

Mestizoamerican linguistic area:

Spanish as a source of convergence in Mesoamerica

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This study revisits the Mesoamerican linguistic area and shows how contact with Spanish has reshaped the traits of this linguistic area, including nominal possession of the type ‘his-dog the man’, vigesimal counting, relational nouns, absence of a verb ‘to have’, and the preference for the verb-initial basic word order (Campbell et al. 1986). Comparing the traditional and modern varieties of several Mesoamerican languages shows whether the Mesoamerican features have been retained in the language varieties used today. The study is based on my own data collected from Nahuatl and Tének speakers, as well as data representing traditional and modern varieties of these two and other Mesoamerican languages published by other scholars.

The analysis demonstrates that the traditional Mesoamerican features have undergone significant change due to influence from Spanish. For example, the traditional head-marking nominal possession is being replaced in e.g. Nahuatl (Lastra 1980, Canger 2001, Hill & Hill 2004) and Otomí (Hekking & Bakker 2007) with the analytic dependent-marking Hispanicised pattern ‘dog of man’. Many languages have also reinterpreted relational nouns as prepositions (e.g. Nahuatl), and borrowed Spanish function words, including prepositions (Stoltz & Stoltz 1996). The absence of a verb ‘to have’ is no longer a prevalent trait as most languages now use a possessive verb with similar meaning to the Spanish verb *tener* ‘to have’. This is the case with the verb *piya* in Nahuatl, *qa'liy* in Totonac (Troiani 2007) or *ñehe* in Otomí (Hekking & Bakker 2007). Moreover, there is a shift from verb-initial basic word order in clauses with both arguments expressed lexically to SVO order, the preferred order in Spanish, in Nahuatl and Tének, Otomí (Hekking & Bakker 2007) and Yucatec (Lehmann 2020). Finally, vigesimal counting has been almost completely eradicated and replaced with the decimal system in Nahuatl, Tének, Totonac (MacKay 1999), Otomí (Hekking & Bakker 2007), Amuzgo (Smith Stark & Tapia García 1990), and Sierra Popoluca (de Jong Boudreault 2009).

This study shows that many of the Mesoamerican linguistic area traits listed by Campbell et al. (1986) are no longer found in modern Mesoamerican languages. Although these languages are changing away from the traditional Mesoamerican features, their cohesion as a linguistic area

remains strong because the influence of Spanish is causing significant morphosyntactic convergence. Further research should examine whether similar features of Spanish are also entering other indigenous languages and causing linguistic convergence throughout Hispanic America.

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