

Potential

Semantically, the potential mode in Tlingit has future tense reference, translating as “s/he might/could do it”. An example is *Gwál k̄waak̄asiteen* “I might see it” (Leer, 1991). Two sub-types of the potential mode have been documented in this resource: the potential attributive and the potential decessive. These will be the topic of discussion here.

Potential Attributive

The potential mode in Tlingit most often occurs in relative clause constructions. Using our example potential verb above, a very common construction is: *tlél aadé k̄waak̄asiteeni yé (k̄oostí)* “there’s no way I can see it” or “I can’t see it”. A word-for-word break down of this construction follows:

<i>tlél</i>	<i>aadé</i>	<i>k̄waak̄asiteeni</i>	<i>yé</i>	<i>(k̄oostí)</i>
no	way	I might/could see it	place	(is/exists)

In this construction, the negative particle *tlél* refers to the main verb of the sentence *k̄oostí*, which is in negative form, and means “doesn’t exist”. The potential attributive form *k̄waak̄asiteeni* is in a relative (dependent) clause. Although *k̄oostí* is the main verb, it is almost never actually stated, but is understood, which is why it is in parentheses above.

The potential attributive mode in Tlingit is characterized by the following: 1) irrealis prefix *u-*; 2) the verb’s regular conjugation prefix (\emptyset -, *na-*, *ga-*, or *ga-*); 3) aspect prefix *ga-*; 4) the +I form of the classifier (*si-*, *dzi-*, *shi-*, *ji-*, *li-*, *dli-*, *ya-*, or *di-*, table provided below) and; 5) the attributive suffix *-i/-u*. The suffix follows the same rules as the possessive suffix regarding when *-i* is used and when *-u* is used. (See the appendix of *Lingít X̄’éináx sá* by Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 2002).

1.0 Tlingit Classifiers

	+I	-I		+I	-I		+I	-I		+I	-I
-D	<i>si-</i>	<i>sa-</i>		<i>shi-</i>	<i>sha-</i>		<i>li-</i>	<i>la-</i>		<i>ya-</i>	\emptyset -
+D	<i>dzi-</i>	<i>s-</i>		<i>ji-</i>	<i>sh-</i>		<i>dli-</i>	<i>l-</i>		<i>di-</i>	<i>da-</i>

The verb stem in the potential is not predictable with respect to vowel length and tone, but must be memorized for each verb individually.

Note that the realis (affirmative) potential and irrealis (negative) potential forms are identical, both requiring the irrealis prefix *-u* and having identical verb stem forms. Here are examples from Leer, 1991.

<i>Gwál k̄waak̄asiteen</i>	“I might see it”	Realis Potential
<i>Gwál tlél k̄waak̄asiteen</i>	“I might not see it”	Irrealis Potential

Because the potential mode requires the verb's regular conjugation prefix along with the aspect prefix *ga-*, and the irrealis prefix *u-*, a variety of contractions take place, making the prefix combination charts especially handy for this form. It will be helpful to discuss each of the four conjugation prefixes separately. Let's look at some examples, beginning with *Ø-* conjugation verbs.

Ø- conjugation verbs

Below each example, a schematic representation of each verbal component is given for comparison with the contracted, spoken form. Let's walk through example (1) together.

1. *tlél aadé oo \underline{x} litséegi yé* "no way can s/he barbecue it"
(*a- + u- + Ø- + ga- + li- + -tséek + -i*)

The potential attributive form *oo \underline{x} litséegi* in example (1) above is made up of each of the parts given in parentheses below the example. These are: 1) object prefix *a-* "it"; 2) irrealis prefix *u-*; 3) this verb's conjugation prefix, which is *Ø-*; 4) aspect prefix *ga-* which is required by the potential mode; 5) classifier *li-*; 6) verb stem *-tséek* "barbecue" and; 7) attributive suffix *-î*, which makes this a dependent (as opposed to main) verb. A couple of contractions have taken place to produce the spoken form of the verb. First, the object prefix *a-* contracts with the irrealis prefix *u-*, producing *oo-*. Second, due to the '3 open syllable rule' in Tlingit, which drops the vowel of the middle of 3 open syllables in a row, the vowel drops out of the aspect prefix *ga-*. This leaves a *g-* next to the classifier *li-*, an unacceptable consonant cluster in Tlingit. The *g-* therefore becomes *x-*, thus producing *oo \underline{x} li-*. Note that this change from *g-* to *x-* occurs everywhere where *g-* directly precedes any classifier beginning with a consonant. Examples (2) and (3) below further illustrate what we've discussed so far.

2. *tlél aadé oo \underline{x} si.eeyi yé* "no way can s/he cook it"
(*a- + u- + Ø- + ga- + si- + -.ee + -i*)

3. *tlél aadé oo \underline{x} dinaayi yé* "no way can s/he drink it"
(*a- + u- + Ø- + ga- + di- + -naa + -i*)

Verbs with the *ya-* classifier undergo different contractions. Here, the aspect prefix *ga-* doesn't drop its vowel and the consonant *g* remains unchanged. Example (4) below illustrates the contraction of the aspect prefix *ga-* with the classifier *ya-*, which results in *gaa-*.

4. *tlél aadé oo \underline{g} aa.aaxi yé* "no way can s/he hear it"
(*a- + u- + Ø- + ga- + ya- + -.aax + -i*)

In (5) below, the verb has the thematic prefix *sha-*. Following this, we see the contraction of the irrealis prefix *u-*, the aspect prefix *ga-*, and the classifier *ya-*, all together producing *ɣwaa-*. The same contraction takes place in (6), except here, there is the object prefix *a-* followed by the thematic prefix *ka-*, which drops its vowel since it's the middle of 3 open syllables in a row.

5. *tlél aadé shaɣwaaheegi yé* “no way can he/she/it get full”
(*sha-* + *u-* + *Ø-* + *ga-* + *ya-* + *-heek* + *-i*)

6. *tlél aadé akɣwaachuxu yé* “no way can s/he knead it”
(*a-* + *ka-* + *u-* + *Ø-* + *ga-* + *ya-* + *-chux* + *-i*)

Example (7) below has no object prefix, and here, the irrealis prefix contracts with the thematic prefix *ka-*, producing *koo-*. Here again, the *ga-* aspect prefix has dropped its vowel and become *x-* because it's followed by the classifier *dzi-*.

7. *tlél aadé kooɣdzinéiyi yé* “no way can s/he knit”
(*ka-* + *u-* + *Ø-* + *ga-* + *dzi-* + *-néi* + *-i*)

As seen by the above examples, the irrealis prefix *u-* may surface in a variety of potential locations in the prefix string, based on which other prefixes are present, and with which it contracts. For example, the irrealis prefix *u-* may contract with the following prefixes: 1) at the beginning of the word with the object prefix *a-*, producing *oo-*, as seen in examples (1), (2), (3) and (4) above; 2) with a thematic prefix such as *ka-*, producing *koo-* as seen in (7) or; 3) with the aspect prefix *ga-*, in which case it surfaces as rounding on the consonant, producing *-ɣw-* or *-xw-* depending on the following classifier. Examples (5) and (6) above illustrate this option. For some verbs, this results in alternate pronunciations of the potential attributive form. For example, revisiting (4) above, either of the following would be acceptable: *tlél aadé ooɣaa.aaxi yé* OR *tlél aadé aɣwaa.aaxi yé*. Most fluent speakers would accept either of these forms. In this resource, most of the time only one of the options is documented for each verb, with the understanding that either would be acceptable (as illustrated in the prefix combination charts).

For a complete table of contractions involving *Ø-* conjugation verbs in the potential mode, see the *ga-* prefix combination chart.

Next, we'll look at verbs that use the *na-*, *ga-*, or *ɣa-* conjugation prefixes. The addition of these conjugation prefixes to the mix make for a variety of different resulting prefix combinations.

na- conjugation verbs

The following are examples of *na-* conjugation verbs in the potential attributive form. Compare (8), (9) and (10) below for another example of the irrealis prefix contracting with alternate prefixes (contracting with the object prefix *a-* in (8) and (9), producing *oo-*, and with the aspect prefix *ga-* in (10), resulting in *xw-*).

8. *tlél aadé oongaas'óowu yé* “no way can s/he chop it”
(*a-* + *u-* + *na-* + *ga-* + *ya-* + *-s'óow* + *-u*)

9. *tlél aadé oonaxlixaashi yé* “no way can s/he cut it”
(*a-* + *u-* + *na-* + *ga-* + *li-* + *-xaash* + *-i*)

10. *tlél aadé anaxwdzit'eixi yé* “no way can s/he troll”
(*a-* + *u-* + *na-* + *ga-* + *dzi-* + *-t'eix* + *-i*)

For a complete table of contractions involving *na-* conjugation verbs in the potential mode, see the *na-ga-* prefix combination chart.

ga- conjugation verbs

The following are example potential attributive forms for *ga-* conjugation verbs. Where the classifier is *ya-* the prefix combination will be *gugaa-* (coming from *u-ga-ga-ya-*) as in (11) below. However, if the verb has an object prefix *a-*, or a thematic prefix (such as *ka-*), then the contraction changes. The vowel drops out of *ga-* because of the ‘3 open syllable’ rule, and the *g-*, being next to *ga-* becomes *k-*. Thus, *a-u-ga-ga-ya-* becomes *akgwaa-*, as in (12) below.

11. *tlél aadé at gugaasheeyi yé* “no way can s/he sing”
(*u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *ya-* + *-shee* + *-i*)

12. *tlél aadé akgwaasheeyi yé* “no way can s/he sing it”
(*a-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *ya-* + *-shee* + *-i*)

For verbs with classifiers other than *ya-*, the prefix combination will render *gux-(clf)-*. This is a result of the aspect prefix *ga-* dropping its vowel and becoming *x-* next to a consonant-vowel classifier (such as *li-*, *si-*, *shi-*, etc.). For example, see (13) below. Example (14) shows that the contraction will be the same in the presence of a thematic prefix (*x'a-* in this case).

13. *tlél aadé guxlidzéeyi yé* “no way can it be difficult”
(*u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *li-* + *-dzee* + *-i*)

14. *tlél aadé x'aguxlitseeni yé* “no way can it be expensive”
(*x'a-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *li-* + *-tseen* + *-i*)

For a complete table of contractions involving *ga-* conjugation verbs in the potential mode, see the *ga-ga-* prefix combination chart.

***ga-* conjugation verbs**

When the conjugation prefix *ga-* is combined with the aspect prefix *ga-*, the first *ga-* gets a long vowel: *gaa-*. What happens to the second *ga-* depends on which classifier follows. If it's *ya-*, then the result is: *gaa^gaa-* (*ga-* + *ga-* + *ya-*). Add the irrealis prefix *u-* and you get *gaa^gwaa-*. Example (15) below illustrates this combination, with the additional object prefix *a-*.

15. *tlél aadé a^gaa^gwaa^xoo^xu yé* “no way can s/he summon him”
(*a-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *ya-* + *-xoo^x* + *-u*)

If there's a thematic prefix present (such as *ka-*), the irrealis prefix *u-* usually contracts with it, producing *koo-*. For example, in (16) below we see the string: *a-ka-u-ga-ga-ya-* contract to produce: *akooga^gaa-*.

16. *tlél aadé akooga^gaa^gas'éil'i yé* “no way can s/he tear it”
(*a-* + *ka-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *ya-* + *-s'éil'* + *-i*)

If the prefix string includes a classifier other than *ya-*, the resulting combination is *gaa^xw-(cl)*. Here, the second *ga-* becomes *x-*, and the *x-* becomes rounded (*xw-*) because of the irrealis prefix *u-*. Examples (17) and (18) below illustrates this combination.

17. *tlél aadé gaa^xw^dixéet'i yé* “no way can s/he sweep”
(*u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *di-* + *-xéet'* + *-i*)

18. *tlél aadé a^gaa^xw^dzigáaxi yé* “no way can s/he ask for it”
(*a-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *dzi-* + *-gáax^x* + *-i*)

Again, if there's a thematic prefix present, the tendency is for the irrealis prefix to contract with it. In (19) below, the string *a-ka-u-ga-ga-si-* becomes *akooga^xsi-*.

19. *tlél aadé akooga^xsikeiyi yé* “no way can s/he untangle it”
(*a-* + *ka-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *si-* + *-kei* + *-i*)

For a complete table of contractions involving *ga-* conjugation verbs in the potential mode, see the *ga-ga-* prefix combination chart.

Potential Decessive

The potential decessive form translates as “s/he would have done it (but didn't)”. The potential decessive is usually used as the main verb in

conjunction with a dependent clause. Here's an example: *Xwasateeni kát k̄waaka.éex'in*. "If I had seen him, I would have invited him." Here, the potential decessive form *k̄waaka.éex'in* "I would have invited him" is the main verb in the sentence, while *xwasateeni* "if I had seen him" is in the dependent clause.

Structurally, the potential decessive is similar to the potential attributive with two minor changes: the -I form of the classifier is used and the decessive suffix *-in/-un* is used instead of the attributive suffix. Note that the decessive suffix takes the opposite tone of the verb stem. The potential decessive then, requires the following: 1) irrealis prefix *u-*; 2) the verb's conjugation prefix (*Ø-*, *na-*, *ga-*, or *ga-*); 3) the aspect prefix *ga-*; 4) the -I form of the classifier (*sa-*, *s-*, *sha-*, *sh-*, *la-*, *l-*, *Ø-*, or *da-*) and; 5) the decessive suffix *-in/-un*. The choice of vowel in the decessive suffix follows the same rules for the attributive suffix and the possessive suffix. (See the appendix of *Lingít X'éináx sá* by Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 2002).

As mentioned above, the shape of the verb stem is not predictable in the potential however, for a given verb, it will be the same in the potential attributive and potential decessive forms.

Compare the potential attributive form in (20a) below with the potential decessive form in (20b).

20a. *tlél aadé oo_xsi.eeyi yé* "no way can s/he cook it"

20b. *oo_xsa.eeyín* "s/he would have cooked it"

For the most part, the prefix combinations will be the same in the potential decessive as were discussed for the potential attributive. The main difference will be for verbs that use the classifier pair *ya-/Ø-*. Because the potential attributive form requires the +I classifier (*ya-*) while the potential decessive form requires the -I classifier (*Ø-*), the decessive forms won't have the long vowel on the aspect prefix *ga-* as seen in the attributive forms. For example, in (21a) the aspect prefix *ga-* combines with the +I form of the classifier *ya-*, producing *gaa-*. In (21b), the -I classifier *Ø-* is used, as required by the decessive form, and so the aspect prefix remains unchanged, *ga-*. As a side note, "hear it" is a *Ø-*-conjugation verb.

21a. *tlél aadé oogaa.aaxi yé* "no way can s/he hear it"
(*a- + u- + Ø- + ga- + ya- + -.aa_x + -i*)

21b. *ooga.aaxín* "s/he would have heard it"
(*a- + u- + Ø- + ga- + Ø- + -.aa_x + -ín*)

This next pair of examples is a *na-* conjugation verb, and illustrates the same point. The attributive form in (22a) has a long vowel on the aspect prefix *ḡaa-* due to the contraction with the classifier *ya-*, while the decessive form in (22b) has a short vowel *ḡa-* because the classifier is *Ø-*.

22a. *tlél aadé oonḡaal'eixi yé* “no way can s/he dance”
(a- + u- + na- + ḡa- + ya- + -l'eix + -i)

22b. *oonḡal'eixín* “s/he would have danced”
(a- + u- + na- + ḡa- + Ø- + -l'eix + -in)

Since all other relevant prefix combinations are discussed above for the potential attributive form, there will be no surprises in the example potential decessive forms given below. Examples will be given for each of the conjugation prefixes, beginning with *Ø-*.

Ø- conjugation verbs

The prefix combinations for the *Ø-* conjugation verbs below are straightforward. In (23) the irrealis prefix *u-* has contracted with the aspect prefix *ḡa-*, producing *ḡwa-*. In (24) however, the irrealis prefix has contracted with the object prefix *a-*, resulting in *oo-*. The aspect prefix *ḡa-* drops its vowel and becomes *x-* next to the classifier *da-*. The result is *ooxda-*.

23. *shaḡwaheegín* “he/she/it would have gotten full”
(sha- + u- + Ø- + ḡa- + Ø- + -heek + -ín)

24. *ooxdaanaayín* “s/he would have drunk it”
(a- + u- + Ø- + ḡa- + da- + -naa + -in)

na- conjugation verbs

Examples (25) and (26) below have the *na-* conjugation prefix. In both, the irrealis prefix *u-* has contracted with the object prefix *a-*, producing *oo-*. The difference between the two prefix strings is the classifier, which in (25) is *Ø-*, and in (26) is *la-*. In (25), the *na-* drops its vowel and the result is *oonḡa-*. In (26) however, as we saw in several examples above, the *ḡa-* aspect prefix has dropped its vowel and, being next to a consonant-initial classifier (*la-*), has become *x-*. The result here is *oonaxla-*.

25. *oonḡas'óowun* “s/he would have chopped it”
(a- + u- + na- + ḡa- + Ø- + -s'óow + -un)

26. *oonaxlaxaashín* “s/he would have cut it”
(a- + u- + na- + ḡa- + la- + -xaash + -in)

ga- verbs

As we saw in the potential attributive forms above, for the *ga-* conjugation verbs, the preference is for the irrealis prefix *u-* to contract with the conjugation prefix *ga-*, producing *gu-*. In (27) below, this is the only contraction that has taken place, since the classifier is \emptyset -. In (28), *ga-* has become *x-* before the classifier *la-*, producing *guxla-*.

27. *gugagaaxín* “s/he would have cried”
(*u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + \emptyset - + *-gaax* + *-ín*)

28. *guxladzéeyin* “it would have been difficult”
(*u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *la-* + *-dzée* + *-in*)

ga- verbs

Verbs that use the conjugation marker *ga-* are the most complex in terms of the prefix combinations. Combining *ga-* and *ga-* always results in a long vowel on the first: *gaaga-*. The classifier that follows these determines the rest. In (29) the classifier is \emptyset - and the result is *agaagwa-*. Note here that the irrealis prefix has contracted with the second *ga-*, producing *gwa-*. An alternate pronunciation for this form is *oogaagaxooxún*, where the irrealis contracts with the object prefix *a-* instead, producing *oo-* (with no rounding on the aspect prefix *ga-* this time). In (30) we see a similar situation, except here the classifier is *la-*, changing the aspect prefix *ga-* to *x-*, resulting all together in *agaaxwla-*. Again, an alternate pronunciation would be *oogaaxlagoowún*, where the irrealis prefix contracted with the object prefix at the beginning of the word instead of the aspect prefix in the middle. Either form should be acceptable to most speakers.

29. *agaagwaxooxún* “s/he would have summoned him”
(*a-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + \emptyset - + *-xoox* + *-ún*)

30. *agaaxwlagoowún* “s/he would have wiped it”
(*a-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *la-* + *-goo* + *-ún*)

Finally, in (31) below we have the added element of the thematic prefix *ka-*. In this example, the irrealis prefix has contracted with *ka-*, producing *koo-*. When the thematic prefix *ka-* specifically is present, the preference tends to be for the irrealis prefix to contract with *ka-*, as opposed to the object prefix *a-* or the aspect prefix *ga-*.

31. *akoogaaxsakeiyín* “s/he would have untangled it”
(*a-* + *ka-* + *u-* + *ga-* + *ga-* + *sa-* + *-kei* + *-ín*)