In Favor of [Fortis]: Evidence from Setswana and Sebirwa
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The purpose of this talk is to bring new acoustic and comparative phonological data to bear on an old problem – what is the nature of phonological contrast and alternation in the Setswana consonant system, and what does that tell us about the nature of contrast and alternation in phonology in general? Setswana post-nasal strengthening (or devoicing) was recognized as a problem as early as SPE, in which Chomsky and Halle note that the structural description and change for this alternation cannot easily be captured in their feature system. More recently, phonologists (Hyman 2001, Coetzee 2007, Gouskova et al. 2011, Zsiga & Boyer 2017) have argued over whether the alternation is natural or not, and how to account for it in a constraint-based grammar. In addition, analysts have disagreed over whether the variably ejective voiceless stops of Setswana are underlyingly ejective or voiceless unaspirated. If voiceless unaspirated, the problem is to account for why they are realized as ejective in contexts usually more conducive to lenition than to fortition. If underlyingly ejective, then Setswana is a language with no plain voiceless stops, another markedness paradox.

In this talk, I will compare Setswana with Sebirwa, both Southern Bantu languages that have three stop series that have been described and transcribed as voiced, voiceless, and aspirated, and that both exhibit oddly “unnatural” post-nasal alternations, focusing on the question of what phonological features best characterize these systems.

In recent work, proponents of Laryngeal Realism (e.g., Honeybone 2005, Beckman, Essen & Ringen 2013) have argued for a distinction between “true voice” languages that exhibit a contrast between [+voice] and [-voice] stops, cued by actual vocal fold vibration, and “aspirating” languages for which vocal fold vibration is not consistent, and whose stop contrasts are better characterized as [spread glottis] vs. plain. Proponents of Laryngeal Realism have focused, however, on languages with only two stop series. Here, I will argue that Sebirwa functions as a “true voice” language but with an additional dimension, contrasting stops that are [+voice], [SG], and plain, and exhibiting true post-nasal devoicing (though surprisingly, with labial stops only!). I will argue that in Setswana, however, all voicing (that is, actual vocal fold vibration) is in fact passive, and that the system of stop contrast can really be best understood by resurrecting the traditional fortis/lenis contrast (Trubetzkoy 1939). Beyond Southern Bantu, a [fortis] feature can also serve to unify other inventories and alternations that don’t fit neatly into a categorization based solely on [voice], [SG], and [CG] (e.g., Gallagher 2011). Contra other approaches that double down on direct representation of laryngeal gestures in phonological representations (e.g., Avery & Idsardi 2001), I will argue that in order to support laryngeal realism, we must also support a certain amount of laryngeal abstraction.