

PART 1

INTRODUCTION

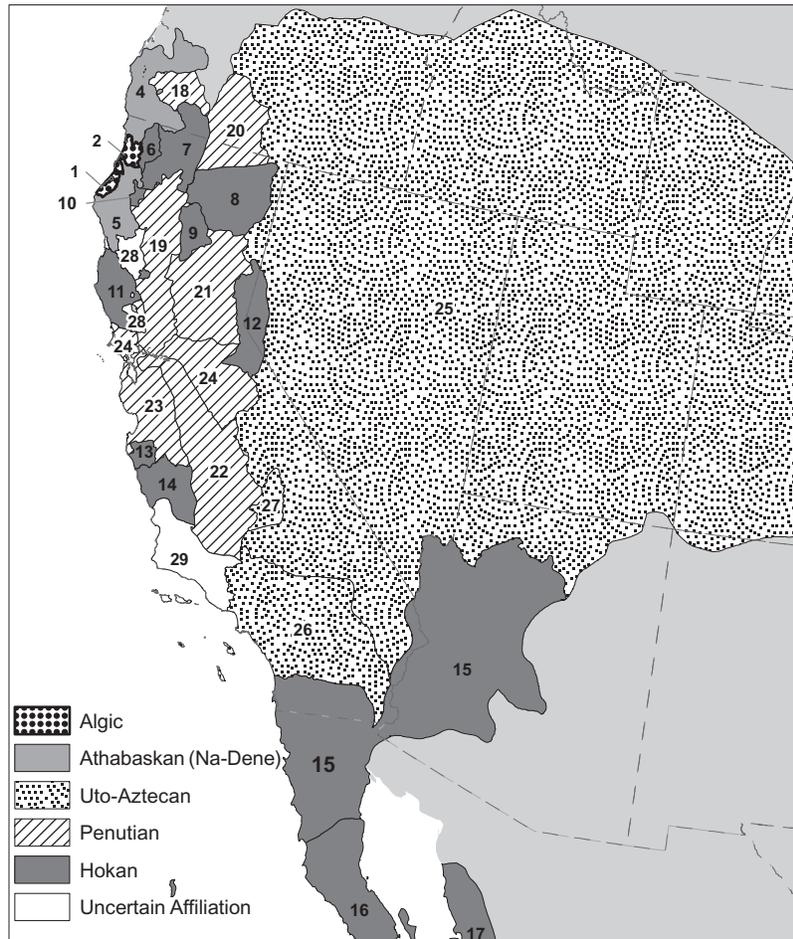
Defining California as a Sociolinguistic Area

Anyone who has paid the slightest attention to the aboriginal languages of California knows that there were a lot of them. In the core region west of the Sierra Nevada and the Mohave Desert, a significantly larger number of mutually unintelligible linguistic systems were in use than could reasonably be predicted from differences in ecology, subsistence strategy, or social organization. Instead, the primary factor generating linguistic diversity seems to have been the evolution, over millennia, of a sociopolitical landscape that consisted of a mosaic of *tribelets*—tiny but independent societies, typically numbering no more than a few hundred individuals, that utilized the resources of a highly circumscribed territory. Too small to survive as primary ethnolinguistic units on their own, tribelets were linked symbolically, but not in any political sense, to the others that spoke varieties of the same language, promoting an ideology that defined language boundaries as unalterable natural features inherent in the land rather than as negotiable social facts reflecting (potential) tribal or national units. Ironically, then, it was the arbitrary, relatively functionless nature of language boundaries that tended to promote their survival and deepening over time. But if the abrupt discontinuities of language that were scattered almost randomly across California had only an abstract meaning to the people who experienced them in precontact times, we today can see them as fossilized traces of past migrations and expansions that provide a uniquely valuable window into the past.

1.1 Diversity

The precontact linguistic diversity of the New World was especially great along the Pacific coast of North America, reflecting both the complex ecology of the West Coast and its position as the gateway to the Americas. Nowhere was this hyperdiversity more extreme than in the fertile strip that lies between the coast and the interior deserts from approximately 31°30' N in Baja California to 43° N in south-central Oregon, from Ensenada to Cape Blanco. Nearly a thousand miles long, and in places more than 200 miles wide, this bountiful region—the California of this book—was home to an extraordinary variety of village-dwelling but nonfarming peoples who spoke seventy-eight mutually unintelligible languages (Map 1), nearly a third of the indigenous languages known to have been spoken in North America

north of Mesoamerica (Golla 2007a). More than a few of these languages are clearly related to languages spoken elsewhere on the continent, indicating that some proportion of the ethnic and linguistic diversity of aboriginal California is to be accounted for by population movements in recent millennia. The majority of California languages, however, have only the most tenuous of relationships to languages spoken anywhere else—mostly through hints of an attachment to the hypothetical Hokan and Penutian phyla, which, if historically valid classifications, probably ramify across the entire hemisphere. These distinctively Californian languages stand a good chance of being, like the lifeways of the people who created them, the products of unbroken sequences of local events that extend back to the initial human settlement of the Americas.



MAP 1. Language families and isolates of the California region.

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|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Algic</i> | <i>Penutian</i> |
| 1. Wiyot | 18. Takelma |
| 2. Yurok | 19. Wintuan |
| <i>Athabaskan (Na-Dene)</i> | 20. Klamath-Modoc |
| 3. Lower Columbia Athabaskan | 21. Maiduan |
| 4. Oregon Athabaskan (not shown) | 22. Yokuts |
| 5. California Athabaskan | 23. Costanoan |
| <i>Hokan</i> | 24. Miwok |
| 6. Karuk | <i>Uto-Aztecan</i> |
| 7. Shastan | 25. Numic |
| 8. Palaihnihan | 26. Takic |
| 9. Yana | 27. Tubatulabal |
| 10. Chimariko | <i>Uncertain affiliation</i> |
| 11. Pomo | 28. Yukian |
| 12. Washo | 29. Chumash |
| 13. Esselen | 30. Waikuri (and other languages of the southernmost part of Baja California) (not shown) |
| 14. Salinan | |
| 15. Yuman | |
| 16. Cochimi | |
| 17. Seri | |

1.2 Tribelet and Language

While most Californian languages shared a number of structural traits (discussed in detail in Part 4), the most important of the defining features of the California language area was not linguistic but sociopolitical. More precisely, it was

the absence of a congruence between the linguistic and the sociopolitical. In this region, uniquely in North America, the idea that a distinct common language is the social glue that holds together a tribe or nation played no significant role. In only one small part of aboriginal California did language

boundaries and political boundaries normally coincide, and that was on the far southeastern periphery of the region, along the lower Colorado River. The varieties of Yuman spoken there—Mojave, Quechan, and Cocopa, as well as Halchidhoma before its speakers were forced to relocate among the Maricopa in the early nineteenth century—were distinct languages spoken by members of well-defined tribes (Kroeber 1925:727). When the Chemehuevi, who spoke a dialect of Southern Paiute, resettled along the Colorado near the Mojave in the early nineteenth century, their dialect also became a tribe-defining language of similar status.¹

For all other California Indians in prewhite times, with the possible exception of the Diegueño or Kumeyaay (the only Yuman-speaking group on the California coast; see ¶3.18.3), the defining social unit was not a tribe but a small village community, or “tribelet” (Kroeber 1961). Comprising a few hundred individuals settled in a clearly demarcated territory that seldom encompassed more than 200 square miles—smaller than the present-day city and county of San Francisco—the triblet was the economic and social building block of aboriginal California. Linked by close ties of kinship, the people of a triblet were the direct owners of the land and its resources, most importantly the oak woodlands from which they gathered their staple food, the acorn (Basgall 1987). While there could be a half dozen or more permanent settlements within a triblet’s borders, there was usually only one of any significance. The headman or “captain” and his immediate family resided there, and the group was usually referred to by the name of that village.

A. L. Kroeber introduced the village community model of California political organization in the *Handbook of the Indians of California*, using the Yuki and the Pomo as his ethnographic examples (Kroeber 1925:160–163, 228–230, 234–235). He developed the idea more fully, and proposed the term “tribelet,” in a monograph on the Patwin (Kroeber 1932:257–270). In his most extensive discussion of the model—the testimony he prepared for the Indian Claims Commission in 1954 (published as Kroeber 1961)—he estimated that most triblets on average had about two hundred fifty members and that there were between five hundred and six hundred such miniature polities in aboriginal California. Over the last twenty years the triblet concept has found a new popularity with ecologically oriented archaeologists who see in it the social expression of a distinctive Californian subsistence strategy that focused on the intensive exploitation of local resources (Basgall 1987; Raab and Jones 2004).

By contrast, the territory within which a given California language was spoken was almost always larger than a single triblet, sometimes, as in the case of Yokuts or Northern Paiute, vastly larger. This language community, however, was largely an abstraction. It did not define a tribe or nation in any political sense, nor did it necessarily imply a common culture. At best, it fostered a sense of common destiny, often expressed in a strongly held belief that the relationship that existed between a particular region and a particular

language was spiritually ordained. At worst, it meant that some of your most dangerous enemies spoke the same language you did.

The disconnection between language and society in aboriginal California was brought home to me recently when, going through Pliny Earle Goddard’s 1903–1908 ethnogeographical notes on the Sinkyone Athabaskans of the Eel River, I came across a brief statement in which an old man called “Little Charlie” described the social world he had grown up in before the whites came. Charlie was a survivor of the *tolankok* triblet, whose territory lay along South Fork from Phillippsville to where it joins the main Eel at Dyerville. Their principal village, *tolanki*, was at the mouth of Bull Creek. Imagining himself a ten-year-old boy again at *tolanki*, Charlie told Goddard:

If Mattole, [main] Eel River Indians, or Garberville Indians come they fight them. Long way off Indian never come this place. Garberville they talk like us. Wailaki talk pretty near us but too tight. Can’t understand Mattole, “awful tight”. Long time ago can’t go to Mattole. Can go Bull Creek. Don’t go Van Duzen. They kill me right there. Can’t go Briceland nor Garberville. (Goddard 1902–1922a, Sinkyone notebook 1, p. 29)

With the exception of the Mattole on the coast, who had a distinct language, all the groups Charlie listed were speakers of mutually intelligible triblet varieties of what can be called the Eel River Athabaskan language (¶3.7.3). On another page in the same notebook, Goddard recorded Charlie’s precise identification of the upstream boundary of his triblet:

[At] Se-sûn-to, mile above Se-tcin-to-dûñ [between Miranda and Phillippsville], fishing there. People live there. Our kind of people. Can’t go any further that way. Same kind of people. Same kind of talk. But can’t go in early day. (Goddard 1902–1922a, Sinkyone notebook 1, p. 21)

There are reasons to believe that the relationships among the Eel River Athabaskan triblets were more bellicose than among most California triblets that shared a common language. Nevertheless, Charlie’s fear that stepping outside his home territory in just about any direction would have had lethal consequences is entirely consistent with Kroeber’s idea of the political self-sufficiency of the small triblet unit.

The Kroeberian triblet has not been without critics.² The most influential of these, Lowell John Bean, suggested that the model should be more flexible, pointing to evidence that the population of some triblets could have been as high as one thousand, and arguing that the size of a triblet’s territory could have varied considerably according to the productivity of the area (Bean 1974). More importantly, Bean and others assembled persuasive evidence for the existence of political structures that went beyond the triblet level to amalgamate several village communities into ad

hoc chieftainships, especially in south-central California (Bean and Blackburn 1976). At the time of contact in the late 1760s, for example, a powerful leader (nicknamed “El Buchon” by the Spanish because of his prominent goiter) held sway over a substantial territory around San Luis Obispo (Jones et al. 2007:129).

Kroeber himself acknowledged that the single-tribelet society with little or no linguistic footprint was not universal in California, but rather the ideal toward which a variety of real-world situations gravitated. A particularly important set of exceptions were the Yokuts “dialect tribes” of the San Joaquin Valley, where a hereditary leader would often exercise authority over the headmen of two or more village communities (Kroeber 1925:474–475). These groups were referred to by special “tribal” names (like Yawdanchi, Chunut, or Chukchansi), not simply by the name of their central village (§4.11.1), and each had a well-defined local dialect (Kroeber 1963). But despite having these tribe-like characteristics, Kroeber argued, Yokuts groups basically functioned like other California tribelets, as local residential units within a wider cultural matrix, rather than as independent, culturally self-contained social units like the “true” tribes of the Colorado. In particular, their dialectal idiosyncrasies were rudimentary, usually confined to vocabulary differences and a few slight divergences in phonology; they remained mere local varieties subsumed in a much wider—and unnamed—language.³

In general, where languages were spread over fairly wide territories, adjacent local varieties would often form a distinctive linguistic cluster, or regional dialect, with respect to other local varieties of the same language. Except in the Yokuts case, however, there is little if any evidence that these regional dialects reflected any formal sociopolitical unity above the village-community level.⁴ Instead, regional dialect boundaries seem to have been correlated with networks of marriage and trade, and were thus ultimately determined by geography rather than political integration. A particularly complex development of this sort characterized Nisenan (Southern Maidu) territory where the four well-defined regional dialects were correlated with riverine travel routes: Plains Nisenan, spoken in a dozen or more tribelet varieties along the Sacramento River, and three distinct Hill Nisenan dialects, Northern, Central, and Southern, each associated with the drainage of one of the streams flowing into the Sacramento from the Sierra foothills to the east.⁵

1.3 Symbolic Function of California Languages

Understanding the social function of a California language is primarily a matter of understanding the symbolic relationship between language and land. Attachment to the land was one of the fundamental characteristics of Native Californians, manifested most clearly in “their strong yearning to live, die, and be buried in the home of their fathers” (Powers 1877:249–250). In addition to fostering an almost obsessive internalization of the geography of one’s

native tribelet, this bond to the land was more abstractly symbolized by an extreme faithfulness to one’s native language—or rather, to the language of the territory in which one was born. When a person had occasion to visit the territory in which another language was spoken—to trade, gamble, negotiate the purchase of a wife, attend a ceremony, or for some other compelling reason—the etiquette strictly required speaking the language of the hosts, since that was the language that “belonged” there. Although the individuals who typically went on these expeditions were either bi- or multilingual (see §1.5.1), or had to seek out someone with such skills to serve as an interpreter, facility with the languages of foreigners had only restricted social value in California Indian society. There were few occasions when any language other than the local one could appropriately be spoken in any given place. A foreign wife, in particular, was discouraged from continuing to speak her native language, however poorly she spoke her husband’s, lest her children should acquire it.

The association of a particular language with a given tract of land was taken to be an immutable fact of nature. It is revealing that languages and the identities they symbolized were hardly ever lexicalized in California languages. This fact also was first noted by Powers:

So contracted are their journeyings and their knowledge that they do not need a complicated system of names. If there are any people living twenty miles away they are not aware of their existence. In consequence of this it was almost impossible for me to learn any fixed names of tribes. (1877:315)

Even the Hupa, who traveled widely along the Trinity and Klamath Rivers, had no consistent names for the linguistic identities of the region. For their own Hupa-Chilula language, they made do with *Dining’xine:wh* (“those who speak like Dini people, i.e., Athabaskans”). One of the few apparent counterexamples, the term “Kashaya” that the speakers of Southwestern Pomo have long applied both to themselves and to their language, has recently been shown by Lightfoot (2005) to have its origin in the restructuring of this ethnic group—originally an uncoordinated group of at least two tribelets—as a work force for the Russian fur traders at Fort Ross during the early nineteenth century. Almost without exception, the names by which we now know the languages of the California region were created by whites, not infrequently by anthropologists and linguists.

The apparent arbitrariness of many language boundaries contributed to the aura of supernatural inevitability that attended them. While in some places they would run along mountain ridges or other natural dividing points, in others they would separate two adjacent village communities with long-standing ties of kinship and trade, as for example the northernmost Wiyot tribelet, Potawat, at the mouth of the Mad River, and the southernmost Yurok tribelet, Tsurai, ten miles to the north at Trinidad. That Wiyot and Yurok are the two branches of California Algic (§3.1) imparts special

historical interest to the location of this particular boundary, but it did little to explain it to Indians of the historic period.

Language boundaries were also remarkably impermeable. The normal processes of assimilation between adjacent languages were reduced to a minimum. Lexical borrowing was infrequent, at least in the form of overt loanwords, and confined to a few semantic domains (see ¶4.14), although covert metaphors and other styles of expression were probably to some extent shared.⁶ Where phonological or grammatical borrowing can be suspected, it is more likely to be the result of language shift than of assimilation between adjacent languages. Even culturally shared subpatterns such as toponymy and counting systems tended to be sharply discontinuous at language boundaries; it was quite exceptional for a language not to have its own distinct place-names and numerals, even where the adjoining languages belonged to the same language family.⁷

It is a reasonable hypothesis that this close-fitting, symbolic Californian relationship between language and the land, operating over several millennia, was the primary cause of much of the structural diversity that is the primary subject matter of this book. Its effects are especially clear where the linguistic diversity in question is among languages belonging to a widespread North American family, such as Athabaskan, Uto-Aztecan, or Algic, which may be assumed to have intruded into the California linguistic matrix at a relatively late date.

Hill (2006), for example, has explored the possibility that the different patterns of internal diversity within the Takic and Numic branches of Uto-Aztecan might be in part explained because the former diversified in the California context while the latter did so mostly in the Great Basin. I have made similar observations about the surprisingly deep differences between the California and Oregon Athabaskan subfamilies, which can be the product of no more than fifteen hundred years of change (Golla 2000). One of the most interesting results of Hill's comparison of Numic and Takic is that a number of the "deep" discontinuities that a linguist tends to notice when comparing one Takic language to another appear much less important, or even to disappear, when they are coded according to the feature variants recognized by the *World Atlas of Linguistic Structures* (Haspelmath et al. 2005). While the WALS coding may be too blunt an instrument to capture the differences in structure that set the Takic languages apart in actual use, another possibility is that many of these differences are primarily sociolinguistic, not grammatical in the strict sense, and more to be attributed to the need for symbolic contrast between adjacent languages—the "California pattern" as it were—than to the accumulation of random changes in two speech communities that have lost contact with one another.

1.4 Languages and Migration

Ideology is not historic truth. Language boundaries were as much in flux in California as anywhere else in the world.

If the historical circumstances that established a linguistic boundary between Potawat and Tsurai are lost in the mists of time, the location of the eastern boundary of both tribelets is easily explainable as the actively contested frontier between the coastal peoples and the Athabaskans of the interior mountains. Early reports indicate that the Athabaskan Chilula were encroaching on Wiyot territory along the lower Mad River near Blue Lake, resulting in a steady shifting of the language boundary westward. While a nineteenth-century observer like Powers may have been too quick to extrapolate a long history of warfare throughout California from isolated incidents of raiding, in the areas where Athabaskans had settled there seems little doubt that a long-term process of expropriation and displacement was still at work at the time of contact.

Michael Moratto (1984) and others have made a persuasive case that the language geography of California may preserve the trace, at least in some part, of old frontiers of intergroup conflict. To a considerable extent I adopt this perspective in the conjectural outline of California linguistic prehistory that I present in Part 5. The Athabaskans almost certainly pushed into southern Oregon and northern California during the last fifteen hundred years, and we may suspect similar incursions and expansions over the past two or three millennia wherever we find single languages or shallowly differentiated language families occupying suspiciously large territories. This roster includes (but is not limited to) the Yokuts language in the San Joaquin Valley; the Wintuan languages in the Sacramento Valley; the string of Achumawi dialects along the Pit River; the Eastern Miwoks from Sacramento to Yosemite; the Shasta dialects, spread from Scott Valley to Shasta Valley and across the Siskiyou to Oregon; the Numic occupation of the Basin; and the Upland (Pai) dialects of Yuman.

By inverting the argument, where we find single languages or isolated families restricted to small territories, we may suspect them to be relics of much older movements of peoples. In this light, certain distributional regularities should be noted.

1. Although the region has an abundance of single-language families or "classificatory isolates"—for the most part orphaned branches of the ancient Hokan or Penutian phyla—none of these is confined to a single tribelet. Chimariko was spoken in at least three tribelet dialects, and the same minimal diversity can be observed in Takelma, Klamath-Modoc, Yana, Esselen, and Salinan. Washo, a Hokan isolate with no reported dialect diversity, is only an apparent exception, since its High Sierra environment led to the development of a seminomadic subsistence strategy more typical of the Basin or the subarctic than of resource-rich California.
2. The same absence of single-tribelet branches holds for the half-dozen moderately differentiated small language families that are so characteristic of the