



**Hai quih pti immistaj xah, comcaac coi ziix quih iti
cöipactoj xah, ziix quih ocoaaj coi iicp hac**

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Languages are a universe of ideas, images, meanings, and cultures; so, penetrating each of them supposes a journey with infinite different perspectives. Carolyn O'Meara opens up the possibility of reading, listening, and imagining the Seri world, or *cmiique iitom*, but, above all, she offers students and speakers of the language a didactic tool and means of entertainment in *Hai quih pti immistaj xah, comcaac coi ziix quih iti cöipactoj xah, ziix quih ocoaaj coi iicp hac*. This is a collection of stories from the inhabitants of the northwestern coast of Sonora, the Comcaac.

The work is the product of O'Meara's doctoral thesis research project about the linguistic classification of landscape and the grammar of spatial reference. For several years starting in 2006, she gathered stories from the inhabitants of the towns of Socaaix (Punta Chueca) and Haxöl Iihom (at the mouth of the San Ignacio River). She quotes outstanding Seri language researcher Steve Mar-

lett as saying that it is considered an isolated language because it cannot be related to any other and it only has about 1000 speakers.¹

In her Spanish-language introduction to the stories, O'Meara emphasizes the importance of creating didactic materials given the urgency pointed out by the Comcaac themselves. Despite the fact that she collected the stories through recordings and writings translated into Spanish, the final edition was monolingual. Following Marlett's advice, O'Meara decided that the book should not be published in a bilingual version, thus giving place and voice exclusively to the original language. While including Spanish-language versions would have attracted a larger reading public in other regions interested in knowing more about the Comcaac, it would not have been a means for teaching and learning the language. Therefore, the didactic and cultural needs of the Sonora communities molded the book's structure. With this awareness of the language's

structural, social, and cultural flexibility, the compiler also proposed a future edition, since new needs could present themselves in the communities or a new edition could even be conceived solely for readers specialized in linguistics. Therefore, the book is presented as “the beginning of future collections of this kind” (p. 13).

O’Meara’s introduction also includes a summary of Seri spelling and pronunciation norms, which acts as a bridge to a series of general reflections about the relationships between words, the body, and the world surrounding them, created through detailed but brief basic rules for reading or speaking the language.² For example, the author carefully explains the following: “[The ‘e’] is pronounced with the mouth slightly more open and the tongue slightly lower in comparison to the vowel written with ‘e’ in Spanish” (p. 13). When reading the phonetic descriptions, it is almost impossible to put to one side the awareness of the body’s movements in order to produce a sound and, at the same time, a meaning. Each language is specific to a people or region, but, in turn, each region has bodies that adapt and accustom themselves to different movements.

After the introduction, the work in Seri is divided into two parts: the stories, “Comcaac coi ziix quih iti cöipactoj xah, ziix quih ocaaj hac, and the explanation of the winds of the region, “Hai pti immistaj coi iicp hac.” As mentioned above, O’Meara chose the stories after years of hearing them in Sonora. For example, one, told by Lorenzo Herrera Casanova, underlines the importance of the food proper to each area and how changing food has consequences: “Comcaac coi ziix hapahit oiitoj coi iicp hac.” This story describes how the Comcaac used to eat mollusks, sea snails, turtles, dragon fruit, and deer, among other things, and after recent changes, serious bouts of disease have broken out because they now eat mainly fried food.

The book also includes a children’s story with a community song in which a cuckolded chameleon is attacked by ants and starts asking for help. It also features an old legend about a mysterious woman who doesn’t know where she’s from, and, after getting drunk and dancing with the girls of the community, disappears as night falls. So, this collection not only allows any reader to know and familiarize him/herself with the Seri language and culture, but it does the same for the Comcaac themselves, who read in their language about their land, and (re)think and get to know the legends and the stories that have shaped their communities for years.

The second part of the book, about the wind, is encyclopedic, because it describes the wind’s properties. O’Meara explains that a translation would not do justice to the Seri words that name the nine winds blowing in the region. For example, “hai isoj caai” means “wind that is preparing for something” and “hoocala imatax” means “cloud that does not leave.” Seri’s linguistic registers presuppose images in and of themselves that are not seen in commonly used terms in other languages, such as Spanish. That is, linguistic diversity also supposes a variety of perspectives that hone in on different details of the natural world, such as the case of intent born with a specific wind: “hai an icaasaj,” explains O’Meara, is used in summer when it’s hot. Both parts of the book are complemented by simple but warm illustrations by Blanca A. Flores Montaña, a Socaaix resident.

O’Meara’s collection does not leave out her linguistic interests, briefly put forward in the introduction, and it also underlines the importance of creating a space for the Seri-speakers to listen to and read themselves. The languages of Mexico’s different regions are an invaluable treasure that nourishes the country’s diversity. In this case, Seri implies structures added to a spatial awareness and, to a certain degree, an ecological awareness. These ideas are also observed in the kind of stories presented and the brief encyclopedia of winds.

Also, the compiler’s reflections at the beginning of the book allow the reader to explore the formation of meanings not only through what is written, but also through the sounds created based on specific body movements. The indigenous languages are commonly seen as something that needs to be rescued, and that position supports the preservation of the ideas they contain and that extol the natural space around us that we have stopped caring for. ■■■

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Notes

- 1 Stephen A. Marlett, “The Seri and Salinan Connection Revisited,” *International Journal of American Linguistics* vol. 74, no 3, pp. 393-399.
- 2 The summary was mainly developed based on the trilingual dictionary, Mary B. Moser and Steve A. Marlett, *Comcaac quih Yaza quih Hant Ihiip hac. Diccionario seri-español-inglés* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdes Editores, 2005).