

Why Tense?

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Under the received view, tense it is a verbal category which indicates how the situation described by the clause is temporally related to the speech time: it may precede, follow or include it, to mention but the simplest cases. If this is basically correct, then it is perplexing that so many languages have tense, because the same function is served much better by adverbials such as in the past, a few minutes ago, last year, in the future, very soon, next spring, right now, today, at present, etc. Such expressions are found in all languages, they are much more precise and flexible, and they give speakers the freedom to leave the temporal location of the situation open, just as its spatial location. In my talk, I will sketch some ideas about why tense makes sense, anyway.