

Bringing it home: the implications of documentation for a vibrant endangered language

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1. THE SERI PEOPLE AND THEIR LANGUAGE

One of the earliest references to the SERI people (the *comcaac*) indicates that the term was applied by the Spanish to the ‘wild peoples’ who lived along the coast of Mexico and who had not been properly subjugated neither to the will of the Spanish Crown nor of the Church (Spicer 1962: 105). They were described as being wild in part because of their nomadic lifestyle (without proper housing), and their disinterest in agriculture and a sedentary mission life. Their language was described as being ‘extremely difficult’ (Sheridan 1999: 23).

It is not known when or how the Seris came to be located in northwestern Mexico, occupying parts of the mainland, some islands in the Gulf of California (Bowen 1983), and parts of the Baja peninsula (Herrera Casanova, to appear). This has been their home for many centuries and it is an area which hardly a single one of them has chosen to leave. Outsiders talk of the dry and inhospitable desert, of the rocks and sand, of the heat, of the difficulties. The Seris do not talk this way at all; they only talk about their home and of the bounty that the sea and the *hehe án* ‘place of the plants’ (what we call the desert) have provided to them.

The four and a half centuries of contact with Europeans and later with non-Indian Mexicans have proved to be extremely difficult. Number-wise, the Seris were reduced from an estimated 3,000 people in 1692 to 160 in 1941 (Bowen 1983: 234). This was due in part to measles and probably influenza as well as other European diseases, high infant mortality, deportations, various skirmishes, outright massacres, tuberculosis and alcoholism. Many observers over the years have announced the impending demise of the Seri people, sometimes with regret and sometimes without remorse (see Coolidge & Coolidge 1939 and Corey 1922: 469, among many).

Fortunately, a number of factors have led to a dramatic turn-around of the situation, beginning around the middle of the twentieth century. It would be simplistic to say that any single one or any pair of these factors contributed to the turnaround of the Seri population decline. Perhaps some crucial synergy created by several of them working together was responsible for one improved index and others of them for other indices. But the good news is that the Seri population is something closer to 800 individuals and at this point in time (late 2007) virtually all children with two Seri parents speak Seri as their dominant language.

2. A PERIOD OF EXTENDED DOCUMENTATION

Up until the middle of the twentieth century, very little was known about the Seri culture and language. In fact, even to this day there has been no serious anthropological study of any depth done by trained anthropologists. The published

anthropological works have been sometimes large or broad, but they were done with embarrassingly small amount of research time in the field; the results have been superficial and/or seriously flawed.

The outside world's knowledge of the language was even more limited, consisting of various short lists of words transcribed with difficulty (given the phonetic complexities) which, if anything, correctly showed that the language was challenging.

Interest in the language from the beginning was primarily focused on its relationship with other languages. To what family did it belong? Of course, the earliest speculations were wild and uninformed, which should be of no surprise — it was related to Chinese, Patagonés, Arabic, Carib or Welsh (the latter probably due to the voiceless lateral fricative). Later hypotheses, formulated by linguists Dixon, Kroeber, and Sapir, placed the language within the newly-proposed Hokan stock, which was once linked with Coahuiltecan and even Siouan (both hypotheses long discounted but still occasionally cited by unsuspecting members of the public).

The picture changed drastically with the arrival of a young American couple, SIL members Edward and Mary (Becky) Moser who took up residence with the Seris in 1951 with the intention of learning the language and translating the New Testament. Their linguistic work went in tandem with broad-based humanitarian work. Most importantly, by learning the language and making good application of their basic linguistic training, this couple quickly became in essence the recorders of culture and language data that had never been done before. The documentation resulted in numerous publications of anthropological and historical interest, drawing solely on direct observations and long interviews with the Seri people conducted in the language itself.

The interest of (primarily American) archaeologists, anthropologists and researchers in other sciences continued to develop during this period, and many of them discovered the importance of actually talking to the Seri people and learning from them. Several of the important publications were co-authored with the translator-linguists since the Mosers were an important link in the research. Year by year, the documentation by the Mosers of the minute details of the grammar continued to grow. During a visit to the area by a prominent arid lands botanist, a research program was set into motion that would last more than twenty years and result in the publication of a landmark ethnobotany (Felger and Moser 1985) which drew attention to the fragile cultural treasure that was on the verge of extinction. This book, published in 1985, inspired research in more domains as it helped scientists realize that groups like the Seris were the inheritors of millennia of knowledge and experience that was both valuable and in great danger of being lost.

During this time, the resident translator-linguists continued to record and transcribe legends, stories, conversations, and history. Some were published for the outside world but most were published in the language for the people themselves. These publications tested the writing system that had been developed and refined over the years. Some Seris achieved modest levels of reading ability — although reading material was limited. At different times the fledgling and

resource-strapped schools attempted to include the Seri language in their curriculum.

3. A POINT OF CRISIS AND A CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

Twenty-five years into their period of residence with the Seris, the Mosers had witnessed many changes. The Seri people had become sedentary town-dwellers on their own government-deeded territory and had traded a mobile hunter-gatherer existence for an economy centered on small-boat commercial fishing and the sale of handcrafts. As time passed, more and more food was purchased rather than procured in the traditional ways. By the 1960's many of the obvious problems caused by alcoholism had been diminished by the influence of a Mexican church, although issues with illicit drug use began to rise in the 1970's and the threat from diabetes began to make itself felt. People had money and could buy their own vehicles, pay for their children to be born in the hospital, and do other things that they wanted. Despite some alarmist reports (Nolasco 1967, Mejido 1976), the Seri culture was not self-destructing and the people were not dying off from mistreatment.

However, not many could read their language well, and no one could write with any real facility. The role of literacy in the community was marginal. Attempts to teach the language in the school were never very successful, both for lack of teachers who spoke the language (they were usually outsiders) and for lack of adequate materials — only a few story booklets and a set of primers existed, all produced by the Mosers. Bilingual language programs have presented great challenges for all governments, and Mexico was no different; the indigenous languages are many and complex, budgets and training are inadequate, and even teachers were often not sympathetic toward literacy in the indigenous languages.

And then Edward Moser died suddenly of a heart attack in 1976. This single event could have brought everything relating to the documentation of the language and culture to an abrupt halt. But it didn't. Within a matter of weeks, Becky Moser was back at work, completing the translation of the New Testament (published in 1982), completing work on the manuscript of the ethnobotany book, editing a contribution for a book on child birthing (Moser 1982), working on the translation of another historical text (Moser 1988), among many other things. Work on producing a full-sized bilingual dictionary from the paper lexical files was also initiated.

It was during this time that other people began to be involved. The author of this article married the Mosers' daughter (1976) and began to take an increasing interest in the language. The application of new ideas about the phonology and different ideas about writing led to some modest changes in the spelling system. More of the information about the grammatical structure of the language was laid out. Some of that information was published in Spanish, making the facts accessible to outsiders.

Meanwhile, the ethnobotany volume had inspired others to work directly with the Seris on their knowledge of the environment. A steady stream of theses,

dissertations and books by American and Mexican scholars on ecology (Rosenberg 1997), fish (Torre 2002), reptiles (Nabhan 2003), and birds (Morales 2006), has appeared. Interest in the ecological and commercial aspects of natural resources such as a certain mollusk (Basurto 2002) has also brought scientists into regular contact with Seri culture. A major ethnography of mollusks is in final stages of preparation (Cathy Marlett).

However, the schools continued to not be very interested in the written language. Literacy had not become very widespread. The New Testament was not used in a very public or obvious way. The traditional stories went out of print. Becky Moser retired and moved away. At that point the documentation could have stopped, the files and recordings archived, and future linguistic research been limited to the peculiar interests of linguistic theory. But since the language was still being learned and used by almost all of the children in the community, and in many domains, that did not seem to be the appropriate action.

During the years 2002-2004 a group of Seris worked with Becky Moser, her daughter (and my wife) Cathy, and me to complete a trilingual dictionary that would pull together fifty years of lexical data collection, with the additional support by the U.S. National Science Foundation. This project brought us into a working relationship with some very talented Seri men and women. Most of the men were small-boat fishermen who fit their work on the dictionary between other activities. As a result of the years of work on the dictionary (Moser and Marlett, compilers, 2005) and all that preceded it, a writing system has resulted that is both very functional as well as aesthetically pleasing. (The major steps in the evolution of the Seri spelling system are documented in Marlett (2006).)

Much of the work on the dictionary was done in full view of the community itself rather than in a distant office. We lived in a pop-up tent trailer that was parked in the middle of one town or the other, and worked out of the small attached screened-in porch. It was not uncommon for four to six of us to be at work in these confined quarters and have various people standing or sitting outside this area to listen to and sometimes comment on the discussion.

The dictionary is itself a miniature cultural display. At more than 900 densely-packed pages, it is large enough and rich enough to give a young Seri person pride in his or her language. Copies were made available to every family courtesy of the National Science Foundation and (with a much greater investment) the Sonoran state government. As one young man said as he received and began to peruse his copy, 'This is like gold to us!'. Some began to study the book for information that they didn't know since the dictionary included words and usages collected from elderly speakers half a century earlier. Others began to read the book in order to learn how to write. Others used the paradigms to impress non-Seris with the complexity and regularity of the language.

The dictionary is obviously part of the reason for a recent surge of interest by young people in learning to read and write their language. The interest is also undoubtedly encouraged by the increasing expectations of government agencies and non-governmental organizations which expect the Seris to be able to write their language. More work is being done now by another generation of non-Seri

botanists who not only record plant names in Latin, but also in Seri, including the location (written in Seri).

During the last few years, there has been a convergence of interests that make documentation of the language of greater importance to the people themselves as well as to the outside world. It is recognized that the language is of considerable interest per se in that it is relatively devoid of obvious borrowings and influence from neighboring languages and Spanish. It provides a window on another way of structuring the world, a tremendous keyhole glimpse into prehispanic Mexico. We now know that it has interesting and unusual properties in many areas of its morphology and syntax, some of which are even just now being appreciated. More studies continue to center on knowledge of the Seri view of their world (Luque and Robles Torres 2006) and these studies appreciate the Seri expression of these beliefs.

Through the establishment of INALI (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas), the government of Mexico is taking greater steps and committing more resources to strengthen the vitality of the indigenous languages. Each of these steps, as well as the efforts of the CDI (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas) (the successor of the INI), affirm to the Seris the value of their language and their culture.

Some of the Seris who contributed to the dictionary are today (with outside encouragement) beginning to write monolingual pieces — short and long — about different aspects of their culture and history. Two of the people crucially involved in writing these materials are known within the community as belonging to the lineage of the *hant iiha cōhacomxoj* ‘the informed ones’ who have the responsibility to transmit knowledge. In previous generations, this was done only orally, of course, but today it is recognized that written documents, audio recordings and video recordings are essential as well. This material, moreover, is beginning to provide the nucleus of reading material for the schooling system.

We have also been able to tap into some of the recordings of folklore and history made forty years ago by the Mosers. Some people are listening to their grandfather or great-grandfather recounting things they have never heard. The documentation of a previous generation is being brought home in numerous ways.

The formal documentation of the language has meant paying attention to the minutiae of the language — including the little words that have presented the greatest challenges to the writing system. This work has provoked long discussions with key Seri consultants who do not endure these discussions but rather seem to thrive on them.

The same people involved in the final stages of the lexicographic work are also working today on finalizing a major grammatical description and a corpus of traditional texts through work sponsored by the Documenting Endangered Languages program of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. Through those projects and through their own writing, they are being exposed again to the challenges of writing, grammar and style. They are becoming major consultants for the next phase of bringing this work to fruition, which is to prepare a generation of Seris for whom reading and writing their language are an integral part of life.

In some respects, the groundwork for language documentation has just been laid now that some Seris are able to write well and are beginning to teach others. Efforts are underway to increase the number of people who have the expertise to build on that foundation with confidence.

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