A PLACE FOR WRITING: LANGUAGE CULTIVATION AND LITERACY IN THE SERI COMMUNITY*

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Abstract. Writing is only recently gaining ground in the Seri community. Interest is now being shown in the way that writing permits the expression, documentation and sharing of a rich cultural heritage. The development of writing in the language provides another support for a language and culture that has survived centuries of pressures from external forces.

1. INTRODUCTION

Seri (*Cmiique Iitom*)[1] is the first language of a very small but vibrant community of speakers (less than one thousand, but up from less than two hundred in the early nineteenth century) who continue to live on the edge, both geographically and socially, of Spanish-speaking northern Mexico (Bowen 1983, S. Marlett 2007b). Linguistic study during the past fifty years has produced numerous linguistic articles on different aspects of the language (both descriptive and theoretical), a modest Spanish-Seri Seri-Spanish bilingual "vocabulario" (E. Moser and M. Moser 1961), four dissertations (Marlett 1981, Martínez Soto 2006, Munguía Duarte 2005, O'Meara 2010) a sizeable trilingual dictionary (adding English, M. Moser and S. Marlett 2005) and most recently a sizeable reference grammar (in English; S. Marlett, in preparation) of this interesting linguistic isolate.

The definition of the Seri speech community as a single language has been unproblematic in the last century since whatever major dialect language variation may have existed earlier (E. Moser 1963) was never documented and does not exist today. Although speakers tend to remark often about the variation in the speech of different families, in actuality differences are extremely minor and extremely few (e.g., *hizi yooho* vs. *hazi yooho* 's/he saw us' and *cap* vs. *cop* 'the (standing)') and do not define any particular group. The language is spoken in two towns between which there is constant intercommunication and movement, and a single elected

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[1] The ISO 639-3 code is sei. The autoethnonym is *Comcaac* – Seri people, and the autoglossonym is *Cmiique Iitom* – Seri person's speech. The origin of the name Seri is unknown.

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governor serves both communities. No formal language academy or committee has ever been formed, but the work on the 2005 dictionary by several members of the community has been accepted as representative of the entire group, as was true of all previously published language materials.

General anthropological study of the culture has been somewhat more limited in scope and depth, but investigations have revealed a fascinating ancient culture that is deeply aware of its environmental context (see Felger and M. Moser 1985 for plants and C. Marlett (in preparation) for mollusks; also see Griffen 1959)[2].

Attempts to introduce local language literacy in the community began early in the second half of the twentieth century (more details below), but were limited by various factors. After centuries of a nomadic style of life dependent on hunting and gathering, people were just beginning to enter a different way of life that would change them forever. Paper and books were of no tangible importance.

Primary schools were introduced first in the decade of the 1950's as part of the Mexican government's attempt to bring all cultures within its borders to be part of the national dialog and experience. This has meant a Spanish-language dominance in educational programs throughout the country (see Heath 1972 for some of the history and Terborg *et al*. 2006 for some recent information and perspective). Interest in the use of the indigenous languages has waxed and waned at the national level, but it never became very important in the Seri schools, where the language has had a small formal presence. Basic reading primers were first prepared in the mid 1950's (shortly after the primary school was first established) by a team of linguists (Edward Moser and Mary Moser) working under SIL International[3]. These primers were occasionally updated and reprinted, but they have been out of print for many years now, and there is no apparent demand for them. Three thousand copies of a single book of the "free textbook" type used in bilingual schools in Mexico was published (Romero Astorga 1994) as part of a nationwide program, but its idiosyncratic and erratic way of writing the language limited its use and effectiveness. In fact, parents reportedly asked that it not be used because of these defects. Other usable materials for school use do not exist, nor have teachers in the school system been trained to deliver any reasonable presentation of the language in the classrooms. There has been no program to produce either more materials or teachers equipped to use them. And finally, there is no serious place in the primary or secondary school curriculum for vernacular language instruction despite the fact that almost all of the students in these schools use Seri as their first language. On the positive side, the author has witnessed and heard about the encouragement of the use of the Seri language in extracurricular

[2] For a fairly complete bibliography of the Seri language and culture, see http://www.lengamer.org/admin/language_folders/seri/user_uploaded_files/links/File/bibliografia_seri/Bienvenido.html.

[3] SIL International is an NGO that has worked in minority languages of Mexico and numerous other countries. See www.sil.org.

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situations by non-Seri secondary school teachers. And some teachers in training today are showing increasing interest in being prepared to do something positive regarding the language.

Today, however, a new development is taking place as gifted writers in the Seri community have begun to document their culture through essays and small books. These materials − all locally produced and consumed − strike an immediate response in the community because of their cultural value. (Such materials contrast in purpose and accessibility with books that are designed more for outsiders, written in English or Spanish, not sold locally, and sold at a high price. The latter have a value to the community but it is much less directly related to the use of the written language.) The new materials also provide important additional documentation of the language and culture. Archived and shared electronically through the internet, the materials themselves as well as audiovisual derivatives are beginning to provide interested people with some of the materials that they have been lacking in order to provide Seri-language related instruction.

This article describes how these changes have come about and how the resulting situation is making a difference in extending another lifeline to a language that during the past century had almost reached the point of no return. This is important since, as Lewis and Trudell (2007: 272) argue, "sustainable language cultivation ultimately requires its use in written form by some significant segment of the population."

THE FOUNDATIONAL BASIS FOR WRITTEN SERI

The basis for general use of a written language must include, among other things, two crucial elements: 1) an adequately expressive writing system and 2) broad-based acceptance of that writing system. These two foundational items have evolved over a few decades in the case of the Seri language (S. Marlett 2006). This is in addition to the desire by the community to actually use the language and to expand its domains of use. In this regard, the comments of a non-linguist observer are apt: "[…] la lengua seri ocupa un lugar primordial en la articulación de la enorme diversidad de la etnia: su práctica, anclada firmemente en las nuevas generaciones, denota un enorme vigor, pues lejos de ser amenazada por el español, constituye la principal barrera semiótica a partir de la cual los seris han preservado del embate occidental los símbolos y certezas que les son fundamentales" [… the Seri language occupies a primary place in the expression of the enormous diversity of this cultural group: its practice, firmly anchored in the new generations, denotes an enormous vigor that, far from being threatened by Spanish, constitutes the primarily semiotic barrier from which the Seris have protected from the western onslaught the symbols and the certainties that are of fundamental importance to them − translation mine, SM] (Rentería Valencia 2007: 52). It has consistently

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been striking to outsiders how much the Seri people have respected their language. This obviously is an important factor, and one that the descriptive, theoretical and applied linguistic work, and anthropological studies during the past sixty years have strengthened.

The Seri writing system is based on the Roman alphabet, as is expected for languages of Mexico. The underlying linguistic analysis for the original Seri alphabet was developed by the linguists mentioned above in the mid 1950's (published as E. Moser and M. Moser 1965) and at the same time a practical alphabet was developed by them as they worked within the guidelines established by the Mexican department of education together with some interested Seri community members. The analysis was modified a bit in later years (S. Marlett 1981; S. Marlett, Moreno Herrera and Herrera Astorga 2005), and the alphabet was modified accordingly in modest but important ways.

The Seri alphabet is closely tied to the alphabet of the Spanish language, as expected by the criteria established by the Mexican government of the mid-twentieth century, although there were various challenges presented by the range of sounds that the Seri language has. These include a uvular fricative, labialized back consonants, a lateral fricative, a postalveolar fricative, a glottal stop, and long vowels.

The original alphabet, as well as later modifications, was worked out through direct consultation with community members and was tested in various informal ways. While some expectations for Mexican indigenous language alphabets have changed during the years (most significantly with regard to the representation of the velar stop), the Seri alphabet has been unaffected by these changes. In part this is due to the fact that it has not been controversial within the community and has been moderately successful for so many years. When the Seri committee responsible for the editing of the trilingual dictionary was given the task of finalizing the norms of the Seri writing system, the changes introduced were not to the alphabet itself, but rather to word breaks and punctuation (which turned out to be very practical and important changes).

The Seri alphabet also has built-in "badges" of distinctivness from Spanish. The representation of the common sounds /k^w/, /x^w/ and /χ^w/ as |cö|, |jö| and |xö|, respectively, means that it is readily apparent that Seri language materials are Seri and not Spanish.

The written language has served as a means for documenting important aspects of Seri culture. Long before the dictionary was published in 2005, a great deal of research on the culture of the Seri people had taken place and had been presented in many venues. The most comprehensive work was an ethnobotany (Felger and M. Moser 1985) that included far more than just information about plants; it gave a broad overview of the history and the culture that was more informative than any of the previously published anthropological studies about the Seris. Moreover, recordings and transcriptions of Seri legends and history had already been made, especially by Edward and Mary B. Moser. Some of this material had been published for local (that is, Seri) consumption (Romero *et al.*

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1975, Herrera *et al*. 1976, Herrera and Morales 1983). The written language was being used in modest ways to reinforce and validate the culture of the people despite the lack of serious involvement by the schools.

THE SERI WRITERS

During the early years of the twenty-first century, a few Seri men demonstrated their interest and ability to write in their language. These men had completed elementary school in Spanish, were bilingual in Spanish and Seri, and were able to take advantage of Seri primers and other basic books to become self-taught writers of their mother tongue. They were motivated by an interest in their language and in the history and culture that they knew it communicated. As the 2005 dictionary was in its three-year final stage of preparation, these men (and others) came to the forefront of the work and were invaluable contributors. Although the work on the dictionary was slow and meticulous, it represented another stage of training and preparation for these men as they grappled with every detail of the written language. They enjoyed thinking about the grammar and the proper representation of words. During this time, attention was again paid to the legends and histories that had been compiled earlier by the Mosers. These were edited and re-worked (see S. Marlett 2007a) to conform to the norms that the 2005 dictionary was putting into place.

It is relevant to note that the men who have been involved in these projects are not professional writers or educators. Since they were not able to finish much (if any) schooling beyond elementary school, they were not school teachers or administrators. Therefore they have no standing in the formal school system. Given their ages, they would never be part of the formal schooling system again. All of them, in fact, have worked as fishermen or artisans to provide for their families. Nevertheless, they are competent in producing literature in their language and documenting their culture, to the extent that in recent months one of them has earned the respect of others in the community and has been invited to teach classes on reading and writing the Seri language to other adults. The first workshop of this type was organized and carried out with the help of SIL and the author of this article in early 2008; later workshops were planned and carried out by members of the Seri community itself with some modest outside financial help. The level of these workshops is moving beyond basic reading skills to the training of a new cadre of Seri writers.

NEW SERI LANGUAGE MATERIALS

After the dictionary was produced, more attention was given to the description of the grammar, and it became clear that more text material would be helpful. The Seri men who were key in the preparation of the dictionary were

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commissioned to write new and original works. These new essays would be of a different genre from those that had been published earlier. Although the essays could vary in length and be about almost any topic of interest to the writer, author interests drifted to traditional knowledge about the natural world and to Seri history. Essay topics include different species of birds, fish and animals, constellations, cultural items, customs of traditional Seris in the past, and famous Seri ancestors. These essays are currently being organized in a collection that has become known as the Seri Encyclopedia, although it is uncertain whether the project will actually continue on to a scale that merits such a name (Montaño Herrera, Moreno Herrera and Marlett 2007). Quite different from mass-produced educational materials that homogenize Indian culture and experience, these new materials capitalize on the uniqueness of the Seri culture and the Seri experience.

One short example is given here. It is a paragraph about *l̲oomz*, which are very young mussels. The word is archaic and in fact had been unrecorded by anyone until the year 2007 when one of the writers, Lorenzo Herrera Casanova, remembered the word from conversations with his grandfather at least forty years earlier, and wrote a short piece about it. (Probably his recollection was prompted by the research on mollusks being carried out by Cathy Marlett.)

> L̲oomz coi, taax satoj heecto ha. Comcaac hantx mocat coi satoj itaaizi x, canoaa quih ano tahca x, satoj com iti toii x, imaaizi. Ox tpacta ma x, satoj caacoj zo tompaho ma x, satoj miizaj xah imaacöl quih tihiiha ma x, canoaa com an itacmolca x, imiimlajc. Ox tpacta ma x, comcaac cmajiic xah ctamcö xah coi, canoaa com haxoj toom ma x, cötazcam x, ox xah yaza: –Xiica hizcoi l̲oomz cah tihiiha ma, imiimlajc. ¡¿Taax ziix hapahit ha zo haaya?! [LHC]

These items appear untranslated for presentation to the Seri people themselves – having Spanish with them would be a distraction and diminish their effectiveness. An English translation is given here so that the reader can see various aspects of this paragraph:

> "L̲oomz" are baby mussels. When the Seri ancestors collected mussels, they would go in a boat over the mussel bed and collect the mussels. When only medium-sized mussels could be found, they would put them into the boat and take them instead. Then the Seri women and men on shore would meet the boat as it arrived at shore and say in jest, "These people have just brought baby mussels. Do they think they are food?"

Such mini-texts provide information about a way of life that is quickly vanishing even from memory, as the Seris no longer collect mussels in this way. Besides reviving a word that was almost forgotten (and which is, incidentally, one of the few words in the language to have a voiced lateral approximant), the essays provides examples of lexicon, syntax and style that enrich the reader. The direct quotation at the end contains a rhetorical question with its unique intonation pattern. Such material affirms the value of older people whose heads are filled with memories of experiences and history that naturally find a home in such essays. This

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kind of text also provides material that could easily be combined in the schools' biology and ecology curricula. Importantly, it reminds people that they have been the caretakers and beneficiaries of the natural resources of this area of the world since time immemorial, resources about which their traditional knowledge and that of Western science can be mutually informed.

In addition, one writer has written two desktop-published "Who am I?" booklets (Montaño Herrera 2007, 2008) that engage the reader by describing local lizards and birds using clues about their habits that usually make sense only to a Seri speaker. These clues typically provoke a hilarious reaction from listeners and readers since they draw on characteristics, behaviors or beliefs that even young people believe that they should know, even when they do not.

Preparations for the writing workshops mentioned above produced some materials that had not existed before: a short one-page overview of "special" letters (those that do not exist in Spanish or that are quite different in pronunciation from those of Spanish) and some word games (memory games, bingo, letter soup, and crossword puzzles). These proved to be effective tools in the workshops and built on general literacy skills in Spanish. In fact, their effectiveness demonstrates that the primers of the past would no longer be relevant, even if still available.[4] In the first workshop, people also learned how to make appealing but inexpensive "big books" that have immediate use in the kindergarten or elementary schools.

Other supporting materials that have been distributed include a small student dictionary and a description of the writing system prepared on the model of the one used for Spanish by the Real Academia Española. The trilingual Seri dictionary with its hundred-page grammatical sketch was given to every Seri household in 2006, courtesy of the government of the state of Sonora (Mexico) and the U.S. National Science Foundation.

MULTI-MEDIA DISTRIBUTION AND USE OF SERI MATERIALS

To have a few people who write well, a small corpus of literature, and a small group of Seri readers is one positive step, but it is quite another to have a literate society and a community that utilizes its written language in many spheres of life. There is still a long way to go in this regard.

At the present time, the use of written Seri in school appears to be negligible. While this may change in the near future because of the heightened interest in the preservation of native languages in Mexico (witness the efforts of the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, for example)[5], realism forces one to recognize that

[4] The primers of the past were designed for use with pre-literate students who had little fluency in Spanish. The one-page overview of "special" letters is designed for people who have already acquired some proficiency in writing Spanish, which is true of people who have attended the local primary school, and thus helps them build on basic literacy skills in Spanish to read and write Seri.

[5] See www.inali.gob.mx.

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literacy efforts need to continue outside of the schooling system. In fact, it would be unwise to do otherwise given the realities of politics and administration of education.

A recently developed tool that is available for the distribution of materials is the Internet. While this is quite a new feature of the Seri community (and still outside the experience of most adult Seris), young people are increasingly familiar with it and are using the new Internet cafés that now exist in each town. The schools, modest as they are, also have (satellite) Internet access. Perhaps equally important, young people who leave the community to study at the college-preparation level or in the university always have access to the Internet and the Seri language materials available through it, while in the past they may not have had regular access at all to anything printed in their language.

In late 2006 a website was launched that made a page available for the electronic distribution of written Seri materials (as well as those of other languages).[6] The existence of this site means that any Seri in any place can download at any time, without any cost, all of the legends, histories, essays, games, booklets, etc. that are available in the Seri language. Some of these (for example, the booklets) are provided in a format that would allow a person to make copies using a common printer. These materials are occasionally revised and corrected, making them always up-to-date. If a teacher wants to download a game, he or she can do so. If an elder wants to read one of the legends that was first recorded and transcribed fifty years ago, he can do so (and also obtain a digital version of the original recording if it is available, or a new recording by a competent reader). If a student writer wants to obtain a copy of the materials that guide him or her through certain aspects of the writing conventions, those are also there ready to be downloaded and used. Best of all, as was reported to the author in April of 2008, exactly what was hoped for has been happening. Computer-savvy Seri young people have found the material on the Internet and have begun using it.

Beyond the basic written materials and the audio files archived alongside them, other materials are available that could be used in the school classroom at any time: posters that illustrate the letters, an alphabet mini-book, the text and illustrations for the "big books" that have been produced in the community. An on-line course to teach Seri writing is now being developed by the author of this article (using QuickTime videos) in order to extend learning opportunities to extrascholastic situations.

The modest efforts to open new spaces for the strengthening of the Seri language in its written have attracted the attention of an international non-governmental organization (the Christensen Fund) that is committed to preserving biocultural diversity.[7] The fund is currently providing critical support for the expansion of the group of writers.

[6] www.lengamer.org.
[7] www.christensenfund.org.

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The world changes quickly, simultaneously challenging language communities and providing new opportunities. The pressures on minority languages, especially with very small populations, are enormous and unabating. New technologies often simply mean another wave of problems. In the case of the Internet, however, the new technology can provide a small lifeline for small language communities that are able to take advantage of it. Instead of people finding materials in their language only in a box somewhere, or in a distant library, or not at all, the Internet makes it possible for wide, efficient, and inexpensive distribution. Better than simple printed materials of the past, or audio materials that quickly deteriorate or are mechanically inaccessible, the Internet materials can combine the print medium, line illustrations, color photography, and easily-accessed audio and video materials. Furthermore, this technology is available to virtually anyone at a low cost and requires little training to use. (On the other hand, some software that may be available at the present time would seem to be inappropriate for our purposes since the software is either expensive, complicated, time-intensive, or not likely to be in use in another decade.) It can be coupled with recent advances in desktop publishing to circumvent problems that plagued small language communities only a few years ago.

THE PLACE OF WRITING

There is evidence that some people in the Seri community believe that writing matters, and that it is relevant for the protection of their cultural knowledge. In the past year, three writers have produced beautiful essays that will be included in an anthology of Native American literature (Kozak, in press). One of these essays brings to light important historical information that has until now only been known to a small group of people. The brother of a Seri singer wants to preserve the singer's repertoire through a volume that preserves and describes the content of the songs that have heretofore never been published; he has asked for help in doing this. The tribal elders have commissioned a writer to record some important religious material so that it will not be lost. One man has begun writing a book on the constellations. There also continues to be encouragement from outsiders, especially scientists working in the area, to have Seri men and women collaborate with them in a way that requires them to use the written language for recording observations, history, names, and place names.

A generation ago, before the introduction of television in the communities, singing and story-telling were common within the culture and practiced in different family situations. In the present-day cultural situation, story-telling has not emerged as a public activity, and singing continues to be a mostly private event. While some wonderful material is being videotaped so that the actual art of storytelling is not entirely lost and may be revived in the future, it may be that

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writing turns out to be the way in which the most traditional and closely held material in the Seri culture survives for future generations. And it may be a key element in convincing young people that their rich heritage, both linguistic and cultural, is something worth passing on.

CONCLUSIONS, AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

The current Seri experience of combining technology, documentation and internet access is just beginning. What we know is that the technology is functioning. Material that has resulted from years of work in the past has been given a new lease on life with much greater possibilities of circulation. These materials combine new creations and productions by respected story-tellers of the past, whose voices are now reaching generations of Seri young people whom they have never met.

This experience builds on the foundation of a stable, adequate alphabet and the relative linguistic and cultural homogeneity of the Seri-speaking population. For that reason it has eluded the problems plaguing literacy programs in other areas that lack an adequate writing system, or that lack stability in the form of the writing system, or that lack the general support of the population that the writing system is supposed to serve. If the Seri case is indicative of anything in this regard, it shows clearly that such problems must be overcome.

The Seri literacy initiative is taking place without heavy top-down programming and without a large budget. It has depended crucially on a few capable Seri people whose commitment to and interest in the writing of their language has been unwavering. The interest of some non-Seris (including linguists, anthropologists, ecologists, and research scientists) has also been very important. But it is coming very late to a very small population, and it is trying to blossom at a time in history when the pressures on the language and culture are at the greatest but perhaps still not perceived. In order for it to be long-lasting, the initiative will need to interest many more people, train many more people, and produce much more literature. If there is not much more literature in a short time, and if it is not easily available, people could become frustrated and think that efforts to achieve reading skills are not worthwhile. The initiative will also need to make entry into the academic domain, and interest people with a background in instructional education to expand the materials that can be utilized in formal schooling situations. But if the language continues to be used in the future as vigorously as it is right now, the chances for successfully establishing written Seri in the community are quite good. At the same time, the written language will continue to support the cultivation of the language generally.

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