Communicating Past Tense in Haisla

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Abstract: Haisla is a language that is spoken in Northwestern British Columbia, and is part of the north Wakashan language family. The Haisla community is pursuing language revitalization efforts for their endangered language. While there are existing dictionaries for Haisla, there are areas of the morphology and syntax that have not yet been described. One such area is the use of past tense in Haisla. This paper examines how Haisla speakers use the recent past marker =*t* ~ =*tet* and the distant past marker =*guł*, as well as makes some brief comments on marking 'deceased' referents using =*uł* and =*gułdi.*

Key Words: Haisla, morphology, North Wakashan, tense

1   Introduction

The Haisla language, which is referred to as x̄á'islaǩala ('Haisla speak') in the language, is part of the Wakashan language family on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia. The language is critically endangered, and the community is invested in language revitalization efforts. This paper seeks to provide a brief description of observed patterns for forming the past tense in Haisla.

In Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, I worked with two Haisla speakers (Vera Wilson, and Nelson Grant)[1] to create class content for undergraduate Haisla language learning courses that were offered through a partnership between Haisla Nation Council and the University of Northern British Columbia. Vera Wilson attended classes to teach the students how to use and pronounce the phrases and encourage the students in their language learning journey. Since my role was to work with the Haisla speakers to create the learning resources and curriculum for the classes, I felt the lack of a full grammar description of the Haisla language keenly.

Haisla has been previously studied and published on, but the bulk of this information focuses on the lexical and phonological level, with some discussion of the morphological level. Most notably, there are two published dictionaries: Lincoln and Rath (1986) and Bach (2006) on the Haisla language. The latter includes two appendices: "Making Haisla Sentences" and "Making Haisla Words". These appendices are very helpful, but there is much more research that must be done to give a full understanding of Haisla grammar. There are also two unpublished dictionaries: Bach (1998) and Hein Vink (1980).

One recurring question in the adult language learning classes was regarding how to communicate the past tense in Haisla. Haisla uses a future/non-future system, where the future tense is always obligatorily marked with a =ƛ. Although the existing literature did not directly address how speakers communicate past tense, Vera Wilson and Nelson Grant used consistent morphological patterns to clearly communicate the recent past tense and distant past tense while preparing for classes and interacting with students. The recent past tense marker was pronounced as =*t* or =*tet*, while the distant past marker was =*guł*. This paper focuses on explaining the use of these past tense markers in Haisla by drawing from recently elicited speech as well as phrase examples found in previously published works, where possible.

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[1] Many thanks to the x̄á'islaǩala Language Carriers referenced in this article. The language data used in this paper are used with permission from Vera Wilson and Nelson Grant. Any errors in the written representation of the language are my own.

2 Overview of Haisla tense system

Haisla's future/non-future system is similar to other Wakashan languages, such as Kwak'wala, a language spoken in Northern Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland of Southwestern British Columbia. Kwak'wala is more documented than Haisla and already has published works on this topic. Greene (2013:69) states that Kwak'wala has a future/non-future system that only obligatorily marks the future tense. Littell (2016:554) explains further that "[t]here are three main non-present tenses in Kwak'wala, =ƛ (future), =xd (recent past), and =uł ~ = wəł (distant past)".

Similarly, Haisla employs =ƛ for future tense, =t or =tet for recent past, and =guł for distant past. Additionally, Haisla does have a similar sounding suffix to the Kwak'wala =uł. However, in Haisla, the use of =uł is restricted to only discussing people who have passed on. Accordingly, the =uł suffix in Haisla is best not thought of as a past tense marker (see Section 6). In contrast to how =uł is used in Haisla, the distant past tense marker =guł is highly productive and can be used in forming a wide variety of distant past tense phrases.

3 Recent past =t

To communicate the recent past, Haisla uses the enclitic =t. This enclitic occurs in the same place as the future tense marker — after the verb stem and before the pronominal enclitic (if present). Examples (1) to (3) demonstrate how this =t is used in Haisla phrases.[2]

(1) kúxʷelaten.[3]
kuxʷela=**t**=en
feel.hot=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ
'I felt hot.'   (Vera Wilson, p.c., March 10, 2022)

(2) dúqʷelatnugʷa'i qáłela.
duqʷela=**t**=nugʷa='i   qałela
see=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ=3[3].OBJ   walk
'I saw her walk(ing).'   (Vera Wilson, p.c., February18, 2022)

(3) p̓álatsu łáncix̄ga.
pala=**t**=su   łancix̄ga
work=**REC.PST**=2.SBJ   yesterday
'You worked yesterday.'   (Nelson Grant, p.c., March 3, 2022)

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[2] Thank you to Charles Murphey for his valuable assistance with glossing the examples in this article and updating the writing in examples from previous publications to the Haisla modern hybrid orthography.

[3] Abbreviations used in the paper: - = suffix, : = unsegmented, <> = infix, = = enclitic, **2** = 'medial (=*there*)', **3** = distal (=over there), **4** = absental (=just gone, absent), ₁ = primary, ₂ = secondary, 1 = 1st person (=I), 2 = 2nd person (=you), 3 = 3rd person (=he/she/it/they), COP = copula, D= deictic, DIS = distant, INV = invisible, LT = late, OBJ = object, OBL = oblique, PASS = passive, PL = plural, PREP = preposition, PROPN = proper noun, PERF = perfective, PST = past, Q = interrogative, REC = recent, REM = remote, SBJ = subject, SG = singular

(4) qáłelanumat m̓enáisutenc.
   qaƚela-numa=**t**   m̓enáisut=Ø=enc
   walk-go.do=**REC.PST**   same.sex.sibling=D₁³=1.OBL
   'My brother went for a walk.'   (Nelson Grant, p.c. March 4, 2022)

3.1 Recent past tense suffix form variation

The recent past morpheme *=t* has an allomorph: *=tet*. Speakers will interchange these two forms and assert that they have the same meaning. Sometimes, a speaker might feel that one form sounds better than the other form, but this intuition does not appear to follow patterns related to the phonetic environment, the meaning of the verb stem, the phonology of the following morpheme, or dialect variance. Speakers disagree on which form 'sounds right' in the same example. Moreover, fluent speakers are usually unaware that they are articulating two different forms, and they occur in free variation. Accordingly, these preferences appear to be specific to the individual. Examples (5) and (6) were collected from the same speaker, within minutes of each other, and were both judged to be accurate.

(5) p̓álaten.
   p̓ala=**t**=en
   work=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ
   'I worked.'   (Nelson Grant, p.c., March 4, 2022)

(6) p̓álateten.
   p̓ála=**tet**=en
   work=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ
   'I worked.'   (Nelson Grant, p.c., March 4, 2022)

The following examples (7) to (9) provide more examples of this *=tet* allomorph in use.

(7) hémgilateten!
   hemgila=**tet**=en
   make.food=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ
   'I cooked!'   (Nelson Grant, p.c., March 3, 2022)

(8) k̓enaisteten.
   kenais=**tet**=en
   feel.cold=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ
   'I felt cold.'   (Vera Wilson, p.c., March 10, 2022)

(9) láaẃisteten łancix̄ga.
   la=aẃis=**tet**=en   łancix̄ga
   go=ACROSS=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ   yesterday
   'I went into town yesterday.' (lit. 'I went across yesterday.')
                                                         (Nelson Grant, p.c. March 4, 2022)

(10) hémgilateti.
   hemgila=**tet**=i
   make.food=**REC.PST**=3³.SBJ
   'Someone cooked.'   (Nelson Grant, p.c. March 4, 2022)

3.2 Reduplication in Haisla

The existence of the =*tet* form of the recent past tense morpheme is likely due to the reduplication of =*t*. Haisla employs reduplication to create plural forms, and there are also instances of additional reduplication processes. In example (11), the infix <*m*>, which communicates 'plural motion', is realized as /*m*/ in the utterance. In example (12), the infix reduplicates and is realized as <*mam*> in the utterance.

(11) dexʷemáx̄ela
     dexʷ<**em**>ax̄ la
     jump.down<**PL.MOTION**>
     'jumping down (off) (pl. of *dexʷáx̄ ela*)'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:80)

(12) dexʷemámaẇ isela
     dexʷ<**emam**>aẇ isela
     jump.across<**PL.MOTION**>
     'jumping across (pl. of *dexʷáẇ isela*)'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:79)

   The same process occurs between (13) and (14).

(13) gáx̄emała / gámex̄ała
     gax̄<**em**>ała   /   ga<**me**>x̄-ała
     come.with<**PL.MOTION**>   come.with<**PL.MOTION**>
     '(pl. of *gáx̄ ała* ['to come along with s.b.'])'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:88)

(14) gáx̄emamułcua / gámex̄ẇełcua
     gax̄<**emam**>ẇł-cua   /   ga<**me**>x̄ẇł-cua
     <**PL.MOTION**>come.out-CONTAINER   <**PL.MOTION**>come.out-CONTAINER
     '(pl. of *gáx̄ẇełcua* ['to come out of container'])'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:88)

   As demonstrated through examples (11) to (14), there is a precedence of reduplication for Haisla affixes outside of what occurs with the recent past tense marker.

3.3 Examples of the recent past in previous publications

There are only a few instances in literature where the recent past is seen. These instances are found in example sentences for Lincoln and Rath's (1986) dictionary. Interestingly, all the examples in the literature only show the =*t* morpheme and do not show the =*tet* allomorph.

(15) túsaten ṁénceqʷex̄sa gi ṁénx̄sagiu.
     tusa=**t**=en   ṁénceqʷex̄sa   gi   ṁénx̄sagiu
     cut=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ   twenty   and one
     'I recently cut 21 slices.'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:84)

(16) ẁigáiksiwatas?
      ẁi=gaiksiwa=**t**=as
      Q=come.through=**REC.PST**=Q.2
      'At which point did you go through?'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:84)

In summary, the recent past tense marker =*t* is clearly used by modern speakers and is also found in Lincoln and Rath's dictionary (1986). The =*tet* form is an allomorph that reduplicates the [t] sound, as it occurs in free variation with =*t*, and reduplication is found in other Haisla affixes.

4   Distant past =*guł*

In Haisla, the =*guł* enclitic functions as the distant past tense marker. Examples (17) to (19) show how =*guł* is used to communicate an event that happened a long time ago.

(17) ṗálagułen la ċimáuċaẋi.
      pala=**guł**=en   la   ċimáuċa=ẋi
      work=**DIS.PST**=1.SBJ   PREP   Kitamaat.Village=DIS
      'I used to work in Kitamaat Village.'   (Nelson Grant, p.c., January 29, 2023)

(18) λ̓íisgułasi
      λiis=**guł**=a=si
      skin=**DIS.PST**=D$_1$^{3}=3^3.OBL
      'the skin it used to have' (*lit*. 'what used to be its skin') (Vera Wilson, p.c., May 11, 2023)

(19) qaqałélsnáxʷagułen 'uísda'enc.
      qaqałels-naxʷa=**guł**=en   'uisda=Ø='enc
      visit-sometimes=**DIS.PST**=1.SBJ   family=D$_1$^{3}=1.OBL
      'I sometimes used to visit my family.'   (Vera Wilson, p.c., February 25, 2022)

Example (19) contrasts with when the speaker wants to describe a recent visit, as shown in example (20).

(20) qaqałélsten 'uísda'enc.
      qaqałels=**t**=en   'uisda=Ø='enc
      visit=**REC.PST**=1.SBJ   family=D$_1$^{3}=1.OBL
      'I visited my family (recently).'   (Vera Wilson, p.c., February 25, 2022)

There are a few examples of phrases with the =*guł* suffix found in free translations in Lincoln and Rath's (1986) dictionary. Examples (21) to (23) are phrases used in dictionary examples that only provided a rough free translation in the published work.

(21) ṗ álagułen la ḡíẁełgułiẋga.
      pala=**guł**=en   la   ḡiẁeł=**guł**=i=ẋga
      work=**DIS.PST**=1.SBJ   PREP   long.ago=**DIS.PST**=D$_1$^{4}=D$_2$^{4}
      'I once worked long ago.'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:110)

(22) kúpx̄ingułnugʷa.
   kupx̄in=**guł**=nugʷa
   broken.shoulder=**DIS.PST**=1.SBJ
   'I had a broken shoulder some time ago.'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:215)

(23) k̓úusnugʷa láẏaxc̓iguł…
   k̓uus=nugʷa   laẏaxc̓i=**guł**
   NEG=1.SBJ   leave=**DIS.PST**
   'I did not depart [='leave'] at that time…'   (Lincoln & Rath 1986:188)

   In summary, the =*guł* enclitic is used in a variety of contexts to communicate the distant past tense in Haisla.

5   Former =*gułdi*

The =*guł* distant past enclitic can also be combined with the =*t* recent past and =*i* absental enclitics to communicate that a person or animal is 'recently deceased'; the result is a compound enclitic =*gułdi*. (Since the =*guł* precedes the =*t*, a phonological deaspiration process occurs in which =*t* is heard as [d].) Examples (24) to (27) demonstrate how =*gułdi* is used to mark that a person or animal is recently deceased.

(24) …qi bekʷáigułdis qi wísemax̄i li k̓es híxt̓inukʷ.
   qi   bekʷai=**gułdi**=s   qi   wisem=a=x̄ i   l=i   k̓es   hixti-nukʷ
   D³   body=**FORMER**=OBL   D³   man=D₁³=D₂³   AUX=3³.SBJ   NEG   head-have
   '…the body of the man which had no head…'   (Bach 1998:76)

(25) …hénλexʷgułdis nuáqelix̄ i…
   henλekʷ=**gułdi**=s   nuaqel=i=x̄ i
   shot=**FORMER**=OBL   old.man=D₁³=D₂³
   '…what the old man had shot [with a bow and arrow]…'   (Lincoln et al. 1990:77)

(26) …c̓áag̱egułdiax̄i, qám̓ilagułdiax̄i, 'emłem c̓ík̓ʷegułdiax̄i…
   c̓aag̱=**gułdi**=a=x̄i   qam̓ila=**gułdi**=a=x̄ i   'emłem c̓ik̓ ʷ=**gułdi**=a=x̄ i
   mountain.goat=FORMER=D₁³=D₂³   deer=**FORMER**=D₁³=D₂³   even   bird=FORMER=D₁³=D₂³
   '…[what used to be] mountain goat, [what used to be] deer, not to mention [what used to be] birds…'   (Bach 1998:45)

(27) …λáx̄dalagułdiax̄i 'ux̄ʷ λ̓úpasus wíget…
   λax̄dala=**gułdi**=a=x̄i   'ux̄ ʷ   λupa-su=s   ẇiget
   grey.cod=**FORMER**=D₁³=D₂³   also   barbecue-PASS=OBL   PROPN
   '…the grey cod had also been barbecued by Wigit…'   (Bach 1998:102)

   This compound enclitic =*gułdi* can also apply to inanimate objects, in which the object has recently changed in state or use.

(28) hidá'in qi ƛáq̓ʷetaɫasguɫdiax̄i

hida='in	qi	ƛaq̓ʷetaɫas=**guɫdi**=a=x̄i
COP.3=PERF	D³	alder.wood=**FORMER**=D₁³=D₂³

'It was what used to be alder wood.' (Lincoln et al. 1990:93)

(29) …guguk̓ʷiásguɫdis gúk̓ʷelutasi.

guguk̓ʷiás=**guɫdi**=s	guk̓ʷelut=a=si
house:PL=**FORMER**=OBL	fellow.villager=D₁³=3³.OBL

'…where some her fellow villagers had had their houses.' (Bach 1998:40)

The compound enclitic =*guɫdi* produces the concept of a person or animal that has recently passed from life to death, or an inanimate object that has just been changed from one state or use to another.

6   Late =*uɫ*

A final enclitic that bears mention when discussing past tense in Haisla is =*uɫ*. This enclitic is used exclusively to refer to a person that has died. Similar to =*guɫdi,* the =*uɫ* enclitic often occurs in past tense utterances, but it is not a past tense marker.

(30) …John-uɫi.

John=**uɫ**=i
PROPN=**LTE**=REM

'…the late John.' (Nelson Grant, p.c., March 9, 2023)

(31) …Gordon Robertson-uɫi.

Gordon Robertson=**uɫ**=i
PROPN=**LTE**=REM

'…the late Gordon Robertson.' (Vera Wilson, p.c., May 12, 2023)

(32) …du David Nelson-uɫi du Dan-uɫi du John Hall-uɫi.

du	David Nelson=**uɫ**=i	du	Dan=**uɫ**=i	du	John Hall=**uɫ**=i
and	PROPN=**LTE**=REM	and	PROPN=**LTE**=REM	and	PROPN=**LTE**=REM

'…with the late David Nelson and the late Dan and the late John Hall.'   (Bach 1992:47)

(33) …gi wáx̄'id x̄ʷeɫápuɫa'enc…

gi	wax̄'id	x̄ʷeɫap=**uɫ**=a'=enc
and	decide	uncle=**LTE**=D₁²=1.OBL

'…and my late uncle decided…' (Bach 1992:47)

While =*uɫ* is certainly the most common way to refer to a person who has passed away, in rare instances, the suffix =*guɫ* can also indicate that a person has passed. Example (34) shows a modern speaker using =*guɫ* in this way.

(34) …'áupguɫienc…

'aup=**guɫ**=i=enc
father=**DIS.PST**=REM=1.OBL

'…my late father…' (Nelson Grant, p.c., May 12, 2023)

There is also one example of using *=guł* to talk about someone who has passed in the Haisla Nuyem from speaker Gordon Robertson, shown in (35):

(35)   … qi híłaqic qi 'áupgułaci.
     qi   hiłaq=i=c=s   qi   'aup=**guł**=a=c=si
     D^3 cousin=$D_1{}^3$=INV=OBL D^3 father=**DIS.PST**=$D_1{}^3$=INV=3^3.POSS
     '…by the cousin of his late father.'   (Bach 1992:51)

One further point regarding using the *=guł* enclitic is that it can also refer to animals that have died, as shown in examples (36) and (37).

(36)   ẇaċgułi
     ẇaċ=guł=i
     dog=**DIS.PST**=$D_1{}^4$
     'deceased dog'   (Vera Wilson, p.c., October 24, 2023)

(37)   saḡʷemgułi
     saḡʷem=**guł**=i
     seal=**DIS.PST**=$D_1{}^4$
     'deceased seal'   (Vera Wilson, p.c., October 24, 2023)

It is much more common to use the =guł enclitic to refer to animals that are deceased than to refer to people. Referring to people who have passed on usually requires the use of =uł.

Since the *=uł* enclitic is used exclusively to refer to people who have passed on, it is not a past tense marker, even though it is often found in past tense utterances and could be etymologically related to *=guł.*

7   Conclusions

In sum, Haisla uses a future/non-future system. When the past tense is marked, it is done using either the recent past marker *=t/=tet*, or the distant past marker, *=guł*. Speakers will often use the *=t* and *=tet* interchangeably but will sometimes have preferences as to what sounds better to the individual. However, these preferences often conflict with other speakers' preferences.

The compound enclitic *=gułdi* marks when a person or animal has recently passed on or an object has changed in state or use. There is also an enclitic *=uł* that is used to communicate that a person has passed on. The *=gułdi* and *=uł* enclitics are not past tense markers but do often appear in past tense utterances. In rare cases, the distant past tense marker *=guł* can also be used to communicate that a person has passed on.

Further research is needed to understand many more areas of Haisla grammar, particularly in understanding clause structure, aspect, and many areas of morphology.

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Appendix: Practical article summary for Haisla language learners Recent and distant past tense: *=t and =guł*

In Haisla, speakers make the future tense obvious for the listener by adding *=ƛ*, such as in *ṗálaƛen* which means 'I will work'. The *ṗála* means 'to work', the *=ƛ* means it happens in the future, and the *=en* is one of the ways to say 'I'.

A Haisla speaker might not always make the past tense obvious. They could say *ṗálanugʷa* and mean 'I work', or 'I worked', depending on the context. However, if a Haisla speaker wants to make it clear that it happened in the recent past, the speaker can choose to add *=t* or *=tet*, such as *ṗálaten*, which means 'I worked' or *ṗálateten*, which also means 'I worked' (Nelson Grant, p.c., March 4, 2022). It seems that either form, *=t* or *=tet*, is acceptable, and can be used interchangeably to show that an action happened recently. In some cases, Haisla speakers may have different preferences on whether *=t* or *=tet* sounds better in a particular phrase. I would encourage learners to start using one of these forms and then follow the instructions of the speaker they are working with as to when the other form should be used.

To give an example of a situation where the recent past tense markers *=t* or *=tet* would be used, Nelson Grant explained that the use of *=t* or *=tet* was unnecessary if the speaker had already made the time clear. For example: 'Today I went to the store' could be communicated with or without these past tense makers. However, in a short exchange, if one speaker asked the question 'Did you cook dinner?' and the other speaker replied, 'I cooked!' the phrase in Haisla could be *hémgila**tet**en!* using the *=tet* past tense marker to make it clear that the cooking already happened (Nelson Grant, p.c., March 3, 2022).

Also, when a speaker wants to make it clear that something happened a long time ago, they may use *=guł*, which is the distant past tense marker. For example, a speaker could say *ṗála**guł**en la ċimáučax̄i* 'I used to work in Kitimat village (over there)' (Nelson Grant, p.c., January 29, 2023).

Late and Former: *=uł and =gułdi*

When speakers refer to people who have passed on, they will most likely add the *=uł*, such as in *John-**uł**i* meaning 'the late John' (Nelson Grant, p.c., March 9, 2023). Occasionally, a speaker could also use *=guł* when referring to someone who has passed, such as in *'áup**guł**ienc*, which means 'my late father' (Nelson Grant, p.c., May 12, 2023). While the *=uł* ending is only used to refer to people, the *=guł* can also be used to refer to animals and objects.

Another ending that is used to discuss someone/something that has died is *=gułdi*. The *=guł* 'distant past' can also be combined with the *=t* 'recent past', which sounds like a [d] here, and *=i* 'absental' to communicate that a person, animal, or object is 'recently deceased', or made former in some way, such as if an object was previously used for a different purpose. This *=gułdi* is most likely to occur in storytelling, where the speaker recounts that someone or something just died at that point in the story. For example, the phrase *ƛáx̄dala**gułdi**ax̄i 'ux̄ʷ ƛúpasus ẇíget* means 'the grey cold that was barbecued by Wigit', and *=gułdi* is used in reference to cod that had recently died (Bach 1998:102). Refer to example (27) in the main body of the article for a more detailed analysis of this phrase.

Learners may notice that *=gułdi* and *=uł* appear in stories and assume that these are past tense markers. However, these markers are only providing more information about the person, animal, or object. They do not change the sentence to make it in the past tense.