



What do languages encode when they encode reality status?

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1. Different views of (ir)realis and the irrealis debate¹

There are at least two ways in which the terms *realis* and *irrealis* are used in grammatical theory. In a major strand of the literature on modality, mainly embodied in the works of Talmy Givón, the term 'irrealis' is used to refer to a 'mega-modality' subsuming a number of more specific 'sub-modes' which share a common denominator, i.e. epistemic uncertainty (Givón, 1994: p. 267; Givón, 2001: p. 308; see also Givón, 1984: 285ff). This common denominator explains why there is often shared grammatical marking of the various irrealis sub-modes:

- (1) "intention, ability, preference, permission and obligation are all future projecting, and [...] the future is by definition an irrealis epistemic mode. The epistemic aspect of irrealis is thus its common denominator, to which an evaluative-deontic aspect may be added." (Givón, 2001: p. 308)

In the literature on modality, and in the practice of grammar writing, the two terms *realis* and *irrealis* are also employed as descriptive equivalents of a number of moods traditionally labelled as 'indicative', 'subjunctive', 'optative', 'conditional', 'potential', etc. (see, e.g., Chung and Timberlake, 1985: 241ff; Timberlake, 2007: 326ff), i.e. they may also refer to **forms** encoding sub-domains of the complex realm of modality, their adoption being generally dependent on the lack of an established alternative grammatical terminology in a given language:

- (2) "After the unmarked mood – indicative or *realis* – and the imperative, it is not uncommon to distinguish another mood. It tends not to be used for any single realm of modality, but is an all-purpose mood used to express a range of less-than-completely real modality when the degree of irreality rises to some threshold. There is no single accepted name; traditions differ, and usage differs in different languages. The term subjunctive points to the fact this mood will commonly appear in embedded structures. Conditional points to one major function of marked modality, that of indicating contingency in explicit conditional structures. Potential covers a broad range of especially future possibilities. *When there is no established term in some tradition, irrealis is useful.*" (Timberlake, 2007: p. 326; our emphasis)

In another tradition, the two terms are used to refer to two opposite values of a functional dimension which is not co-extensive with modality. Indeed, some authors speak of 'reality status' (or 'status') as a grammatical category to full right, realized differently in different languages, with at least two values: *realis* (or neutral) and *irrealis* (e.g. Foley and Van Valin, 1984; Van Valin and La Polla, 1997: 40ff; Elliott, 2000: p. 80). These two values are characterized in terms of actualization vs. non-actualization of a given state of affairs (henceforth SoA). A proposition is *realis* if it asserts that a SoA is an "actualized and certain fact of reality", whereas it is classified as *irrealis* if "it implies that a SoA belongs to the realm of the imagined or hypothetical, and as such it constitutes a potential or possible event but it is not an observable fact of reality" (Elliott, 2000:

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pp. 66–67). According to this view, reality status, on a par with better established grammatical categories such as tense or aspect, may be obligatorily coded morpho-syntactically in all finite clauses in some languages, it needs to be marked only in specific syntactic contexts in others, and it is merely optional in still other languages. On the formal side, reality status may be encoded by means of an array of morphosyntactic strategies including simple affixation (see e.g. (3)), portmanteau affixation (see e.g. (4)), sentence particles and adverbs (see e.g. (5)), segmental mutations (see e.g. (6)), etc.:

(3) Bukiyip (Torricelli, Kombio-Arapesh; [Conrad and Wogiga, 1991](#): p. 18, 95)

- | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|
| a. | <i>nabotik</i>
yesterday
“Yesterday they hit him, and he died.” | <i>ch-a-Ø-nú</i>
3PL.MIX.SBJ- REAL -hit-3SG.OBJ.M | <i>n-a-gak</i>
3SG.M.SBJ- REAL -die |
| b. | <i>kaman</i>
tomorrow
“They will come tomorrow.” | <i>ch-ú-naki</i>
3PL.MIX.SBJ- IRR -come | |
| c. | <i>nabotik</i>
yesterday
“Yesterday he didn’t come.” | <i>wo</i>
PST.NEG | <i>n-ú-naki</i>
3SG.M.SBJ- IRR -come

<i>e</i>
PST.NEG |

(4) Tukang Besi (Austronesian, Western Malayo-Polynesian, Sulawesi; [Donohue, 1999](#))

- | | | |
|----|--|----------------------------------|
| a. | <i>no-wila</i>
3.REAL -go
“He was walking, swinging his arms.” | <i>legolego</i>
arms.swinging |
| b. | <i>na-baiara-e</i>
3.IRR -pay-3.OBJ
“She’s going to pay.” | |
| c. | <i>i-sumbere-waliako!</i>
2PL. REAL -immediate-return
“Go back home this instant, you lot!” | |
| d. | <i>to-manga-do</i>
1PL. REAL -eat-EMPH
“Let’s eat first!” | |
| e. | <i>no-baiara</i>
3.REAL -pay
“She’s about to pay.” | |

(5) Sheko (Afro-Asiatic, Omotic; [Hellenthal, 2007](#))

- | | | | |
|----|--|--|----------------------------|
| a. | <i>shima</i>
day.after.tomorrow
“They will go the day after tomorrow.” | <i>ish-tag-a-me</i>
3PL-go-IPFV-SFP: IRR | |
| b. | <i>k’áy-ē, gob</i>
rise-sky
IMP | <i>sats’-á-ke</i>
become.light-3SG.M-
SFP: REAL | |
| c. | <i>‘hayn yet</i>
IDEOPH 2SG
“Grr, I will eat you. Give it to me!” | <i>ñ-gyá-me</i>
1SG-eat-SFP: IRR | <i>nāñ</i>
1SG.DAT |
| d. | <i>wosa ñ-ts’af-ki-ke</i>
letter 1SG-write-be-SFP: REAL
“I’m writing a letter.” | | <i>ñāts-ē’</i>
give-IMP |

(6) Chalcatongo Mixtec (Oto-Manguean, Mixtecan; [Macaulay, 1996](#))²

- | | | | |
|----|---|--|-------------------|
| a. | <i>rúú</i>
I
“I will eat beans.” | <i>kee = rí</i>
eat [IRR] = 1
beans | <i>nduči</i> |
| b. | <i>rúú</i>
I | <i>žee = rí</i>
eat [REAL] = 1
beans = 1 | <i>nduči = rí</i> |

² In Chalcatongo Mixtec verbs have two distinct stems, called realis and potential (=irrealis). The realis stem occurs in progressive, habitual, and stative forms. The potential stem is used to express future time, imperative, counterfactual, conditional and various other senses. The two types of stems may differ (i) segmentally (e.g. *kee* vs. *žee*, ‘eat[_{REALIS}]’ vs. ‘eat[_{POTENTIAL}]’); (ii) by tone (e.g. *kaku* vs. *kákú*, ‘be born[_{REALIS}]’ vs. ‘be born[_{POTENTIAL}]’); and (iii) segmentally and by tone (e.g. *xasú* vs. *kásu*, ‘close[_{REALIS}]’ vs. ‘close[_{POTENTIAL}]’).

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