

## The Diachronic Typology of Retroflex Vowels

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This talk presents the results of a study on the possible diachronic pathways that lead to so-called rhotic or retroflex vowels. These vowel sounds, acoustically characterized by a lowering of the third formant, are crosslinguistically rare, but nevertheless quite well-known since they appear in varieties of some of the major languages of the world (Standard Chinese, North American varieties of English and French) (Ladefoged & Maddieson 1996: 313).

The variety of possible origins of rhotic/retroflex vowels has so far only been hinted at in the literature, usually by researchers working on particular linguistic areas or language families (e.g. Heegård & Mørch 2004: 67-71; Di Carlo 2016: 112-115; Golla 2011: 209; Matisoff 2003: 383). As a result, the available accounts are at times unsatisfactory or incomplete.

In this talk, the major historical sources and the mechanisms behind the arisal of rhotic/retroflex vowels will be identified based on a historical-comparative examination of several unrelated areal clusters and individual languages, in which they can be found (especially the eastern Hindu Kush, California and the wider Yunnan-Sichuan area).

The peculiar relation between acoustics and articulation in rhotic/retroflex vowels (cf. Ladefoged & Maddieson 1996: 234-235, 313), as well as their various possible origins, additionally point to some more general conclusions regarding the nature of sound change.

### References:

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