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In Mayan languages, especially within the Eastern (Quichean-Mamean) branch, interrogative pronominals vary greatly between different languages (e.g., for the meaning ‘who?’ within the Mamean group Mayers (1966:275) gives Mam *alkyee*, Ixil *ab’il*, and Awakatek *na’j*), between the dialects of a single language (e.g., ‘with what?’ is *su* in Santa Cruz de El Quiché K’iche’, *jas* in Totonicapán K’iche’, and *wach* in Cubulco K’iche’, Par Sapón and Can Pixabaj 2000:94, 206), and sometimes even within one dialect (e.g., in Cubulco K’iche’, ‘who?’ is found as *chinoq*, *china*, *na* and *pa*, Par Sapón and Can Pixabaj 2000:95, 203), which suggests their instability. Importantly, the diversity of interrogative pronominals is not reducible to regular sound changes, which makes their reconstruction particularly challenging. Thus, interrogative pronominals have not been convincingly reconstructed for Proto Mayan or the major branches of the family yet (cf. Kaufman 2003:1516-1517). In striking contrast, most other parts of the lexicon are much more stable and cognacy is usually rather straightforward so that the relationship among Mayan languages was recognized very early (Campbell and Poser 2008:118-120). In this paper, I focus on the reconstruction of interrogative pronominals in Eastern Mayan. In particular, I argue that their remarkable formal diversity is primarily due to the tendency to construct interrogative pronominals as clauses which subsequently underwent cycles of truncation, contraction (as typical of frequently used items), and later accretion with the material of the new constructions built on their basis. For the Proto Eastern Mayan level, the respective construction can be reconstructed as something like ‘it is that one which is called?...', implying ‘who/what?’, or ‘it is how that that one is called?’. Among the later constructions built on formally reduced versions of this construction, the selective interrogative construction ‘(it is) who/what among them?’, i.e. ‘which one?’, features most prominently.

Workshop title

Stability and Borrowability of Interrogative Pronominals

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