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THE HISTORY OF THE TERM “PENUTIAN”

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In this paper I do not directly address the validity, nature or scope of the Penutian linguistic relationship. Instead, I take the reader on a short onomastic expedition, and ask: Where did the term “Penutian” come from? What has it been used to designate in the past? What does it designate now? And where (if only by implication) might the term go in the future? This may seem like a history of the concept in a nominalist guise, and perhaps it is, but I intend to approach the topic more in the spirit of a librarian or archivist than as a historian of ideas.

1. WHERE DID THE NAME COME FROM? Most linguists know that Dixon and Kroeber invented “Penutian” to label one of the three super-Powellian units of their 1913 reclassification of California Indian languages.¹ As they put it in 1919:

It was necessary to find names for the new groups or families. To extend the designation of one member of each group to the entire group would have been as misleading, in the end, as it would have been to name the tongues of Europe “Sanskritan.” Binary designations of the type of Indo-Germanic, Ural-Altaiic, and Uto-Aztekan were likely to prove unrepresentative, and certain to be clumsy. There seemed no recourse, accordingly, but to new and therefore arbitrary designations of the types of “Semitic”; and genealogical as well as national appellations being wanting in the native Californian field, and none of a geographical character applicable, the family names proposed were based on forms of the numeral “two” in the families of speech involved (Dixon and Kroeber 1919:54).

The family that consisted of “the Wintun, Maidu, Yokuts, Miwok, and Costanoan families as previously recognized” was dubbed PEN-UTI-AN by generalizing the forms in the two resemblant sets for “two” in their data:

#152 Wintuan pale-t, pampa-ta; Maidu pene, pen; Yokuts punoi, pono, pongoi, and pungo
(= PEN)

#153 Miwok oti-ko, oyo-ke, ossa, otta; Costanoan utsi-n, uti-n, uthi-n, utxi-n, and uti-s (= UTI)

2. PENUTIAN AS A CALIFORNIA FAMILY. Kroeber, the coiner of the term, was reluctant for many years to use “Penutian” to refer to any genetic group beyond the five California families. In this, he diverged from Sapir (as we shall see below) as early as 1915. After the publication of Sapir’s “superstock” classification in 1921, in which “Penutian” was used to label a much larger group, Kroeber’s narrow usage became stubbornly idiosyncratic. Thus, we find him using “Penutian” in the strictly California sense throughout his *California Handbook* (1925); in *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America* (1939); and in the second edition of his general anthropology textbook (1948). None of these works even refer to Sapir’s or any other linguist’s broader application of “Penutian”.

This terminological conservatism reflected Kroeber’s deep skepticism about the validity of phylum-level genetic classification. This was expressed most strongly in a paper published in 1940:

The inspectional method has pushed certain relationships into the realm of very high probability....In this category...are the Hokan and Penutian groupings of Dixon and myself. [But] as soon...as the closely

¹ Although I follow scholarly usage and refer to the coinage as a joint effort by the two co-authors, there is every reason to believe that Kroeber was the primary if not the sole creator of the three new family names.

contiguous California Penutian languages are left behind, and one compares them with, say, Kus in Oregon, the inspectional method begins to leave us in the lurch....A step farther to Chinook...and inspectional resemblances have disappeared altogetherEssentially what Sapir is doing when he connects Hokan and Siouan, or Chinook and Penutian, is to perceive structural resemblances (Kroeber 1940: 465-6).²

In passing, Kroeber remarks on the “coined syncopated words” like “Hokaltecan” or “Otomanguean” that were then coming into fashion. He hopes that

the unwary cultural anthropologists will not bandy these shiny new counters about as if they were validated coin of the realm instead of merely provisional tokens whose right to currency remains to be determined by their general acceptance....I have myself had a hand in fathering “Penutian,” which is an equally arbitrary compound. Many of the new compounds, however, represent merely an opinion, and they are being introduced in considerable number, bearing a form similar to that of names of proved families (Kroeber 1940: 470).

If (in Kroeber’s view at least) the strictly California Penutian relationship had “very high probability,” the term “Penutian” so applied was intellectual coinage of proven value. By implication, the use of the term, by Sapir and others, for a “phylum” of heterogeneous languages scattered from Alaska to Honduras (if not further) could only debase it.

In the decade or so following the Second World War, “Penutian” was used in the narrow Kroeberian sense by a number of linguists and anthropologists associated with Kroeber or with Berkeley. Most significantly, the linguists associated with our very own Survey of California (and Other) Indian Languages followed Kroeber’s usage well into the early 1960s, at least in their published work. Thus, Harvey Pitkin and Bill Shipley begin their “Comparative Survey of California Penutian” with the statement:

In the discussion which follows, the term Penutian will be used to designate the languages of California to which Dixon and Kroeber originally applied the name (Pitkin and Shipley 1958:174).

Bill Shipley introduces his *Maidu Grammar* (1964) by stating that:

Maiduan is a Penutian family, clearly (though distantly) related to Yokuts, Wintun, the Miwok languages, and Costanoan (Shipley 1964:2).

In a variation on the theme, Sydney Lamb in 1959 dubbed the California Penutian relationship “Pen-Uti”. (Lamb proposed a rationalized nomenclature for North American genetic relationships in which all family-level units were to be named with a binary term on the “Indo-Germanic” model. Plateau Penutian was “Klamath-Sahaptian”; Oregon Penutian was “Coos-Takelman”. The California languages, by similar logic, constituted the “Pen-Uti” family.)

But Kroeber’s mind was never closed, and in the 1950s, the last decade of his long and productive life, he revisited the question of deep genetic classification. Partly owing to a strong interest in Morris Swadesh’s glottochronological work, Kroeber came at last to accept the possibility that “extra-California” Penutian connections could be proven. And with this came, finally, a shift in his terminology: the California relationship is now “California Penutian”, while “Penutian” is something larger. This shift is seen very clearly in the following passage from one of his last publications on California ethnography, an essay on “Recent Ethnic Spreads” (1959). After referring to his treatment of the “Penutian Family” in his 1925 *Handbook*, he continues:

We do not know where the California Penutian languages originated. They seem more similar to one another than to any extra-California languages recognized as Penutian, but....it remains possible that

² Kroeber expressed many of the same reservations, but without direct reference to Sapir, in his presidential address to the LSA, published in 1941.

California Penutian ...split off from other, non-California Penutian elsewhere than California.... But the determination... cannot even be attempted except within the full context of the entire Penutian group (1959:276-77).

As Penutian specialists, especially Bill Shipley, came to adopt the same attitude, so too did their usage change. After the mid-1960s the California languages were almost universally referred to as “California Penutian,” and “Penutian” ceased to be used by linguists to designate solely the California Penutian group. (The only exception I can think of is Otto von Sadovszky, who hypothesizes an improbable relationship between the Ob-Ugric branch of Uralic and the Penutian languages of Central California, with no claim that any other languages called “Penutian” are involved [Sadovszky 1996].)

3. PENUTIAN BEYOND CALIFORNIA. The first, and most successful extension of “Penutian” to a wider relationship was made by Sapir. This usage shows up in correspondence between him and Kroeber as early as 1915, only two years after Dixon and Kroeber’s first announcement, although it did not reach print until 1920.³

In a letter dated April 21, 1915, Sapir tells Kroeber that he is enclosing “145 resemblances between Coos and Takelma on the one hand and Penutian on the other,” using “Penutian” in the California sense. But then he proposes to Kroeber that “we could collaborate on a paper which would show that Takelma and Coos are members of the Penutian stock,” implying that the California term should be used for an expanded relationship. But in a postscript, Sapir appears to have misgivings about the term:

P.P.S. I don’t like ‘Penutian’. In view of Cost[anoan] ama, Yokuts mai, Maidu mai-, Coos mä, I would suggest “Mai” as stock name. Bother -an! Mai stock would be good enough.

One might suspect a little donnish humor here, were it not that—as we will see below—Sapir continued to use this label for at least several months, apparently in all seriousness.

In his somewhat delayed reply (May 29, 1915), Kroeber appears to buy into a possible extension of the term, thanking Sapir for his “evidence as to new ... Penutian affinities”, but he reverts to the narrower sense when he tells Sapir that other commitments prevent him from collaborating in the near future “on a paper connecting Coos and Takelma with Penutian.”

By the end of the year, Sapir’s comparative work had led him to dramatic and far-reaching conclusions, which he summarized to Kroeber in a bubbling letter dated December 9, 1915. However, this letter shows Sapir still reluctant to extend “Penutian” and searching for an alternative. He begins, equivocally, by telling Kroeber that

You may...quote me as maintaining that your Penutian stock is continued in Oregon by Takelma, Coos, and Lower Umpqua (Siuslaw).

But then makes it clear that “Penutian” should mean (if anything) the California relationship:

I strongly surmise that Coos, Siuslaw, and Alsea form a fairly close unit as contrasted with Takelma and with Penutian proper....However...we do not even know if Penutian, as first defined, is really a unit. Takelma may turn out to be coordinate with say Yokuts, not Penutian as such.

In proposing even wider connections he allows himself to use the term loosely:

I now believe this enlarged Penutian stock to travel still further north and to include...Chinook!.... And...I think Tsimshian is the most northern outlying member of the stock.

³ Quotations from Sapir’s and Kroeber’s letters are from Golla (1984).

However, at the end of the letter, in diagramming the relationships that he sees emerging, he uses “Mai” as the overall name for the stock and restricts “Penutian” to its original California scope:

MAI

Penutian Takelma W. Oregon Chin[ook] Tsim[shian]

None of this discussion reached print at the time. The first published allusion to wider “Penutian” relationships appeared in 1918, and came not from Sapir but from Leo Frachtenberg, a linguist working on Oregon languages for the Bureau of American Ethnology. In the second number of *IJAL* Frachtenberg published a paper on “Comparative Studies in Takelman, Kalapuyan and Chinookan Lexicography”, in which he stated that “there exist strong reasons to believe that the Takelman, Kusan, Siuslawan, Yakonan, Kalapuyan, and (perhaps) Chinookan languages spoken in Oregon may be proven to be Penutian sister-tongues” (Frachtenberg 1918:175).

The publication of Frachtenberg’s paper somewhat miffed Sapir—he felt that he was far ahead of Frachtenberg in this area of research—and this, together with the publication of Dixon and Kroeber’s full monograph on their Hokan and Penutian data (1919), stimulated him to prepare a paper of his own, entitled “A Characteristic Penutian Form of Stem” (Sapir 1921a). Sapir sent a manuscript copy of this paper to Kroeber in November 1919, referring to it as his “‘extended-Penutian’ study.” In it Sapir severs “Penutian” from its California usage and applies it unequivocally to a stock that he believes extends from Tsimshian to Yokuts. He writes:

It is, of course, entirely premature to group the Penutian languages genetically, but the following provisional scheme may be of some slight value...

- A. Californian group
- B. Oregon group
- C. Chinookan
- D. Tsimshian

To Sapir now, the “Penutian languages of California” are coordinate with “the Penutian languages of Oregon” as part of “the Penutian languages as a whole.”

The same proposed relationship, with basically the same nomenclature, formed one of the six “great groups” (or “superstocks”, as we have come to call them) that Sapir proposed at the AAAS meeting in December 1920, and that was published as “A Bird’s-Eye View of American Languages North of Mexico” (1921b). The only difference was that the “California group” and the “Oregon group” were explicitly called “California Penutian” and “Oregon Penutian”.

In 1929, when Sapir summarized his general classification in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, he added a final West Coast branch to the Penutian superstock, “Plateau Penutian” (comprising Sahaptin, Molala-Cayuse, and Klamath-Modoc). More important for our nomenclatural survey, the 1929 classification also includes a coordinate “Mexican Penutian” branch, comprising Mixe-Zoque and Huave, and Sapir notes that “both Xinca and Lenca (also Paya and Jicaque?) may be remote southern outliers of the Penutian languages of North America.” In Sapir’s hands “Penutian” has now come to label a relationship of an entirely different order from Dixon and Kroeber’s California grouping of 15 years previously. While the latter is merely a factor in the prehistory of Central California, Sapir’s version of “Penutian” plays a major role on the hemispheric stage:

The Penutian languages, centered in Oregon and California, must early have extended far to the south as they seem to be represented in Mexico and Central America by Mixe-Zoque, Huave, Xinca, and Lenca. These southern offshoots are now cut off from their northern cognate languages by a vast number of intrusive languages, e.g. Hokan and Aztek-Tanoan (Sapir 1929).

Sapir's 1929 classification, minus the Mexican connections, has emerged as the standard version of the stock-level "Penutian" hypothesis in the second half of the 20th century. It was espoused by Hymes in a series of papers from 1954 onwards, and was the working definition of "Penutian" adopted by the Workshop on Comparative Penutian held at Eugene in 1994, coordinated by Scott DeLancey and myself. We reasserted this definition in our special issue of *IJAL* in 1997, and it was adopted by Ives Goddard as the definition of the "proposed Penutian superfamily" in the classification and map accompanying Volume 17 of the *Handbook of North American Indians* (1996).

4. THE MACRO-PENUTIAN PHYLUM. By the mid-1930s a number of younger linguists were following in Sapir's classificatory footsteps, proposing new alignments and configurations with the "syncopated" labels that so irritated Kroeber (1940:470). In 1935-36 two Yale linguists, George Trager and Benjamin Lee Whorf, made an ambitious proposal in which Penutian centrally figured. Since this involved linking Penutian with two other widespread and deeply diversified stocks (Uto-Aztecan and Mayan), they dubbed the relationship a "phylum", implying an older and deeper relationship than anything previously called "Penutian", and labeled the proposal "Macro-Penutian." Whorf briefly alluded to the relationship, without naming it, in his paper on "The Comparative Linguistics of Uto-Aztecan" (Whorf 1935:608), but J. Alden Mason, in his summary of the languages of Central America in *The Maya and their Neighbors*, was apparently the first to publish the term:

Resemblances between Penutian, Uto-Aztecan (Utaztecan), Mayan, Mixe-Zoque-Huave (Mizocuavean), and Totonacan have often been pointed out, and their genetic relationship suggested. B. L. Whorf's recent unpublished critical studies have convinced him the first four should be combined in a phylum which he terms "Macro-Penutian"...the inclusion of Totonac is problematical (Mason 1940:58).

Xinca and Lenca are also provisionally added on the accompanying map (Johnson 1940). Another version of Macro-Penutian, reworked by Trager, was published in 1958 in Trager and Harben's short monograph on North American classification:

Macro-Penutian

1. Penutian
2. Sahaptian
3. Azteco-Tanoan
4. Tunican
5. Mayoid (Mayan)
6. Totonac

In this scheme, "Penutian" is as Sapir had defined it, including Tsimshian and "Mexican Penutian" (Mixe-Zoque and Huave), except for Plateau Penutian, which is treated as a separate branch of the phylum and a link between Penutian and Aztec-Tanoan.

The most far-reaching version of Macro-Penutian—or, in one variant of his terminology, the "Penutioid" phylum—was Morris Swadesh's. Based on idiosyncratic lexicostatistical estimates of genetic closeness, he proposed a chain of relationships down the Pacific coast of both American continents, from Tsimshian in the north to Quechua-Aymara in the south, including in all 20 major divisions (Swadesh 1954, 1956).

Swadesh later withdrew this hypothesis in favor of a continuum of North and Middle American languages he called "Macro Mayan" (Swadesh 1967), which included all of Sapir's Penutian (although not as a distinct subgroup) but excluded Quechua, Tarascan, and Zuni (these forming part of a different continuum, "Macro Quechua").

Starting in the mid-1960s—around the time "Penutian" ceased to be used for the California "kernel"—the unmodified term gradually came to be used in place of "Macro-Penutian" for

phylum-level proposals. The first instance of this was in the influential “consensus” classification that came out of the first “Conference on American Indian Languages” at Bloomington in 1964 and embodied in the Voegelins’ wall map (Voegelin and Voegelin 1966). In this version, “Penutian” refers to a group that includes Sapir’s 1929 unit (with Mixe-Zoque and Huave), plus Mayan and Totonocan, plus Chipaya and Uru in Bolivia.

In 1987 Joseph Greenberg incorporated “Penutian” into his hemisphere-wide classification as one of the eleven “subgroups” of the “Amerind” macrostock. The eight subdivisions of Greenberg’s “Penutian” include—besides the usual suspects in California, Oregon, British Columbia, and Mexico—Zuni (following Stanley Newman’s 1964 proposal) and “Yuki-Gulf”, the latter consisting of Mary Haas’s “Gulf” relationship (Atakapa, Chitimacha, Muskogean, Natchez, and Tunica) plus the Yukian languages of California (Greenberg 1987:143-62).

Finally, during the last decade the German scholar Stefan Liedtke has reasserted the possibility of a genetic link between Quechua-Aymara and Penutian in Sapir’s 1921 sense, linking also Tarascan, Zuni, Wakashan, and Salishan. He refers to this modest assemblage simply as “Penutian” (Liedtke 2001).

5. EXTENSIONS TO ETHNOGRAPHY AND ARCHAEOLOGY. From early days, Kroeber was wont to talk about “Penutian” culture and “Penutian” peoples in an ethnographic sense:

“...the Penutians of California were very plainly the people of the great interior valley. It is chiefly from the vicinity of San Francisco to Monterey that they impinged on the ocean” (1925:544).

“Central California [was] distinctly a Penutian Province with Hokan fringes” (1925:913).

Kroeber was also the first to project the idea of a Penutian culture and nationality back into the prehistoric period:

“The speech and perhaps the customs of [the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta] are likely to be more similar to Penutian speech and customs of a thousand years ago than the tongues and habits of any other Penutian area” (1925:349).

“The Penutians...have therefore presumably spread out along this stretch of coast, in which their Costanoan division was located in historical times and where it may be supposed to have taken shape as a group” (1925:544-545).

This ethnic reification of “the Penutians” has become quite common in archaeology, and is now migrating into biological anthropology. My geneticist colleagues at UC Davis regularly speak about the mitochondrial DNA they have obtained from “Penutians”—meaning anyone from a Chinook to a Yokuts. In both archaeology and in genetic studies, “Penutians” or “Penutian speakers” migrate about the map with alarming alacrity. A couple of examples from among many:

Aggression from Numic speakers, rather than environmental deterioration, may have forced Penutian withdrawal from the Basin (Oetting 1989).

This model...suggests that the Costanoans and Coast Miwok resulted from the cultural and physical mixing between early Hokan speakers and incoming Penutian speakers (Breschini 1983).

6. PENUTIAN FURTHER AFIELD. Through textbooks, encyclopedias, and other distillations of received knowledge, the term “Penutian”, in one or another of its classificatory senses, has here and there seeped into general American culture. In preparing this paper, I did an Internet search for the term, looking for instances of the term outside its normal academic contexts. My results fell into three groups:

(1) “Penutian” as a language or language type:

Reinstatement of the Klamath Tribe has brought about a revitalization of traditional practices, translation of books into the Penutian language, and renewed emphasis on traditional crafts.

“Walla Walla” is a Penutian word meaning “Little River”.

The Bay Miwok spoke a Penutian dialect.

(2) “Penutians” as an ethnic group or subgroup:

These two tribes [of Takelmas] ... belonged to a speech phylum known as Penutian who had inhabited much of the Oregon Territory until approximately 1500 years ago when other tribes moved south into the region.

MEChA (“Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán”—“We are Chicanos and Chicanas of Aztlán reclaiming the land of our birth”) is divided into nine regions. Each region has a communication center....The Centro California center (communication center at CSU-Chico) is “Penutian MEChA Central”.

(3) “Penutian” in geology

Finally, I was startled to find various web references to the “Penutian Stage” of the Eocene Epoch. This turns out to be part of a special North American geological nomenclature, in which the subdivisions—or “stages”—of the Epochs (Miocene, Pliocene, Pleistocene) are given distinctively North American names, rather than the standard names that are derived largely from European locales. It is not clear how widely used this nomenclature is, but Google came up with several citations. Typical is:

Subaerial notching of the shelf edge coincided with the Late Penutian sea level drop.

Given one or two other uses of American Indian names in the nomenclature—the “Commanchean Stage” of the Early Cretaceous—it seems likely that this is a special case of “Penutian” being taken as the name of a group of (prehistoric) people. The model would be the naming of the Silurian Epoch of the Paleozoic after the ancient Silures of Wales, where important strata dating to that epoch were first identified. Apparently the Penutian Stage is defined (for North America) by strata in Central California.⁴

⁴ I am grateful to Prof. William C. Miller, Department of Geology, Humboldt State University, for information on the geological use of “Penutian.” He writes:

Names like Penutian have a regional currency, and were coined in most cases when stratigraphic successions were first described and ages were estimated based on fossils for the first time. Each region has its own “time-stratigraphic” (chronostratic) division names. These very often are not the standard names used internationally. Names coined in the places where rocks of a particular age were first recognized are conserved in the international system of naming divisions of the Geologic Time Scale. The European name “Ypresian” (lowest stage- and oldest age-level division of the Eocene Epoch/Series) contains the Penutian and has priority (because rocks of this age were first recognized and named in France). Therefore, in the accepted usage, Penutian would have to be referred to as lower or early Ypresian, if you wanted workers worldwide to know what you’re talking about. You could stick to Penutian if you were talking to geologists from California who specialized in Eocene stratigraphy. I don’t know how widespread the practice is of naming stages/ages for tribes and language groups. Usually, region or place names are used, but not always. The quest is to find a name that hasn’t been used.

7. CONCLUSION. For reasons that are largely accidental, “Penutian” has become one of the most polysemous terms in American Indian historical linguistics, and—more than most labels of tenuous genetic relationships—has made its way into more general usage in allied disciplines and beyond. As students of these languages, we are both blessed and cursed by this terminological chameleon.

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REPORT 11

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OTHER INDIAN LANGUAGES**



**PROCEEDINGS OF THE MEETING OF THE
HOKAN-PENUTIAN WORKSHOP**

**June 17-18, 2000
University of California at Berkeley**

**Laura Buszard-Welcher, Editor
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PREFACE

The year 2000 was the 30th anniversary of the first Hokan languages conference. That first conference was imagined, planned and run by Prof. Margaret Langdon at the University of California at Berkeley, with the assistance of Prof. Shirley Silver of California State University at Sonoma. Almost every year since then, Hokan workshops and then Hokan-Penutian workshop in the previous few years had been either very small or even cancelled due to the lack of a sufficient number of people submitting paper titles. There was some thought of abandoning the Hokan-Penutian workshops altogether. Margaret felt that it would be a shame for this long tradition to end without a last hurrah, and so I offered to hold a Hokan-Penutian Workshop at Berkeley in conjunction with the “Breath of Life” Language Workshop for California Indians. The Breath of Life Workshop is a biennial gathering of California Indians here at Berkeley, and is designed primarily for people whose languages have no speakers left. We give them tours of the campus archives and show them how to use publications, fieldnotes and recordings of their languages for their own purposes – primarily language learning and teaching. I felt it would be a good thing to show the linguists who spent their careers working on these endangered languages to see the use their work is being put to by the descendents of the very people they worked with years ago. Therefore, the first session of the Hokan-Penutian Workshop consisted of presentations by the participants in the Breath of Life Workshop. The anticipation of this treat may have played a role in bringing a relatively large crowd here in 2000, perhaps along with billing the workshop as “The (Last?) Hokan-Penutian Workshop.” Sixteen papers (not counting the Breath of Life presentations) were given at the workshop, eight of which are published in this volume.

With both the Hokan and Penutian hypotheses in doubt, there is always a question as to which languages should be included at the workshop. Although my sympathies are with the “splitter” camp in linguistics, I’m definitely a social lumpener. Therefore, for purposes of the workshop I chose to define “Hokan” and “Penutian” as rubrics rather than language stocks, and advertised the workshop as being “for any language that has ever been hypothesized to be Hokan or Penutian.” We thus have papers ranging from Tsimshianic to Zuni, and—oh, well – we even accepted Juliette Blevin’s excellent paper on Yurok, an Algic language, which has never been hypothesized as either Hokan or Penutian.

At the business meeting held at the end of the Hokan-Penutian workshop, no-one wanted to say that this was the last one. Instead, we voted to continue with the workshops on a biennial basis, to be held here at Berkeley from now on, overlapping with the Breath of Life Workshop as it did in 2000. As I write this preface, the two years have already passed, and we are preparing for the 2002 Breath of Life Workshop, which this year will overlap with – not the Hokan-Penutian Workshop – but the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the Survey of California and Other Indian Languages. The upcoming conference for the Celebration subsumes participants in Hokan-Penutian Workshops. I imagine that our biennial gathering will continue on; whether it will be a Hokan-Penutian workshop in 2004 or something broader than that remains to be seen.

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HOKAN-PENUTIAN WORKSHOP**

June 17-18, 2000
University of California at Berkeley

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