

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

This paper discusses the implications of documentation work and research that has been taking place among one of the smallest endangered languages of Mexico which nonetheless remains the first language of a vibrant community of speakers. The history of the Seri people and language has been one of clash between cultures — a confrontation that they have barely survived. At one point in the first half of the 20th century the number of adults in the group numbered less than 150.

Documentation of this language began in a serious way over fifty years ago and has continued up to the present. Most importantly, however, the language documentation went hand in hand with a documentation of the culture. That research has resulted in numerous small publications as well as a landmark ethnobotany (Felger and Moser 1985) which drew attention to the fragile cultural treasure that was on the verge of extinction and thus inspired research in more domains. It has taken simultaneous intense efforts by dedicated linguists to understand the intricacies of the language, and the interest of native speakers, to come up with a writing system that is very functional as well as aesthetically pleasing.

Today these different efforts are converging in serious ways — perhaps just in time. A major dictionary (Moser and Marlett 2005) was published which was the fruit of the linguistic and literacy efforts. Literate Seri men and women had major input into the final shape and content of the illustrated dictionary, 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. It is part of the reason for a recent surge of interest by young people in learning to read and write their language. Some of those 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. These are archived in written, audio and sometimes video versions. This material, moreover, is beginning to provide the nucleus of reading material for the schooling system which has heretofore been unable or just disinterested in delivering any competency in reading and writing the minority language. 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. Exposed again, through those projects and through their own writing, to the challenges of writing, grammar and style, these people are becoming major consultants for the next phase of bringing this work to fruition, which is to prepare a generation for whom reading and writing are an integral part of life.

This paper documents the stages of this process, the challenges, the elements of the collaboration in different directions, and the role of formal documentation.

References

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