

THE ISLAND CHUMASH LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK

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ABSTRACT

The present state of knowledge about the Chumash language spoken on the Santa Barbara Channel Islands shows it to be a distinct member of the Chumashan family. However, its exact position within the family is not clearly understood, and many questions remain to be answered. Certain lexical and grammatical features of Island Chumash—including the source of vocabulary items not shared with mainland Chumash languages, the unique syntax of Island Chumash, and certain aspects of its phonological development—are not easily explained by reference only to the other Chumash languages, and an interdisciplinary approach to the history of the Islands will be necessary in order to interpret the linguistic data fully. In turn, knowledge of what linguistic analysis can show about the internal history of the family may help specialists in fields such as archaeology, history, and resource management interpret their own data or support hypotheses developed from their research.

Keywords: Chumash language, Island Chumash language, Channel Islands language, Language, Channel Islands, historical contacts.

INTRODUCTION

I present in this paper some background information on the Chumashan family of languages, leading up to a discussion of ways in which linguists and scientists from other disciplines might work together to establish a more detailed picture of island history, including linguistic history, than specialists from any one area can provide. I ask a number of questions which are implied by the linguistic data, but for which linguistic data alone cannot provide definitive answers.

I began working on Chumash languages in about 1970. At that time, the available linguistic attestations of them (e.g., those of Alphonse Pinart (Heizer 1952), H. W. Henshaw (Heizer 1955), and Alfred Kroeber (1910)) did not offer much concrete insight into the relationship between what appeared to be at least a half dozen so-called “dialects.” However, scholars at the Smithsonian Institution and the University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley), were beginning to learn that the late John P. Harrington’s notes (on Chumash and other languages) (Harrington, various dates) were far more voluminous than previously imagined. Kroeber had, with very little evidence, adduced that the

Chumash languages formed a family with three distinct divisions. In the 1950s, Robert Heizer published the Henshaw and Pinart vocabularies, but misreadings rendered them of relatively little use unless checked against the originals. This is not something most users could easily do because the manuscripts are in archival collections in Berkeley (the Bancroft Library) and Washington DC (the National Anthropological Archives), and the originals can be consulted only in exceptional circumstances (microfilms being available for most users). Harrington’s materials, however, opened wide the doors to Chumash studies. Within a few years, I was able to conclusively demonstrate the relationship of the major attested dialects to one another, and conclude that Chumashan was a major family, on the order of the Pomoan or Yuman families in its internal diversity (Klar 1973, 1977). Despite far-ranging differences in the dialects, deep similarities of types unlikely to be due to chance or mere areal affiliation with other languages remain; these include basic patterns in syntax and inflectional morphology, as well as a high percentage of shared stems and roots.

THE CHUMASHAN LANGUAGE FAMILY

After the initial determination that the languages called (since Kroeber) Ventureño, Barbareño, Ineseño, Purisimeño, Obispeño, and Cruzeño were definitely related, the next task was to determine the relative linguistic distance between them, and to decide which we could call languages and which dialects (on the basis of mutual intelligibility).

A three-way division was immediately apparent. On phonological evidence alone, Obispeño constituted a grouping on its own, an isolate, so-called, within the family; likewise Cruzeño. The other four idioms, although showing some differences, fit neatly together into a third grouping.

Figure 1 posits equi-distant relationships between each of the three branches of Chumashan, and within the Central branch, equi-distant relationship between each member of the sub-group. An ongoing subject of investigation is whether, in fact, there is a closer relationship between any two of the three major branches (Figure 2), and I will have more to say about this subsequently. There has also been discussion about the internal relationships of the Central dialects.

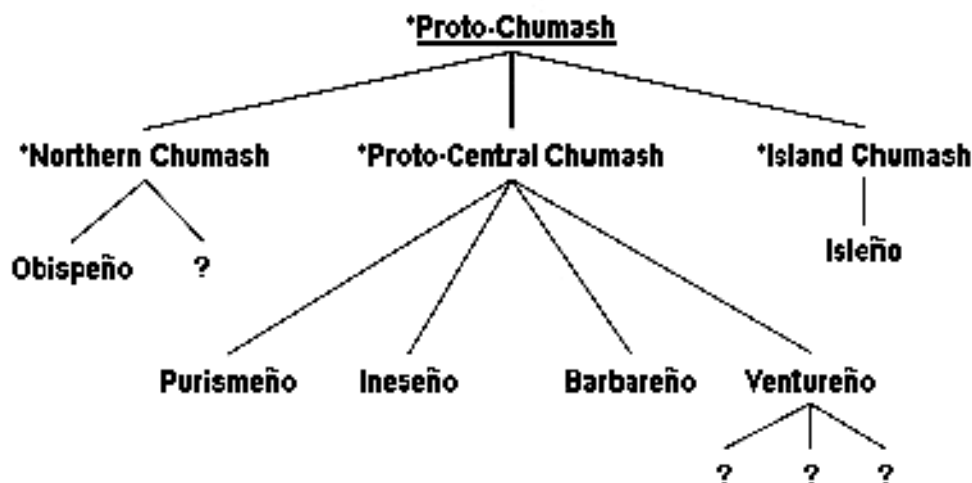


Figure 1. Chumashan family relationships: original three-way division.

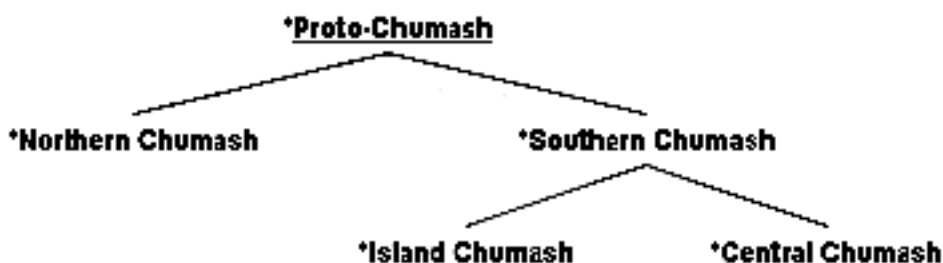


Figure 2. Chumashan family relationships: original two-way division (dialects as in Figure 1).

I believe it was Richard Applegate who first proposed, in a conversation, that there was a “dialect continuum” of the Central Chumash dialects (Applegate, pers. comm.). You will be familiar with this concept if you think of English dialects from Sussex north to London and on through East Anglia, the Midlands, Yorkshire, and finally Scotland. Any two adjoining towns or regions could understand one another, but the further away you got from your home base, the more difficult it was to understand the local speech without spending some time adjusting your ear, as it were. A Cockney and a Glasgow Scot would, at first hearing, think they were speaking different languages (and by the reckoning of some linguists, they are). Thus it appears to have been with the four Chumash idioms, Purismeño, Ineseño, Barbareño, and Ventureño. Neighbors had no difficulty understanding one another, but two or three dialects away, it became more difficult. More recent observations (K. Whistler, pers. comm. ?1973) have suggested that there was so much internal variation in Ventureño itself that we can say that the dialect continuum probably extended further and was more complex than previously thought.

Obispeño clearly did not fit into the mainland dialect continuum, but constituted its own subgroup. Subsequent research has shown that there were probably at least two subdialects within Northern Chumash, depending upon the

reflex of a reconstructed proto-Chumash $*k_1$ as either [kš] or [tʰ]. In Central Chumash, it is realized as [k], [q], or [x]; in Island Chumash as [č]. [Island Chumash data from Beeler and Klar, In press.]

Proto-Chumash $*k_1$	I	tʰx	‘eye’
	B, V	tʰq	
	P	taq	
	O	tʰʰ ~ tʰkʰ (dialect forms)	
	Cr	te...	

The vocabulary of Obispeño is so markedly different, in regular, phonologically predictable ways; and its derivational morphology is so idiosyncratic within the family, that one has no hesitation about treating it as an isolate.

There is no doubt that at the time of the arrival of Europeans, a Chumash language was spoken on the Channel Islands of Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel. Cruzeño—or Island Chumash, or Isleño, as it is now sometimes called—presents us with a different set of problems. Northern Chumash vocabulary items, where they have been recorded (the record is small), show a high percentage of correspondence with Central Chumash forms; however, one must know the phonetic correspondences which relate them, for they are not by any means identical. With the recorded

material for Island Chumash, however, we find many forms which are either identical with mainland forms (generally Ventureño) or so markedly different as to comprise a “linguistic residue” of vocabulary with no known correlates in other Chumashan languages. There are also a number of sets in which there is a clear Central Chumash cognate, and a second Island form with no known mainland analogues.

Cr	towolilay	‘flute’
V	towolilay	
B	towoli’lay	
I	tiwaluluay’	
Cr	tup’an	‘bow’
I	’ax	
O	’aqa	
Cr	mʔk-i...’far’	(i)yakay ‘far’ (no Chumash cognates)
I, B	mʔk	
O	mʔtʔ ~ mʔkʔ	

This is a fascinating situation. The identical vocabulary items could imply that Island Chumash was, for all practical purposes, similar to (if not nearly identical with) at least coastal Ventureño. But when we recall that nearly all of Harrington’s information came from Fernando Librado, who spent his entire life in Ventura, we have to be at least a little skeptical. We must wonder whether, when Fernando did not know or did not remember an island form, he gave Harrington what was in fact a Ventureño form. (In fact, in the ‘far’ set above, the expected Cruzeño reflex would be *meč suggesting that Fernando did in fact report both a Ventureño form and an island one.) Given that the inflectional morphology of Island Chumash is, like that of Northern Chumash, idiosyncratic in many details (though related by regular correspondences to other Chumash), we know that Island Chumash is not just another dialect of Ventureño. When it comes to the “residue” of vocabulary left after cognates with mainland Chumash forms have been eliminated, we are confronted with a stock of words which have no known linguistic affiliations, and must wonder from where they came.

THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF ISLAND CHUMASH

With regard to historical phonology, island speech shows some remarkable points of similarity with Northern Chumash, which argues against a relatively closer grouping of either with Central Chumash, and for status as co-equal branches in the family. The proto-Chumash phoneme *k₁ (realized as either [kʃ] or [tʃ] in Northern Chumash; see the ‘eye’ and ‘far’ sets above) realizes as [c] in Island Chumash, which thus shares with Northern Chumash a tendency toward heavy palatalization of this proto-phoneme.

With regard to island vocabulary and syntax, the first thing to note is that the vocabulary is heavily oriented toward marine, rather than terrestrial, life. This is hardly unexpected. Still, as noted above, many of the vocabulary items

have no cognates on the mainland, even where one or more mainland dialects have forms for the same items. Second, the canonical shape of many island words (i.e., the normal patterns of distribution of consonants and vowels in a word) are not reminiscent of “typical” Chumash words, including island words with clear mainland affiliations. Chumashan languages permit fairly complex consonant clusters; roots are generally monosyllabic, and stems (roots plus derivational affixes) tend to be mono- or disyllabic. A number of the residual forms in Island Chumash do not follow this general canonical structure, but are of the form CVCV(...) or even show (possible, but quite uncommon for Chumash) -VV- sequences. This reminds one, in general, of Uto-Aztecan or even Hawaiian. (These two linguistic entities are not chosen at random, as I will subsequently explain.)

Syntactically, Island Chumash is also peculiar when viewed against the backdrop of mainland dialects. The preferred, unmarked word order in all mainland dialects (including Obispeño) is Verb-Object/Complement-Subject. This, among the world’s languages, is an unusual configuration, and its appearance in two major branches of Chumash argues for its antiquity in the family. Island Chumash, while demonstrating the possibility of using this word order, nonetheless, has as its usual unmarked order Subject-Verb-Object/Complement, a much more common occurrence among the world’s languages. All Chumash languages could place the subject first in topicalized sentences; only Island Chumash generalized it as the preferred word order in simple sentences.

Cr	p ^h le’eÓ ’ala.um	nimawap ^h mih	
	the fish	is present	inside the water
	"The fish is in the water."		
Cr	p’alamuyun ’ala.um	p ^h mas’awa	
	the man	is present	(at) our (3+) house
	"The man is at our house."		
V	yʔla’a	ʔoÓ... sakitwonpi	so’o lo’ka’axʔoÓwaÓ
	all	he knew	springs water Coyote
	"Coyote knew all the water springs."		
V	kaÓa’a»	ʔpÓwaÓ	he’su’ut’am kisaqmil (so’o)
	and went	Coyote	to the river to drink (water)
	"And Coyote went to the river for a drink"		
O	.i. yamqnipu	tihisa	nitim
	is	my house	up in Lopez Canyon
	"My house is up in Lopez Canyon."		
O	.mitip ^Y t	yact ^Y t	yamiÓna
	they sparkle	the eyes	my cat
	"My cat’s eyes sparkle (in the sun)."		

QUESTIONS

The following questions are raised by the facts presented above in the preceding sections:

- 1) The primary divisions within the Chumash family are old, on the order of thousands, rather than hundreds, of years. However, the exact relationship between the branches of the family are not yet fully understood. How might the work of other disciplines shed light on the occupation of the islands and the origins of the Chumash islanders, and on the relationship of the Island Chumash to the mainland groups?
- 2a) We must ask where the so-called “residue” vocabulary in Island Chumash comes from. Are the forms retentions from proto-Chumash (or earlier?) which all mainland dialects have lost? Or—and I think this more likely—are these items the result of borrowing from another linguistic group, perhaps encountered on the islands when Chumash speakers first inhabited the islands, or from some other marine-oriented group on the mainland with whom the ancestors of the Island Chumash may have been in close contact? I think an answer to this dilemma should be a prime focus of research for linguists, aided in any way possible by archaeologists and environmental specialists.
- 2b) Perhaps the borrowings come from several or many different linguistic sources. The first possibility is that the islands were already occupied by another linguistic group when Chumash speakers first arrived there, in which case, the speakers of the two languages would certainly have interacted with one another. What does the archaeological record say about the history of island occupation? Alternatively or additionally, are we looking at Island Chumash as perhaps some kind of regional trading language, fully Chumash, but with a large influx of words from other languages? An investigation of the vocabulary of languages whose speakers were known or suspected (due to historical circumstances) to have been in contact with Islanders is warranted: these would include Uto-Aztecan, Aleut, Tlingit, Kodiak Eskimo, Russian, Hawaiian, and English (and perhaps others). The input of historians and archaeologists familiar with the timing and circumstances of such contacts would be invaluable.
- 3) Related to 2a) and 2b) is the question of why Island Chumash syntax changed so radically from the seemingly stable form reconstructable to proto-Chumash and preserved by all mainland dialects. Was this entirely a process internal to Island Chumash, or did a pre-existing possible

grammatical structure, under the influence of substrate or adstrate contact with another linguistic group determine the direction in which Island Chumash syntax developed? (If so, which group or groups?)

IMPLICATIONS—AND MORE QUESTIONS

Standing back and looking at Kroeber’s maps of California Indian languages gives one a false sense of security about the state of our knowledge of actual boundaries of territories occupied by speakers of different languages, and in the case of the smaller of the two maps, at the wider affiliations of linguistic groups with one another. The general idea of a number of groups in situ along the southern California coast, confronted first with an expansion of Uto-Aztecs from the Great Basin, then with a Yokuts expansion from the north via the Central Valley, is in general conformity with some of the more anomalous features of the mainland Chumash languages.

Bill and Marcia Bright suggested in 1969 (Bright and Bright 1976) that in prehistoric times some unknown language, long extinct, existed in the area of Southern California occupied by the Gabrielino and Luiseño at the time of first European contact. This lost idiom bequeathed to southern California Uto-Aztecs a number of loanwords, the source of which may never be surely known. Something similar may well be the case with Island Chumash.

With regard to contact from ephemeral visitors to the Channel Islands, some seventy years ago, Ronald L. Olson (Olson 1930) posited “Oceanic affiliations” to explain “a number of traits in both material and social culture” in southern California (including plank canoes). Olson urged “cautious acceptance” of this view; scholars have, in fact, generally ignored it. The late D. Travis Hudson, former curator of Anthropology at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, was intrigued by this possibility (D. T. Hudson, pers. comm.), but never to my knowledge proceeded to do a systematic investigation. Of course, Oceanic influence need not mean that Polynesian navigators stopped off in California on their way to Hawaii (or some such scenario); the Channel Islands were visited by Hawaiians working the fur trade. There is an entry in Harrington’s notes on Cruzeño about the name “Chumash.” To Fernando’s form [čumaš], Harrington gives no gloss, but does add (presumably from Fernando’s information), “Alaska or Kanaka origin. Tied boats back and front.” I think that Olson’s suggestion deserves another look at this time, at least with regard to the Kanakas (i.e., Hawaiians) who were known to have visited the Channel Islands in historical times.

The islands present us with still more problems, however. Was there a primary division between Northern Chumash and a proto-Southern Chumash, with subsequent split between the Central and Island groups. Or is the three-way split itself original—and ancient? Were the Chumash initially land-based (and if so, where?), with an expansion

along the coast and out to the islands, with a concomitant development of marine culture in which the Northern Chumash did not share? Or was the first Chumash landfall in California in fact the islands, with subsequent movement to the mainland? Whenever Chumash speakers first inhabited the islands, what other earlier inhabitants (if any) did they encounter?

As a linguist, I can't presently answer these questions based solely on the information at my disposal, though the data are suggestive about some of the outlines. However, linguists are wise to remember the so-called "Teeter's law," i.e., that the dialect that one is working on at the moment is the most archaic dialect. Sometimes, when I'm looking at Obispeño, I almost convince myself that the Chumash "homeland," if you will, was in the northern portion of present Chumash territory; when I look at Ventureño, I just know that the Chumash had to have stopped there first. And when I come to the island material, it can be tempting to think that they started life in California there. I'm here today to ask all of you to share your insights and research with us linguists, and to promise to help you in any way I can, to illuminate this aspect of the history and ecology of the Channel Islands.

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SOURCES OF UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL