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Time without tense?

Typology and parametric variation in
temporal systems

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Every language must have tense, yeah? It seems obvious that humans everywhere need a way to talk about past, present, and future. But then you encounter languages that simply... don't. No past, no future, at least not grammatically. Yet their speakers navigate time just as fluently as anyone else.

My research examines what these systems reveal about cross-linguistic variation in tense and how they are represented syntactically.

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Central question: Can time be encoded without tense?

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2. What mechanisms do they use for temporal reference?
3. How could a parameter hierarchy better capture temporal encoding?

What is “tenselessness”?

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Debate: true absence of TENSE vs. covert realisation

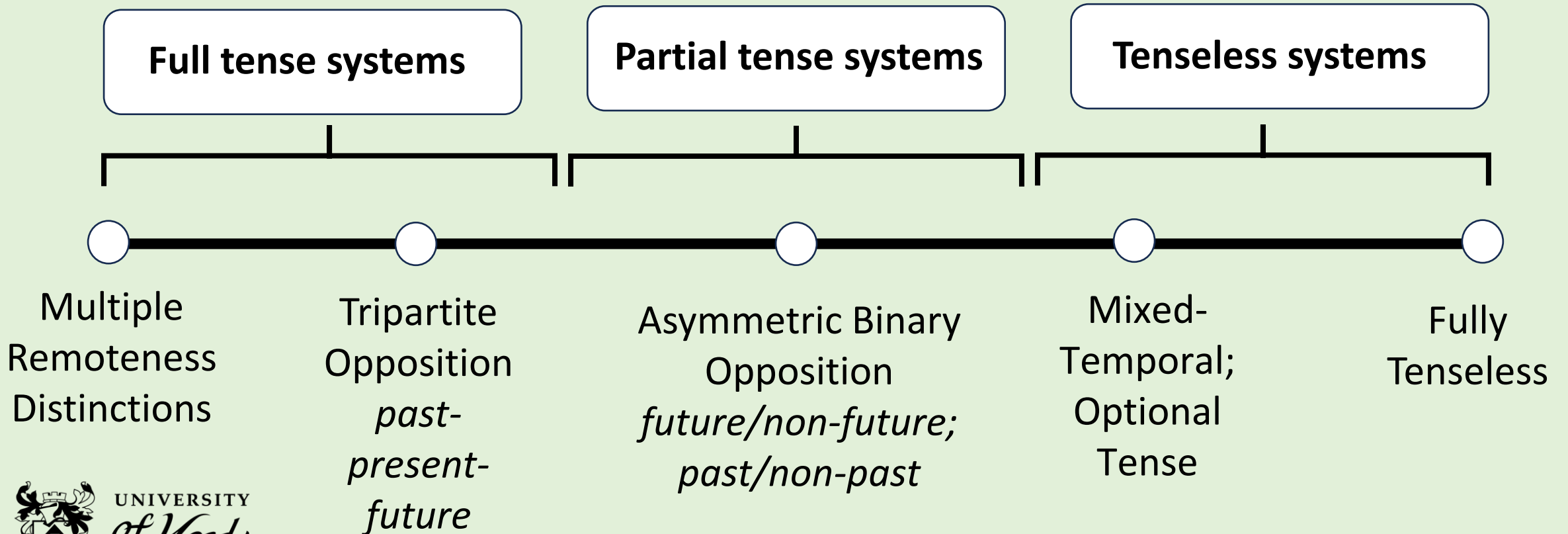
Typologies of tense systems

Tripartite system (Smith, 2008)

fully tensed → mixed → tenseless

Typologies of tense systems

Building on this, I provisionally propose a slightly more elaborate continuum of TENSE:



Temporal Mechanisms I: Aspect- / mood-driven systems

Mandarin, Standard Thai, Vietnamese, Yúcatec Maya, Hausa, West Greenlandic

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(1) Mandarin

Tā mǎi le dōngxi

3SG buy PERF things

'S/he bought things.'

Temporal Mechanisms I: Aspect- / mood-driven systems

Mandarin, Standard Thai, Vietnamese, Yúcatec Maya, Hausa, West Greenlandic

(2) West Greenlandic

Amia avatassatut suliarissavat.

ami-	a	avata-	ssa-	tut	suliori-	ssa-	va-	t
skin	3SG	hunting.bladder	PROSP-	EQU	process	PROSP-	IND.TV-	2SG>3SG

'You will process the skin for a hunting bladder.'



PROSP = prospective aspect

IND.TV = indicative mood, transitive verb 2SG>3SG = agreement: 2nd person singular

EQU = EQUATIVE (\approx 'as / like / in the role of')

acting on 3rd person singular

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'You will process the skin for a hunting bladder.'

{-ssa-} encodes **expectation or desirability** of an event happening.

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Burmese, Dyribal, Lakota, Anii, Ayoreo, Chamacoco

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(3) **Lakota**

REALIS

Uŋ-wašté-pi

1PL-good-PL

'We are good.'

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REALIS

Un-wašté-pi

1PL-good-PL

'We are good.'

IRREALIS

Un-wašté-pi **kte**

1PL-good-PL IRR

'Let's be good.'

Temporal Mechanisms III: Adverbial- / deictic-driven systems

Maybrat, Nivacle

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Maybrat, Nivacle

(4) **Maybrat** (isolate; Bird's Head Peninsula, Indonesia)

iwai y-no honor **fares**

earlier 3M-do honorary.tasks still

'Earlier, he was still doing his honorary tasks.'

Temporal Mechanisms III: Adverbial- / deictic-driven systems

- Maybrat, Nivacle

(5) **Nivacle** (Matacoan; Paraguay, Argentina)

yoy naʔ siwanak
escape DEM.VISIBLE dorado.fish
'the dorado-fish is escaping.'

yoy xaʔ siwanak
escape DEM.NOT.VISIBLE dorado.fish
'the dorado-fish escaped.'

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NOMINAL TENSE, encoded in the DEMONSTRATIVE system

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St'át'imcets, Washo, Paraguayan Guaraní

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(6) **Paraguayan Guaraní**

Ko'áâga a-purahei

now 1SG-sing

'I'm singing now.'

Temporal Mechanisms IV: Optional tense / mixed systems

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Ko'áâga a-purahei
now 1SG-sing
'I'm singing now.'

Kuehe a-purahei
yesterday 1SG-sing
'I sang yesterday.'

Temporal Mechanisms IV: Optional tense / mixed systems

St'át'imcets, Washo, Paraguayan Guaraní

- (7) **Paraguayan Guaraní**
#Ko'ẽro a-purahei
tomorrow 1SG-sing
Intended: 'I will sing tomorrow.'

Temporal Mechanisms IV: Optional tense / mixed systems

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#Ko'ẽro a-purahei

tomorrow 1SG-sing

Intended: 'I will sing tomorrow.'

Ko'ẽro a-purahei-**ta**

tomorrow 1SG-sing-FUT

'I will sing tomorrow.'

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*Tonhauser's (2011) analysis, but Pancheva & Zubizarreta (2023) reanalyse this as a modal marker (PROSPECTIVE).

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→ e.g. Hausa, Anii
 - III. The Americas, from North to South.
→ e.g. Lakota, Yúcatec Maya, Nivacle

Areal Typology

- Three main areal tendencies for tenseless languages (Dryer, 2013):
 - I. Southeast Asia and the Pacific -- often morphologically isolating
 - II. West and Central Africa
 - III. The Americas, from North to South.
- By contrast, tenseless languages are generally absent from:
 - Europe
 - most of Western and Central Asia
 - Australia
 - northern and southern Africa

Areal Typology



Dryer, 2013

From Typology to Theory

My typology shows:

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Proposal: a parametric hierarchy of temporal systems

The Problem with a Single Parameter

Why [\pm TENSE] is insufficient

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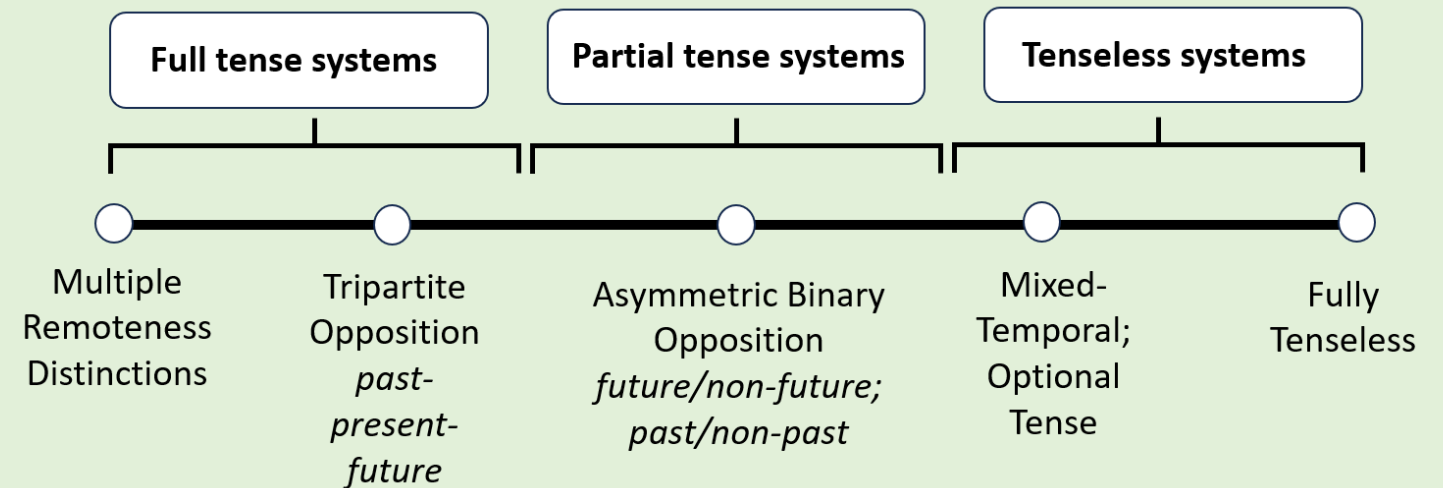
Why [\pm TENSE] is insufficient

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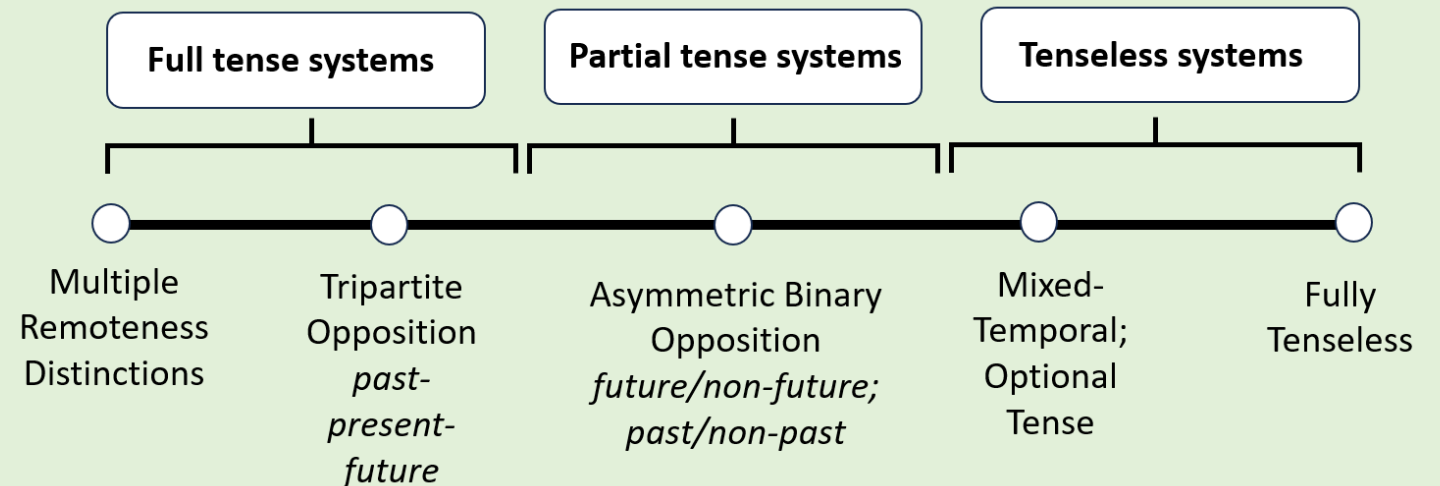


The Problem with a Single Parameter

Why [\pm TENSE] is insufficient

- Mandarin: no tense, rich aspect
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Variation is gradient and multidimensional

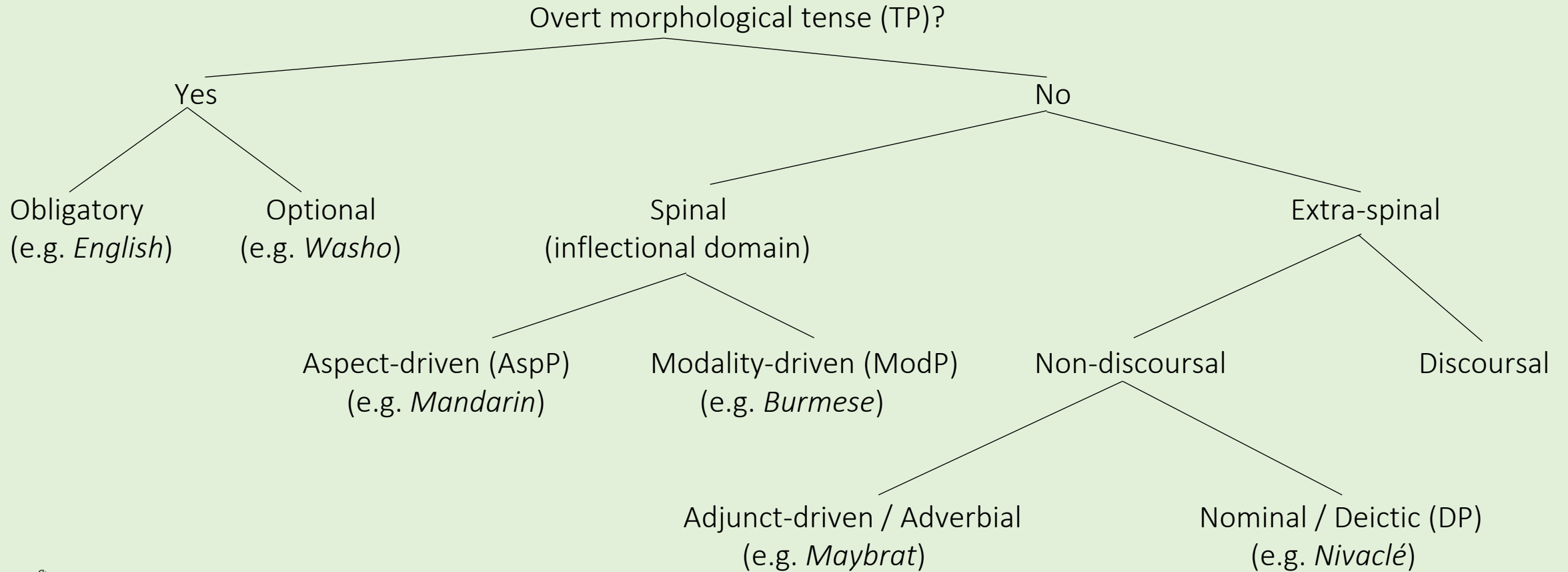


Proposed Parameter

A good parameter of temporal systems would capture:

- i. TP projection (present / absent)
- ii. Temporal anchoring strategies
- iii. Obligatory vs optional encoding

Proposed Temporal Anchoring Parameter Hierarchy (untested)



Summary

- Languages can encode time through tense, aspect, mood/modality, deictic features, adverbials, and context.
- Tense is more fine-grained than a binary category. It could possibly be a continuum, ranging from fully tensed to tenseless.
- A parameter hierarchy, like the one I propose, better captures the apparent complexity of temporal anchoring.
- However, this hierarchy needs to be refined to account for mixed systems.
- Temporal anchoring is a universal property of human language, realised through different grammatical pathways.

Closing

Even 'tenseless' languages express time:
not through tense forms, but through other mechanisms.

Understanding tenselessness helps us see not what
languages lack, but how they re-imagine time.

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Links and downloads



My personal linguistics website



My dissertation on tenselessness



My linguistics Instagram