

**Variation in tense systems: The view from optional and graded tenses**  
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In this talk, I discuss two types of grammatical tense systems that are typologically rather common, but which have not received much attention in formal linguistics, namely optional tense and graded tense. The phenomena are exemplified by two languages that I have conducted extensive fieldwork on: Washo, a language isolate spoken in western USA, and Luganda, a Bantu language of Uganda.

First we consider optional tense, exemplified by Washo. I argue that the past tense in Washo is truly optional, in the sense that tensed clauses contain a semantic tense feature, whereas morphologically tenseless clauses lack such a feature that places a restriction on the identity of a temporal variable. I show that the latter point is in fact quite difficult to argue, even after examining a variety of clause types, including conditionals, complement clauses, and clauses with so-called sequential morphology. A novel argument for semantic tenselessness comes from the lack of Maximize Presupposition effects, which would otherwise be expected if morphologically tenseless clauses in fact contained a phonologically covert semantic tense.

Second we consider graded tense in Luganda, focusing on cases where multiple graded tenses occur within the same clause in order to achieve 'past perfect' interpretations. The proposed analysis places graded tenses in between the past tense and the perfect in English. That is, these morphemes in Luganda can track both event time and reference time variables, unlike English tenses, which only track reference time variables on the standard view.

In sum, the existence of such temporal systems must be countenanced by a cross-linguistically valid theory of the semantics, syntax, and morphology of tense.