

78th StuTS, Stuttgart, Germany

Time without tense?

Towards an updated typology of
tenseless languages
and the syntax of tense

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University of York
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Every language must have tense — right? 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.

My academic journey

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Currently studying a Master's by Research Student at the University of York investigating default object-initial word order languages of the Amazon.

My academic interests in Linguistics

Broad interests

- comparative syntax and morphology
- syntactic and morphological typology
- generative syntactic theory
(minimalist, cartographic)
- language universals and parameters
- description and documentation of
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- tense and aspect typology (especially
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- O-initial word orders (OVS, OSV)
- the typology and syntax of negation
- parameter hierarchies.

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Areal interests

Amerindian, particularly Amazonian; but generally, any opportunity for cross-linguistic study – the rarer the language, the better!

Research motivation

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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. Is there syntactic evidence for a TP across languages?

Theoretical background

What is “tenselessness”?

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Semantic tenselessness: temporal reference via ASPECT,
adverbials, discourse

Debate: true absence of TENSE vs. covert realisation

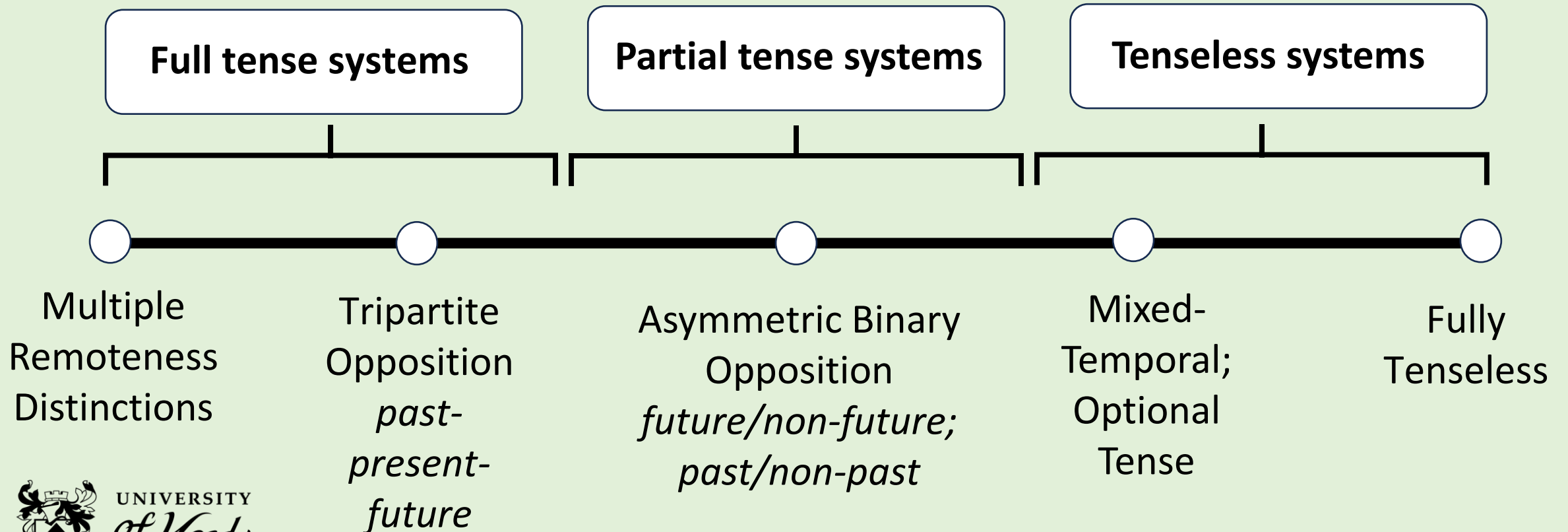
Typologies of tense systems

Tripartite system (Smith, 2008)

fully tensed → mixed → tenseless

Typologies of tense systems

Building on this, I 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 suliar- ssa-va-t

skin-3SG hunting.bladder-EXP-EQU process-EXP-IND.TV-2SG.3SG

‘You will process the skin for a hunting bladder.’

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‘You will process the skin for a hunting bladder.’

- {-ssa-} encodes expectation/desirability

Temporal Mechanisms II: Mood-driven systems

- 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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(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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(6) Paraguayan Guaraní

Ko'áğa a-purahei

now 1SG-sing

'I'm singing now.'

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

Temporal Mechanisms IV: Optional tense / mixed systems

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(7) **Paraguayan Guaraní**

#Ko'ẽro a-purahei

tomorrow 1SG-sing

Intended: 'I will sing tomorrow.'

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Ko'ěro a-purahei-**ta**

tomorrow 1SG-sing-FUT*

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

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

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

How Tenseless Languages Work in Syntax

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- Some languages (e.g., Mandarin, West Greenlandic, Hausa) truly lack a T(ense) node.
- Temporal reference arises from **Aspect, Modality, and context**.



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- Temporal reference arises from **Aspect, Modality, and context**.

Evidence:

- no finiteness distinctions, no case-driven movement, no obligatory tense morphology

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2. Tensed view (Matthewson, 2002, 2006; Bui, 2019; Sybesma, 2007; Abusch, 1985)

Claims:

- Even in “tenseless” languages, clauses still project a covert T head.
- T anchors Reference Time (RT) to Utterance Time (UT) silently.

How Tenseless Languages Work in Syntax

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- 2. Tensed view (Matthewson, 2002, 2006; Bui, 2019; Sybesma, 2007; Abusch, 1985)

Evidence:

- Restrictions on futurate readings (e.g., St'át'imcets, Vietnamese)
- Modals need a temporal anchor
 - In many languages, modals (e.g. will, might) locate the event after or relative to the utterance time. To do this, they must combine with something that provides a reference time

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 - In many languages, modals (e.g. will, might) locate the event after or relative to the utterance time. To do this, they must combine with something that provides a reference time
- **Syntax:** Modals merge in T's domain
 - In generative syntax, modals typically occupy or select T (or appear in its specifier)
 - So, if a language expresses future meaning through modals, this implies a T position exists in the clause structure

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- Some show evidence for a covert T head.
- Others rely solely on Aspect or discourse.
- Evidence supports a universal TP – present in syntax, though sometimes morphologically silent.
- 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 structure.

Understanding tenselessness helps us see not what languages lack, but how they reimagine time.

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