

# ISW Colloquium – Spring Semester 2024

22.04.2024 | 16:00-17:00 | UniTobler F -111 (U1)

**Nadine Grimm (U Rochester):**

## **Grammatical tone in the verb phrase of northwestern Bantu languages**

Bantu languages are known for their complex grammatical tone (GT) systems. Although they usually distinguish only two to three tonal levels, they are highly diverse with respect to tonological operations, which play an important role especially in verbal inflection. In this talk, I explore the interaction between tonal and segmental morphology in the verb phrase of northwestern (NW) Bantu languages. It is generally assumed that the tendency in Bantu diachronic change is towards the loss of tonal distinctiveness in favor of pitch-accent systems (Clements & Goldsmith 1984, Ratliff 2015). This change is explained as resulting from an increased morphological complexity of the inflected verb and the widespread phenomenon of tone spreading. I show, however, that the opposite is the case in northwestern (NW) Bantu languages. Based on a sample of twelve NW Bantu languages, I show that these languages have constraints on the number of syllables in the verb, reducing segmental material in the encoding of tense, aspect, mood, and polarity categories. There are three dedicated loci of GT in the verb phrase, but despite these commonalities, language specifics on how GT is realized and under which conditions vary substantially. The data also demonstrate that GT occurs majoritarily as a co-exponent, together with a segmental morpheme, in the encoding of TAMP categories. Given the restrictions on the prosodic size of verb stems and the erosion of segmental grammatical markers, tone takes on a higher functional load in coding distinct grammatical categories and becomes thus, indispensable.