

A Semantic Class in the Great Basin

THOMAS L. CLARK

SINCE H. L. MENCKEN gave his listing of eight leaky classes of place-naming, a number of theories and taxonomies for categorizing place-names have been suggested.¹ Early on, onomasticians had difficulty with the overlap of categories described by Mencken. For example, the place-name *Tecopah* is at once a descriptive name, a commemorative name, and an Indian name. Onomasticians, prior to that time, had been interested in giving as full and complete a description of listings of names as possible. Such was to be expected, since a description of general naming patterns had to wait for the collection of a respectable body of data. European scholars in the early years of this century had quite an advantage over students of naming in the United States. Their collecting had a long tradition behind it, while the United States did not have a formal society devoted to naming study until 1951.² But by 1954, scholars in this country were able to pull together both data and theory. Citing all work done in description and theory would require too much space; but a few citations can indicate the general trend of recent scholarship.

Early contemporary work by George Stewart helped give direction to onomastic theory and patterning.³ This does not imply that exhaustive work was not being done by others in descriptive methodology, but Stewart represents the modern strain in contemporary theory and description. Fundamental work in patterns of nomenclature appeared shortly afterward in articles by Meredith Burrill.⁴ By cataloging toponymic generics by label and meaning, Burrill demonstrated the occurrence of distinctive nomenclature regions and subregions for the same label. Differences in definitions for the same generic term can be mapped. But the reasons for the differences in meaning may be a bit

¹ H. L. Mencken, *The American Language*, abridged by Raven I. McDavid, Jr. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 643ff.

² Margaret M. Bryant, "After 25 Years of Onomastic Study," *Names*, 24:1 (March, 1976), 30-55.

³ George R. Stewart, "A Classification of Place Names," *Names*, 2:1 (March, 1954), 1-13.

⁴ Meredith F. Burrill, "Toponymic Generics I," *Names*, 4:3 (September, 1956), 129-137, and "Toponymic Generics II," *Names*, 4:4 (December, 1956), 226-40.

more complex. Two reasons immediately suggest themselves. The first has to do with settlement patterns. As people moved from one part of the country to another, there would be a tendency to give a generic term to a feature almost, but not exactly, like one back home. "Stream" as a replacement for "run" is an example that comes to mind. The second reason is partly accounted for by Burrill, who points out that the feature responsible for the generic label may disappear after the naming has taken place. This is common with water-related features. An additional consideration must be that the geological context in which the feature occurs may differ from the context in another part of the country. This is found, for example, with the term *coulee*, and its relationship to former glaciated areas. It may be that the core meaning in the generic term could help resolve category conflicts.

By the late 1960s, work on taxonomies had progressed to the point that the descriptive methodology for place-name study was well in hand. For example, Fred Tarpley could employ an encompassing typology in his work.⁵ He could list and cross-list by type of feature, foreign language source, and category of derivation. The next step was a refinement of categories and sub-categories, accompanied by components designed to elucidate the reasons for naming practices. Vivian Zinkin, for example, demonstrated the value of identifying the specific label and the generic label in a single component.⁶ Both linguistic and cultural concepts were drawn together by Janet H. Gritzner, and Donald Orth incorporated both theory and descriptive methodology.⁷

Dialect variation in the languages of both the giver of place-names and the borrower of place-names has been well described by Hammill Kenny.⁸ He pointed out that the apparently inexplicable alternation of place-names can be accounted for, not by errors of the ear, or alternating perception, or by permutation, but rather as different bands of Indians speaking different dialects to different explorers, surveyors, and settlers. In this country, the people who began westward exploration and settlement often spoke different languages. And by the time parts of the American Southwest were settled, a veritable Babel of languages and dialects were in contact.

⁵ Fred Tarpley, *Place Names of Northeast Texas* (Commerce: East Texas State University Press, 1969).

⁶ Vivian Zinkin, "The Syntax of Place-Names," *Names*, 17:3 (September, 1969), 181-98.

⁷ Janet H. Gritzner, "Seventeenth Century Generic Place-Names: Culture and Process on the Eastern Shore," *Names*, 20:4 (December, 1972), 231-39; Donald Orth, "The Nature of Topographic Terms," *Indiana Names*, 20:3 (September, 1972), 5-18.

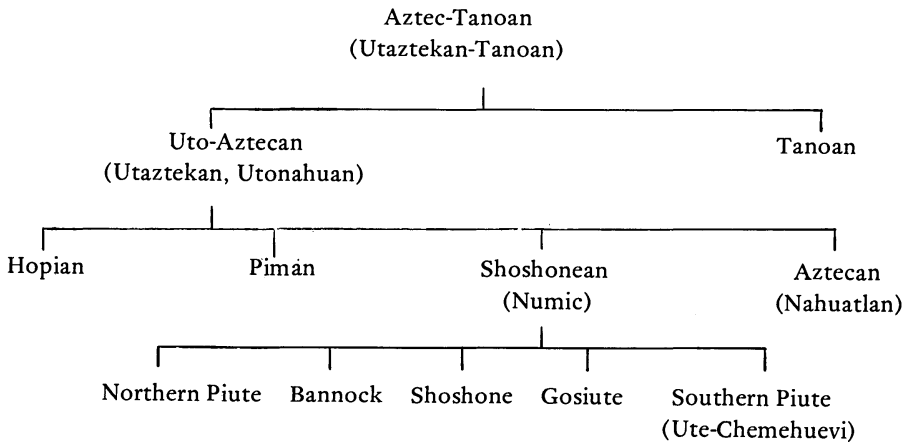
⁸ Hammill Kenny, "Place Names and Dialects: Algonquian," *Names*, 24:2 (June, 1976), 86-100.

Since settlement and mining are determined by the presence or absence of water, a disproportionate number of place-name features are water-related. Large land features like mountains will be dotted with dozens of names related to springs, wells, creeks, and washes.⁹ These smaller features sometimes carry the original label, sometimes are assigned new sobriquets which become the standard name when the mapmakers arrive. Naming patterns in the Great Basin reflect the important role of water.

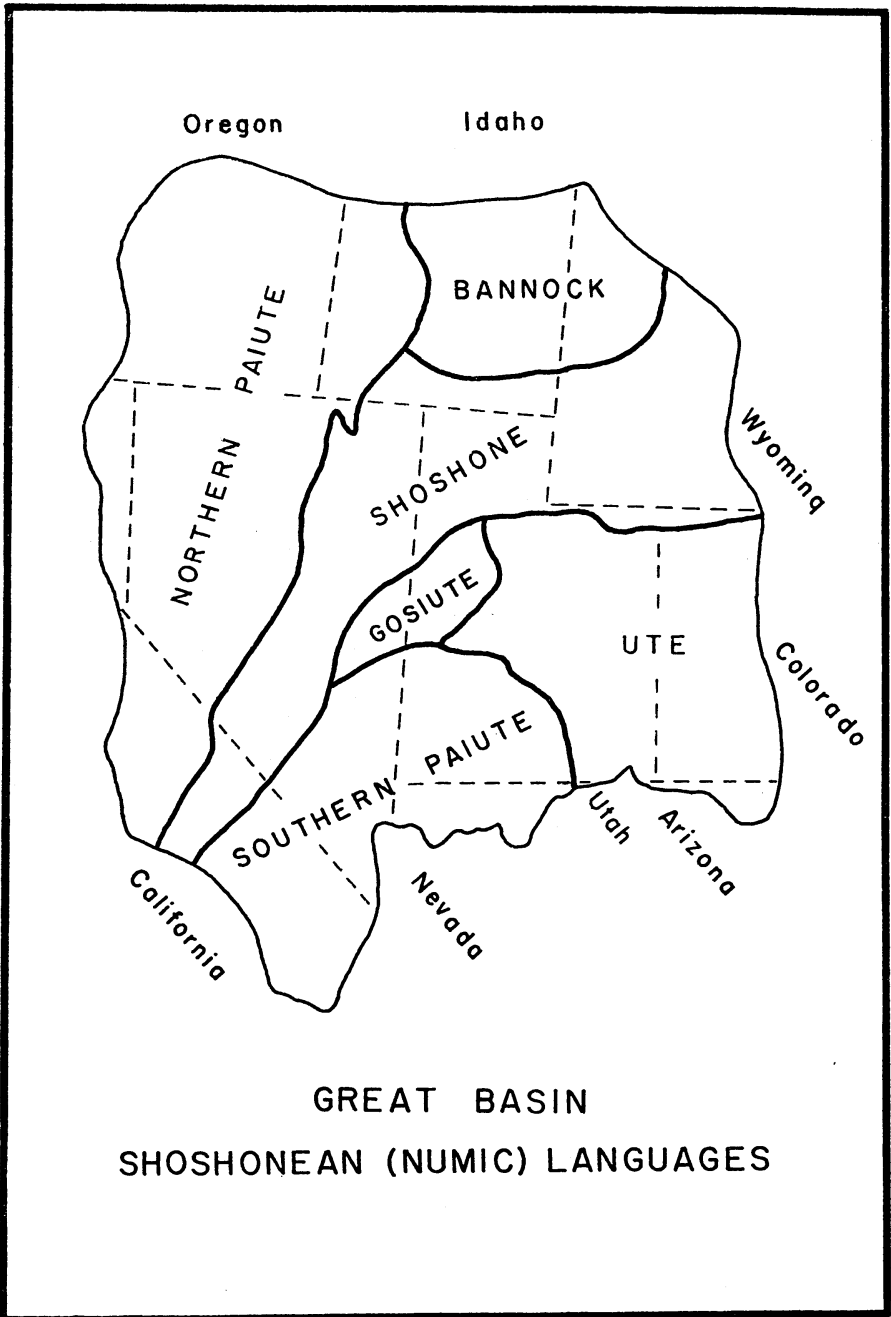
The designation *Great Basin* itself indicates the importance of water, since the term designates an area of internal drainage: water flows into the Great Basin and remains. There is no outlet to the sea. The accompanying map illustrates the eight states which lie wholly or partially within the Great Basin.

The Uto-Aztecán (variously Utaztekan or Utonahuan) grouping of languages includes the Shoshonean (or Numic) branch. The accompanying language tree is a compilation of work done by a number of anthropologists and linguists, hence the variations.

LANGUAGES OF THE GREAT BASIN



⁹ Cf. Celia M. Millward, "Universals in Place-Name Generics," *Indiana Names*, 3:2 (June, 1972), 48-53.



The Shoshonean subfamily includes a number of closely related, and for the most part, mutually intelligible languages. But, as in all related tongues, some morphemes cross a number of languages, depending on the frequency and importance of the term. We see this regularly with kinship terms. In the arid environment of the Great Basin, terms for water were frequent and important. Shoshonean bands were mainly desert dwellers and lived in oases of various types. The Piutes (*Pab Utes* “water people”) were aptly named. That a term for water is part of their self-designation and identity bespeaks the importance of the precious commodity. So pervasive is the generic for water that I have found only one Piute label that does not contain the *pab* morph. *Toquop wash* “black tobacco,” used as tobacco by the Piutes, refers to a weed growing in the area. But even this label refers to a feature which has only occasional water. All Piute place-names referring to year-round springs or ground water retain the generic *pab*.

Since the Piutes were nomadic, moving from one watering and harvesting spot to another, white settlers were the first permanent residents in many areas. Permanency, however, is a risky word to use in any ore-rich mining region. Places like Sweet Spring, Goodsprings, Blacksprings, and Lathrop Wells were settlements only for as long as the water (or silver) held out. But before these settlements became ghost towns, their new names were sufficiently justified by usage to replace the earlier Piute names on maps. The only place-names to be found on maps of some regions of Nevada are those which determine the location of springs. In the *Directory of Geographic Names in Nevada* no fewer than 2,531 names, or 33 percent of the total listed, have *spring* or *creek* as part of the name.¹⁰

In the Great Basin, more than 160 place-names with *pab* or one of its variants occur. Of these, 46, nearly one-third of the total, are some version of *Piute*. Nearly all of the names using *Piute* were named by explorers or settlers as commemoratives. While some of the names relate directly to water, as in *Piute Springs*, *Piute Creek*, *Piute Lake*, and *Piute River*, a good many of them do not: *Piute Mesa*, *Piute Valley*, *Piute Ranch*, *Piute Butte*, and so on with Peak, Wash, Pass, Canyon and the like.

Variants in like names reflect a spelling change dependent on phonological variation and perception.¹¹ *Piute* has the variants (in descending

¹⁰ *Directory of Geographic Names in Nevada* (Carson City, Nevada: Cartographic Section, State Department of Highways, 1971). This is the source for current name variants.

¹¹ Variants are from Helen Carlson, *Nevada Place Names: A Geographical Dictionary* (Reno:

order of frequency) *Pabute*, *Paiute*, *Pab-Ute*, and *Pautch*. The morpho-phonemic shape for "water" in Proto-Shoshoni is /pa-/.¹² Since this form, with vowel lengthening, is common to all dialects, early writers without phonological training would have recorded length in the only way they could, by spelling the low-central lengthened vowel *ab*. The *pab* form was the earliest and most common form of spelling. The phonemic shape for *Piute* would be /pa-ˈjut/, with stress on the second syllable. Since length is not phonemic in English, contiguous assimilation of *Piute* /a-j/ to the English diphthong /ai/ was to be expected. Frequency of occurrence, along with a desire to regularize variants, led to the simplified spelling form. The variant *Pautch* occurs only once, as an alternate name for *Beaver Dam Wash*. Jedediah Smith, an early trapper and explorer, encountered a band of Indians at the head of the wash, and recorded the form in his journal.¹³ The idiosyncratic form suggests two interesting points about Smith's own pronunciation: he used /au/ for /ai/ and /č/ for /ts/.

The elision of *b* is found in other variants. *Yampab*, *Yampa* "root water" is a tribal name and the name of a plateau. *Yucaipab*, *Yucaipa* "wet or marshy land" may refer also to the edible part of the yucca, a plant which marks the boundaries of the Mohave Desert.¹⁴ An analogous formation is *Iosepab*, *Iosepa*, a town in Utah named for Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon church. The label was modeled on the Gosiute language by Hawaiian converts to Mormonism who settled the area in 1889.

Four variants account for more than a dozen names. *Pabrum*, *Pab-Rum*, *Pabrump*, and *Pabrimp* "water stone, rock" are found in widely scattered areas. Variant spellings obviously account for the first two. The two latter seem to vary because the postvocalic /mp/ cluster may front and raise the vowel from a central position. A similar occurrence is found in *Timpabute* and *Tempiute* "rock, stone water" where the

University of Nevada Press, 1974); Ralph V. Chamberlin, "Place and Personal Names of the Gosiute Indians of Utah," *American Philosophical Society Proceedings*, 52 (1913), 1-20; Will C. Barnes, *Arizona Place Names*, rev. by Byrd H. Granger (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1960); Erwin G. Gudde, *California Place Names*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); A. L. Kroeber, "California Place Names of Indian Origin," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 12, no. 2 (1916), 31-69; George R. Stewart, *American Place-Names* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

¹² Wick R. Miller, James L. Tanner, and Lawrence P. Foley, "A Lexicostatistical Study of Shoshoni Dialects," *Anthropological Linguistics*, 13, no. 4 (1971), 147.

¹³ Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953), p. 238.

¹⁴ Jeanne W. Clark, "Paleoclimate in the Great Basin," unpublished ms., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1973.

central vowel in the first syllable is raised in the environment of the alveolar /t/. The Shoshonean vowel system has fewer contrasts in the high front and central vowels than does English. Consequently, those who first transcribed the names heard a sound like a fronted schwa, and transcribed the /ə/ as *Pabrump* /pə'ɾʌmp/ and *Pabranagut* "water valley" (later spelled *Pabranagat*) on analogy with *rump*, *gut*, and *temperature* /'tɪmpəʒər/.¹⁵

While Shoshoni does have a schwa, the tendency in English is to centralize vowels. In Nevada, one hears variously /pə'ɾʌmp/ and syncoated /pɾʌmp/. Frequency of use may have more to do with pronunciation than would a phonological rule. People refer more often to *Pabrump*, a town west of Las Vegas than to *Pabroc* "water underground," but I have no evidence of /pə'ɾʌk/ or /pɾʌk/ rather than /pə'ɾak/. Likewise, polysyllabic *Pabranagat* is regularly /pə'ɾæniɡət/.

The alternate form of *Pabroc* is *Pabrock*, which appears to be spelled on analogy with *rock*, final *c* being rare in English except in weak syllables. *Rock* suggests a restressing. Another form is *Pab Rab*, which has the same meaning in Chemehuevi as the former has in Southern Piute. Since the glottal stop is phonemic in Piute, a transcriber might easily hear a stronger articulation as /k/. There are other alternate spellings that account for other variants, *Quichpah*, *Quitcpah* "dung-water," cf. *which*, *witch*, and the *a/u* alternation in *Pabranagat* and *Pabranagut*. Distant regressive assimilation may account for the replacement of *Ibipah* by later *Ibapah* "clay (colored) water" and of earlier *Illipah* by *Illapah* "rock water (spring)"; it is at least as plausible that the same phenomenon at work in *Missouri* and *Cincinnati* accounts for the variants.¹⁶ *Pahcoon* "hot water (spring)" has become the normalized spelling for a number of earlier variants. *Pa-a-Coon* reflects the lengthened vowel, *Pab-Ghoon* and *Pab-Ghun* may represent fortis in articulation or the tendency to voice intervocalic stops in English, while *Pab Coon* and *Pakoon* are simple spelling variants. *Tupapa Seep*, *Topopah Spring*, and *Tippipah* "emerging water" represent dialect difference. They are, respectively Southern Piute, Shoshone, and Bannock.

Hybrid forms of place-names with *pah* are scarce, though a number

¹⁵ Compare also *Dinwiddie* and *Dunwoody*, *Milligan* and *Mulligan*.

One howler is found in Walter R. Averett, *Directory of Southern Nevada Place Names* (Las Vegas: by the author, 1962), p. 78, where the etymon for *Tempiute*, on mistaken analogy with *temperature*, is given as "sick Indian."

¹⁶ Cf. George B. Pace, "Linguistic Geography and Names Ending in ⟨i⟩," *American Speech*, 35 (1960), 175-87.

of names are composed of the *pab* form with an English generic: *Pab Wash*, *Pab Spring*, *Pab Summit*, and *Pab Seep*. *Windypab* is the name of a mining district in the Palmetto Mountains. *Nopab* is the name assigned by the Pacific Railroad Survey to an arid range in California. Water had to be carried along that section of the survey.

As in all place-name studies, the importance of etymology in support of naming patterns was made apparent while examining words with *pab*. One would be immediately suspicious of forms too distant from the language area, e.g. *Rappahannock*, Virginia or *Tampa*, Florida. But right in the main area of concentration of *pab* names in Nevada stands the Mizpah Hotel in Tonopah. This is the most colorful and widely known establishment between Las Vegas and Reno, and a halfway point for travelers. *Mizpah* (variously *Mizapah*, *Mispah*, *Mezpah*) is at once the name of a hotel, a post office, a ghost town, a well, a mine claim, a mining district, and of streets in Las Vegas and Reno. However, as Bible readers know, the name has nothing to do with Piute; it is Hebrew and means "high place" in the context of a watchtower or beacon. Nor is the name, in turn, to be confused with *Mazepa*, a canyon and a mine, which was the name of a play (derived from Byron's poem) performed at Virginia City in February of 1863.

One problem with Great Basin Indian names obtains whenever one wishes to do thorough research on any Indian names. The aboriginal names are sometimes difficult to distinguish from commemoratives or names put on the land by settlers or surveyors. For example, *Inkopab* "mountain water" was created by the California Department of Highways, while *Chayopooyapab* "bullrush creek" and *Tabeechaypab* Pass "frozen water" were names created by workers on the Pacific Railroad Survey and probably have little to do with the original Piute designation, if indeed any people from the Shoshonean group even had a designation for the features. Conversely, a number of features have no English label, and the Indian label is not used on maps, as Chamberlin has pointed out in his survey. In addition, a single name may spawn a dozen more in a few days or weeks, as was the case during periods of rapid mining developments. *Tonopab* "greasewood water" designated a fresh water spring rising from a patch of creosote, or greasewood, brush. Shortly after the silver rush in that area, 11 names (and a hybrid, *Tonogold*) could be found, only one of which designated a spring.

When conflicting or unclear etyma are supplied, one must range farther afield. *Weepab* "knife water" carried the legend that the stream referred to a place where a murder weapon was thrown. But *Pahaweap* "water in a canyon" was a designation for a portion of the Grand

Canyon, and *Tonoweep* and *Toroweap* “greasewood wash” refer to watercourses with steep sides. Since *Weepab* is the same type of feature, the likelihood is that the designation refers to a sharply cut channel or wash, as though the water cut through like a knife. Likewise, *Pariab*, *Paria*, *Pabreah* were either “elk water” or “dirty water.” *Moapa*, *Moa-pariat* refers to “mosquito river people.” The alternate form for the feature is *Muddy River*. The river is muddy and marshy and a breeding ground for mosquitos. Thus the designation for elk appears to be misleading. The first part of *Ivanpab* is given variously as “dove,” “clear,” or “white,” and contemporary descriptions dwell on the clarity of the water, so “dove” would indicate a quality of lightness. *Tecopa*, *Tekopa* “high water” is a spring which rises on a peak in California, but six places which carry the name were all named for a Southern Piute chief. Only incidentally did one of the features happen to be a mountain-top spring.

Outside of the Great Basin a number of names with *pab*, or a variation can be found. To the Southwest, a half-dozen Uto-Aztec languages supply place-names, some retained and some created by later surveyors and settlers. To the Southwest, in Arizona, languages unrelated to the Shoshonean group are found, but the languages themselves are intriguing: Walapai (Hualapi), Havasupai, Yavapai, and Maricopa are Yuman languages. Whether the final syllable in each of these languages is a morpheme glossed “water” is still a matter of conjecture. Some names indicate Piute influence, for example, *Parishawampitt* “boiling water,” the name of a canyon in Arizona. Others, however, are perhaps influenced by Piute, or borrowings. For example, *Hassayampa* is “hidden water,” but a Yuman word. *Arivaipab* refers to a creek, a fort, and a tribe. The word is said to be Piman for “girl” but more likely is Papagoan for “small spring.” Within the Great Basin, a few place-names are not well enough documented to determine the etymology or whether the naming source was Indian or surveyor or settler.

The survey of the *pab* form in the Great Basin resulted in two encouraging observations and one disappointment. First, retained Shoshonean names which refer to water consistently use *pab*. The indication is that Great Basin natives used a semantic determination for naming water features. Second, non-Indians who created or adopted Shoshonean names for features other than watercourses only occasionally recalled the semantic class reflected in *pab*. Such a practice might well be expected by anyone using borrowed names. The interesting point is that surveyors sometimes made a conscious effort to reflect the Shoshonean meaning in their naming practices. The one disappointment

in the survey stemmed from the hope that regional dialect variations in Shoshonean tongues would be reflected in retained Indian names. But evidence from variants of the same name is too shadowy to be conclusive.

University of Nevada

NECROLOGY

The Secretary-Treasurer regretfully announces the deaths of the following members:

William Ashton, in Helena, Montana on February 6, 1978.

Ephriam Cross, in New York City on January 15, 1978.

Alfred Senn, in Willimantic, Connecticut on February 9, 1978.