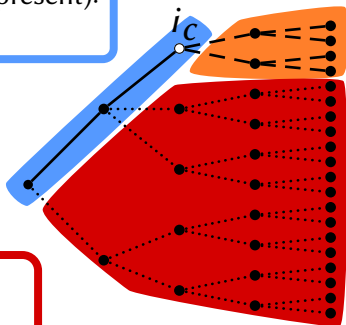


- The realis/irrealis distinction is characterized by an asymmetry between the present/past vs. the future.
- This asymmetry can be modelled by a branching-time framework (Prior, 1957; Thomason, 1970).

The actual, the counterfactual, and the possible

the actual (past/present):
 $\{i | i \leq i_c\}$

the possible
 future: $\{i | i_c < i\}$



the counterfactual
 (past/present/future):
 $\{i | i \not\leq i_c, i_c \not\leq i\}$

von Prince (2019) shows how branching time can generate a three-way distinction between modal domains.

Modal-temporal distinctions

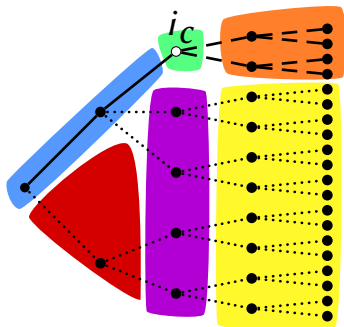


Figure: Combining the modal with the temporal dimension allows for more fine-grained distinctions

“Irrealis” and counterfactual in North Ambrym and Sinaugoro

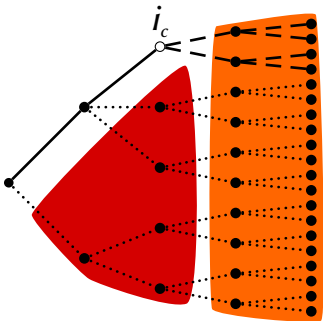


Figure: The “irrealis” in Sinaugoro (red) and in North Ambrym (orange)

Functions of irrealis

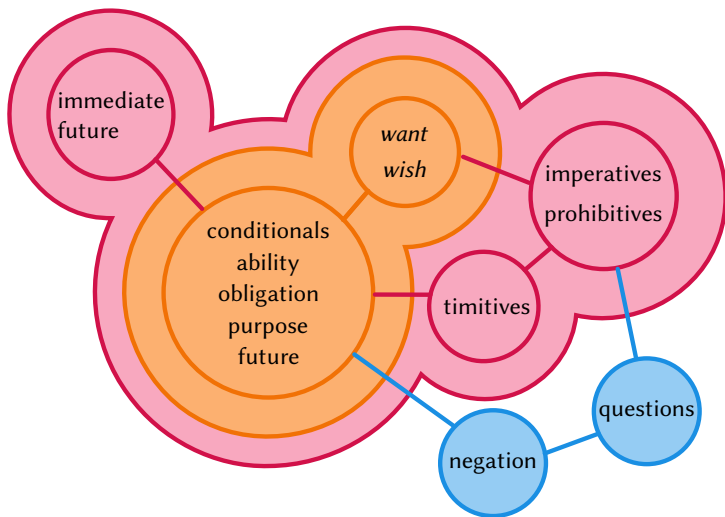


Figure: Functions of irrealis markers inspired by Bugenhagen (1993)

Functional split of irrealis in Paamese

realis (zero-marked)
distant future
immediate future
timitive
prohibitive
imperative

Table: TAM categories in Paamese, after [Crowley \(1982\)](#); a similar system is found in South-East Ambrym ([Ridge, 2019](#)).

Functional split of irrealis in Muyuw

Function	Marker
past	realis/zero
conditionals	irrealis
<i>want</i>	irrealis
<i>wish</i>	irrealis
ability	irrealis
obligation	irrealis
purpose	irrealis
timitive	irrealis
prohibitive	irrealis
imperative	zero

Table: TAM marking in Muyuw according to Bugenhagen (1993)

Interim

- Irrealis markers might be blocked from expressing certain functions by more specialized markers in the system.
- In the Oceanic context, this concerns in particular functions such as imperatives, prohibitives, timitives, as well as the immediate future.

“Realis” subject proclitics in Nafsan

	Realis	Irrealis	Perfect
1sg	<i>a=</i>	<i>ka=</i>	<i>kai=</i>
2sg	<i>ku=</i>	<i>p̃a=</i> [k̃pa]	<i>kui=</i>
3sg	<i>i=</i>	<i>ke=</i>	<i>ki=</i>
1dl (incl)	<i>ta=</i>	<i>tak=</i>	<i>takai=</i>
1dl (excl)	<i>ra=</i>	<i>rak=</i>	<i>rakai=</i>
2dl	<i>ra=</i>	<i>rak=</i>	<i>rakai=</i>
3dl	<i>ra=</i>	<i>rak=</i>	<i>rakai=, rai=</i>
1pl (incl)	<i>tu=</i>	<i>tuk=</i>	<i>tu=, tui=, tukoi=</i>
1pl (excl)	<i>u=</i>	<i>ko=</i>	<i>ui=, koi=</i>
2pl	<i>u=</i>	<i>ko=</i>	<i>koi=</i>
3pl	<i>ru=</i>	<i>ruk=</i>	<i>rui=, rukui=</i>

Table: Portmanteau subject proclitics in Nafsan based on Thieberger (2006)

The problem with Nafsan realis proclitics

- (4) *Ru=f to nigmam traus-i-∅, ko=fo*
 3PL=COND HAB 1PL.EXCL.BEN tell-TR-3SG.OBJ 1PL.EXCL.IRR=PSP.IRR
tæ, me gar i=tik.
 know but 3PL 3SG=not
 “If they had told it to us, we would know, but they didn’t.”
 (Thieberger, 2006:259)

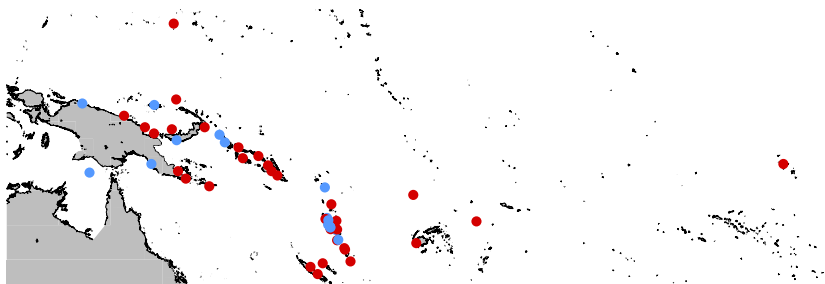
Our proposal

- The “realis” set of Nafsan subject proclitics is in fact neutral with respect to TAM ([Krajinović, 2018](#)).
- The interpretation of utterances unmarked for TAM as referring to the actual past or present is a pragmatic default ([Smith et al., 2007](#); [Mucha, 2012](#); [von Prince, 2018](#)).
- The same analysis can be applied to languages such as Wogeo (cf. [Exter, 2012](#))

Conclusions

- Realis and irrealis are meaningful categories in Oceanic languages;
- Crosslinguistic mismatches can largely be accounted for by the following factors:
 - TAM markers labeled as *irrealis* might refer only to a modal-temporal subdomain of the irrealis domain.
 - Irrealis markers might be blocked from expressing certain functions by more specialized markers in the system.
 - Markers labeled as *realis* might in fact be neutral with respect to TAM and therefore occur in non-realis contexts.

Binary realis/irrealis systems



Non-overlapping modal-temporal domains

de Haan (2012): the “irrealis” in Limbu has no overlap with the “irrealis” in Hualapai.

- (5) Limbu (Tibeto-Burman): counterfactual past/present
yaŋ kɔtt-u-ŋ-gɔ:ni iŋ-u-ŋ-ba.

money have-3P-1SG.AG-IRR buy-3P-1SG.AG-IPF
 “If only I had the money, I would buy it.”

- (6) Hualapai (Pai, Yuman): immediate future
olo-h-ch ha: thi:-hi-k-wi

horse-DEM-SUB water 3/3.drink-IRR-SS-AUX/be
 “The horse is going to drink the water.”

“Irrealis” in Limbu and Hualapai

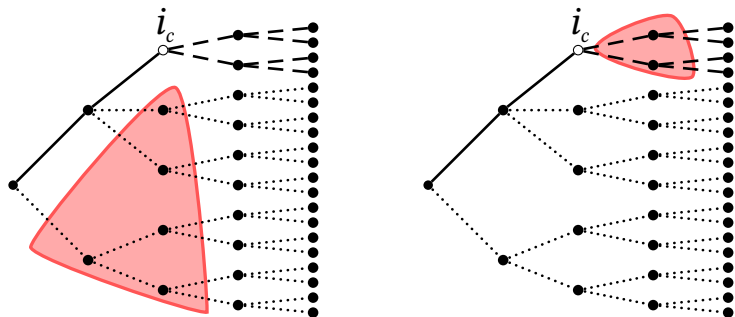


Figure: Irrealis in Limbu (left): counterfactual past/present; irrealis in Hualapai (right): immediate future.

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