

The Oto-Manguean languages of Mexico: A typological treasure of melodic complexities.

Enrique L. Palancar, SeDyL, CNRS

In this course, we will study the Oto-Manguean languages of Mexico from a typological point of view. There are various reasons for this, namely: Oto-Manguean is one of the most diverse linguistic phyla in the Americas; in Oto-Manguean we find some typological traits, rare in the world's languages; and Oto-Manguean has contributed substantially to our understanding of the Amerindian languages of Mexico and Central America as constituting the linguistic area of Mesoamerica. The phylum could be said to be divided into eight branches, some of them with dozens of languages: Oto-Pamean, Popolocan-Mazatecan, Chinantecan, Zapotecan, Mixtecan, Amuzgoan, Tlapanecan and Chiapanecan-Manguean. Except for Oto-Pamean (and the now-extinct Chiapanecan-Manguean), all other branches are spoken in the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, in a territory no bigger than Ireland.

Tone is one of the typological highlights of the Oto-Manguean languages. While all languages in the phylum are tonal, the tonal systems vary enormously from branch to branch, from languages with two tones to languages with ten or more. But tone is the more interesting when viewed in the role it plays in the making of inflection, both verbal and nominal. This is so to the extent that the Oto-Manguean languages can by themselves serve to instantiate most of the cross-linguistic types we can identify for tone and inflection. Oto-Manguean inflection is complex. The complexity is partly due to the existence of multiple systems acting independently of each other, resulting in cross-classification: e.g. a verb may simultaneously belong to various classes: one for its endings, another for its stem changes and a third one for its tonal changes. This situation produces the great deal of irregularity in verbal paradigms that is characteristic of some of the branches, which are counted among the most intricate morphological systems known to us.

In general, due to the internal diversity of Oto-Manguean as a phylum it is difficult to come up with an inventory of features that is shared by all its languages, but we can nonetheless try. There is an overwhelming tendency towards open syllables, especially at root level. Languages often have nasal vowels; complex phonation and voice quality. All languages are head-marking. Nouns do not inflect for case, although they may receive classifiers and their possessive inflection can be challenging. In some branches, the animacy value or the discourse status of a noun is also a relevant feature-value for verbal inflection. Oto-Manguean languages do not have noun incorporation but for the basic type, and most of the times we are dealing with old compounds. In this, as in other senses, word formation rules are largely unproductive and new words are often borrowed and often lie outside the scope of the more tricky aspects of the inflection. Also, Oto-Manguean languages lack non-finite forms such as infinitives, and this has important consequences for the syntax of clause chaining. At the level of word order syntax, all branches can be characterized as verb initial, but recently some have become predominantly SV, mostly under the influence of Spanish.

In the five sessions of the course, we will first locate the languages, make an excursion on to tone and its role in the inflection, continue on to the intricacies of both verbal and nominal inflection in representative branches, and then we will concentrate on a set of relevant aspects of the morphosyntax. We will conclude the course by exploring Oto-Manguean in the larger context of Mesoamerica.