Coding evidence time in the Ticuna noun phrase

Demonstratives and other determiners often encode information about the mode of the speaker’s perception of a referent: for example, whether it is visible (Matthewson 1998; Hanks 2011). Based on recent semantic fieldwork, I argue that Ticuna (isolate; Brazil, Colombia, Peru) has determiners which express information about the time of perception of the referent.

Data. Ticuna has two definite determiners for familiar referents, ye₃ma² and ye₄ma⁴ (numbers indicate tone). In declaratives with no intensional operators, ye₃ma² and related forms can appear in clauses with any temporal reference (1), while ye₄ma⁴ and related forms are permitted only in clauses with remote past temporal reference (2). Note that there is no evidence for tense in the verbal system of Ticuna.

Context (same for all of 1-4): I ask if I can borrow your cat to control some mice. You say,

(1) na₄= mu²t̃u⁴ =ta₁ma³ ni¹t̃i⁴ i⁴ ye₃ma² mi³t̃i¹
Neg 2SG.DAT 1SG.SBJ= give(AnimO) NCL DET cat
3SBJ= here =SCALAR.FOC FOC NCL DET cat
(Yes), that cat is/was will be right here.’

(2) na₄= mu²t̃u⁴ =ta₁ma³ ni¹t̃i⁴ ga⁴ ye₄ma⁴ mi³t̃i¹
Neg 2SG.DAT 1SG.SBJ= give(AnimO) NCL+DET² DET² cat
3SBJ= here =SCALAR.FOC FOC NCL DET cat
Acceptable as: ‘That cat was right here (before yesterday).’
Not acceptable as: ‘(Yes,) that cat is/will be/was (yesterday or today) right here.’

Under negation and in other non-factual contexts – under modals and attitude predicates; as the object of communication verbs like ‘discuss’; and in adjuncts – ye₄ma⁴ loses the clausal tense implication of (2). It conveys only that at utterance time, a long time has elapsed since the speaker last perceived the referent (3, 4). With the context established by the continuation in (3), where the speaker last perceived the referent in the remote past, either ye₃ma² or ye₄ma⁴ is felicitous. With the context in (4), where the speaker perceived the referent on the day of utterance time, only ye₃ma² is felicitous.

(3) ta₄ma³ ku³t̃na¹ tfa₃ma³?= mi²  ✓ i⁴ ye₃ma² / ✓ ga⁴ ye₄ma⁴ mi³t̃i¹
Neg 2SG.DAT 1SG.SBJ= give(AnimO) NCL DET NCL+DET² DET² cat
‘I'm not lending you that cat (because I gave it away 8 months ago).’

(4) ta₄ma³ ku³t̃na¹ tfa₃ma³?= mi²  ✓ i⁴ ye₃ma² / ≠ ga⁴ ye₄ma⁴ mi³t̃i¹
Neg 2SG.DAT 1SG.SBJ= give(AnimO) NCL DET NCL+DET² DET² cat
‘I'm not lending you that cat (because I gave it away this morning).’

Analysis. I provide a neo-Reichenbachian analysis of ye₃ma² and ye₄ma⁴, with the addition of a new time variable, evidence time (tₑv). ye₃ma² has no temporal or evidential meaning. ye₄ma⁴ encodes, as not-at-issue content, the following propositions: Where tₑ is utterance time and tₑv is the time closest to tₑ that the speaker directly senses the referent of the noun phrase, tₑv < tₑ; and D(tₑv, tₑ) (distance from evidence time to utterance time) is large by contextual standards. The implications of ye₄ma⁴ in non-factual contexts are due solely to this meaning. Its clausal tense implications in factual contexts are implicatures arising from the Maxim of Quality. If the speaker last perceived a referent in the remote past, she has first-hand information about events involving that referent up to her evidence time, but not about events involving the referent at subsequent times. Therefore, the highest-Quality interpretation of a factual clause with ye₃ma² is that the clause has remote past temporal reference. This analysis makes two correct predictions: (a) ye₄ma⁴ cannot be used in presentatives (‘Look at the cat’) or ostensives (‘That is/isn’t a cat’) and (b) the clausal tense implications of ye₄ma⁴ in factual contexts can be canceled.

Implications. ye₄ma⁴ represents a new kind of nominal temporal marker. The nominal temporal markers of Tupi-Guaraní languages affect only the temporal interpretation of nominal predicates and possession relations (Tonhauser 2007, 2008). Ticuna determiners, on the other hand, affect the temporal interpretation of clauses (1, 2) and encode temporal information about the speaker’s perception of a referent (3, 4). This is consistent with a view of determiners as potentially encoding temporal, modal, and evidential information about the referent (Matthewson 1998) as well as familiarity and uniqueness. 498 words