Temporal interpretation in the narrative mode

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An important insight in the study of temporality is that the speaker's perspective is key to the semantics of tense and aspect, and moreover, the speaker's sentence-internal perspective has consequences for the temporal structure of discourse. This talk addresses this larger question by focusing on the "narrative mode": the use of the present tense for narratives that do not describe events as ongoing at the speech time.

The first part of the talk establishes an empirical generalization about the viewpoint aspect in sentences in the narrative present: there is cross-linguistic variation in what aspects are permitted, correlating with the aspects acceptable in habitual sentences. The suggested analysis for the sentence-internal temporal perspective has consequences for discourses in the narrative mode.

The second part of the talk, which represents joint work with Maria Luisa Zubizarreta, suggests that some of the grammatical mechanisms behind the narrative mode may apply more broadly to languages that do not have overt tense morphemes. An analysis along those lines, allowing for temporal reference to be established without tense, is illustrated for Paraguayan Guarani. Tense is revealed to not be a semantic universal.