Towards a semantics of graded futures in Washo

This talk discusses the semantics of the graded future morphemes -ašaʔ (“near future”), -tiʔ (“intermediate future”) and -gab (“distant future”) in Washo (isolate, USA; Jacobsen 1964). Several diagnostics set -ašaʔ (“near”) apart from the other two. First, -ašaʔ occurs in a different morphological slot in the verbal complex than the other two. Second, -ašaʔ does not directly encode temporal remoteness. In contexts where speakers have no idea when an event will take place in the future (a couple hours from now, or next week), speakers consistently use -ašaʔ, and not the more specific forms. Third, -tiʔ and -gab are constrained to appear only in specific licensing environments, but -ašaʔ is not. Specifically, -tiʔ and -gab can only occur in the scope of an overt modal or attitude verb, in questions, or in conditionals. Two challenges present themselves for the analysis of the Washo system. First, how does the “near future” inference for -ašaʔ arise? On the one hand, it seems natural to assume that -ašaʔ gives rise to a “near future” inference due to competition with -tiʔ and -gab, which are each more specific. On the other hand, many current theories of pragmatic competition rely on the notion of structural parallelism (e.g., Katzir 2007), whereas the Washo futures are not members of the same morphological paradigm. The second challenge is characterizing the licensing environments for -tiʔ and -gab. Although the notions of modality (Matthewson 2012) and veridicality (Mucha 2016) have been argued to play a role in licensing futures in other languages, neither notion fully covers the licensing environments for -tiʔ and -gab. Nevertheless, the fact that -tiʔ and -gab require licensing corroborates the view that future meaning is decomposable into temporal and modal/“extra” components (e.g., Kratzer 2012, Matthewson 2012).