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Recurrent sound change is drawn from a pool of systematic variation

Abstract:
The first part of my talk is a quick review of reconstructed or ongoing (incipient) tonogenesis/tonal split, along with consonant devoicing/denasalisation in several languages I have worked on: Wu Chinese, Tamang, Korean, and Japanese. Preliminary observations suggest that the (unidirectional) change in laryngeal/nasal features (classically termed "fortition") along with the creation of a vocalic feature tend to be initiated in domain-initial positions. Whether such a positional/prosodic effect on sound change is recurrent needs support from more crosslinguistic data.
The second part explores why this sound change may happen recurrently. It summarises experimental data from several studies of the EVOTONE project, which test the consonant-pitch interaction in the laboratory. Models accounting for the phonetic motivations of sound changes, including recent proposals on prosodic domains, are evaluated. I will argue that none of these models provide standalone explanations, but the mechanisms underlying each model can all explain a part of the sound change described above. It is how these mechanisms constitute a causal chain that determines whether and how sound change is initiated. I highlight the observation that higher-order linguistic structures tend to affect variations in different sound types (e.g., consonant vs. vowel) in a systematically different way, and propose that such systematicities may be one source initiating "recurrent sound changes".