Pismo and Nipomo: Two Northern Chumash Place-Names*

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AMONG THE FEW EVIDENT reminders that the land of California was not always inhabited mainly by people of European origin are the place-names which have as their sources the languages of the state's numerous Indian groups.

In Southern California, from Los Angeles to just north of San Luis Obispo, the land was occupied, at the time of the European arrival, by Chumash Indians. There were three distinct linguistic divisions within the group, which may by called Northern, Central and Island Chumash, with a few further subdivisions. The last speaker of any Chumash dialect died in 1965; her language was Barbareño, one of the Central Chumash dialects and the most well-documented of any Chumash. Good and extensive material is also available on Ventureño and Ineseño, Central Chumash dialects similar to but certainly not identical with Barbareño. For the fourth main Central Chumash dialect, Purisimeño, good material is available; unfortunately, it is very limited in quantity. For Island Chumash there exist only a few word lists, none very extensive. The present study, however, is not concerned specifically with any of the aforementioned groups, but rather with the third division of the family, Northern Chumash; and in particular with two place-names within the territory of this group, Pismo and Nipomo. As far as can be presently determined, the Northern Chumash (or Obispeño as they are frequently called) occupied an area along the coast from approximately the mouth of the Santa Maria River in the south to the northern end of Morro Bay, around Cayucos. The exact territorial boundaries, especially the inland ones, are not known.[1]

The situation with regard to documentation of the Obispeño language lies in between the extensive records for Barbareño and other Central Chumash dialects and the extremely limited records of Island speech.

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[1] A.L. Kroeber, however, suggests the following territorial limits, based on geographical factors: the inland boundary was the crest of La Panza Mountain Range, the southern boundary was just north of the Santa Maria River, and the northern boundary, where Chumash territory met that of the Salinan Indians, followed an approximate east-west line from Cayucos to where it met with La Panza Mountain Range. This territorial designation has never been either conclusively proven or disproven. See A.L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California,* U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin no. 78, Plate 1 (Indians of California by Stock and Tribe), 1925.

The first known recording of Obispeño was by Pedro Fages, a Catalan who later became the first governor of the new Spanish territory of Alta California. In 1769 Fages was a member of the Portolá expedition which began the establishment of a chain of Franciscan missions in California. During the course of their journey northward, the expedition members encountered many Indian groups, and records were occasionally made of a few words of their speech. Either at this time or in a later journey through this part of California, Fages recorded the 70 items which comprise his Obispeño vocabulary. The document which contains them is itself dated November 20, 1775.[2]

The lengthiest of the early records of Obispeño is that collected by the Franciscan missionary Felipe Arroyo de la Cuesta. Father Arroyo, who served in California from 1808 until his retirement in 1833, left records of numerous California languages including several Chumash, Yokuts and Costanoan dialects as well as Luiseño, Esselen and Salinan. The manuscripts containing Father Arroyo's records are currently in the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. At this time, the Obispeño data remain unpublished.

Perhaps the least-known of all the early Obispeño recordings is that of a Dublin physician, Dr. Thomas Coulter, who "resided for several years"[3] in California during the 1830's. This record consists of 61 glosses; Obispeño forms are supplied for 46 of them. The Obispeño is included in a comparative list along with six other Southern California languages.[4]

The next documentation of Obispeño comes from Eugene Duflot de Mofras, an agent of the French government sent to California 1840-42 to describe and evaluate the western territories of the North American continent and to assess France's chances for acquiring California (among others) when Mexican control of the territory ceased. The Obispeño recorded by Duflot de Mofras consists only of the numerals from one to ten.[5]

Several decades later, H.W. Henshaw, while working with the Powell Survey of American Indian languages, recorded a vocabulary of Obispeño consisting of approximately 500 items.[6] J.W. Powell notes, "In

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[2] H.I. Priestly, trans., *A Historical, Political, and Natural Description of California by Pedro Fages, Soldier of Spain.* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1937.

[3] J. Scouler, "Observations on the Indigenous Tribes of the N.W. Coast of America," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, vol. 11, 1841, pp. 215-51. The passage quoted is from page 229.

[4] In Scouler's designations, Pima, San Diego, San Juan Capistrano, San Grabriel, Santa Barbara and San Antonio.

[5] Eugene Duflot de Mofras, *Exploration du Territoire de l'Oregon, des Californies et de la Mer Vermeille* (Executee Pendant Las Annees 1840, 1841 et 1842), Paris, 1844.

[6] R.F. Heizer, ed., *The Mission Indian Vocabularies of H.W. Henshaw*, Anthropological Records 15:2, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1952.

1884 Mr. Henshaw visited the several counties formerly inhabited by the populous tribes of [the Chumashan] family and discovered that about forty men, women, and children survived."[7]

Each of these early vocabularies is transcribed in a different system reflecting the linguistic bias of the recorder, be it French, Spanish or English. The vocabularies more often than not contain overlapping information. However, the last recording of Obispeño we come to is different in both respects. It is transcribed in a standard phonetic alphabet (basically that of the International Phonetic Association) and in terms of volume and variety of information far surpasses any of the early records. This is the unpublished field material collected by the late American ethnologist John P. Harrington, who worked with the last known native speaker of Obispeño, Mrs. Rosario Cooper of Arroyo Grande, California.

Harrington had early developed a love for the Chumash family of languages, and in the years 1914-54,[8] while working for the U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology, he devoted countless hours to recording and learning what he could of the dying dialects. He had worked on them on his own for several years before joining the Bureau; following his retirement in 1954, he continued working on the only one of them still surviving at that time, Barbareño. It is from Harrington's work with the last Obispeño speaker in 1914, 1915 and 1916 that we derive our most extensive and best records of this language. Unless otherwise specified, it is from Harrington's notes that the data in this study is taken.[9]

One of the entries in Fages' 70-word list reads: "Pismù El chapopote."[10] Priestley, in his edition of the Fages manuscript, glosses "El chapopote" as "The tar (*brea*)." This is confirmed by Harrington, who gives [pismu?] "tar, brea." This word is cited by Gudde in connection with the source of the name Pismo, which occurs in the names Pismo Beach, Pismo Creek, Pismo Lake and Pismo State Park.[11] This in itself is an entirely plausible etymon; the Indians used tar (asphaltum) for decorating and caulking their baskets and boats. According to archaeologist Roberta Greenwood, speaking specifically of the Obispeño area, "There was abundant evidence for the use of asphaltum, for which

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[7] J.W. Powell, "Indian Linguistic Families," *Annual Report of the U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology*, vol. 7 (1885-6), p. 68.

[8] These dates are obtained from the *Annual Reports of the U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology* for the years cited.

[9] The Harrington materials on Obispeño and several other Chumash dialects are currently on loan from the Smithsonian Institution to the Department of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley.

[10] Priestley, *op.cit.*, p. 82. The citation given in this study is from the Fages ms.; Priestley's entry with his gloss of Fages' Spanish reads, "Pismu The tar (*brea*) chapopote."

[11] E.G. Gudde, *California Placenames*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969, p. 248.

there are many local sources."[12] One of these "sources" could easily have been located at or near any of the various places currently bearing the name Pismo, or on the site of the Mexican land grant of the same name. But a more detailed analysis, and one which has more the flavor of a usual Chumash place-name, is possible.

The Obispeño form for "to be black, dark" is [piso?]. This occurs in formations such as [spiso?] "it is dark" < [s-] third person singular prefix + [piso?]. When it occurs reduplicated for emphasis, as in [spis^{h}piso?] "it is very dark," or in combination with another segment, as in [pismono?] "thundercloud" (lit. "dark (and) strong"), it shows the combining form [pis-] or [pis^{h}-].[13] The segment [-mu?], which occurs in nearly all the Chumash dialects, is a "locative nominalizer" or "instrumental" suffix: that is, it can either make a noun of location from a verb or noun, or it can turn a verb or noun into an agentive form. In the case of Pismo, an original [piso?] + [-mu?] became, through the rules of combination discussed above, [pismu?], lit. "dark place" or "dark stuff" (that is, a place where there is "dark stuff" or tar). When the Spanish adopted this Indian word into their language, they applied their own phonological rules, one of which is that Spanish words do not end in unstressed [u] except in a few "learned" cases such as *espíritu.* The Spaniards thus changed the final [u] to [o].[14]

For Nipomo, which occurs as the name of a town in San Luis Obispo County, as well as in Nipomo Valley, Nipomo Creek and Nipomo Hill, I know of no previous reference to a possible etymon except for Gudde's statement that it was the name of a Chumash rancheria (village).[15] The availability of good data on Obispeño makes a solution possible, however. The <-mo> is the same locative suffix [-mu?] which occurs in Pismo. <Nipo-> represents one of the forms of the Obispeño word for "house," which Harrington records as [nipu] or [qnipu].[16] Thus, [nipu] + [-mu?] becomes [nipumu?] "house place, village," which becomes in Spanish [nipomo].[17] Other Chumash dialects show exactly parallel construc-

[12] R. Greenwood, *9000 Years of Prehistory at Diablo Canyon, San Luis Obispo County, California,* San Luis Obispo County Archaeological Society, Occasional Paper no. 7, 1972, p. 47.

[13] The presence of aspiration as indicated by [^{h}] is not significant to the meaning in this case, although in other Chumash forms it sometimes is.

[14] In addition, many Spanish words end in a segment <-ismo>; a change from [u] to [o] would be especially logical in the case of Pismo by analogy with other "<-ismo>" words in Spanish, as well as the general prohibition of final [u] in the language.

[15] Gudde, *op.cit.*, p. 222.

[16] Among the Chumash dialects, Obispeño is distinguished by the frequency with which it shows initial, complex consonant clusters where the other dialects do not. Though the usual form for "house" is [qnipu], [nipu] is also attested. The initial [q-] is a presently unanalyzable prefix which occurs in many Obispeño words.

[17] As in the case of Pismo, we can assume more than one factor to be operating in the lowering of [u] to [o]. There is no constraint that would require that the first [u] in [nipumu?], as well as the second, be lowered; thus, a form *[nipumo] could be expected in Spanish. For historical reasons, however, Spanish words ending

tions:[18]

Ineseño:	[ʔapʰaniš] "town, village; tribe, nation" + [-muʔ] > [ʔapʰanišmuʔ] "home, where one lives"
Barbareño:	[ʔapʰaniš] "buildings" + [-mu] > [ʔapʰanišmu] "village"
Cruzeño (Island):	[ʔawa] "house" + [-ʔaṁu] > [ʔawaʔaṁu] "rancheria, village"

All of these words have the sense of "a place where there are houses" or by extension, a "village."

There is no doubt that this process, using a noun or verb in combination with [-muʔ], was a common pattern for the formation of place-names among the very diverse Chumash dialects. This fact, along with data from a linguistically reliable source such as Harrington, allows us to propose etymologies for two place-names whose origins were previously obscure. There are still a number of place-names in this same geographical area whose origins are obviously not from English or Spanish and may therefore be assumed to have come from Indian languages of the area. These include Temettate Creek, Casmalia, Sisquoc, Mt. Lospe, Huasna Valley, Tepusquet Peak, and Machesna. Further research on the little-known Chumash family of languages will hopefully make clear statements of their origins possible.

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in <-omo> are more frequent than those ending in <-umo>. This is similar to the influence of <-ismo>, discussed above.

[18] The Ineseño data are from the unpublished Ineseño lexicon of Richard Applegate. The Barbareño data are from personal communication with Madison Beeler. The Cruzeño (Island) data are from the currently unpublished field notes of John P. Harrington.