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Mesoamerican Historical Linguistics

In Mesoamerica, there are several language families and hundreds of typologically diverse languages. This workshop will address facets of the histories of the two most diverse language families in Mesoamerica: Mayan and Otomanguean. All of the papers are based in part on early documents in these languages, current fieldwork on them, or both. Most of the papers also draw upon linguistic reconstruction that the diversity of languages in these families makes possible. In addition, some of the papers are able to draw on cultural developments that have affected the course of language change.

There are two types of “early” documents in these languages. Mesoamerica stands out from among other parts of the Western hemisphere in having documents written in indigenous languages and scripts, most of which come from the two families addressed here. In addition, these languages have some of the earliest documentation in adapted forms of European writing in the New World, dating to the sixteenth century CE - just a few decades after the beginning of the Spanish invasion of the New World.

The European-based documents in and about indigenous languages do not register all of the phonological distinctions that were made in the indigenous languages; their interpretation depends upon comparison with modern forms of the same languages and with historical reconstruction. The decipherment and linguistic analysis of the pre-Columbian indigenous records also hinge on comparative reconstruction.