The present tense in a superficially tenseless language

This paper contributes to the debate about tenseless languages, by providing evidence for a covert present tense morpheme in Blackfoot (BL; Algonquian). Although BL lacks overt tense morphology, we argue that BL possesses an instantaneous present tense parallel to that of English (EN). Evidence for this is that BL displays the same effects as those observed by [1] for EN: in the present tense, eventive predicates must be in the imperfective. Just like [1], we derive this fact from the semantics of the present tense morpheme. We conclude that the absence of overt tense distinctions does not necessarily indicate an absence of tense.

**The EN instantaneous present.** In EN, eventive predicates must be in the imperfective if the reference time coincides with the utterance time (1a,b). Statives do not show this restriction (1c). [1] derives this effect by claiming that the present tense denotes the instantaneous utterance time. States, which possess the subinterval property, can hold at an instantaneous moment, while eventive predicates cannot.

**Superficially tenseless properties of BL.** BL lacks an inflectional present/past distinction, as shown in (2): the same form can be interpreted as either present or past. This has led [7] to claim that BL lacks tense entirely, and that Inf in this language encodes (non-)coincidence of participants rather than of times.

**The BL present-tense data parallel those of EN.** In BL, imperfective aspect is overtly marked on all predicate types, and is used both for on-going and for habitual situations (3-6). (The fact that this differs from the EN progressive reflects a well-known independent point of variation in imperfectives [3].) Interestingly, in a present-tense context, BL statives do not need to be in the imperfective (7), but eventive predicates do (8). In the absence of the imperfective marker, eventive predicates can only have a past tense interpretation, and hence are felicitous in the present-tense phone context (8b).

**A tensed analysis of BL.** We adopt a standard analysis of the perfective and imperfective, as in (9). Following [1]’s analysis of EN, we propose that BL possesses a phonologically covert present tense which denotes the instantaneous utterance time (t₀). The 'phone context’ forces reference to the present tense = t₀. States can hold at a moment, and therefore are felicitous in the perfective in the present tense. However, perfective eventive predicates as in (8b) are impossible in this context because an event of e.g., cooking cannot fit inside the instantaneous utterance time; see (10).

**Failure of an aspectual analysis.** An alternative approach would be that the contrast between (7) and (8) is aspectual, and can be derived without reference to tense. However, the fact that imperfective is overtly marked on all predicate types suggests that viewpoint aspect is not telicity-dependent in BL (unlike e.g., Inuktitut; see [2]), since telicity-dependent languages overtly mark perfective aspect on atelic predicates. Furthermore, aspectual analyses of temporal effects usually predict that all atelic predicates pattern alike, but in BL, activities pattern with accomplishments rather than with statives in the phone context.

**The failure of a tenseless analysis.** As mentioned above, [7] argues that BL is a truly tenseless language. The tenseless analysis predicts – and [7] explicitly claims that – perfective eventive predicates are interpretable as either present or past. However, this is directly contradicted by the data in (8b), as well as by data presented in [4]. Given the failure of an aspectual explanation for the infelicity of (8b), there is no way to predict the right facts under a tenseless analysis.

**A prediction.** We predict that a language which lacks an instantaneous present tense would fail to pattern with BL in the phone context: if the present tense could denote a time-interval longer than a moment, then even activities or accomplishments could fit inside the present-tense time-span, and thus be felicitous in the perfective aspect. We show that this prediction is upheld for another superficially tenseless language, St’át’imcets (ST; Salish). In ST, which has independently been argued to possess only a single non-future tense [6], eventive predicates do not have to be in the imperfective in the phone context.

**Consequences for activities.** Our analysis requires us to claim that activity predicates lack the subinterval property; this has independently been argued by [8]. Activities are not homogeneous, but instead have minimal subparts which last longer than a moment. Activities are then correctly predicted in both BL and EN to require the imperfective in the present tense.

**Conclusion.** Our explanation for the BL data entails that languages with no overt tense inflection can nevertheless have tenses which are semantically equivalent to those of obviously tensed languages. The absence of visible tense does not entail an absence of tense.
(1) Context: Your friend calls you on the phone and asks you to meet her right now. You say ‘I can’t …’
   a. I’m cooking / dancing / knitting a sweater.  [HABITUAL / ‘SPORTSCASTER’ ONLY]
   b. # I cook / dance / knit a sweater.
   c. I feel sick / want to wash my hair / am hungry.

(2) a. nitsííktsstso'kini
    nii-ik-stsso'kini
    I'm cooking / dancing / knitting a sweater.
    1SG-INT-hungry

(3) nitsííkssistsiko
    nitsííkssistsiko
    I'm being tired.
    1SG-INT-tired

(4) nitáihpiyi
    nitsííkssistsiko
    I am / was dancing / (habitual).
    1SG-INT-tired

(5) nitsííkooksin
    nitsííkooksin
    I am mean.
    1SG-INT-mean

(6) nitsííkooksin
    nitsííkooksin
    I am mean if I don’t get anything to eat.
    1SG-INT-mean

(7) Context: As in (1)
   a. # nitsííkssistsiko
   b. nitsííkssistsiko

(8) Context: As in (1)
   a. nitaihkiita
   nit-a-ihkiita
   I’m cooking.
   1SG-IMPERF-cook

(9) \[
    \text{[[PERF]]} = \lambda P \lambda t \exists e [P(e) \land (e) \land t] \\
    \text{[[IMPERF]]} = \lambda P \lambda t \exists e [P(e) \land t \land (e)]
\]  [from [5]]

(10) \[
    \text{[[PRESENT PERFECTIVE nitsííksk̓iita]]} = e [\text{cook(e)} \land \text{Agent(I,e)} \land (e) \land t_0]
\]

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