

Explicit apprehensions, implicit instructions

An indirect speech act in the grammar

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Abstract

Among the languages that grammaticalize the apprehensive domain, some use a subordinator like Eng. *lest* (“Don’t run, *lest* you fall”); others have an apprehensive modality within their verb system. Mwotlap (Oceanic, Vanuatu) thus has a mood marker /tiple/ (≈‘might’), often found in paratactic constructions like “Don’t run, you *might* fall!” This apprehensive also encodes a form of interclausal dependency; yet rather than being due to syntactic subordination proper, this dependency effect is arguably of a pragmatic nature. Indeed, by exposing an event (e.g. your falling) as a risk to be avoided, the apprehensive clause serves as an argument towards a certain behaviour (“don’t run”). Sometimes, only the apprehension is formulated (“You might fall!”), leading the hearer to reconstruct the intended instruction. The apprehensive mood then defines an indirect speech act – one where exposing a danger serves as a proxy for an implicit order. The pragmatic effect is sometimes exploited for politeness strategies, or for its humorous potential.

1 Introduction: Syntax or pragmatics?

1.1 The problem

The grammatical encoding of apprehensional meanings was initially brought to light in individual language descriptions, covering various families and areas – e.g. Austin (1981) on a language of Australia; Lichtenberk (1995) on an Oceanic language of the Solomon Islands; Pakendorf & Schalley (2007) on a Turkic language of Siberia; Vuillermet (2018a) on a Takanan language of Bolivia... to cite but a few.¹ Beyond the discrepancies in terminology and glossing (“evitative”, “avertive”, “apprehensive”, “timitive”, *lest*...), the various constructions there described share enough properties to justify delimiting the APPREHENSIONAL domain as a linguistic area worthy of comparative investigation – leading to a more recent line of research in typology (see Dobrushina 2006; Vuillermet 2018a, 2018b; Faller & Schultze-Berndt 2018 – as well as the present volume).

The Oceanic languages of northern Vanuatu in the South Pacific have grammatical devices dedicated to apprehensional semantics. Among them, the language Mwotlap has a particle *tiple*, labelled “Évitatif” (François 2003) or “Apprehensive” (François 2005: 130):²

- (1) *Mwotlap*
 ⟨Tēy van na-gayga en,⟩_P ⟨nēk **tiple** qēsdi⟩_Q!
 hold DIREC ART-rope DEF 2sg APPR fall
 ‘Hold on to the rope, (otherwise) you *might* fall! / *lest* you fall!’

In a nutshell, this apprehensive morpheme flags an irrealis event (e.g. the risk that you could fall) as being undesirable, and worthy of being avoided. This form *tiple* fits in the slot of Tense-Aspect-Mood markers in Mwotlap, and will thus be described as its “Apprehensive mood”.³

Most of the time, in Mwotlap just like in many languages with similar constructions, the apprehensive clause appears in natural speech as the second one in a diptych, along the pattern ⟨P, *lest* Q⟩. Following terminology shared in the present volume, I shall call P a “pre-emptive clause”, whether it encodes an order as in (1), a prohibition, or a

¹ I wish to thank the editors for their input on earlier drafts of this chapter. (...) This work relates to the axis *Typology and dynamics of linguistic systems* within the broader program *Empirical Foundations of Linguistics* (Labex EFL, ANR 10-LABX-0083) based in Paris.

² Examples are cited in their practical orthographies. Conventions for Mwotlap include: *e* = [ɛ]; *ē* = [i]; *o* = [ɔ]; *ō* = [ʊ]; *y* = [j]; *g* = [ɣ]; *b* = [ʙ]; *d* = [d̥]; *n̄* = [ŋ]; *q* = [kʰ]; *m̄* = [ŋm̄]. Other languages of the area essentially share the same conventions.

³ Following conventions advocated by Haspelmath (2010:674), I will use the term “apprehensional” or “apprehensive” – with lower case – when referring to semantic or pragmatic function; and “Apprehensive” – capitalized – when labelling a particular morpheme in a language.

statement. As for Q, it exposes the undesirable situation which would be avoided by following the instructions of the pre-emptive clause P.

Such diptychs make it tempting to analyse the Apprehensive as a subordinator linking two clauses, similar to a negative purposive ('Do P *so that not* Q'). That is, indeed, an interpretation commonly proposed for apprehensive morphemes in various languages (Dobrushina 2006:48–50). If so, *tiple* would belong to a special type of TAM markers, which combine modality semantics with a syntactic effect of subordination. And yet, it is not rare to hear utterances consisting only of an apprehensive clause Q with no pre-emptive clause P:

- (2) Nēk **tiple** qēsdi!
 2sg APPR fall
 [to a boy in a tree] 'Hey, you might fall!'

The question then arises of how best to analyse such examples. If *tiple* is a subordinator, is (2) a case of *insubordination* – i.e. a subordinate clause used independently (cf. Evans 2007)? Alternatively, I will propose that apprehensive clauses in Mwothlap are grammatically well-formed sentences; they do present a form of dependency towards an external utterance, explicit or implicit – yet that dependency is not syntactic in nature, but rather pragmatic.⁴

In the analysis I propose, the work of the apprehensive modality is to expose to the addressee a specific risk that should be avoided. By formulating such an apprehension, the speaker yields support to a particular instruction – one that is sometimes specified as in (1), and sometimes left implicit as in (2). This interplay between *explicit apprehensions* and *implicit instructions* is typical of the apprehensive modality.

The pragmatic properties I propose to identify here pertain to the apprehensive mood of Mwothlap, and of similar constructions in other languages. This is not a comment on the properties of its English translation, which might well warrant a different emic description. Indeed, the modal auxiliary *might* has a broader array of meanings, pointing to a general possibility without entailing a negative outcome (e.g. *You might get a pay raise*). By contrast, the apprehensive modality, in languages where it is grammaticalized, specifically depicts a virtual state-of-affairs as detrimental, and as cause for immediate action.

1.2 This study

The present study rests on primary data I collected during a number of field trips in Vanuatu since 1997, on the 17 languages of the Torres and Banks Islands (Map 1).

⁴ The neighbouring languages of the Torres Islands have TAM morphemes – the Subjunctive and the Background Perfect – that also correlate with interclausal dependency. François (2010) also argued that this dependency effect is pragmatic rather than strictly syntactic.



Map 1 – Location of the Torres and Banks Islands in Vanuatu (South Pacific)

My total corpus includes 4156 pages of handwritten notes, including snippets of conversation heard during participant-observer immersion in each community, as well as data elicited using a homemade conversational questionnaire (François 2019); plus a collection of texts taken from my 962 audio recordings, transcribed and annotated in the presence of native speakers. Among these, 168 narratives were typed, resulting in an electronic text corpus of 250,000 words, with the largest corpora being in Mwothlap (100,000 w.), Lo-Toga, Hiw and Dorig. Most of these texts are archived in open access.

Several linguists have worked on Northern Vanuatu languages, whether their focus was the grammar – François (2001) for Mwothlap, Schnell (2011) for Vera’a, Malau (2016) for Vurës – or the lexicon – Codrington & Palmer (1896) for Mota, François (2020) for Mwothlap. The present study leans primarily on the chapter “Évitatif” in François (2003: 301–312), a monograph on the Tense-Aspect-Mood system of Mwothlap.

I will begin this study with an overview of apprehensive strategies in northern Vanuatu, showing their links with other grammatical devices (ablative case, prohibitive modality). I will then focus on the morpheme *tiple* of Mwothlap, as it shows the most unambiguous case of an apprehensive modality, distinct from other moods, and clearly different from a subordinator such as English ‘lest’.

After describing the syntax and semantics of the Mwothlap Apprehensive (Section 3), Section 4 will get back to our discussion about the nature – syntactic or pragmatic – of the dependency effect observed with apprehensive constructions. Our final discussion (Section 5) will pay particular attention to the absolutive uses of the Apprehensive – as in ex.(2) – and its pragmatic correlates.

2 Areal overview of apprehensive devices

The Oceanic languages of Vanuatu tend to grammaticalize the apprehensional domain, yet they do so in slightly different ways.

Table 1 presents a number of morphemes from a sample of seven (out of 17) languages of the Torres–Banks, in geographical order from northwest to southeast. The apprehensive markers proper correspond to the two rows in the middle (“*lest* linker”, “apprehensive mood”). Shaded areas indicate when an apprehensive device also has a different function in the system. The table is explained in the following paragraphs.

Table 1 – A sample of apprehensive markers from the Torres–Banks area, showing their connections with other meanings

	Hiw	Lo-Toga	Löyöp	Lemerig	Mwotlap	Vurës	Dorig
ablative	ton	dën	nin	'en	den	den	dën
<i>lest</i> SUBORDINATOR	–	–	nin	'en	den	den	tekor
APPREHENSIVE MOOD	vit	mit	nin	'en	tiple	–	–
prohibitive	take ~ tati	mit ~ tate	tet	'en + <i>Red.</i> ~ 'og 'en	(ni)tog	nitog ~ mitV-	tog... te

Unlike Mwotlap, the languages Vurës and Dorig lack any apprehensive mood. What encodes the apprehensional meaning is a clause-initial word that behaves like a subordinator, like Eng. *lest*. The verb of that dependent clause inflects for a general irrealis mood, which lacks any specific connection to the apprehensive. Consider the form *tekor* in Dorig (Gaua island):

- (3) *Dorig* [q.Rerem.04]
 Nēk s-tekgor o sri-n, **tekor** nēk so-dlōm!
 2sg IRR-beware ART bone-3sg **lest** 2sg IRR-swallow
 ‘Beware the bones, *lest* you swallow them!’

The linker *tekor* of Dorig is grammaticalized from a verb also present in (3), namely *tekgor* [tekɔr] ‘watch out, beware’ (from *tek* ‘look’ + *gor* ≈ ‘over’). Its use in the imperative was the source of its apprehensive interpretation: ‘beware you’ll swallow them’ > ‘*lest* you swallow them’. Incidentally, the five other languages of Gaua show the same pattern of grammaticalization, from a verb ‘watch out’ to an apprehensive linker: Lakon *ätä-woo*, Olrat *ēl-woy*, Koro *ēl-gor*, Nume *kērē-gor*, Mwotlap (*ma*)*ta-gor*.⁵ When used as a linker, these forms do not behave like verbs anymore (with a subject or TAM inflection), and fill the syntactic slot of a complementizer.

⁵ These forms are always derived from the verb ‘look’, with a suffix that reflects a polysemous root **yoro* ‘around, over, against [→ surround, protect, block, prevent, forbid...]’ (François 2000, 2005b:495). The language Toqabaqita is another example of an Oceanic language in which the apprehensive marker *ada* derives from a former verb meaning ‘see; look out, watch out’ (Lichtenberk 2008:780).

In several languages, the *lest* linker originates in an ablative preposition ‘from, away from’ (first row of *Table 1*). One example is Lemerig ‘*en* [ʔɛn]:

- (4) *Lemerig* [Lmg.Rock.25]
 Nē k-van kal sag ‘en naw.
 1sg AO:1sg-go inland uphill ABL sea
 ‘I’ll go uphill, *away from* the sea.’ [ablative]
- (5) *Lemerig* [d05.Naef.14]
 Nē k-mimi’ir rān e ‘en ē sē n-pēl.
 1sg IPFV-sleep~HAB over.it TOP lest PERS anyone IPFV-steal
 ‘I sleep on it so nobody steals it.’ [*lest* linker]

The grammaticalization of the apprehensive from an ablative adposition⁶ rests on a spatial metaphor: the risk that is to be avoided (e.g. a theft) is analogical to a place you move (or keep) away from.⁷

By contrast, some languages encode the apprehensive using a dedicated modality marker directly on the verb of the precautioning clause. Thus in Hiw (Torres Islands), the apprehensive mood (*mik* ~ *mit* ~ *vit*) inserts between the subject and the verb, just like other TAM markers:

- (6) *Hiw* [Hiw.Mrvt-oven.088]
 Noke metegtog noke vit yoqse.
 1sg fear 1sg APPR miss
 ‘I’m afraid I *might* miss [the target]!’

Hiw does not have any apprehensive complementizer akin to Eng. *lest* or Dorig *tekor*.

A handful of languages can combine the two strategies. Thus in Mwotlap, an apprehensive clause features an obligatory marker of modality *tiple* [see §1.1]; but in addition, that clause can be optionally introduced by a subordinator *den* (< ablative):

- (7) *Mwotlap*
 Nēk so vēlēgē hiy, den ige tiple bel.
 2sg PROSP hurry towards lest HUM:PL APPR steal
 ‘You should hurry, (*lest*) people *might* steal them.’

While the optional ‘lest’ linker is clause-initial, the apprehensive mood proper inserts between the subject and the verb, in the TAM slot.

⁶ All Torres–Banks languages have an ablative preposition whose etymon reconstructs to **ndani* (François 2005b:494). The morpheme has grammaticalized as an apprehensive subordinator (“lest”) in eight northern Banks languages: Lehali *dān*; Löyöp *nin*; Mwotlap *den*; Lemerig ‘*en*; Vera’a *den*; Vurēs *den* (Malau 2016:677–680); Mwesen *nen*; Mota *nan*.

⁷ The connection ablative–apprehensive is attested in other languages. Thus in Upper Tanana Dene (Athabaskan, Alaska), the suffix *-ch’a* is both a postposition ‘away from’ and an apprehensive subordinator ‘lest’ (Lovick, this volume).

In a couple of close languages with such a dual strategy, the ‘lest’ linker and the apprehensive TAM marker are in fact the same form (*Table 1*). Thus Lemerig ‘*en* – already illustrated in (5) above – can appear twice in (8), with different functions:

- (8) *Lemerig* [d04.Kava:25]
 Gätru ge wān? – Óòó, ‘**en** ga ‘**en** rañ nāk!
 1inc:du FUT chew.kava EXCL:no lest kava APPR intoxicate 2sg
 ‘Shall we do some kava-chewing?
 – No way! You might get dizzy.’ [*lit.* lest kava might intoxicate you]

Several languages of north Vanuatu colexify the apprehensive with the prohibitive; that morpheme may warrant a neutral gloss ‘Negative optative’ (OPT.NEG). Thus, Lo-Toga *mit* is ambiguous between an apprehensional reading (9) and a prohibitive (10):

- (9) *Lo-Toga* [Ltj.Monster.027]
 Nike *tat ho vēn* o! Ne n̄wiē **mit** kur n̄ke.
 2sg NEG.IRR NEG.POT go out ART monster OPT.NEG eat 2sg
 ‘You can’t possibly go out! The monster *might* eat you!’
- (10) *Lo-Toga* [Ltj.Mrwh-canoe.016]
 Nike **mit** not noke!
 2sg OPT.NEG kill 1sg
 ‘Don’t kill me!’

In a different context, a clause like (10) could be used as an apprehensive ‘[don’t do X] *lest you kill me*’; but in the particular story where it was used, the morpheme clearly takes up its prohibitive meaning. Similarly, the morpheme ‘*en* of Lemerig, whose multi-functionality was already illustrated in (4)-(5)-(8), will code for prohibitive when combined with reduplication:

- (11) *Lemerig* [Lmg.Rock.24]
 Nāk ‘**en** ‘eñ’eñ !
 2sg PROH RED~weep
 ‘Don’t you cry!’

These different morphological configurations were summarized in *Table 1* above.

For the present study, I will focus on the language Mwotlap. I won’t discuss much its *lest* linker (*den*), which is optional and rare anyway, and will concentrate instead on its Apprehensive modal marker *tiple*. Compared to neighbouring languages, this morpheme is indeed the clearest example of a proper apprehensive modality – as it is unambiguously distinct from other morphemes in the language, whether the ablative, the *lest* subordinator, or the prohibitive.

3 The Apprehensive mood of Mwotlap

3.1 Morphology of the Mwotlap Apprehensive

The Apprehensive mood of Mwotlap is attested with a number of formal variants. Table 2 lists them, together with the number of tokens of each allomorph in my text corpus of 99,800 words (which does not include my field notes). The total number of tokens for the Apprehensive mood, regardless of allomorphy, is 49.⁸

Table 2 – Free variants of the Apprehensive mood marker in Mwotlap

Allomorph	<i>tale</i>	<i>tile</i>	<i>tele</i>	<i>taple</i>	<i>tiple</i>	<i>tevele</i>	<i>tepele</i>	<i>vele</i>	TOTAL
# tokens	7	4	4	8	18	2	1	5	49

These forms are used interchangeably, even by the same speaker, without any semantic or pragmatic difference. Because *tiple* is the most common variant, I will use it as the citation form for that morpheme, referring to the whole set of allomorphs.

The etymology of *tiple* is unclear. Reconstruction is made difficult by the absence of any cognate form in any other language of the area (cf. Table 1 p.5) – except for Volow, a now extinct dialect of Mwotlap, which had *tavele* ~ *tivele*. A potential etymon would be the root **tavala* ‘on the opposite side, beyond’ (cf. Clark 2009:194): this would suggest a pattern “P, on-the-opposite-side Q” reminiscent of Eng. “(you should do) P, *otherwise* Q (might happen)”. If this etymology is correct, then we would have here another spatial metaphor, in addition to the one we saw earlier with the ablative **ndani* (‘away from → *lest*’).

3.2 The Apprehensive in the TAM system

The Mwotlap Apprehensive belongs to a rich paradigm of 26 morphemes encoding Tense-Aspect-Mood and Polarity (François 2003, 2005a:133). The following sentences show a sample of these TAM markers, all from the Irrealis domain. Taking a Saussurean view, the contrasts they define help circumscribe the semantic space of the Apprehensive in (12i).

- (12a) Nĕk **so** yoñteg?
 2sg PROSP hear
 ‘Do you want to listen?’ [Volitive prospective]
- (12b) Nĕk **so** yoñteg!
 2sg PROSP hear
 ‘You should listen!’ [Deontic prospective]

⁸ Out of the 49 tokens of the Apprehensive mood, 6 feature the clause-initial *den* “lest” – see (7).

- (12c) Nēk **to-yoñteg** **qiyig**.
 2sg FUT₁-hear FUT.HOD
 ‘You will hear it (I predict/promise it).’ [Hodiernal future]
- (12d) Nēk **qoyo** yoñteg atgiy.
 2sg DILAT.FUT hear later
 ‘You’ll hear it later.’ [Dilatory future]
- (12e) Nēk **to-yoñteg** **vēh**.
 2sg POT₁-hear POT₂
 ‘You can/may hear it (you are able/allowed...).’ [(positive) Potential]
- (12f) Nēk **tit-yoñteg** **vēste**.
 2sg NEG.POT₁-hear NEG.POT₂
 ‘You can’t hear it. (unable/not allowed...).’ [Negative potential]
- (12g) Kē ne-myōs so nēk **Ø** yoñteg.
 3sg STAT-want COMP 2sg (AO) hear
 ‘He wants you to hear it.’ [Aorist–Subjunctive]
- (12h) Nēk **tog** yoñyoñteg!
 2sg PROH RED~hear
 ‘Don’t listen!’ ~ ‘Stop listening!’ [Prohibitive]
- (12i) Nok so hohole yoyoñ, nēk **tiple** yoñteg.
 1sg PROSP talk quiet 2sg APPR hear
 ‘I’ll speak in a low voice, so you don’t hear it.’ [Apprehensive]

The various TAM markers listed in (12a–i) belong to the irrealis domain, i.e. they present an event as a virtual state-of-affairs [S_v =‘X hears s.th.’] that has not become reality at the moment of utterance S_0 . Each modal marker then assigns a different perspective upon that irrealis situation S_v :

- The Prospective represents S_v as the object of s.o.’s desire (12a) or duty (12b).⁹
- The Hodiernal future¹⁰ (12c) predicts S_v with certainty, whether as a prediction or a promise performed by the speaker.
- The Dilatory future (12d) also predicts S_v in the future, yet with an explicit focus on ‘later’ rather than ‘earlier’.
- The Potential (12e) presents S_v as an event that can possibly happen – whether this reflects the inherent properties of the participants (S_v is possible), or it is licensed by an authority (S_v is allowed).
- The Aorist (12g) presents S_v as a virtual event, the target of a matrix predicate.¹¹

⁹ The Prospective has various meanings (François 2003:218–257), including deontic (*I should X*) and desiderative (*I want to X*).

¹⁰ The “hodiernal” future (< Lat. *hodiernus* ‘of today’) is required when referring to an event that is to take place the same day as the moment of speech (François 2003:258–269).

¹¹ The Mwothlap Aorist is also highly polysemous (François 2003:165–199; 2009).

The nuance between Prohibitive and Apprehensive is subtle, and we saw in §2 that some nearby languages (e.g. Lo-Toga) don't even distinguish between the two; yet Mwotlap does contrast them. Both categories share the same core meaning, namely the need to avoid an undesirable event, yet they function differently.

The Prohibitive *tog* (12h) represents S_v as an undesirable event over which the addressee has direct control (hence the translation 'listen' instead of 'hear'). The situation to be avoided (S_v) is pragmatically foregrounded, as the utterance specifically forbids the addressee from carrying out that action.

By contrast, the Apprehensive mood *tiple* (12i) does not directly request the addressee to take any action, nor does it require them to have control over the virtual event S_v . This mood marker presents the undesirability of S_v as a reason motivating another action by some participant:

- (12i') <I'll speak in a low voice>**Foreground**
 <because otherwise, you may hear me – and I don't want that>**Explanation**

The undesirability of the event S_v is here pragmatically backgrounded: it is only mentioned here as an argument for supporting another clause.

3.3 Direct and indirect undesirability

The Mwotlap Apprehensive can be used in the two configurations identified by Lichtenberk (1995:299) in his pioneer study – respectively, the *avertive* use and the *in-case* construction.

All the examples we've seen so far are of the *avertive* type. That is, the apprehensive clause Q describes a negative scenario S_v , which another action P is meant to deter altogether. In principle, the success of P normally implies that the event S_v does not materialize at all: *if I speak in a low voice, then you won't hear me*.

A rarer pattern – known as "in-case" configuration – is when S_v describes an event that in itself cannot be avoided, e.g. a weather situation. The apprehensive here is not about avoiding S_v altogether, but avoiding its undesirable consequences:

- (13) Lep no-sot gōh, mahē **tiple** momyiy!
 take ART-shirt this place APPR cold
 'Take this sweater, *in case* the weather gets cold.' [Telefon.095]
 * 'Take this sweater, *so the weather doesn't get cold.*'
- (14) Nēk vēlvēlēgē, ne-met **vele** mah!
 2sg RED~hurry ART-tide APPR dry
 'Hurry up (fishing), [?]*in case* ~ *before* it gets to low tide.' [Mtp.Wotwé.093]

Obviously, the actions described in the first clause P cannot, by themselves, avoid the change of ambient temperatures, or prevent the tide from going low. Rather, they are indications of the behaviour that would help prevent the negative consequences of those weather events: (13) that you may catch a cold; and (14) that you may fail to catch any fish while you still could.

In both these examples, the apprehensive clause keeps its argumentative function: it exposes an undesirable situation as an argument for justifying a particular action.

4 The pragmatic dependency of the Apprehensive

Oftentimes, an apprehensive predicate shows a form of dependency with respect to another clause. This section will discuss whether this dependency is syntactic, or rather has its roots in the semantic and pragmatic features of this particular modality.

4.1 The Apprehensive in subordinate clauses

One first observation is that the Apprehensive is sometimes found in clauses that are clearly subordinate. Thus, it is the normal mood taken by the complement clause after predicates meaning ‘fear’ (see also (6) in Hiw):

- (15) Nok mētēgteg ⟨na-mtewot **tele** qal nēk⟩.
 1sg fear ART-injury APPR hit 2sg
 ‘I’m afraid you might get injured.’ [Emails.2014-04-22]

It is also common after matrix verbs meaning ‘beware’,¹² ‘prevent’, ‘forbid’:

- (16) Nēk etgoy ⟨kēy **tiple** ekas nēk⟩.
 2sg watch.out 3pl APPR find 2sg
 ‘Make sure they don’t find you.’ [Mtp.Coconut-Han.102]
- (17) Nok higoy kōmyō ⟨so kōmyō **tele** vanvan hep na-nye mey gēn⟩.
 1sg forbid 2du COMP 2du APPR HAB~GO beyond ART-cape REL there
 ‘I forbid you to ever walk beyond that headland over there.’ [Mtp.Roua.076]

In these cases, the verb in the Apprehensive is clearly dependent of the matrix verb for syntactic reasons: it belongs to an object clause, sometimes with formal markers of deranking (complementizer *so*). This is also true on semantic grounds: the meaning of undesirability is embedded in the matrix predicate itself (‘fear’, ‘forbid’...), and the Apprehensive could be said to simply concord with it semantically.

Another clear case of formal dependency occurs when the Apprehensive combines with a clause linker, such as the optional *den* ‘lest’ (see also (7) above):

- (18) Dō sēkan nowmat, **den** nēk **tiple** higap den nē-plēn.
 1in:du shake.hands right.now ABL/lest 2sg APPR miss ABL ART-plane
 ‘Let’s say goodbye right away, so you don’t miss your flight.’

This utterance consists of two clauses. The first one, a hortative, requests a particular action (*saying goodbye right away, without further ado*). The second clause is then given

¹² The verb in (16) *etgoy* ‘beware, watch out’ (< *et* ‘look’ + *goy* ≈ ‘over...’) is parallel to the verb found in Gaua languages further south [fn.5 p.5], except it has not grammaticalized into an apprehensive complementizer.

as a justification for that request. The semantic link between the two clauses is marked formally by the linker *den* ‘lest’.

4.2 Juxtaposed clauses

In order to examine the interclausal dependency possibly triggered by the apprehensive mood, it is methodologically wise to eliminate those cases where *tiple* occurs in a clause that is already tagged as subordinate anyway, and focus instead on more ambiguous examples.

And in fact, the construction in which the Mwotlap Apprehensive occurs most frequently involves no explicit clause linker. It takes the form of a diptych of two juxtaposed clauses ⟨P, Q⟩, in which the second one inflects in the Apprehensive mood. Consider sentence (1), copied here:

- (1) ⟨Tēy van na-gayga en,⟩_P ⟨nēk **tiple** qēsdi⟩_Q!
 hold DIREC ART-rope DEF 2sg APPR fall
 ‘Hold on to the rope, (otherwise) you *might* fall! / *lest* you fall!’

Many examples cited in this study conform to this dual-clause pattern – (1), (3), (7), (9), (12i), (13), (14), (18). In each case, the pre-emptive clause P generally refers to an action that the speaker requests, suggests, promises, or forbids; as for the precautionary clause Q, it provides a justification for P, by exposing the situation it is meant to prevent. Mwotlap is here consistent with what has been observed for apprehensional markers across languages (Lichtenberk 1995, Vuillermet 2018, Schultze-Berndt & Vuillermet, this volume).

The pattern is so pervasive, that it would be tempting to analyze Mwotlap *tiple* as a mood marker with a subordinating function – in a way reminiscent of subjunctives in the languages that have them. Under that analysis, *tiple* would form clauses equivalent to a “negative purposive”: e.g. “Hold on to the rope, *so you don’t* fall.” (cf. the Latin negative subordinator *nē*). This hypothesis would be compatible with the general ancillary function we have defined for the Apprehensive: the clause marked with that modality operates as an argument towards an action that is expressed in a different clause.

4.3 When the pre-emptive clause is minimal

Language immersion in the Mwotlap community gave me the opportunity to hear the language used spontaneously in various contexts. While the dual pattern ⟨P, Q⟩ is indeed prevalent in conversation, I often noticed that the initial clause P was sometimes reduced to the bare minimum.

For example, the content of P (the pre-emptive clause) is sometimes encapsulated in a mere interjection, such as the vocal gesture for negation Óòó [ʔɔ.ʔɔ.ʔɔ] ‘no!, no way!’, that encodes disapproval or protest.¹³

¹³ See also the Lemerig example (8) in Section 2.

- (19) Damdam egal tog van! – ⟨**Óòó!**⟩_P ⟨kē **tile** mēt!⟩_Q.
 RED~hang try POLIT to.it EXCL:NO 3sg APPR break
 ‘Go on, slide down the rope! – ⟨No way!⟩_P ⟨it might break!⟩_Q.’

[Mtp.Iqet.Qasvay-TL.072]

The context makes it easy to reconstruct the action hidden behind that interjection: *A wants B to slide down the rope, but B protests → B refuses to slide down, and justifies that decision with an apprehensive clause.*

A similar mechanism can take place with the adversative linker *ba* ‘but’:

- (20) Vasem me hiy no! – ⟨**Ba**⟩_P ⟨nēk **tele** yēheg no!⟩_Q.
 tell hither DAT 1sg but 2sg APPR mock 1sg
 ‘Tell me! – ⟨But⟩_P ⟨you might laugh at me!⟩_Q.’

The pragmatic function of *ba* ‘but’ is indeed to reverse the argumentative polarity of the previous sentence: *A wants B to tell a secret; B starts her sentence with ‘But...’, by way of refusal.*

An even more subtle example is provided by (21). In this folktale, a father intends to sacrifice himself for his children, by stepping inside a large oven, in order to turn magically into food. His son, fearing the fatal consequences, protests:

- (21) Nok hayveg lelo qēyēñi. – ⟨**Imam!**⟩_P ⟨nēk **tale** mat!⟩_Q.
 1sg enter inside oven father 2sg APPR die
 ‘Let me get inside the oven.
 – Father!⟩_P, ⟨you might die!⟩_Q.’

[Mtp.Metesayig.132]

The apprehensive clause *you might die* is provided as an argument towards the instruction “*Don’t do it!*”. Yet that instruction is not made explicit by the speaker: the only hint that helps retrieve it comes through the prosodic contour of protest that comes with the vocative *imam!* ‘(but) father!!’.

5 Absolute uses of the Apprehensive mood

In the three examples just discussed, the apprehensive clause came in response to a previous formulation, by the addressee, of an intended action (*Slide down the rope; Tell me your secret; Let me get inside the oven*): this made it actually easy to reconstruct the implicit instruction, by simply reversing that scenario. In fact, the pre-emptive clause P is sometimes even more drastically reduced, down to purely contextual clues.

5.1 An indirect speech act

One day, a toddler was awkwardly handling a large knife around the house, and someone warned me:¹⁴

¹⁴ Austin (1981:229) discusses a similar example in Diyari (Australia), in his section ‘*Lest’ as main clauses.*

- (22) Kē **tiple** tig nēk aē!
 3sg APPR injure 2sg with.it
 'He might injure you with that knife!' [AF-AP3-72]

This was the first utterance after a long silence, so there was no way to simply retrieve an instruction from the discourse context. Analysing this sentence as a subordinate clause would be far-fetched; the only way to do so would be to describe (22) as a case of *insubordination* (Evans 2007), i.e. the independent use of a formally subordinate clause.¹⁵ While this interpretation cannot be dismissed, it would rest on the hypothesis that apprehensive clauses are inherently subordinate – yet this is precisely what I am questioning here.

Alternatively, I propose that (22) is actually a well-formed sentence from the syntactic point of view, but that it is pragmatically incomplete. As we saw earlier, the semantic work of the Apprehensive modality is to present an unrealis situation as a risk to be avoided; the very act of formulating that risk instructs the hearer to identify a pre-emptive action (P) that would prevent that scenario – or its consequences – from happening. Most often, the speaker spells out that action P explicitly as in (1) or (13), or at least hints at it as in (19)–(21). Yet in some occasions, the pre-emptive scenario P cannot be extracted from the discourse context, and the hearer is left to infer it from situational clues, combined with their practical knowledge about the world.

In the case of the knife-wielding toddler in (22), the addressee was instructed to reconstruct mentally whatever scenario P could avoid the detrimental event of being injured: e.g. *Stay away from that toddler ~ Be careful ~ Get out of the house for a moment ~ Take away the knife from his hands ~ etc.* The correct interpretation behind the Apprehensive is here left to the addressee to work out.

The crucial point here is that an apprehensive clause in Mwotlap is always understood as an argument for some kind of action. This makes it different from other tenses such as the Hodiernal future, which the speaker could also have used in the same situation:

- (22') Kē **ti-tig** **qiyig** nēk aē!
 3sg FUT₁-injure FUT.HOD 2sg with.it
 'He's going to injure you with that knife!'

A sentence in the future like (22') may be read as a threat, a prediction, or a warning, and of course, may well result in some actual reaction by the hearer. Yet it could as well be uttered "for its own sake" – e.g. as a joke to elicit laughter. In fact, no linguistic element in (22') constitutes any unambiguous appeal to action.

By contrast, the apprehensive modality in (22) serves to expose a particular risk that should be avoided. As per the Gricean maxim of relevance ("*Be relevant*", Grice 1975), such an utterance can only be read as an argument for something else – namely, the

¹⁵ An analysis in terms of insubordination is proposed for similar apprehensive constructions, by Daniel & Dobrushina (this volume) for Archi (Caucasus); or Anderbois & Dabkowski (ibid.) for A'ingae (Colombia).

need to take action. This mechanism constitutes a form of “indirect speech act” (Searle 1975): apprehensive clauses encode an *explicit apprehension*, as a way to perform an *implicit instruction*.

5.2 A politeness strategy

Languages commonly employ indirect speech acts as a politeness strategy (Searle 1975): instead of an imperative *Close the door!*, it is more polite to phrase it as an apparent question *Would you mind closing the door?*, or a statement *It's getting cold in here*. In Brown & Levinson's (1987:70) terms, a direct order would threaten the addressee's “negative face”, and a common politeness strategy consists in softening such a “face-threatening act” using speech acts that are not directly directive.

And indeed, Mwotlap exploits the indirect speech act of main-clause apprehensives for its politeness potential. Thus if my father-in-law wants to enter the room where my child is asleep, I may fear that the noise could wake her up; yet using a simple imperative *Don't come in!* could be taken by my in-law as too blunt and disrespectful. In such situations, a Mwotlap speaker may choose to simply evoke an undesirable situation as a way to hint at a possible instruction:

- (23) Tētē mino **tele** matyak!
 baby my APPR wake.up
 [stopping the father-in-law before he enters the room]
 ‘My baby might wake up!’

While (23) is syntactically well-formed, it is pragmatically incomplete: it instructs the hearer to mentally identify the nature of a pre-emptive action that may help prevent the baby from waking up. This strategy shifts the burden of formulating an imperative, from the speaker to the hearer. In such situations, the apprehensive strategy does an efficient work of getting a message through, while preserving the face of both participants.

5.3 The humorous potential of the apprehensive

Finally, the pragmatic mechanism at play with the Mwotlap Apprehensive is perhaps most conspicuous when it is exploited for its humorous potential.

One of the favourite pastimes of teenagers in the region is to playfully tease each other about their romantic relations, real or imagined. Interestingly, humorous speech appears to be particularly prone to the use of stand-alone apprehensives, perhaps because they play on people's imaginations. I once witnessed a dialogue between two teenage boys, in the cheeky tone that is typical of friendly interactions on the island of Motalava. One boy (let's call him Stan) had just stealthily smiled at a girl who was walking in the distance. Her brother Joe caught sight of this, and said to Stan:

- (24) Êt! Dō **tiple** wulus!
 INTJ 1inc:du APPR brother.in.law
 ‘Hey! Hope we don't become in-laws!’

This witty line made everyone laugh. The logic here rests on the idea that brothers-in-law owe great respect to each other, have to avoid each other or to comply with various taboos, which are central to kinship relations in this society. Joe and Stan were good friends, joking at each other all the time, but the prospect of one day becoming in-laws would mean the end of this casual friendship, and the beginning of a very different sort of respectful relation, filled with rules and pitfalls. Many jokes play on the contrast between casual and formal kinship relations, and a sentence like (24) was no exception: the contrast between those two different social statuses was source for laughter.

But what probably made the joke even wittier was the ellipsis triggered by the stand-alone apprehensive, as it forces the hearer to retrieve a hidden instruction behind it. Hearing (24) drove everyone to wonder what could have suddenly caused the mention of becoming in-laws. One had to rewind Joe's whole reasoning, from a new kinship relation in an imaginary future, back to... the brief smile he had just seen Stan send to his sister. Only this logical path could connect the dots between Q and P – that is, between the “apprehended” situation (Q: *you and I might end up becoming in-laws*) and the implicit instruction (P: *you'd better stop smiling at my sister!*). The sentence was all the more witty that this particular instruction P was left unsaid, and could only be retrieved through some acrobatic mental gymnastics.

What made this utterance fascinating to the linguist observer, was how it exploited the pragmatic mechanism that is precisely central to the apprehensive mood. The marker *tipl* not only exposes a potential “risk”, it also forces the hearer to reconstruct a hidden instruction behind it, anchored in a specific discourse context. The stretched distance between the two ends of the reasoning was key to the success of the joke.

6 Conclusion

Mwotlap belongs to those languages that grammaticalize a specific modal category of “apprehensive”, whose primary role is to flag a virtual situation as undesirable. Yet an apprehensive clause is never uttered for its own sake, as though one simply predicted an inevitable situation with a tone of regret (as in *Alas, we'll soon get soaked in that rain*). Rather than just predicting a problem, this modal marker also flags it as an argument towards a conclusion, and typically implies a call for action.

Quite often, the intended instruction takes the form of a separate clause P, while the apprehensive Q serves as a background justification for it: $\langle \text{Let's go back inside} \rangle_P \langle [\text{because otherwise}] \text{we'll get soaked in the rain} \rangle_Q$. But our study of the Mwotlap apprehensive has shown that the foreground clause P is not always present, and may need to be reconstructed by the hearer based on contextual clues. An utterance consisting solely of an apprehensive clause (\approx Eng. *We might get soaked in the rain!*) may be syntactically complete, yet it remains backgrounded pragmatically, as it presents itself as a justification towards an implicit instruction. In some contexts, this indirect speech act may be exploited for its potential as a politeness strategy – a subtle way to trigger the addressee's action without threatening their face with a direct order – or for its humorous potential.

As more studies are published about the apprehensional domain, it should become easier to situate each language within a typology of apprehensive categories. Many languages, like English, do not seem to associate this domain with any systematic strategy, and uses instead semantically vague mood markers like *might*, whose meaning can't be reduced to just apprehension. By contrast, several languages endow that domain with dedicated grammatical constructions. Their apprehensive devices encapsulate one precise type of "speech motif" (cf. François 2019:173), namely: *flag a virtual situation as undesirable, as an argument towards the instruction (whether explicit or implicit) to take action and avoid it.*

Such is the function of the mood marker *tiple* of Mwotlap – but also, I believe, of similar apprehensive strategies in the languages that have come to grammaticalize that particular pragmatic mechanism.

Abbreviations

Glosses follow the *Leipzig glossing rules*. Additional glosses include the following.

ABL	ablative	IRR	irrealis
AO	aorist aspect	OPT.NEG	optative negative
APPR	apprehensive modality	PERS	personal article
COMP	complementiser	PFT	perfect
DEF	definite	POLIT	polite imperative
DEM	demonstrative	POT	potential
DILAT.FUT	dilatory future	PROSP	prospective
DIREC	directional	RED	reduplication
EXCL	exclamative	REL	relativiser
FUT.HOD	hodiernal future	STAT	stative aspect
HUM	gender classifier for humans	TOP	topicalizer
IPFV	imperfective		

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