Tone is a salient means in the majority of Bantu languages to express both lexical and grammatical differences. Certain tonal phenomena on a syntactic level, however, are generally understudied in the literature on Bantu. For instance, many languages have a H tone that attaches to the final vowel of non-phrase final verbs. This phenomenon is often referred to as 'metatony' or sometimes the 'conjoint/disjoint' distinction. Yet, the behavior of this H tone attachment to the verb differs widely across languages, with varying restrictions such as TAM category and/or the word class of the element following the verb. Even more mysterious is the purpose of this H tone attachment: accounts have ranged from information structure explanations (Costa & Kula 2008) to phonological processes (Hyman & Lionnet 2011).

In this talk, I examine metatony from the perspective of Gyeli, an endangered Bantu A80 language spoken by about 4000 – 5000 “Pygmy” hunter-gatherers in southern Cameroon. Data used in this talk stem from my own field research conducted within the framework of a DoBeS (Documentation of Endangered Languages) project. I show that Gyeli behaves in yet a different way than has been previously observed in the literature: while H tones appear in Gyeli on the verb in the past and present tenses, they do not appear in the future, subjunctive, and prospective categories. I therefore propose the tonal process of metatony in Gyeli corresponds to the realis/irrealis distinction. These findings on Gyeli contribute to the general understanding of this syntactic H tone in Bantu by demonstrating that the supposedly same tonal process may develop different functions in different languages.