

The Story behind the Seri Dictionary

The recently released Seri dictionary is the culmination of more than fifty years of data collection and analysis and the collaboration of people from several generations. As a result, it is one of the most comprehensive dictionaries of any indigenous language spoken in Latin America. The compilers, Mary B. Moser and Stephen A. Marlett have been involved in studying the language for 54 and 30 years, respectively. The book was published in 2005 the Universidad de Sonora (Mexico) and Plaza y Valdés Editores (Mexico City).

The Seri language is and was endangered by virtue of the size of the population of its speakers. It is estimated that there were fewer than 150 members of this group in the 1930's. By 1951 there were 230 people in the group shortly before a deadly measles outbreak. Today there are perhaps four times that many (the 2000 census figure was 716). In almost all Seri families the children still grow up speaking the language. Children and young people of all ages interact daily in the language in both of the towns where the Seri people live.

The 942 page dictionary is trilingual: Seri, Spanish and English, with indexes from Spanish to Seri and English to Seri. The grammar included in the same book is written only in Spanish, however. Two maps, one featuring islands in the Gulf of California, are presented only in the Seri language — the first time that Seri place names have been prominently and accurately published on a map. Nevertheless, the maps contain only a very few of the hundreds of place names included in the dictionary.

One won't find many words that one recognizes on the Seri side of the dictionary. Because Seri is a linguistic isolate — not known to be related to any other existing language — there are few words similar to those of close or distant geographical neighbors. The hypothesis has been around for more than a hundred years that it is related to the Yuman languages of Baja California, Sonora, California, and Arizona, but the scanty evidence has been insufficient to establish this hypothesis. Relationship to languages farther away of the so-called Hokan stock, made famous by the work of Edward Sapir and Alfred Kroeber, among others, is also unproven.

The dictionary is based on the pioneering work of Edward Moser (1924-1976) and Roberto Herrera Marcos (1916-1988) who worked together between approximately 1952 and 1976. While one of their goals was to translate the New Testament into the Seri language (published in 1982), their close interaction led to years of discussion of topics about the language —which had not been written before that date—and culture—which was only known to the world through the eyes of generally uninformed outsider.

Edward Moser and his wife Mary (Beck) Moser took up residence in the Seri region of Sonora, Mexico in 1951. They built a small three-room adobe house in what was then the small fishing camp of Desemboque (not to be confused with a Mexican town farther north up the coast of Sonora which more commonly appears on maps).

The Mosers maintained this home as their only residence, eventually adding a couple

of rooms to provide a bedroom for their daughter and a room for guests who occasionally passed through. The village of Desemboque had no running water until decades later, nor electricity (until 2005). The Mosers helped to maintain a well with a pump run by a gasoline motor in order to provide the camp with a regular source of drinking water. In the house, bathing was done in a corner of the kitchen under a bucket raised by a rope on a pulley. Water came from a 55-gallon drum which stood near the small gas kitchen stove. In the beginning of their time of residence, it took nine hours to travel the dirt road from Desemboque to Hermosillo (the state capital and nearest place to buy supplies).

Visitors to the Moser home over the years led to an increasingly active interaction with the scientific community. While the Mosers, Herrera and others were documenting the Seri knowledge of their history and environment, scientists from the outside were providing a link to the wider academic community. Archaeologist Thomas Bowen (author of *The Unknown Island*, the story of the inhabitants of San Esteban Island), botanist Richard Felger (co-author with Mary Moser of *People of the Desert and Sea: Ethnobotany of the Seri Indians*), ichthyologist Jorge Torre, ornithologist Enriqueta Velarde, ethnomusicologist and linguist Fernando Nava, paleontologist and archaeologist Richard White are among those who have published information about the Seri knowledge of their world which Herrera and the Mosers helped to make public, and many of them served as consultants for the dictionary itself.

The linguistic and cultural research that the Mosers and others were able to document in

this way helped document the last Seri generation that was primarily hunter-gatherer. The perhaps inevitable shift to a non-nomadic way of life had already been made, encouraged in part by the establishment some years earlier of a fishing cooperative, by the Mexican government, and the introduction of schools. Nevertheless, speakers who knew the older way of life, including the family of Roberto Herrera Marcos, helped to ensure that the information would not be forever lost.

After the death of her husband Edward in 1976, Mary Moser (more generally known as “Becky”) continued to maintain her residence in El Desemboque for many years as she worked on the dictionary and Seri stories and history. Moser, now a Tucson resident, recently turned 81 years old.

While there were of course numerous Seri contributors to the dictionary, the primary one being Roberto Herrera Marcos, key Seri participants in recent years included Roberto’s son Lorenzo Herrera Casanova, his grandson Xavier Moreno Herrera, his nephew Genaro Gabriel Astorga, his grandnephew René Montaña Herrera, Alma Imelda Morales, and María Luisa Astorga de Estrella. Some of these have also co-authored papers with Moser and Marlett on Seri language and culture, including one in 2005 published in the *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*. At the beginning of their period of residence in Sonora, the Mosers also worked with older speakers of the language and documented back then what were considered archaic words, also preserved in the new dictionary.

The dictionary contains more than 600 illustrations, both of flora and fauna of the area and also of items specific to the Seri

culture. The illustrator, Cathy Moser Marlett, spent her childhood there and learned the Seri language as a child. This experience and background also helped in the final years of work on the dictionary. The participation by Steve Marlett in the project began around the time that he met Cathy during linguistics classes at the University of North Dakota.

The linguistic investigation was done under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (now known as SIL International), in conjunction with development of literacy materials and the translation work. For most of the years, the lexical database was maintained on 3x5 slips of papers filed meticulously at night by kerosene lamp. These paper files were utilized until the final camera-ready manuscript was submitted for publication. The final stages of the dictionary project were supported by the National Science Foundation, through a grant to the University of North Dakota where Marlett is an adjunct professor.

The alphabet used in the dictionary is a slightly revised version of the one which Seri consultants and the Mosers developed in the 1950's during the years when SIL's work in Mexico was done under agreement with the Secretaría de Educación Pública. The Seri consultants for the dictionary, who read through multiple versions of the manuscript in the last few years, made the final decisions about word breaks and spellings, always a challenge even though the writing system is generally based on a phonemic analysis of the language.

The Seri language has had some renown in linguistic circles for the difficult sounds that it has as well as the consonant clusters that

its words exhibit, although it is not as complicated in this respect as languages in the Pacific Northwest. Some words to illustrate sequences of consonants usually difficult for outsiders to pronounce include *ptcamn* 'Cortez spiny lobster', *ziipxöl* 'foothill palo verde', *azcz* 'his younger brother', *ctaaplc* 'be early in the morning' and *czcoomct* 'those who like it'. In these words, the "z" represents a sound similar to the 'sh' sound of English, the "l" a fricative "l" like that found in Welsh, the "x" a voiceless uvular fricative, and "xö" a labialized version of the same. The "h" represents a glottal stop and is common in other words including the longest lexical item in the dictionary: *Hant Licot Conttaca Toii Hant Cöicáap Hast* 'mountain (*hast*) at the channel where one goes through to the lands beyond', known to Mexicans as Isla Las Ánimas.

Not all words are long and complicated, however. Two short ones are *ai* 'his father' and *am* 'her father'. A longer word that is still not too difficult, *acatazáta* 'his older brother's wife' illustrates the complexities of kinship terminology in Seri. The kinship system of Seri is one of the most complicated systems documented in the world.

The Seri language has a highly inflected verb system. A transitive verb in Seri may have more than 200 distinct conjugated forms, as illustrated in an appendix to the dictionary. Plurals of nouns and verbs are also complicated to the degree that they must be listed in the dictionary. For example, the plural of *ziix* 'thing' is *xiica*, the plural of *cmaam* 'woman' is *cmajüic*, the plural of *ctam* 'man' is *ctamcö*, the plural of

ziic ‘bird’ is *ziicalc*, and the plural of *quisil* ‘small’ is *quixt*.

Another reason why one won’t find many recognizable words on the Seri side of the dictionary is that the Seri people have borrowed relatively few words from other languages, partly for historical reasons of self-chosen isolation. To be sure, there are a few Spanish words and a few O’odham words, the latter deriving from the period when the Seris temporarily shared territory with some O’odham families. Loanwords are also rare because the Seri people have created their own terms for most modern gadgets — partly because of their isolation from Spanish speakers, partly because they have a well-established tradition of using newly coined descriptive lexical items to replace words which become taboo — such as the way English speakers create new terms like “fire extinguisher”. For example, the common expression for “cow” is *ziix cooha*, literally ‘thing that cries’. The expression for “windshield” is *eenm an iquíjim ziix cöimahnáxz*, literally ‘mirror (metal that one looks in) that has not been painted’. “Newspaper” is *hapáspoj cmatsj* ‘paper that tells lies’. The dictionary is a window into the culture of the people that speak this language.

This past November (2005), the printed dictionary was first shown to the Seri community, many members of which will receive complimentary copies provided by the institutions which paid for the publication (the Universidad de Sonora, the Instituto Sonorense de Cultura, and the NSF). As one young man held up a copy, he remarked “This is like gold to us.” As in other minority language groups, the publication of a prestigious book that

affirms their linguistic identity is a pivotal moment in their history.

Further information:

Web page announcing publication:

<http://www.und.nodak.edu/instruct/smarlett/SeriDictFlyer.htm>

Roberto Herrera Marcos was born at Pozo Coyote, Sonora, in 1916. Respected by his fellow tribal members, Herrera served them in many capacities. He was for many years the highest elected or appointed official of the Seris in various capacities. Herrera was extremely knowledgeable about the history, traditions, and language of the Seri people. The basis for most of the linguistic and cultural information that is found in recent published work is directly attributable to his patient explanations. The Seri dictionary, the New Testament in Seri (1982), and books of traditional stories and history are works in which he played a key role. He died October 16, 1988 at his home in El Desemboque, Sonora.

Edward Moser graduated from Wheaton College (B.A.) after serving in the U.S. navy in World War II. He received an M.A. in linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania in 1961. He published multiple articles on Seri culture and language. **Mary B. Moser** also studied at Wheaton College, but received her B.A. from the University of North Dakota. She has also published numerous articles on Seri culture and language. A joint work with her husband was the Seri-Spanish Vocabulary which was published in 1961. The Mosers worked with SIL International during their careers and

both taught linguistics during numerous summers at the University of North Dakota.

Stephen Marlett collaborated on the project in the final years. He holds an M.A. in linguistics from the University of North Dakota and a PhD in linguistics from the University of California at San Diego. He has authored multiple articles on the Seri language. He is currently working on a comprehensive reference grammar of Seri. He has worked with SIL International for most of his career, and is an adjunct professor of linguistics at the University of North Dakota and the Universidad Ricardo Palma in Lima, Peru.

Cathy Moser Marlett, illustrator, daughter of Edward and Mary Moser, received her B.A. in biology and art from Wheaton College and did graduate studies in linguistics at the University of North Dakota. She is a literacy materials artist for SIL International. She recently illustrated health-awareness materials related to avian flu for language groups in Asia and the Pacific. Her current personal project is a comprehensive study of the Seris' knowledge of mollusks.

A **bibliography** of work on Seri language and culture can be found at:
<http://www.und.nodak.edu/instruct/smarlett/BibliografiaElectronicaSeri.htm>.

Also see the SIL-Mexico **web page on the Seri language** at
<http://www.sil.org/mexico/seri/00i-seri.htm>

Basic information about the Seri dictionary on one page can be found at

<http://www.und.nodak.edu/instruct/smarlett/SeriDictFlyer.htm>

and

<http://www.und.nodak.edu/instruct/smarlett/Flyer.pdf>

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