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The “High Languages” of Native California as Indices of Social Rank: A (Re)Consideration

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This paper examines the statement generally offered in support of the argument that “high” or “refined” languages were spoken by members of elite classes in California Indian societies prior to contact with Europeans. It suggests that California’s “high languages” had more to do with formal or ceremonial contexts than with the everyday construction of identity. Rather, it appears that what have been termed “high languages” are examples of prestigious or formal styles or registers of a single language. Special styles and registers are two types of speech occurring in most if not every society on earth, and which are commonly associated with public oratory, oral literature, and formal or ceremonial contexts. These varieties do not provide a useful form of evidence for the existence of ranked social classes in California native societies on a par with other forms of evidence such as specialized clothing or displays of wealth.

This paper examines an oft-quoted statement, generally offered in support of the argument that social stratification existed in California Indian societies, that “high” or “refined” languages were spoken by members of elite classes prior to contact with Europeans (Bean 1974, 1978; Gamble 2008; Haines 1997; Pilling 1989; Shippek 1985). Lowell Bean, eminent scholar of California Indian cultures, first made this pronouncement in the edited volume *Antap: California Indian Political and Economic Organization* (1974:22): “Upper class people (chiefly families) tended to inherit rank and capital resources... They maintained special knowledge (a great tradition) and often spoke a special refined language which set them apart from others” (emphasis added).

The breadth and nature of social stratification in pre-contact California, as well as the reasons for its development, is a subject still being debated by anthropologists (Arnold 2000; Bean and Lawton 1973; Buckley 1984; Gamble 2008; Gamble et al. 2001; Johnson

2004; Pilling 1989; Raab and Larson 1997). This paper is more specifically concerned with the issue of whether or not linguistic evidence exists in support of the above statement, that upper-class indigenous Californians spoke distinct languages which set them apart from other members of their societies. To this author’s knowledge, this statement not only has yet to be critically examined by linguists, but such an examination is also long overdue.

The first point that should be considered is whether what Bean termed “special refined languages” were actually what linguists would call distinct languages, rather than examples of some other subset of a language, such as dialects, registers, styles of speaking, or some combination of these three terms, for which linguists have the handy and more inclusive label “variety.” In linguistic terms, two codes may be said to be distinct languages (as opposed to two related dialects of a single language) if they are not mutually intelligible. They may or may not be genetically related, or share a common ancestor.

It is certainly possible for two languages (related or not) to be used in different contexts by members of a single speech community, one in which everyone is bilingual and typically one language is more prestigious than the other; this situation is called diglossia. For example, in French-speaking Canada, where English has more prestige than French, or in India, where Sanskrit has more prestige than Kannada (Schiffman 1998), the two languages are used by everyone in different contexts. Typically, in speech communities where diglossia occurs, the more prestigious (“high”) language is used in more formal contexts, whereas the “low” language, which is everyone’s mother tongue, is considered to be less worthy, vulgar, undignified, etc., and so typically is not employed in formal situations. If the speech community has a tradition of literacy, it is always in the high language. In fact, the existence of an ancient and prestigious body of written literature is one of the key conditions that is usually associated with the development of a diglossic speech community (Schiffman 1998).

Diglossia may also be said to apply in speech communities where two genetically-related varieties of a language are spoken (as in countries where classical and vernacular Arabic are spoken), in which case the more prestigious “classical” variety is always the one associated with a tradition of literacy and a (usually ancient) body of written literature. However, and importantly, in this

situation there is another important criterion for diglossia to exist: the “classic” or high language must be so unlike the contemporary vernacular that it must be studied and learned in school (Fishman 1980; Schiffman 1998.) This was not the case in pre-contact California, as far as we know, and certainly was not common to the entire culture area. Therefore, the sociolinguistic description for how so-called “high languages” were used in pre-contact California does not include diglossia, as far as we know. Rather, it appears that what have been termed “high languages” are examples of prestigious or formal *styles* or *registers* of a single language, using basically the same grammar as the vernacular, although it may have been more elaborate, together with some special vocabulary, special phonology, and/or intonation.

Special styles and registers are two types of speech occurring in most if not every society on earth, and that are commonly associated with public oratory, oral literature, and formal or ceremonial contexts. The difference between a style and a register is sometimes hard to distinguish, since they overlap to some degree, but the basic distinction is that styles vary along a continuum of formality, whereas registers are germane to specific contexts of use. I will try to tease the two apart and present examples of each below; however, some overlap is unavoidable (and this is why linguists frequently prefer to use the term “variety,” which subsumes both.)

Golla (2011:226) summarizes the situation succinctly:

In communities throughout the California region, special styles or registers are reported to have been employed by prestigious individuals on certain formal occasions. These ranged in complexity from a few distinctive words or turns of phrase that might be employed by a polished storyteller to elaborate semi-secret jargons used by religious initiates. Although detailed attestations of these usages are relatively rare, it seems likely that the basic phenomenon was widespread, if not universal.

These two speech varieties, formal styles and ceremonial registers, were employed by people in prestigious social roles, such as chiefs and religious specialists (shamans); indeed, in many cases one of the most important qualifications for any individual wishing to fill one of these specialized social roles was their ability to demonstrate their mastery of the appropriate style or register. Both varieties may include special, esoteric vocabulary, an emphasis on quotation from

prior cultural texts, metaphor or other kinds of semantic differences in word meaning, specialized intonation or prosody, and/or elaborated syntax. Both varieties may be used in coordination with specialized behavior or in specialized contexts.¹ However, neither formal style nor ceremonial register on its own constitutes what may be called a distinct language from the vernacular of a speech community; both are typically mutually intelligible (for the most part, at least²) with everyday speech, although their phonology, grammar, and lexicon may differ in various ways—which will be discussed further below.

More importantly for the stated goal of this paper, these varieties do not index a particular social group as much as they index formality of context or topic. They are “sociolects” (Trudgill 2003), or indices of speakers’ social identity or background, in the way that Ebonics is in the United States, or upper class “received pronunciation” is in Great Britain. Sociolects are used across multiple contexts by their speakers, including at the family dinner table and in other mundane situations where, in diglossic speech communities, “low” varieties are typically used by everyone. California’s high languages had more to do with formal or ceremonial contexts than with the everyday construction of identity. Below are some examples from various areas within the state.

WOOGY SPEECH

The “high language” of indigenous California which is probably the best documented is the “Woogey speech” of Yurok society, where the existence of a traditional social hierarchy is well-documented (Bushnell and Bushnell 1977; Kroeber 1925; Pilling 1976). As Buckley explains (1984:468), this special variety was attributed to the Wo’gey, the mythical bearers of Yurok culture and language. According to native theory, ordinary language devolved from the speech of these spirit-beings, which was retained in its pure form only by the social elite, the “high families.” Woogey speech was mutually intelligible with everyday Yurok, differing in ways that are perhaps easier for linguists to describe than for Yurok speakers:

[It is] on the surface, not radically different from ordinary Yurok. Rather, it comprises a recognizable elaboration of ordinary Yurok occurring largely through phonological departures from it and through increased syntactic and semantic complexity. There are

irregularly expressed tendencies toward the softening or, occasionally, omission of some plosive and fricative consonants and toward a more general lengthening of internal vowels. Suffixes may be omitted from stems normally requiring them in ordinary Yurok. Such means contribute to what speakers perceive as a “smoother,” more flowing quality to woogey speech (WS), which should be “like music” when contrasted with ordinary Yurok speech. Conversely, however, affixes and preverbal particles may be piled up in WS utterances, which tend to be far more precisely specified and more densely inflected than ordinary Yurok ones. These details begin to explain why speakers, while stressing the sheer beauty of a good WS performance (“people are moved to tears by the beauty of it”), also compare WS to “the way lawyers talk.” By comparison, according to an informant, colloquial Yurok is “just a rough way of talking” [Buckley 1984:470].

Buckley also clarifies that Woogey speech was used in an assortment of speech events “broadly definable as ‘religious,’” including “the recitation of myths involving Wo’gey actors, moralistic oratory, legal and philosophical discussion, and ritual performances.” According to Buckley, “It served as a creative index of high social rank, although the connotations of its use were not purely socioeconomic, in any restricted sense, but “religious”—ritual, literary, jural, moral, philosophical—as well” (1984:469).

Kroeber defined (1960) Woogey speech as ritual language, used in formulas and prayers. He also observed (1960:995) that many of the words in its vocabulary were metaphorical substitutes for words in colloquial Yurok, for example:

Olheka “earth” or “what people grasp” replaced the colloquial *lhkelh* “ground” and *welhkkelh’ona* “world.”

Melhketso’ “sun” or “with light” replaced the colloquial *wonauslai*.

Melhhegwomi weskelh “fire” or “what they warm their bodies with” replaced the colloquial *mets*.

Kits-kaahselumisoon “the dead” or “the unknowing ones” replaced the colloquial *kesamui*.

Hupa ceremonial language also contained similar examples of metaphor. According to Golla and O’Neill (2001:83), a number of common words are tabooed at all World Renewal Dances, including certain motions of dancers involved in the Jump Dance, and the word for “water,” which the first people/deities (who are considered an important part of the audience) did not

like and did not drink. For the Hupa, the most stylized of ritual language was used in the “medicine formulas” which were conducted in private, rather than used in public ceremonies. We know very little about the specific linguistic form of this ritual language, however, as the early recorded texts were of narratives *about* them, rather than examples of the actual ritual language itself (Golla and O’Neill 2001:305.) Keeling (1993) further clarifies the fact (with reference to Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk in general) that rather than involving a specialized lexical or grammatical form, it was the participation structure of this special register which was the most stylized:

The word “formula” properly refers to a fixed set of words...perhaps the earliest collectors assumed that these expressions were supposed to be recited verbatim, but this is almost certainly not the case. A modern medicine man, the late Rudolph Socktish (Hupa), once told me that the words of a prayer “just come to him” as he speaks, and others that I knew described such prayers as “talking” to the spirits in a manner that suggests ordinary conversation rather than formulaic speech. ...The person not only asked for help but then proceeded to answer the appeal, letting his own voice utter words on behalf of the spirit-person who had been petitioned. It was this implication of transition in which the dialogue format found its main significance: when he answered his own prayer the formulist himself spoke as a Wo’gey, and then his words had power [Keeling 1993:129].

Golla and O’Neill further discuss the specialized intonation involved in Hupa ritual language:

In actual medicine rituals... formulas should be recited as if a conversation were being carried on between the person making the medicine and the spirit power who originated the medicine. ...A repetition of nasalized he-he-he indicates a question being asked by the medicine maker, and he-he-he-yang an answer from the spirit power. ...This conversation is conducted in a shaking voice, each syllable staccato and breathy. The shaky voice notifies the spirit powers that the medicine is being made [2001:306].

As Buckley also notes (1984:469), Woogey Speech was gender-linked, and specifically associated with men: “It is well remembered that the distinct register was once equated with the upper echelons of Yurok society and particularly with male esoteric specialists; WS is occasionally referred to as ‘men’s religious language.’”

Given these associations, it becomes somewhat difficult to consider this special variety of Yurok as only indicating social rank, or as an upper-class sociolect,

since by definition it would have to have been used by an entire social class within Yurok society, in many different contexts.

CEREMONIAL SPEECH

As opposed to the Northwest culture area of California, where Woogey speech continued long enough to be fairly well documented, the evidence for the previous existence of an elite dialect elsewhere in the state is extremely sketchy, and limited to two vague observations made in the nineteenth century about the neighboring Tongva and Juaneño cultures³ (Boscana 1933; Reid 1852). The following brief anecdote from Boscana’s 1846 account of Juaneño culture is frequently cited throughout the anthropological literature on this subject:

All their knowledge is from tradition, which they preserve in songs for their dances, and these are introduced by a chief at their festivities in a language distinct from that in common use [Boscana 1846 (cited in Golla 2011:226)].

Similarly, Reid (1968) observed about the Tongva (or Gabrieliño) that “...there is now at San Gabriel an old woman named Bona who takes pride in speaking sometimes the “court language” to the young ones, to stultify their intelligence” (cited in Golla 2011:226).

Apart from these vague anecdotes by Europeans with very little knowledge of the languages they were commenting upon, we otherwise have no concrete information on how, when, or where these early styles of speaking were employed, nor any linguistic details of how they differed from colloquial speech in these communities. We do know, however, that Takic-speaking groups (including the Juaneño and Tongva peoples) were closely allied and shared a religious complex (the Chingichngish religion), which may have been the context for the more formal varieties noted by Boscana and Reid.

Special registers were also used in other forms of ceremonial speaking, as in the Wintu “shamanic register” described by Shepard:

[The] shamanic register differs from [ordinary Wintu speech] by special idioms and metaphors, more “polite words” for concepts considered taboo... archaicisms, repetition, a preference for certain vowels and consonants... lack of the hesitation-type connective... longer words and sentences, and more subordination [1992:206].

She provides many examples of metaphors used in this register, such as the following:

“one who lifts someone up” for the colloquial “wife”

“used for that which is seen ahead” for the colloquial “eyes”

“one who is in the fields” for colloquial “coyote”

Shepard also found archaicisms, or ancient words no longer used in everyday speech, replacing the everyday words for “blood” and “death.” As she discusses, this special register was used by shamans, not by an elite class:

Wintu who were not shamans could, of course, switch register depending on the topic they were discussing. DuBois (1932) reports that Kate Luckie [a Wintu consultant] once paid two shamans to speak about the end of the world, and, in repeating their prophesies, she switched to a high poetic style [1992:205].

ORAL LITERATURE

Many California cultures had special styles for the recitation of oral literature. Much of the evidence we have for formal varieties comes from recorded narratives in which an oratorical style is attributed to certain characters (Callaghan 2004) or used by the narrator throughout (Demetracopoulou 1940; Du Bois 1908; Shepherd 1992). DuBois (1908) observed that the oral literatures of the Takic languages Juaneño and Luiseño involved a poetic form of parallelism in which deities and important cultural items were paired and listed together, as in the example below from the Creation story (Tomaiyowit, Mother earth, gave birth to these things first):

<i>Yula</i> spirit/hair	<i>Wanawut</i> milkweed string used in ritual
<i>Chakwut</i> basket for girls’ puberty ceremony	<i>Wakut</i> rabbit throwing stick
<i>Nosish</i> red algae (ceremonial paint)	<i>Ayaraka</i> green algae (Earth’s menses)
<i>Pala</i> water	<i>Yowhala</i> mud
<i>Ushla</i> wild rose	<i>Pikla</i> wild blackberry (thorny plants associated with Chingichnish)
<i>Nenexel</i> tussock grass sedge	<i>Pachayel</i> (both plants were used in girls’ puberty ceremony)

This kind of parallelism in form is often seen in ritual language (Du Bois 1992). DuBois (1908:96) stated that translation of the songs containing these poetic forms was extremely difficult, as “they include words unused in ordinary life, and ideas that would have been puzzling in the old days to any but the initiated.”

Callaghan notes for Lake Miwok that traditional mythology is spoken in “high narrative style,” which is “declamatory” (ostentatious, theatrical) and marked by “high words and certain particles.” The particles she refers to here are most likely what linguists call evidential morphology, which indexes the source of a statement. In traditional narratives, the source is typically the ancestors or deities, and the narrator is at pains to clarify that s/he is repeating what has been passed down from them by adding “it is said,” or “they (the ancestors) say” at the end of multiple lines within a text. Traditional narratives may also be identified by formulaic openings and closings, or phrases which help to identify a genre, such as the Shasta “They were living there” (Silver and Miller 1997). A Pomoan formulaic closing meant to make daylight come more quickly was “from the East and the West may the Mallard girls hurry and bring the morning” (Barrett 1933:43). Hupa stories typically ended with the expression “My back will be like bluestone!” meaning “I shall be straight-shouldered, not stooped” because “blue rock was the hardest rock known by the Indians, apparently serpentine. If you don’t end a story with this formula, you will become stoop-shouldered or hump-backed” (Golla and O’Neill 2001:411, based on Sapir’s notes.)

Radin (1929) made a similar observation about Yukian narratives:

One of the most interesting features of the spoken language as known today⁴ is its deviation in certain grammatical details and vocabulary from the language of the texts, at least from that in which all the myths told by Tripo were couched. My interpreter (McCloud) always referred to this as the “high language” and experienced occasionally some difficulty in understanding a few of the forms.

Foster (1944) explains that the Yuki language had a specific term for this “high language”: *k’oni hôt*. He also tells us that this register was used by the “well-educated,” but further observes that *k’oni hôt* was learned by attending a mere 8 days of ritualistic instruction in the mythology surrounding the creation and the subsequent

adventures of Coyote, in which all tribal youths participated. Clearly, what Foster is describing here is a special register associated with the particular genre of oral tradition (creation mythology), rather than an upper-class dialect.

PUBLIC ORATORY

Ethnographic observations concerning a requirement for skills in public oratory for chiefs all over California are very easy to find. Although in many California societies chieftainship was inherited, this was not always the case, and if a son did not command the prerequisite speaking skills, the job might go to a different relative. A few examples are typical:

Chieftainship among the Pomo was hereditary, with inheritance subject to the candidate’s possessing the qualities of “goodness of heart,” oratorical ability, and apparently sometimes, wealth [Loeb 1926:235].

The influence of an Atsugewi chief within the village was considerable, but it depended much on his personality. If a chief was popular, he had a big following; if he was unpopular, people were likely to move away from the village. ... He had to respect the desires of his people. As [his consultant] put it “*he has to talk to his people and make them all willing to do something that he wants done*” (emphasis added) [Garth 1952:178].

The social organization of the Yokuts and Western Mono tribes was exceedingly simple. There was a complete absence of anything like a class or caste system. With the exception of the chief’s and winatum’s lineages, which were mildly aristocratic, any man was as good as his neighbor. This does not mean that there was a failure to recognize differences between individuals. But the differences of influential superiority or inferiority grew out of qualities inherent in the person himself, such as his abilities to acquire wealth or supernatural power, or to be an inspiring orator [Gayton 1930:372].

Only [Modoc] men could be leaders. No woman, regardless of her wisdom, wealth, or following, was eligible for the role.... The man also had to be the head of a family and household. Beyond these basic requirements there were three additional criteria.... These were oratorical ability, wealth, and size of household. ... Emphasis differed with respect to the three, however. A man of great oratorical power was recognized as a leader almost without regard to wealth [Ray 1963:3].

CONCLUSION

Closer examination of several examples of “high languages” in the ethnographic literature on California Indian societies reveals that rather than being either distinct languages or class-based varieties (or what linguists call sociolects, associated with particular social groups), they are typically examples of a special style or register associated with ceremonial contexts, recitations of oral literature, and public oratory.

The sociolinguistic situation known as diglossia did not apply in California, mainly because an ancient tradition of literacy is typically associated with the development of diglossia in societies around the world, and California literature remains largely oral to this day.

The formal styles or registers of California languages differ from colloquial speech in their lexicon, which may be intensely metaphorical, their phonology and/or intonation, which may be stylized or differ from colloquial norms in some way, their syntactic form, which may also be more stylized or poetic, containing repetition or parallelism, and they may have more elaborate grammar or morphology.

Most importantly, their usage indexes formality of genre or context, such as ceremony, storytelling, or public speaking, rather than social class. They do not provide a useful form of evidence for the existence of ranked social classes in Californian native societies on a par with other forms of evidence such as specialized clothing or displays of wealth. As Raab and Jones (2004) argue in the *Introduction* to their reader on archaeological studies of prehistoric California, anthropological perspectives on the nature of social organization in indigenous California cultures shifted wildly during the twentieth century from a Kroeberian paradigm in which native societies were viewed as passive tenants in a land of natural abundance in which social complexity (and the presupposed requirement of farming) was simply unnecessary, to the view originally proposed by Bean and Lawton (1973:46): “Within communities, populations were administered by powerful hereditary chiefs and a bureaucratic elite whose principal function appears to have been control and management of production and redistribution.”

The truth possibly lies somewhere in the middle—social stratification may have existed in some indigenous California societies, but not in all of them. Most importantly, the goal of this paper is to clarify the point

that the so-called “high languages” of Native California do not in any way constitute evidence of such social stratification. California has for thousands of years been home to many diverse cultures, and any broad generalizations regarding the social organization of California Indians in general are probably naïve at best.

NOTES

¹See Du Bois 1992 for further elaboration on the forms and context of ritual language which are less likely to be shared with the formal style typically seen in oratory and/or non-religious forms of narrative. These may include parallelism in structure and meaning, speaker’s disclaimer of responsibility for the words uttered, and general attenuation of the speaker’s presentation of self, among other aspects. Keeling 1992 discusses these in depth with reference to Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk ritual performance.

²With the exception of archaic, borrowed, or otherwise generally unintelligible (even to the speaker) vocabulary, which is often part of ritual languages around the world (Du Bois 1992).

³Although Bean does not specifically state that these examples were the basis for his observation concerning the existence of special, refined languages which set the elite apart, they possibly were, and are also frequently cited along with his observation.

⁴Radin made these recordings in 1917.

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