

# A Preliminary Account of Circumstantial *xwent* in Secwepemctsin

Bruce Oliver

University of British Columbia

**Abstract:** This paper provides a preliminary account of the modal uses of the predicate *xwent*, which otherwise means ‘fast’, in Secwepemctsin (Shuswap). Using original Secwepemctsin data, I show that *xwent* can be used broadly as a circumstantial modal, in pure circumstantial, ability, and deontic contexts. I also show that it can interact with the past tense marker *lu7* to create past temporal perspectives. Finally, I show that, at least in pure circumstantial cases, *xwent* has variable modal force, supporting existential and universal readings. I provide a provisional semantic analysis for *xwent* as an underlyingly universal modal with two ordering sources, the primary ordering source determining the modal flavor and the secondary ordering source optionally weakening the universal force to existential. Much more testing is required to develop a complete account of *xwent*, but this is an important first step in characterizing the system of circumstantial modality in Secwepemctsin.

**Keywords:** Salish, Shuswap, modality, circumstantial, ability, deontic

## 1 Introduction

This paper aims to provide a preliminary account of the distribution and semantics of circumstantial *xwent* in Secwepemctsin (Shuswap). Secwepemctsin is a Northern Interior Salish language spoken in the interior of British Columbia, with fewer than 50 living first-language speakers (Marianne Ignace, pers. comm.). The Secwepemctsin dictionary indicates that *xwent* means ‘fast’ (Kuipers 1983). However, *xwent* also sees use as a robust circumstantial modal, used in deontic and ability contexts in addition to pure circumstantial contexts. In this paper, I will present original Secwepemctsin data to characterize the modal predicate *xwent* as a variable strength circumstantial modal which supports deontic and stereotypical ordering sources.<sup>1</sup>

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I provide a short background on modality and briefly discuss circumstantial modality in other Salish languages. In Section 3, I present original Secwepemctsin data illustrating various characteristics of modal *xwent*. In Section 4, I provide a sketch of a semantic analysis for modal *xwent*. Section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2 Circumstantial modality

### 2.1 Modality background

Modality is the expression of the possibility or necessity of propositions with respect to knowledge/evidence or with respect to certain facts. Modality with respect to knowledge/evidence is known as *epistemic* modality, and modality with respect to certain facts is known as *circumstantial*

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modality. Under a Kratzerian (1977) model, a modal claim consists of *quantification over possible worlds*.

There are two fundamental parts to any modal: the *strength* of the quantification, and *which worlds* we're quantifying over. These are referred to as *modal strength* and *modal base*, respectively. In most Indo-European languages, modal items have a fixed modal strength, and the modal base varies with context.

- (1) a. Alfred **must** be the killer (in light of what we know).  
 b. Alfred **must** go to prison (in light of the laws).

In English, the lexical item *must* can be used to express both epistemic and circumstantial (deontic, in this case) modality, as demonstrated in (1), but it can only ever express strong modal force, i.e., universal quantification over possible worlds. This organization need not be the case for all systems of modality, and Salish languages in particular deviate from this model to a greater or lesser extent.

## 2.2 Circumstantial modality in Salish

Many modal constructions in Salish languages have a fixed modal base and contextually-determined modal force, the opposite of English and many other Indo-European languages. This is the case for all St'át'imcets modals (Rullmann, Matthewson, and Davis 2008), as well as one of Nsyilxcen's epistemic modals, *mat* (Menzies 2013).

Although a cross-Salish survey is outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that ability modals (another type of circumstantial modal) are not generally present across the family of Salish languages. One exception is St'át'imcets (Lillooet) *ka-...-a*, a circumstantial modal which has both ability and no-choice readings depending on its (contextually-specified) strength (Davis, Matthewson, and Rullmann 2007).

- (2) wa7 xil-em=wit ets7á kw=s=zwat-en-ítas swát=as ku=wá7  
 impf do-mid=3pl this det=nmlz=know-dir-3pl.erg who=3conj det=impf  
 ka-xilh-tal'í-ha ku=xwém  
 circ-do(caus)-top-circ det=fast<sup>3</sup>

'They did that to see who could do it the fastest.' (Davis et al. 2007:140)

St'át'imcets has a separate circumstantial modal, *ka*, which is used in deontic and irrealis contexts (Rullmann et al. 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviations used: 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, abs = absolutive, boul = bouletic, caus = causative, cd = complementizer/determiner, circ = circumstantial, comp = complementizer, cond = conditional, conj = conjunctive (subjunctive) subject, cop = copula, ctrl = control, cust = customary, dem = demonstrative, deon = deontic, der = derivative, det = determiner, dim = diminutive, dir = directive, emph = emphatic, erg = ergative, impf = imperfective, irr = irrealis, lc = limited control, lex = lexical, loc = locative, mid = middle, neg = negative, nmlz = nominalizer, obj = object, obl = oblique, pl = plural, poss = possessive, pst = past, q = question particle, sbj = subject, sbjv = subjunctive, sbrd = subordinator, sg = singular, top = topic, tr = transitive.

- (3) lán-lhkacw ka áts'x-en ti kwtámsts-sw-a  
 already-2sg.sbj deon see-dir det husband-2sg.poss-det  
 'You must / can / may see your husband now.' (Rullmann et al. 2008:328)

- (4) *Context 1: You are saying that the tree needs to be chopped down because it's a danger; it's gonna fall in the first strong wind; it would fall.*  
*Context 2: You are the paranoid type who doesn't put things on high shelves in case of earthquakes, doesn't drive behind logging trucks in case a tree falls off the back, etc., and you don't want to pitch your tent underneath a tree because the tree could fall if the wind got strong. (I.e., it's not that the tree looks particularly weak.)*

zikt ka láti7 ku srap lh-gelgel-ás ta sk'éxem-a  
 fall irr dem det tree comp-strong-3conj det wind-det  
 'That tree would / could fall, if the wind got strong.' (Rullmann et al. 2008:331)

This is in contrast to a language like Nsyilxcen (Okanagan), which has the bouletic *cak<sup>w</sup>* as its only dedicated circumstantial modal and uses the bare predicate and irrealis or imperative marking to express ability and deontic/teleological modality (Menzies 2013).

- (5) *Context: We are running low on meat supplies and need to get more so we can make it through the winter. You say that John should go hunting.*

cak<sup>w</sup> ac-piḥ-m  
 boul cust-hunt-mid  
 'He should go hunting.' (Menzies 2013:30)

- (6) *Context: I am physically strong enough to lift the big rock.*

tali kn=k<sup>w</sup>æck<sup>w</sup>áct n-wis-lx-st-n i? xḥut  
 very 1sg.abs-strong der-lift-lex-tr det rock  
 'I am very strong. I lift the rock.' (Menzies 2013:37)

### 3 Secwepemctsin *xwent*

#### 3.1 Existing work

Very little prior work on Secwepemctsin modality exists. Kuipers (1976) briefly mentions the formation of conditionals with the suffix *-se/-ske*, giving the example (transliterated to the practical orthography) *k'ul-em-se-ken* (make-mid-cond-1sg.sbj) 'I would make/I would have made'. Although RI accepted and translated forms with the *-ske* ending in *would/should* contexts, he never volunteered it in free translation, even for very similar contexts. Kuipers does not mention the modal interpretation of *xwent*.

### 3.2 Pure circumstantial/stereotypical

Modal *xwent*, like its homonym meaning ‘fast’, is a predicate, taking its preajacent as a relative clause. The most common word order in Secwepemctsin is VSO, meaning *xwent* will almost always appear first in a sentence.

- (7) *Context: Talking about a rock-lifting competition, commenting on the ability of the current competitor faced with a particular rock.*

Xwent k s-cwent-és.  
circ cd nmlz-lift-3.sbjv

‘He can lift it.’ (RI)

*Xwent* need not only relate to personal ability, but can also be used in pure circumstantial cases, such as whether it is possible for plants to grow in a certain climate.

- (8) *Context: Asking someone who knows about the climate of California if a soapberry bush could grow there.*

a. Xwént-en k s-k’ult-s re= sxúsem ne California?  
circ-q cd nmlz-grow-3.poss det soapberry loc California

‘Can soapberry grow in California?’ (RI)

b. Ma7a, xwent yeri7 k s-k’ult-s.  
yes circ dem cd nmlz-grow-3.poss

‘Yes, it can grow there.’ (RI)

*Xwent* can also combine with the past tense morpheme *lu7*, allowing the expression of a past temporal perspective with a future temporal orientation in counterfactuals (i.e., sentences where the preajacent is not true).

- (9) *Context: You are trying to cook a meal over the fire, but some rain leaks through your firewood covering and gets it wet. It takes a long time to dry the firewood and it’s long past dinner time by the time you get a fire going. If it hadn’t rained, dinner would already be ready by now.*

Xwent lu7 mell ke n-s-qw’lé<l>-em-es e tá7-wes lu7 k  
circ pst already cd 1sg.poss-nmlz-cook<dim>-mid-3.sbjv cond neg-3.sbjv pst cd  
s-kllekst-em-s.  
nmlz-let.go-mid-3.poss

‘I could/would have cooked it already, if it hadn’t rained.’ (RI)

As previously mentioned, many Salish modals, including those of St’át’imcets (Rullmann et al. 2008) and Nsyilxcen (Menzies 2013), have variable modal force, determined by context. This is unlike most Indo-European languages, whose modals are specified for force. Modal force, simply put, is the difference between necessity and possibility. Many English modals are only felicitous in a situation of necessity, whereas others are only felicitous in a situation of possibility. Consider the following situation of necessity, inspired by a context from Rullmann et al. (2008).

- (10) *Context: There is an old, rotting tree near someone's house. It will surely fall as soon as a strong wind comes along, so you are arguing that it needs to be chopped down, as it could fall on the house and hurt someone.*
- a. That tree would fall if the wind got strong.
  - b. #That tree could fall if the wind got strong.

The English strong modal *would* is felicitous in this scenario, but not the weak modal *could*. Contrast the preceding example to the following context, expressing possibility.

- (11) *Context: You are a very paranoid person who never puts things on high shelves in case of an earthquake, doesn't walk by cliffs when it's raining in case there is a mudslide... You're so paranoid that you won't ever pitch your tent below a tree on the off-chance that it falls, even if the tree looks perfectly sturdy and healthy.*
- a. #That tree would fall if the wind got strong.
  - b. That tree could fall if the wind got strong.

In this context, the opposite is true: only the weak *could* is felicitous and the strong *would* is infelicitous. Pairs of contexts such as these were provided during elicitation to determine the modal force of *xwent*. Consider the following data, which show that the same sentence with *xwent* is felicitous in both a context representing necessity and a context representing possibility.

- (12) *Context 1: There is an old, rotting tree near someone's house. It will surely fall as soon as a strong wind comes along, so you are arguing that it needs to be chopped down, as it could fall on the house and hurt someone.*

*Context 2: You are a very paranoid person who never puts things on high shelves in case of an earthquake, doesn't walk by cliffs when it's raining in case there is a mudslide... You're so paranoid that you won't ever pitch your tent below a tree on the off-chance that it falls, even if the tree looks perfectly sturdy and healthy.*

Yiréy te= tsrep xwent k s-yikt-s e xexe7-es re= s-newt.  
 dem det.obl tree circ cd nmlz-tree.fall-3.poss cond strong-3.sbjv det nmlz-wind  
 'That tree would/could fall if the wind got strong.' (RI)

- (13) *Context 1: One of your neighbors has just shot a cougar. You ask why. He answers that the cougar was on a rampage, killing cats and raccoons, and it has just cornered a child and was growling at it before it was shot. It sounds like it would have definitely killed the child if it hadn't been shot.*

*Context 2: A cougar was shot near where you live; you are explaining to someone that cougars sometimes roam into built-up areas and sometimes kill children when they do.*

Yiréy te= smúwe7 xwent lu7 k s-pul-s te= sk'wimém'elt, e  
 dem det.obl cougar circ pst cd nmlz-kill-3.poss det.obl child cond  
 tá7-wes lu7 k s-q'él-en[-t]-s.  
 neg-3.sbjv pst cd nmlz-shoot-ctrl[-tr]-3.poss

'That cougar would/could have killed a child, if they hadn't shot it.' (RI)

The generalization based on these data is that *xwent* has variable strength, being permitted in both necessity and possibility contexts.

### 3.3 Deontic/teleological

The prior data have shown modal *xwent* having circumstantial base with a stereotypical ordering source, i.e., an expression of necessity/possibility with respect to the expected or most common continuation of events. This is not the only ordering source that *xwent* supports. The following data show deontic usage of *xwent*, in which the worlds in the modal base are ranked based on the fulfillment of good behavior with respect to laws, customs, etc. Specifically, the following example is a weak deontic, expressing permission rather than obligation.

- (14) *Context: You are at a party, and you notice a small child looking nervously at a plate of sxusem (soapberries). It seems as though he really wants to eat some, but he doesn't know if he's allowed to. You laugh and say to him:*

Xwent yeri7 e s-7illen.  
 circ dem sbrd nmlz-eat

'It's okay to eat it.' (BD)

Additionally, *xwent* can be used with a teleological ordering source, which is similar to a deontic ordering source but relates instead to accomplishing goals. The following example is one such case.

- (15) *Context: You are being asked to prove your physical fitness. They give you two options, both of which will be accepted: to climb up a nearby mountain in under one hour, or to swim across a lake in under five minutes.*

Xwent ke 7-s-trepelcús, e ye-ws ke 7-s-t'qwéscn-em te=  
 circ cd 2sg.poss-nmlz-climb.hill cond cop-3.sbjv cd 2sg.poss-nmlz-swim-mid det.obl  
 tkenú7s re= pésellkwe.  
 across det lake

'You can climb [the mountain] or swim across the lake.' (RI)

One test of weak modal force is coordinating a modal claim with its negation. With a weak modal, this is perfectly acceptable, but with a strong modal, this creates a contradiction. Cf. English:

- (16) a. #You must take your backpack with you, or you must leave it here.  
 b. You may take your backpack with you, or you may leave it here.

Now consider the Secwepemctsin using *xwent* as the modal, demonstrating that *xwent* indeed has weak modal force.

- (17) *Context: You are going for a job interview and you are not sure what to do with your bag. The receptionist outside the office tells you that it is fine to take your bag into the interview with you, but you can also leave it in the waiting room.*

Xwent k s-kwen[-n-t]-Ø-c re= 7-ctécken'ten, ell xwent k  
 circ cd nmlz-take[-ctrl-tr]-3.obj-2sg.erg det 2sg.poss-backpack and circ cd  
 s-llwél-en[-t]-Ø-c ne7élye.  
 nmlz-leave.behind-ctrl[-tr]-3.obj-2sg.erg here

'You can take your backpack, or you can leave it here.' (RI)

Below is another test of deontic *xwent* with its negation. Although *xwent* does not appear in the negation, it is highly unlikely that *xwent* would mean *must* in this context, as the sentence *you must wash it or not* is trivially true and not felicitous in the context of asking for advice, as it contributes no useful information.

- (18) *Context: You are cooking rice for the first time, and you ask your friend if it's important to wash rice before you cook it. The friend's response:*

Xwent yeri7 k s-ts'éw-en[-t]-c re ta7-wes.  
 circ dem cd nmlz-wash-ctrl[-tr]-2sg.erg cd neg-3.sbjv

'You can wash it or not.' (RI)

I have not formally tested whether *xwent* is felicitous in strong deontic contexts. In free translation tasks involving strong deontic contexts, consultants have volunteered *me7* (the strong circumstantial modal) or various paraphrases, such as *qwelmimentsems* 'they want me to' or the imperative. Whether this is an issue of scalar implicature or an actual restriction on the strength of *xwent* in deontic contexts requires further investigation.

### 3.4 Ability

Finally, *xwent* can be used as an ability modal, as we have already seen in (7). Another example is below.

- (19) *Context: A race is coming up, and you ask your friend whether John is a fast enough runner to win the race.*

Xexe7 yi7 re= John te= cwiselc-s. Xwent yi7 k s-q'uw-úm-s re=  
 strong emph det John det.obl run-3sg circ emph cd nmlz-win-mid-3.poss det  
 stogwéy'e-s  
 foot.race-3.poss

'John is a strong runner. He could definitely win the foot-race.' (RI)

As in the pure circumstantial case seen previously, *xwent* can combine with past *lu7* to express a past ability. Whether this carries an actuality entailment like French perfective *a pu* (Bhatt 2008) requires further investigation.

- (20) *Context: An old man who used to compete in the rock-lifting competition. He was a top competitor in his youth, and he could lift the heaviest rocks, but now in his old age he is too weak to lift them.*

L-twí<w>t-wen xwent lu7 k s-cwenté<t>-en, k'émell tá7a pyin.  
 pst-grow.up<dim>-1sg.sbjv circ pst det.irr nmlz-lift<dim>-1sg.erg but neg now

'I could lift it before, but now I can't.' (RI)

In testing how to express a lack of ability, I noticed that *xwent* seemed to resist embedding in subordinate clauses (which negation in Secwepemctsin requires), with speakers preferring a different predicate using limited control marking in free translation tasks and translating an attempted embedding of modal *xwent* as meaning 'fast'. Whether *xwent* broadly resists embedding or this is unique to negation requires further investigation.

- (21) *Context: Watching a rock-lifting competition, expressing disbelief that the current competitor will be able to lift that rock.*

a. #Ta7 k s-xwent-s e s-cwent-és.  
 neg cd nmlz-fast-3.poss cond nmlz-lift-3.sbjv

Intended: 'He can't lift it.'

Actual meaning: 'He could not lift it very fast.' (RI)

b. Ta7 k s-xe-nwéllen'-s e s-cwent-és.  
 neg cd nmlz-do-lc.mid-3.poss cond nmlz-lift-3.sbjv

'He is incapable of lifting it.' (RI)

Consultant comment: "Maybe he's a 50-pound weakling, totally incapable of lifting it."

It is worth noting that using limited control marking to express ability is a feature of *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) (Jacobs 2007) and occasionally occurs in Secwepemctsin outside of a subordinate clause environment, as in the example below.



- (22) *Context: You hear a noise in the middle of the night, so you go out of the house to investigate with Marianne. It is pitch black outside, and you can't see anything at all, so you ask Marianne if she can see.*

Xe-nwélln'-en-k te s-wík-em?  
do-lc.mid-q-2sg cd nmlz-see-mid

'Are you able to see?'

(RI)

The Secwepemctsin data in this section provide support for the claim that *xwent* is a circumstantial modal which supports stereotypical, deontic, and teleological ordering sources, and has variable strength, being compatible with circumstantial necessity and possibility, at least in pure circumstantial contexts. The next section will provide a preliminary semantic analysis of *xwent* accounting for the variable strength.

#### 4 Semantics of modal *xwent*

As data is still being collected, I can only offer a preliminary analysis of the semantics of *xwent*. That being said, I propose that *xwent* is an underlyingly existential circumstantial modal which supports deontic, teleological, and stereotypical ordering sources. In the same vein as von Stechow and Iatridou's (2008) analysis of the weak necessity modal *should* and *ought to*, I propose a secondary ordering source which weakens the strength of *xwent* from universal to existential by restricting the domain of the universal quantification, i.e., placing further restrictions on the worlds selected by the base and ranked highly by the primary ordering source. This secondary ordering source can be empty: if so, then no further restrictions are placed on the set of best-ranked worlds and the default universal quantification gives rise to a strong modal interpretation.

For example, taking (12), repeated below in (23), the strong interpretation has an empty secondary ordering source, and so the modal claim is simply that in all worlds in which a normal series of events occur (adding the conditional to the modal base, so the wind is very strong), the tree will fall. The weak interpretation, on the other hand, has a non-empty secondary ordering source — for example, a doxastic ordering source, which contains statements that the speaker believes, but are not necessarily actual: “this tree is weaker than it seems, the wind is abnormally strong, the soil the tree is rooted in is unstable.” The restriction that these propositions be true in the highest-ranked worlds therefore reduce the highly-ranked stereotypical worlds to a smaller subset of (in this case, more outlandish) worlds. Although the quantification over worlds is still universal, the smaller subset of worlds in the domain of quantification yields an existential interpretation.

(23) *Context 1: There is an old, rotting tree near someone's house. It will surely fall as soon as a strong wind comes along, so you are arguing that it needs to be chopped down, as it could fall on the house and hurt someone.*

*Context 2: You are a very paranoid person who never puts things on high shelves in case of an earthquake, doesn't walk by cliffs when it's raining in case there is a mudslide... You're so paranoid that you won't ever pitch your tent below a tree on the off-chance that it falls, even if the tree looks perfectly sturdy and healthy.*

Yiréy te= tsrep xwent k s-yikt-s e xexe7-es re= s-newt.  
 dem det.obl tree circ cd nmlz-tree.fall-3.poss cond strong-3.sbjv det nmlz-wind  
 'That tree would/could fall if the wind got strong.' (RI)

The secondary ordering source over universal quantification also captures the ability reading, which can be paraphrased as “in all worlds *in which the agent attempts to enact the prejacent*, and in which events proceed as expected (stereotypical ordering source), the prejacent is true.” The secondary ordering source provides the additional restriction on the stereotypically likely worlds that the agent is attempting to enact the prejacent in that world. Of course, the exact nature of ability modals is a subject of great debate (Bhatt 2008; Nouwen 2018), so more research is required to determine all the features of ability *xwent* (e.g., distribution over disjunction, free choice permission, actuality entailments) and accurately characterize its semantics.

The formal denotation of a modal with two ordering sources is not yet clear to me, as von Stechow and Iatridou (2008) themselves lay out some difficulties with the implementation: namely, “promoting” the secondary ordering source so that it restricts the set of worlds ranked by the primary ordering source, without making it count at the same level as the primary ordering source. Simple set union does not quite achieve the desired result; see von Stechow and Iatridou (2008) for more discussion.

The analysis of an underlyingly universal modal with optional weakening stands in contrast with the opposite analysis, that of an underlyingly existential modal with optional strengthening, as in Peterson's (2010) analysis of the Gitksan epistemic *=ima*. More data will be needed to determine which is the best strategy — for example, a consistent test of the “out-of-the-blue” interpretation of *xwent* may give a better idea of its default strength. However, even this test is complicated by the presence of an invariably strong circumstantial modal, *me7*, meaning a default weak reading may be the result of scalar implicature as opposed to an underlying existential quantification.

## 5 Conclusion

Although my research is still in its initial stages, I have collected enough data to provide an initial account of the distribution and characteristics of *xwent*. I have shown that *xwent* can be used in a variety of circumstantial contexts with a wide range of ordering sources and supports weak and strong readings at least in pure circumstantial contexts. The largest remaining semantic mystery is whether *xwent* is underlyingly universal or existential — although it may not be possible to come to a definite answer, more rigorous testing will at least get us closer. *Xwent*'s yet-unattested felicity (or lack thereof) in strong deontic environments may be convincing evidence, but the specter of scalar implicature with strong circumstantial *me7* is a constant issue.

Another subject of inquiry is the embeddability of *xwent*. Although not directly related to the

semantics of *xwent*, if it is completely unembeddable, it becomes quite difficult to test how it interacts with scope. I suspect that if *xwent* is ever in a subordinate clause that requires nominalization, which is true of many subordinate structures in Secwepemctsin, it will lose its modal meaning and simply mean ‘fast’, but I have yet to collect sufficient evidence for this hypothesis.

Finally, as I have hinted at many times, an analysis of *xwent* is not complete without an analysis of *me7*. I have not collected enough data on *me7* to include an analysis in this paper, but from very preliminary data, it seems to be an invariably strong circumstantial modal and, as such, may form a scale with *xwent* to create scalar implicatures and cause *xwent* to pragmatically favor weak readings.

Continuing work on circumstantial modality in Secwepemctsin will provide greater insight into the nature of variable-strength modals in Salish languages, especially concerning their interaction with fixed-strength modals expressing the same modal base.

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