Kwak’wala (Wakashan) has a set of suffixes which have been described variously as ‘passives’ (Boas 1947; Rosenblum 2013), ‘focus’ suffixes (Levine 1980a, 1980b) and ‘voice’ suffixes (Sherer 2014) that promote arguments to subject position which otherwise appear case-marked in unmarked clauses. Voice suffixes in Kwak’wala are traditionally differentiated in terms of the thematic role of the arguments they promote: however, in certain cases more than one voice suffix is capable of promoting the same argument, as shown in (1) and (2) with –(ɔ)t and –suʔ, respectively.

(1)   duqʷ-ʔt=i=da   gənanəm=a   (=sa bəgʷanəm)
      see-NOM=3LOC=O   child=VIS   (=O.POSS man)
   ‘The child was seen (by the man).’  (Levine 1980: 4)

(2)   duqʷaɬ-əl-a-suʔ=i   Katie   (=s Pat)
      see-CONT-FV-NOM=3LOC   Katie   (=O.POSS Pat)
   ‘Katie was seen (by Pat).’  (Sherer 2014: 28)

Finding a precise characterization of the semantic differences between -t and -suʔ has proven somewhat of a puzzle. Boas (1947) presented -t as a passive of verbs of ‘sensation or mental action’ in contrast with -suʔ which promotes accusative-marked arguments more generally. However, Levine (1980) revealed an analysis of -t as a ‘stimulus’ promoting passive to be too narrow by showing that this suffix can also appear on agent transitives such as gəals- ‘to paint’, as well as on some unaccusatives such as mənək- ‘to be rusty’, in the latter case forming ‘passives’ with no active counterparts. He also observed that in some cases, -t clearly generates out-of-control readings. This led Levine to propose that the meaning of -t is always associated with out-of-control semantics.

Two findings from recent fieldwork suggest there is more to the meaning of -t than out-of-control. To begin with, -t does not always have out-of-control semantics – in fact, such readings appear to only arise when -t attaches to lexically agentive verbs. Secondly, -t has an even wider distribution than previously thought: it is able to promote the direct argument of many propositional attitude verbs. This deepens the puzzle about how to account for its distribution.

In this talk, I will attempt to answer two questions: 1) why -t is constrained to occur with the particular verbs that it does; and 2) how -t gives rise to out-of-control readings with a subset of these verbs. My proposal will build on Sherer’s (2014) analysis of voice morphemes as nominalizers, and will take into account the observation that -t attaches directly to the root while –suʔ attaches outside of aspectual suffixes. In essence, I propose to account for differences in interpretation between -t and –suʔ not in terms of thematic roles, but in terms of the position in the event structure at which nominalization occurs. In particular, I will investigate the hypothesis that differences between -t and –suʔ can be explained with reference to whether an agent is present in the structure or not.

References (abbreviated)
Spence, J. Sylak-Glassman (eds.). Berkelely, CA: SCOIL.