

The Preterit Mode and Counterfactuality

Counterfactual statements, or those which the speaker believes to be untrue, are realized morphologically in various ways cross-linguistically. In Ojibwe, preterit mode morphology in the conjunct order is utilized in expressing counterfactuality and this paper provides a preliminary description and how the preterit mode's use as a counterfactual marker patterns cross-linguistically.

Nichols (1980) notes the use of the conjunct preterit in expressing counterfactuality:¹

(1) *Noongom isa go biidawipan...*

noongom isa go biidaw-ipan
today EMPH EMPH bring(it).for.h/-CONJ.PRET.3SG>>1SG
'Had he brought it for me today (but he didn't)...'
(Nichols 1980: 124)²

Conditional statements are useful in illustrating counterfactuality and (2) utilizes conjunct preterit morphology to indicate that the antecedent is not true while the implicative, non-counterfactual conditional in (3) lacks preterit morphology on the protasis:

(2) *Gkendaaspa, daa-gchitwaawzi.*

gkendaas-pa daa-gchitwaawzi
be.smart.3SG.CONJ.PRET MOD-be.rich.3SG
'If he were smart, he would be rich.'

(3) *Da-mno-yaa giishpin mshkiki daapnang.*

da-mno-yaa giishpin mshkiki daapnan-g
FUT-good-be.3SG if medicine pick.up-3SG.CONJ
'If he takes this medicine, he will be well.'

Wishes are also useful to illustrate counterfactuality as they are predicated on the speaker's belief of a thing to be untrue or unlikely. The presence/absence of preterit morphology in (4) and (5) correlate with the speaker's belief or disbelief in an event coming true:

(4) *Begish naa bkinaageyaambaa.*

begish naa bkinaage-yaambaa
OPT EMPH win-1SG.CONJ.PRET
'I wish I would win'

¹ Abbreviations used: 1 - first person; 3 - third person; SG - singular; OPT - optative particle; EMPH - emphatic particle; CONJ - conjunct verbal order; PRET - preterit mode; PRET/DUB - preterit-dubitative mode; FUT - future tense; MOD - modal; >> - indicates subject to object in transitive verbs.

² The Ojibwe text in this example has been transcribed into the double-vowel orthography and glossing is modified for consistency. The English free translation is unmodified.

(5) *Begish naa bkinaageyaan.*

begish naa bkinaage-yaan

OPT EMPH win-1SG.CONJ

'I hope I win.'

Cross-linguistically, counterfactuality is often expressed with past tense or imperfective aspect morphology. While the preterit mode in Ojibwe is neither of these things, I analyze its interpretations and discuss theories of counterfactual marking, noting that the concept of an *exclusion operator* fits well with a description of the preterit in Ojibwe.

References

Nichols, John D. 1980. *Ojibwe Morphology*. Cambridge: Harvard University.