

Tense: representation, realization, and interpretation

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Tense is in many ways the backbone of clause structure. In mainstream generative syntax it is a functional category that drives such core phenomena as agreement, argument licensing, and word order, while in formal semantics it has received much attention on its own terms, as well as in its interaction with categories such as aspect and modality. But despite this prominent role in contemporary theory, comparatively little attention has been paid to how tense systems vary, in the realization and interpretation of specific tense contrasts, or to whether there are principled limits on this variation. This differs, for example, from grammatical contrasts in the nominal domain, where much work has been done to develop representational accounts of attested variation in categories such as person and number—i.e. accounts framed in terms of the organization and location of a small inventory of formal features.

This lecture series takes up the task of developing a similar representational account of contrasts in the clausal domain, specifically of the temporal contrasts encoded in tense systems, with a focus on two main theoretical issues. The first concerns analogies between pronouns and tenses: is there cross-linguistic variation in the pronominal status of tense? Does this correlate with syntactic differences in the representation of tense, and do pronominal tenses have the articulated representations sometimes proposed for pronouns? The second theoretical issue concerns the inventory and organization of tense features, with attention to “markedness” in tense contrasts: are some tenses represented by the absence of tense features? Do languages vary in whether tense can be unspecified in this way?

We address these questions via a focus on two phenomena that have been viewed in terms of tense “stacking”: the perfect, and sequence of tense. The perfect in some languages, and in some contexts, has been viewed as a relative past: a past tense that occurs under a higher present or past tense in the same clause. Sequence of tense, by contrast, involves tense sequences across multiple finite clauses. Both of these provide contexts where the interaction of multiple specifications for tense can be observed, as well as instructive variation across languages with different tense systems.