Disambiguating {-Vm} Suffixes in Mainland Comox

John Hamilton Davis
Bellingham, Washington

Abstract: In Mainland Comox, there are several suffixes with the shape /-əm/ or /-am/. These suffixes are difficult for a marginal or non-speaker to distinguish, but when pronounced carefully are heard to be acoustically distinct. In rapid discourse, they are distinguished by syntactic or pragmatic context.

Keywords: middle voice, indefinite object, spatial relations, Mainland Comox.

1   Introduction

Bill Galligos (born 1908) was careful to point out the difference between two seemingly homophonous suffixes. He volunteered that the word for 'become sick' *kwetem* [kʷʊtəm] ends with "t-u-m" and is different from the word for "go over, like go over a fence" *kwetam* [kʷʊtʌm] ~ [kʷʊtam] which ends with "t-a-m". Since his explanation, the difference between these two suffixes has shown up in tales told by Noel George Harry (whose Indian name was *Mowheyalas* [moçʷiyalʌs], Tommy Paul (known as Swinney [swɪnɪɪ] and whose Indian name was *Yapawtwh* [yɛpʌʊtçʷ]), and Ambrose Wilson. The speakers whose speech most clearly illustrated this difference were Sliammon speakers Mary George and Elsie Paul and Homalco speakers Ambrose Wilson, his sister Adeline Francis, and Noel Harry (known as Nuwa [nuwʌ]), who was considered to be *'i'ayten* [ʔɛʔaɪtən] 'good natured; a cheerful person who cheers others'.

2   A list of seemingly homophonous suffixes

The following sections present examples of /-əm/ as a place name, /-əm/ as the ending on an intransitive verb, /-əm/ as reflexive, /-ʔəm/ marking a transitive verb with an indefinite patient, /-am/ as an indicator of what is predicted to happen, and /-am/ as an indicator of location. This latter use is contrasted with the ending /-igan/ which also shows location and /-am/ which refers to the interior of a container.

3   Place names

One way that places are named is with the suffix /-əm/. Examples include the following:

(1) a. *peqws*
         [pɔqʷs]
         /pəqʷs/
         'fall into the water'

     b. *peqwsem*
         [pɔqʷsəm]
         /pəqʷsəm/
         'place of falling overboard'
         (a site in Bute Inlet)

(2) a. *thathxays*
         [θaθχaɪs]
         'gravel'

     b. *thathxaysem*
         [θaθχaɪsəm]
         'gravel beach/place'
         (one name for Westview)

Jimmy Wilson (son of Ambrose Wilson) gave the following analysis for the name of the beach in front of Sliammon village:

(3) a. *t'eshem*   b. *t'eshius*
         [t̓ɪšɪm]   [t̓ɪš^yus]
         /t̓əšəm/   /t̓əš^yus/
         '(water) milky/cloudy'   'appear milky/cloudy' (herring spawn)

     c. *t'eshiusem*
         [t̓ɪš^yusəm]
         /t̓əš^yusəm/
         'place of herring spawning'

The story of this name was given in Tommy Paul's commentary on twins (Davis 2016:75–76). When Marion Harry heard the audio of this story, she remarked that Marshall Dominic once had a twin and the two of them brought the herrings to the beach in front of Sliammon so they would continue to spawn there.
     Possibly related:

(4) a. *tihsk'wat*   b. *k'watem*
         [tihsk̓ʷat]   [k̓ʷatəm]
         'Powell River'   'river'
         The place name retains the archaic /s/.   This is not a specific place name.

3 /-əm/ as a marker of intransitive

(5) *hasem*   (6) *kwetem*   (7) *sechem*   (8) *k'wez'em*
     [hasəm]   [kʷʊtəm]   [sɪčɪm]   [k̓ʷʊt̓θəm]
     /hasəm/   /kʷətəm/   /səčəm/   /k̓ʷət̓θəm/
     'sneeze'   'become sick'   'itch'   'jump'

4 /-əm/ as probable intransitive, possible reflexive

(9) a. *shiasem*   b. *shiaset*
         [š^yæsəm]   [š^yæsət]
         'to sneak'   'sneak up on him/her'

(10) a. *tlemlhalh*   b. *tlemlhayem* [1]
         [λʌmɬaɬ]   [λʌmɬayɪm]
         'wet throat'   'to wet one's throat' (have a drink)

---

[1] 'to wet his/her throat' has not been recorded.

5 /-əm/ as reflexive

(11) a. *lhilhichem*
[ɬiɬičɪm]
{C₁V₁-ɬič-əm}
IMPF-comb-*əm*
'combing one's hair'

b. *lhilhicht*
[ɬiɬičt]
{C₁V₁-ɬič-t}
IMPF-comb-TRANS
'combing his/her hair'

(12) a. *thejiaqop*
[θɪĵʸæqʷop]
'hat'

b. *thejiaqopem*
[θɪĵʸæqʷopəm]
'don a hat'

c. *thejiaqopt*
[θɪĵʸæqʷopt]
'put a hat on him/her'

(13) a. *sasaxosem*
[sasaχʷosəm]
{C₁V₁-saχʷ-os-əm}
IMPF-scrape-face-*əm*
'shaving oneself'

b. *sasaxost*
[sasaχʷost]
{C₁V₁-saχʷ-os-t}
IMPF-scrape-face-TRANS
'shaving him/her'

c. *saxwat*
[saχʷat]
/saχʷa-t/
scrape- TRANS
'scrape it'

(14) a. *k'wenosem*
[k̓ʷʊnosəm]
'look at one's face'
(in the mirror)

b. *k'wenost*
[k̓ʷʊnost]
'look at his/her face'

c. *k'wenos.'em*
[k̓ʷʊnosʔəm]
'look at another's face'

6 /-ʔəm/ as transitive

After a transitive predicate ending in /-t/ (intent with or without result) or /-(n)əçʷ/ (result with or without intent), a single direct complement refers to a patient.[2] However, when a predicate has the suffix /-ʔəm/ the single direct complement refers to the agent. When a patient is added, it is marked as oblique by the preposition /ʔə/. The word order is VSO.

(15) a. *t'oz'otas kw qigath*
[t̓ot̓θotəs kʷ qɛgʌθ]
/t̓ut̓θ-u-t-as   kʷ qigaθ/
shoot-(V)-TRANS-AGENT ART deer
'(S)he shot (at) a deer.'

b. *ho zem t'oz'.'em 'e kw qigath*
[ho t̓θəm t̓ot̓θʔəm ʔə kʷ qɛgʌθ]
/hu t̓θəm   t̓ut̓θ-ʔəm   ʔə kʷ qigaθ/
go 1SG.FUT shoot-TRANS OBL ART deer
'I'm going to go shoot (at) a deer.'

c. *t'oz'.'em Joe 'e kw qigath*
[t̓ot̓θʔəm *Joe* ʔə kʷ qɛgʌθ]
/t̓ut̓θ-ʔəm   *Joe* ʔə kʷ qigaθ/
shoot-TRANS *Joe* OBL ART deer
'Joe shot/shoots (at) a deer.'

---

[2] A second direct complement after a predicate marked with intent /-t/ or result /-(n)əçʷ/ occurs, although not common in the corpus, to indicate the agent. For example, a sequence "bit the dog the man" may pragmatically indicate that the dog bit the man, but grammatically means 'the man bit the dog' — Mary George *finally* corrected me in 1980. In other words, regular transitive word order is VOS even though word order after a predicate marked for passive is VSO.

(16) *hiy'amolh Chichila' 'e she mos z'ok'wshten*
[hɛɪʔamoɬ čičilaʔ ʔə ši mos t̪͏̊ok̓ʷštən]³
/hiy-ʔəm-uɬ   čičilaʔ ʔə   šə   mos   t̪͏̊uk̓ʷštən/
make-TRANS- PAST name OBL ART four rug/mat
'Chichila' made four mats/rugs.'⁴

This is parallel with the VSO order in a passive sentence, marked by the addition of /-əm/, where the agent is marked as oblique and the patient is unmarked:

(17) *hiytem 'e Mary te ninpos*
[hɛɪtəm ʔə *Mary* tə nɛnpos]
/hiy-t-əm   ʔə   *Mary* tə   ninpus/
make-TRANS-PASS OBL Mary   ART   sweater
'Mary made the sweater.'

When a verb ending in /-ʔəm/ is imperfective, this suffix changes to /-aʔam/.

(18) *lhelhna'amolh Chichila' 'e she z'okwshten*
[ɬɨɬnaʔamoɬ čičilaʔ ʔə ši t̪͏̊ok̓ʷštən]
{C₁V₁-ɬ(ə)n-aʔam-uɬ   ʔə   šə   t̪͏̊ok̓ʷštən}⁵
IMPF-weave-*aʔam*-PAST OBL ART rug/mat
'Chichila' was weaving a rug/mat.'

(19) a. *hiy.'em 'e kw ninpos*   b. *hahajia'am 'e kw ninpos*
     [hɛɪʔəm ʔə kʷ nɛnpos]   [hahaǰʸɛʔɛm ʔə kʷ nɛnpos]
     /hiy-ʔəm ʔə kʷ nɛnpos/   {C₁V₁-hiy-aʔam   ʔə   kʷ   nɛnpos}
     make-*ʔəm* OBL ART sweater   IMPF-make-*aʔam* OBL ART   sweater
     'make (knit) a sweater'   'making (knitting) a sweater'

(20) a. *z'eq't*   b. *z'eq'.'em*
     [t̪͏̊ʌq̓t]   [t̪͏̊ʌq̓ʔəm]
     /t̪͏̊əq̓-t/   /t̪͏̊əq̓-ʔəm/
     throw-TRANS   throw-TRANS
     'to throw it overhand'   'throw something overhand'

     c. *z'ez'q'a'am*
     [t̪͏̊ɨt̪͏̊q̓aʔam]
     {C₁V₁-t̪͏̊(ə)q̓-aʔam}
     IMPF-throw-TRANS
     'be pitching (baseball)'

---

³ /ʔəm/ ⇒ [ʔam] before /uɬ/.
⁴ In this example, Mary George used the name of her great-grandmother, Chichila, who was her father's father's mother.
⁵ {C₁V₁-C₁ə-} the root schwa is elided.

(21) a. *sep't*
      [sʌ́p̓t]
      /səp̓-t/
      club-TRANS
      'to club it'

      b. *sep'.'em*
      [sʌ́p̓ʔəm]
      /səp̓-ʔəm/
      club-TRANS
      'to club something'

      c. *sesp'a'am*
      [sɬsp̓aʔam]
      {C₁V₁-səp̓-aʔam}
      IMPF-club-*aʔam*
      'be batting (in baseball)'

      d. *sep'amin*
      [sʌ́p̓amɪn]
      /səp̓-amin/
      club-INSTRUMENT
      'baseball bat'

(22) a. *yem.'em*
      [yɪmʔəm]
      /yəm-ʔəm/
      'kick unspecified object'

      b. *yeyma'am*
      [yiɪmaʔam]
      {C₁V₁-y(ə)m-aʔam}
      'kicking unspecified object(s)'

      c. *ye'eyma'am*
      [yɪʔiɪmaʔam]
      'several people kicking unspecified
      object(s); playing soccer'

(23) *yeyq'a'am ti'i tumesh 'e kw xa'a*
      [yiɪq̓aʔam tɛʔɛ tumiš ʔə kʷ χaʔa]
      {C₁V₁-y(ə)q̓-aʔam   tɛʔɛ   tuməš   ʔə   kʷ   χaʔa}
      IMPF-buy-*aʔam*   that   man   OBL   ART   clam
      'That man is buying some clams.'

7   /ʔam/ as impending

(24) a. *saxwa*
      [saχʷa]
      'urinate'[6]

      b. *saxw.'am*
      [saχʷʔam]
      'need to urinate'

(25) a. *qoqo*
      [qʷoqʷo]
      'drink'

      b. *qoqo'am*
      [qʷoqʷoʔam]
      'thirsty'

      c. *qoqo'amstomayem*
      [qʷoqʷoʔamstomayɪm]
      /qʷuqʷu-ʔam-stu-may-əm/
      drink-*ʔam*-CAUSATIVE-1SG.OBJ-PASS
      'I was made thirsty.'

---

[6] In Puget Salish, there are separate words for a woman to urinate and for a man to urinate. This distinction may have been throughout the Coast Salish area, but is undocumented in Comox.

(26) a. *joxwat*   b. *joxwat.'am*
          [ǰoχʷat]   [ǰoχʷatʔam]
          /ǰuχʷat/   /ǰuχʷatʔam/
          'to vomit'   'nauseous'

These examples make this suffix appear to be desiderative. However:

(27) a. *kwekwtem*   b. *kwekwtem'am*
          [kʷʊkʷtəm]   [kʷʊkʷtəmʔam]
          'be sick'   'starting to feel sick'
                                                (unlike example 6 above)

(28) a. *q'aq'a*   b. *q'aq'a'am*
          [q̓aq̓a]   [q̓aq̓aʔam]
          'hungry'   'starting to feel hungry'

(29) a. *ch'elh*   b. *ch'elh'amos*
          [č̓ɪɬ]   [č̓ɪɬʔamos]
          /č̓əɬ/   /č̓əɬ-ʔam-us/
          'rain'   rain-*ʔam*-appearance[7]
                                                'It looks like it's about to rain.'

In the Sechelt dictionary, the description of the cognate suffix reads as follows (Beaumont 2011:533):

> **-am**[3]   This ending, which is usually stressed, indicates that someone or something is approaching, or just at, the point of change from one state to another. It often translates into English as 'want to …', 'need to …', 'have to …', or 'feel like …'

8   /-am/ as relative position

(30) a. *qwel'*   b. *qwel'am*   c. *qwel'ams*
          [qʷɔlʔ]   [qʷɔlʔam]   [qʷɔlʔams]
          /qʷəlʔ/   /qʷəlʔ-am/   /qʷəlʔ-am-s/
          'come'   come-*am*   come-*am*-of.it
                                   'on the near side'   'on this side of it'

(31) a. *tho*   b. *thaham*   c. *thahams*
          [θo]   [θaham]   [θahams]
          /θu/   /θah-am/   /θah-am-s/
          'go'   'on the other side'   'on the other side of it'

(32) a. *peyesh*   b. *peyt*   c. *peytam*   d. *peytams*
          [piyiš]   [piɪt]   [piɪtam]   [piɪtams]
          /pəy-əš/   /pəyt/   /pəyt-am/   /pəyt-am-s/
          'descend'   'low'   'lower, below'   'below it'

---

[7] /-us/ as in example (3b) above.

When I was looking for a coffee mug in Ambrose Wilson's cupboard, he said "shia'tam":

(33) a. *shia'* b. *shia't* c. *shia'tam* d. *shia'tams*
       [šʸɛʔ]   [šʸɛʔt]   [šʸɛʔtam]   [šʸɛʔtams]⁸
       /šʸaʔ/   /šʸaʔt/   /šʸaʔt-am/   /šʸaʔt-am-s/
       'ascend'   'high'   'above/higher'   'above it'

From the story of Pileated Woodpecker and Raven traveling to the underworld, when Raven is under the octopus:

(34) a. *tl'ep*   b. *tl'ipam*   c. *tl'ipams*
       [ƛ̓ʌp]   [ƛ̓ɛpam]   [ƛ̓ɛpams]
       /ƛ̓əp/   /ƛ̓ip-am/   /ƛ̓ip-am-s/
       'deep'   'underneath'   'under it/him/her'

The ending /-am/ is also used for time as well as for physical space:

(35) a. *hiwtam*   b. *hiwtam kweth 'ilhten*
       [hɛʊtam]   [hɛʊtam kʷɪθ ʔɛɬtən]
       /hiwt-am/   /hiwtam kʷ-ə-θ   ʔiɬtən/
       in.front-*am*   before   ART-(ə)-your eat
       'before'   'before you eat'

Bill Galligos used the root /kʷət/ with the suffix /-am/ in his example for "go over like over a fence". The word /kʷətam/ also means 'after in time' and the root can be used with a variety of lexical suffixes. See Section 12 below.

(36) a. *kwetam ch'iaham*   b. *kwekwtam tegiwh*
       [kʷʊtam č̓ʸɛham]   [kʷʊkʷtam tɪgiçʷ]
       /kʷət-am č̓ʸaham/   {C₁V₁-kʷ(ə)t-am təgiçʷ}
       change-*am* church   IMPF-change-*am* nine
       'after church'   'a little after nine o'clock'

9   The homophonous lexical suffix /-am/

Compare these examples with (34a):

(37) a. *tl'epam*   b. *tl'epam k'walht*   c. *k'walht*
       [ƛ̓ʌpam]   [ƛ̓ʌpam k̓ʷaɬt]   [k̓ʷaɬt]
       /ƛ̓əpam/   /ƛ̓əpam k̓ʷaɬt/   /k̓ʷaɬt/
       'a deep inside'   'bowl'   'dish, plate'

---

⁸ Compare this with example (42b).

In the Sechelt dictionary, the description of the cognate suffix reads as follows (Beaumont 2011:553):

> **-am²**   container (inside of), dish, hole in the ground, hollow surface, vessel (hull).

10   The plural suffix /-am/

(38) a. *ch'îano*
      [čéʌno]
      /č̓ʸanu/
      'dog'

b. *ch'en'am ~ ch'ian'am*
    [čɪnʔam]   [č̓ʸɛnʔam]
    /čənʔam/   /č̓ʸanʔam/
    'dogs'

(39) a. *jiajia*
      [jʸɛjʸɛ]
      /j̓ʸaj̓ʸa/
      'tree, log'

b. *jiajia'am*
    [jʸɛjʸɛʔam]
    /j̓ʸaj̓ʸaʔam/
    'trees, logs'

In the Sechelt dictionary, the description of the cognate suffix reads as follows (Beaumont 2011:554):

> **-am⁷**   This ending is recorded only on a few words indicating a number of dogs, trees and perhaps leaves.

Noel George Harry said that the homophonous *jiajia* means "friends and cousins" — those you grew up with. The plural ends in /-tən/, the suffix for plural relatives.

(40) a. *jiajia*
      [jʸɛjʸɛ]
      /j̓ʸaj̓ʸa/
      'friend, cousin'

b. *jiajiaten*
    [jʸɛjʸɛtən]
    /j̓ʸaj̓ʸatən/
    'friends, cousins'

11   /-igan/ as one more lexical suffix showing relative position

(41) *z peytigan*
    [tᶿ piɪtɛgʌn]
    /tᶿ   pəy-t-igan/
    my down-STATIVE-side
    'below me'
    (compare 32d above)

(42) *shia'tigans*
    [šʸɛʔtɛgʌns]
    /šʸaʔ-t-igan-s/
    upward-STATIVE-side-of.it/him
    'above him'
    (compare (33d) above)

When the killers of T'ichewaxanam [t̓ɛčuwaχanʌm] were kicking his head about on the beach, the power of the thunder came above them:

(43) a. *qwel' testhot xwat'q'wem*
      [qʷɔlʔ tʌsθot χʷat̓q̓ʷɔm]
      /qʷəlʔ tʌsθot   χʷat̓q̓ʷəm/
      come   approach   thunder
      'The thunder came close.'

b. *shia'tiganit*
    [šʸɛʔtɛgʌnit]
    /šʸaʔ-t-igan-it/
    upward-STATIVE-side-their
    'it was above them'

c. *hi tl'alhsems T'ichewaxanam*
   [hɛ ƛaɬsəms t̓ɛčuwaχanam]
   /hi   ƛaɬsəm-s   t̓ičəwaχanam/
   DEICTIC   strong/strength-his   t̓ičəwaχanam
   'That was T'ichewaxanam's power.'

(44) *ga thathat kwekwtigathi*
      [gʌ θahat kʷʊkʷtɛgaθɛ]
      {ga θa-(h)-at   C₁V₁-kʷ(ə)t-iga(n)-t-Si}[9]
      if   go-we   IMPF-change-side-TRANS-you
      'if we're passing you by'

(45) *kwekwtigatawlh*
      [kʷʊkʷtɛgʌtʌʊɬ]
      {C₁V₁-kʷ(ə)t-iga(n)-t-awɬ}
      IMPF-change-side-TRANS-RECIPROCAL
      'passing each other'

12   A sampling of other lexical suffixes with the root /kʷət/

Following are just a couple of the lexical suffixes which can be used to show motion and relative position.

(46) *kwetshiawlh*
      [kʷʊtšʸʌʊɬ]
      /kʷət-šʸawɬ/
      change-road
      'cross the road (or hall)'

(47) *kwetshen*
      [kʷʊtšin]
      /kʷət-šən/
      change-foot
      'change direction (while going)'

(48) *kwetosem*
      [kʷʊtosəm]
      /kʷət-us-əm/
      change-face-VERB
      'turn to face away'
      (e.g. away from the fire
      at a funeral burning)

(49) *qwel'osem*
      [qʷɔl̓osəm] ~ [qʷɔ̓losəm]
      /qʷəl̓-us-əm/
      come-face-VERB
      'turn to face toward'
       (compare with 30 above)

For a full discussion and more examples, see Hinkson (1999).

---

[9] Note: /-t-/ + historical */-Si/ ⇒ [θɛ].

Sources consulted

Beaumont, Ronald C. 2011. *Sechelt Dictionary.* Sechelt Indian Band, Sechelt, BC.

Davis, John Hamilton. 1969–1980. Field notes on Mainland Comox. [MS]

Davis, John Hamilton. 1969–1980. Field recordings of Mainland Comox. http://cla.berkeley.edu/collection/10048

Davis, John H. 1980. *The Passive in Sliammon.* Berkeley Linguistics Society (6:278-86).

Davis, John H. 2016. Two explanations in Comox by Tommy Paul. In: Marianne Huijsmans, Thomas J. Heins, Oksana Tkachman, and Natalie Weber (eds.), Papers for ICSNL 51. Vancouver, BC: UBCWPL, 69–77.

Hess, Thomas M. 1976. *Dictionary of Puget Salish.* Seattle, WA: University of Washington.

Hinkson, Mercedes Quesney. 1999. *Salishan Lexical Suffixes: A Study in the Conceptualization of Space.* Doctoral dissertation, Simon Fraser University.