

***[fɪ-] > [ŋ-]? An unusual case of diachronic strengthening in Tikuna (isolate, Western Amazonia)**

Denis Bertet

March 21, 2019—DDL (Lyon, France)

San Martín de Amacayacu Tikuna (SMAT; Colombia) features lexical word-initial velar nasals [ŋ] /ŋ/, as in *e.g.* [ʔŋa¹¹] /ŋa¹¹/ ‘to scold’, [ʔŋo:¹¹wa⁵] /ŋo¹¹wa⁵/ ‘wild dog’, or [ʔŋã³³] /~ŋa³³/ ‘lowland paca’. The velar nasal phoneme /ŋ/ exhibits an anomalous distribution, in particular with respect to nasality, a syllable-level phonological feature. While the language’s phonology virtually only generates either entirely oral or entirely nasal syllables on the surface, /ŋ/ gives rise to the only phonetically half oral-half nasal syllables, as illustrated by the first two examples above.

In fact, in regard to nasality, syllables with a velar nasal onset can be shown to behave as though they had no onset synchronically. Interestingly, it so happens that various converging lines of evidence independently point at the velar nasal realization of /ŋ/ in today’s SMAT being the result of a fairly recent development from an earlier word-initial laryngeal fricative or velar approximant (*≈[fɪ] or *≈[ɣ]), or possibly from a complete absence of onset (*[∅]).

Language-internal synchronic evidence includes, among other things, a handful of functional words that display two alternative realizations—with or without an initial [ŋ]—conditioned by the realization or omission of stress, as *e.g.* [ʔŋɛ:³³ru⁴]~[^(h)ɛ³³ru⁴] for /^(ʔ)~ŋe³³du⁴/ ‘because’. There are reasons to believe that in such pairs of surface realizations, the unstressed, [ŋ]-less alternative might reflect the former phonological shape of the word more faithfully than the other alternative, in which a secondary initial [ŋ] could have arisen through strengthening (or even epenthesis) under the effect of stress. An unrelated piece of language-internal evidence is the phonologically exceptional word [ʔŋo:³¹hɔ¹hɔ³] ‘nocturnal rat sp.’, most likely an onomatopoeic creation from *≈[hɔhɔhɔ], an imitation of that rodent’s whisper.

Diachronic evidence includes wordlists by 19th century European explorers in which today’s SMAT [ŋ]-initial words are systematically transcribed with an initial <h> or <∅>, as in *e.g.* <ho-o> or <ã.ã> for today’s SMAT [ʔŋo^oʔo³] ‘devil’. Only by the middle of the 19th century do transcriptions with initial nasal graphemes (<n>, <mh>, <ñ>) begin to occasionally appear in these wordlists where today’s SMAT exhibits initial [ŋ]’s. Furthermore, a few old loanwords from Old Omagua and Spanish in today’s SMAT have developed a word-initial [ŋ] where the original language had an absence of onset, as in *e.g.* [ʔŋu:³ru³ka³re¹] ‘mosquito net’ < Old Omagua *[iri’kari] ‘id.’.

One last line of evidence—one of dialectological nature—comes from the observation that the reflex of SMAT [ŋ] in certain Tikuna varieties is a phone I tentatively identify as [ɣ]. I hypothesize that this non-nasal, non-stop realization is phonetically closer to the ancestor of SMAT [ŋ] than [ŋ] itself.

I finally show that there exist a few known cases of developments of velar nasals from former laryngeal fricatives—or even from a complete absence of syllable onset—across the languages of the world.

Taken as a whole, these individually weak pieces of evidence build a reasonably strong case for today’s SMAT [ŋ] being an innovation that arose over the course of the 19th century. Its most plausible immediate ancestor is */fɪ/ [fɪ]. A laryngeal nature of the ancestor of today’s SMAT /ŋ/ [ŋ] would make it typologically less surprising for it not to behave quite as a segment in the language.

The data this talk is based on come primarily from personal work with Tikuna consultants and first-hand recordings that were kindly shared to me by colleague researchers.