

Mesoamerican tonogenesis

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Although the historical phonology of Mesoamerican languages are among the best documented language families in the Americas, there are conspicuous residual issues that remain elusive. In this talk I consider two puzzles of tonogenesis in Mesoamerica. The first deals with the rise of contrastive tones in Yucatecan. In general, there is agreement among the mayanists in accepting a reconstructed long vowel as the source of contemporary low tones in Yucatec; however, there is no consensus on an explanation for the development of all cases of synchronic high tone: Early proposals hypothesized a postconsonantal glottal fricative as the source of high tone (Kaufman 1969, Campbell 1971). One outstanding problem is that reconstructed syllable nuclei of vowel followed by a glottal stop or glottal fricative have both reflexes of high tone in contemporary Yucatec. In principle, it seems unexplicable how the contradictory gestures entailed by [ʔ] And [h] can both produce high tone reflexes. In addition to these known facts, I show new evidence of an emergent pitch pattern in Yucatec Maya. The second examines the wide variation in the production of laryngealized voice quality in vowels across Mesoamerican languages (Otomanguean, Mixe-Zoquean, Totonacan): I show that this variation ranges from gestures in which the glottal closure is complete, to others in which phonation is creaky and cases in which vowels are produced with modal phonation. The evidence discussed here suggests that the phonetic implementation of laryngealization is undergoing a change in course so that creakiness can be dispensed with and substituted by concurrent sub-phonemic pitch cues. I discuss the evidence in the light of the development of tonogenesis.