

Tell-Time Project: Abstract

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Tell-Time is a multidisciplinary project that reunites linguists, ethno-linguists and mathematicians. The goal of the Tell-Time project is to examine the representations of time, through a linguistic analysis of temporal expressions containing temporal anchoring terms (such as *month, evening, winter*) that refer to conventionalised segmentations of clock-and-calendar systems (CC-systems). We henceforth refer to such expressions as CC-expressions.

All human societies mark, at the very least, the rising and setting of the sun and the segments delineated by them; these serve as the kernel for the establishment of time tracking systems, of varying complexity, that enable temporal representation, minimally in relation to the present. The development of such systems enables the appropriation and, to some extent, the standardisation of the temporal dimension in various spheres of life. Every CC-system is based on an inventory of segmentations, adopted within a specific group in light of its needs, traditions and technical abilities. Multiple CC-systems, which may be competing or complementary to various degrees, are in use simultaneously. Every speaker must manage a complex of CC-systems and a large repertoire of linguistic expressions, with no one-to-one relation between them. Thus, in societies that have developed more abstract and normative CC-systems, CC-segmentations are interpreted on at least two levels: i) the rigid-absolute level, based on a precise and universal perspective; ii) the flexible-relative level, mundane or ritualized, that employs local and cultural re-appropriation and adaptations. The examination of the resultant linguistic complexity lies at the heart of this project.

The study of temporality in linguistics is generally centred on the description of predicates and localising events in time, focusing on phenomena in the verbal domain, such as tense, aspect and modality. Temporal indicators that lie outside this domain, including CC-expressions, have been the subject of only a handful of studies. The study of time in sociology, anthropology and philosophy addresses the relation between culture and language, but linguistic facts tend to be used only to illustrate the arguments advanced. Thus, the description and linguistic analysis of CC-expressions remain largely unaddressed. This is precisely the gap that the present project is intended to bridge.

Tell-Time is designed as a cross-linguistic project. In depth language-specific and cross-linguistic studies will be conducted in languages of diverse families, in order to explicate the underlying temporal systems. In its three year span, the project will focus on the most significant CC-segmentations. The establishment and use of linguistic corpora, both written and oral, will enable the formation of inventories of CC-terms and the linguistic analysis of CC-expressions in the relevant domains (lexical, morpho-syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and diachronic, when possible). In particular, we will examine strategies involved in the expression of several dimensions: deixis/anaphora, past/future, proximity/distance, precision/vagueness. The study of the relation between conventionalisation (grammaticalisation and lexicalisation) and temporal proximity is at the heart of this project, complemented by the interaction of the temporal domain with the concepts of number, series, space and person. We aim to develop a set of tools appropriate for the collection of cultural and linguistic data related to CC-temporality.

Results of the linguistic analysis and the modelling of CC-systems would also enable us i) to elucidate the interactions with diverse cognitive methods of time tracking and ii) to contribute to the study of the temporal representations that underlie the dual continuous/discrete conception of time and their realisations in language.