

Remoteness marking: What is it, and what is it for?

Preliminary workshop proposal and call for papers for
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Time is central to the human experience, to human cognition, and to human languages. Many languages – though few major European ones – grammatically distinguish not only past, present, and future times, but also *degrees* of past or future time, as in Aghem’s hodiernal (today)–based system in (1). Some languages are reported to have many more distinctions.

(1) Aghem (Grassfields Bantu; Anderson 1979: 88–95)

- a. *ghé mō sù fighàm*
3PL P1 wash mat
‘they washed the mat’ [today]
- b. *ghé mò sú [†]fighâm*
3PL P2 wash mat
‘they washed the mat’ [before today]
- c. *ghé sî sùu fighàm*
3PL F1 wash mat
‘they will wash the mat’ [today]
- d. *ghé ló sùu fighàm*
3PL F2 wash mat
‘they will wash the mat’ [after today]

Dahl (2013: 39) estimates at least 15% of the world’s languages grammatically distinguish temporal remoteness; these languages are largely concentrated in Africa, the Americas, and Papua New-Guinea, with more scattered occurrence elsewhere, and are notably absent in most languages spoken in Eurasia. Perhaps partly as a result of this areal distribution, remoteness distinctions are frequently described in grammars, but they have received somewhat less attention in typological and theoretical studies (cf. Nurse 2008; Botne 2012; Dahl 2013), and many open questions remain.

For example, past forms are often used cyclically, with the same morphology used when referring to the current day, year, season, or even era (Nurse 2008, *inter alia*). However, not all grammatical descriptions specify whether this is the case. Furthermore, the boundaries between the time periods to which different remoteness forms can be used are sometimes discrete, and sometimes flexible, but grammars are often silent on this point (Nurse 2008: 90). In other cases, systems described as relating to temporal remoteness may in fact primarily be based on to other features and concepts (see e.g. Savić 2026 on Xhosa). The boundary between the present day and previous (or subsequent) days is important enough that it is the most common distinction marked in multiple-tense systems (Nurse 2008: 90–91; Botne 2012; Dahl 2013). However, even basic questions like *what is the boundary between today and yesterday?* are rarely addressed rigorously, although the answer to this question may have important implications about the relationship between grammatical structures and the encoding of memories (e.g. during sleep, see Crane 2011: 236–237; Dahl 2013: 43).

In addition, although speakers frequently report intuitions about how remoteness markers can be exploited for social functions, positioning a speaker with respect to a reported event (e.g. associating or distancing oneself from it; see, for example, the papers in Botne & Fanego 2023). However, interactional studies of remoteness marking are almost vanishingly rare, so little is known about how they are employed and negotiated in everyday speech.

Because of these lacunae and others, we still lack the necessary data to understand the natures and functions of these systems. Why do speakers innovate them, given their complexities and the potentially higher processing costs (Dahl 2013)? What are their limits, and how do these correspond to the encoding and retrieval of memories, and to social indexical functions?

This workshop aims to bring together researchers working on remoteness distinctions from various perspectives, in order to better understand their typological distribution, their properties, and their uses. An important goal of the workshop is to establish a longer-term research community.

We therefore welcome proposals for papers, from any theoretical perspective, dealing with (but most certainly not limited to) the following topics and themes:

- Typological perspectives on remoteness systems, their distribution, and their conceptual limits
- Detailed descriptions of remoteness systems in particular languages
- “Outlier” systems, with (typologically, areally...) unexpected numbers or types of contrasts
- Interactions between remoteness and other linguistic systems, e.g. aspect, evidentiality, egophoricity, the grammar of space, modality, information structure, and negation
- Conversation-based studies
- Cognitive perspectives (e.g. remoteness and memory)
- Historical perspectives (how systems develop)
- Remoteness marking and cultural concepts of time
- Remoteness marking in multilingual contexts; contact involving languages with different systems, or those lacking remoteness entirely
- Remoteness marking and theoretical models of tense

Interested participants should send us a title and preliminary (100-word) abstract by 5 November 2026, so that we can submit the full proposal by the 20 November deadline. Please send abstracts to Thera Crane (thera.crane@helsinki.fi).

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