Learning from Serrano Documentation

A century of best and not-so-best practices
Introduction

• Serrano language has few speakers left
• Hard to get new language data
• Past documentation from
  • community members
  • linguists, anthropologists
  • other academic fields
  • amateurs
• Our efforts are enabled and constrained by past research
• Issues we are facing as a result
Traditional Serrano Territory

Population at Contact: 15-20,000
Speakers today: 2 (English dominant)
Background

- Ernest Siva
  - Morongo Band of Mission Indians
  - tribal elder and historian
  - Founder of the Dorothy Ramon Learning Center
- Serrano Language Revitalization Project
  - San Manuel Band of Mission Indians
  - community language project
  - part of the Tribe’s Education Department
Goals of Project

• Documentation
  • for the Serrano community, not academic community
  • original documentation
    • (late) Pauline Murillo
    • Ernest Siva
  • archival/literature research
    • community members
    • linguistically trained academics
    • non-linguistically trained academics
    • amateurs

• Revitalization
  • dictionary
  • grammar textbook
  • classes
Siva’s Work

- Personal knowledge
  - grew up in Serrano speaking household
  - published book of Serrano songs
- Documentation of past speakers
  - kept journals of mother and aunt for 20 years
  - didn’t use audio recorder (they didn’t like it)
  - always some new word or new use
  - expressions you do not hear anymore
  - things that do not translate well
- Collaboration with SLRP
  - weekly meetings
  - review material (audio, text)
  - correct mistakes, expand on topics, teach new things
Practices and Consequences

• How do past documenters’ practices affect our understanding of Serrano?
  • quality of material
  • coverage of material
  • reliability of material
  • context of documentation
Audio Quality

• Guy Tyler recordings of 4 Serrano speakers
  • 43 recordings, 1960s-70s
  • spotless sound quality, well taken care of
  • best audio recordings of Serrano

• Wick Miller recorded anonymous Serrano woman
  • 6 word elicitation, 1950s
  • good sound quality, stored and digitized by UC Berkeley
  • Miller himself not miked well, so hard to understand prompts

• Kenneth Hill recorded Sarah Martin and Louis Marcus
  • 20 narratives, 8 word/phrase lists, 1965-67
  • not professionally stored, quality degraded
  • professionally cleaned to restore quality
  • best verifiable source of grammar of the language
Organization of Notes

- C. Hart Merriam
  - naturalist
  - worked with speakers of from San Manuel and Morongo
- well-organized notes
- easy to find information
Organization of Notes

- J. P. Harrington
  - anthropologist
  - worked mostly at San Manuel, some Morongo
  - notes are mostly stream of consciousness
  - very hard to find information
  - we are getting them transcribed to improve search-ability
Redundancies vs. Gaps

• Redundant data: different documenters sometimes covered the same material
  • the good: allows us to verify information
    • “My X is killing me” = “I have an X-ache”
    • wamat hʷə̱ačkihʷa’t “raccoon” (lit. “tree ladder”)
  • the bad: the more overlap, the less new data

• Gaps in data: things documenters missed
  • Scarce lexical information about
    • astronomy, geology, religion, military, music, craftwork
  • linguists kept using the same easy verbs and nouns for examples
    • Crook compiled 2100 words, < 100 unique
Depth vs. Breadth

- Depth – comprehensiveness of a particular domain
  - Non-linguists tended to delve into particular topics
    - lacked the skills to transcribe words or understand grammar
  - Linguists tended to delve into grammar, not the lexicon
    - often lack specialized knowledge for accurate translation

- Breadth – how many domains were covered
  - Linguists covered many domains
    - Ramon and Elliott – 721 texts across all kinds of topics
  - Community members have good breadth
    - record what is around them
  - Non-linguist academics did not stray much from their topics
Reliability

- Linguists
  - very reliable for transcription and grammar
  - not always as reliable for specialized domains of knowledge
    - species identification by linguists not very reliable
    - frequently miss cultural background
- Non-linguists
  - very reliable for their fields
  - not very reliable for transcription or understanding phrases
- Community members
  - not always reliable for pronunciation of words
  - excellent information on culture and history
- Sometimes we can cross-check these for improved accuracy
- Sometimes we can’t
Reliability

Pümüvü' m raakʷ. Kiič Atių'avi m raakʷ.

Literal: They ate on them. They ate at the Big House.
Better: They ate in their honor. They ate in honor of the Big House
Verifiability

- How do we know other people got their data right?
- Collaboration between SLRP and Ernest Siva
  - Confirm or change translations
  - Check pronunciation
  - Discuss other uses of same word
  - Explain missing background information
- Audio recordings
  - Hill has graciously given us copies of all his recordings so we can verify his transcriptions and translations
- Specimen collection
  - Harrington irregularly collected specimens of plants and rocks
  - Lerch (anthropologist) inspected those plant specimens for species identification
It is often important to know the context of data collection to reconstruct missing information.

• Harrington (clear)
  “When at Big Meadows about the seventeenth of October and about 10 o’clock p.m., Tomas showed me the constellation túkumʃiva’t in the northern heavens just to the left of Cassiopoea. It is a gigantic triangle with base fairly horizontal just to the left and a little below Cassiopoea and of greater diameter than the entire length of Cassiopoea.”

• Harrington (unclear)
  “There is a similar large rattlesnake, they said, that lives at the foot of Məkat mountain (across valley from here) in a dry wash. It goes about at night and is then seen.”

• We don’t know where “here” or Məkat is.
Take-aways for Documenters

• A lot of the work we have to do would be easier if linguists and other specialists coordinated the first time around
• Something is better than nothing, but organized data, audio recordings, and specimens will help later documenters and revitalizers
• Try to cover new lexical ground
• Work with “less than perfect” speakers, because they have much to contribute
Take-aways for Communities

• There may be more information out there than you think
• Reach out to specialists in other fields, not just linguists and anthropologists
• Reach out to non-academics; they may have skills that make their documentation superior to others
• Record the expressions you hear around the house that experts may not have access to
‘Ivi’ ‘Ayee’

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