

The North Star and the Captain

La estrella Polar y el capitán

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Summary

Basic information about the Seri language and its speakers is given, along with a description of the state of the documentation of the language. A short text about the North Star and its role in the past is presented and glossed. By means of this text, written by a Seri man who was greatly interested in history, the mentioned morphological and syntactic facts are illustrated. The Seris used the stars to arrange meetings between dispersed groups of them for various purposes, including, as in this text, to plan revenge attacks on those people who had caused the deaths of their loved ones.

Keywords: Seri language, documentation, oral history, astronomy, war, customs, rhetoric.

Resumen

Se presenta información básica acerca de la lengua seri y sus hablantes, además de una descripción del estado de la documentación de la lengua. Se incluye un texto breve acerca de la estrella Polar y su rol en el pasado. Por medio de este texto, escrito por un hombre seri con mucho interés en la historia, se ilustran los hechos morfológicos y sintácticos mencionados. Los seris usaban las estrellas para convocar reuniones entre grupos dispersos para varios propósitos, incluso, como en este texto, para planificar las represalias a las personas que causaron las muertes de sus seres queridos.

Palabras clave: lengua seri, documentación, historia oral, astronomía, guerra, costumbres, retórica.

1. *The Seris and their language*

The Seri language, referred to by its speakers as *Cmiique litom*, with ISO 639-3 code [sei], is presently considered a language isolate (Heaton, 2018), although it has often been linked to the Hokan hypothesis in the past, including Yuman languages, often with certitude (Langdon, 1974; Kroeber, 1931; Crawford, 1976; see Golla, 2011 for a brief review)

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and to Salinan of California (see S. Marlett, 2008c for discussion).³ The published evidence presented in favor of these relationships, including that of Brown (2017), has been extremely thin and problematic, although tantalizing. See the references in S. Marlett (2022a) for more of the long history, which dates back to Gatschet (1883).

Although today there may be three times the number of speakers (INEGI, 2020) as seventy years ago, when there were fewer than 230 people in total (Spicer, 1962: 115) or not long before that, about 160 (Sheridan, 1999: 462), the language has recently entered a critical stage since so many children are now non-speakers, semi-speakers, or only passive participants, unlike in the past. The factors causing this shift are the traditionally known ones, principally related to the breakdown of intra-family transmission deriving from the massive intrusion of Spanish through social connections and institutions and because of higher mortality rates from diabetes, drug abuse and alcoholism.

With few exceptions, the speakers live in two towns on the coast of Sonora on communal property. The change from a semi-nomadic lifestyle to one that is sedentary, which has occurred in the past hundred years, and from a high-protein diet to one that favors processed carbohydrates (C. Marlett, 2019; Narchi *et al.*, 2020), has contributed to serious health problems and deaths. Of course, this situation has also negatively affected the vitality of the language.

Texts from this language that have been published in *Tlalocan* include: E. Moser (1962, 1968); O'Meara *et al.* (2012); S. Marlett (2013); Montaña Herrera and Marlett (2016); S. Marlett *et al.* (2018); Morales *et al.* (2019); and Pasquereau and Perales (2021).

2. *Characteristics of the language*

The language is robustly head-final: SOV, possessor precedes possessum, and determiner-final (S. Marlett, 2015). Some variability of word order in the clause exists, of course, either because of fronting, as in line [9.3] of the text below, or postposing, as in line [6]. Relative clauses, all nominalized, are arguably head-internal (S. Marlett, 2012). Chained clauses and switch-reference marking are prominent characteristics (M. Moser, 1978b; Farrell *et al.*, 1991). It has a rich, semantically-sensitive set of definite articles and demonstratives (M. Moser, 1978a; S. Marlett and M. Moser, 1994), historically

³ I thank Xavier Moreno for his help in confirming and expanding on various details regarding this text, and my wife Cathy for discussions about many other details. I also appreciate very much the comments and questions that Carolyn O'Meara has given me, as well as those from two anonymous reviewers who were kind enough to consider the manuscript. The text was analyzed using SIL Fieldworks and then prepared for presentation using XLingPaper.

related to positional verbs. It may have one of the most complex kinship systems ever recorded, although many parts of it have recently fallen into disuse (M. Moser and S. Marlett, 1999).

It is also a predominantly head-marking language: rich person agreement on the verb (S. Marlett, 1990), possessor marking on possessed nouns and on relational preverbs (S. Marlett, 2019b), no case. Negation is marked on the verb. Mood is the major factor for finite verbs, but evidentiality has a role as well in that, under certain conditions, one verb form apparently implies that the speaker is indicating direct personal knowledge. Passives, both personal and impersonal (Marlett, 1984a) and also raising constructions with number verbs (Marlett, 1984b) are also marked on the verbs. Non-finite forms, including imperatives, infinitives and three kinds of nominalizations, add to the repertoire of verb-related facts that must be understood. The morphology is agglutinative and mildly fusional. In addition, various morphemes trigger ablaut, expanding the complexity. Marking for plurality of the subject and of the event contributes another layer of richness (Baerman, 2016; Cabredo *et al.*, 2018; Pasquereau *et al.*, 2022), in addition to the complexity of noun plurality (E. Moser and M. Moser, 1976). While the previous are shown through infixation, suffixation, other stem modifications, and suppletion, the language is primarily prefixing. The superficial transitivity of a clause is relevant for various morphological facts; it seems almost an obsession; see Appendix C of the grammar, S. Marlett (forthcoming).

Seri may be the only language in Mexico that has uvular fricatives as phonemes (a plain one and a rounded one). Rounded back consonants are a relatively recent addition to the system; they have resulted from the loss of the vowel /o/ in their context in morphologically-determined contexts; compare, for example, *xeecoj* /'χεεκοx/ 'wolf' and *xeeçöl* /'χεεkʷl/ 'wolves'. The glottal stop is a consonant with a high functional load. Seri is also famous for the abstract consonant, devoid of almost all features, that is required to adequately describe a small group of verbs (S. Marlett and Stemberger, 1983). Vowel length, distinctive in stressed syllables, is extremely important. The syllable structure, with complex onset, complex nuclei, and complex codas, in addition to extrametricality licensed by inflection, is another interesting facet (S. Marlett, 1988). The stress pattern is penultimate on the root (a notable fact), not on the word; it is also quantity-sensitive (S. Marlett, 2008b). For the purposes of stress, a word-final consonant is extrametrical; two consonants in the coda are thus necessary to create a heavy syllable.

3. *Graphic representation*

The Seri language has been written using a roman alphabet for more than sixty years. Early proposals were developed by Edward and Mary Moser, working with the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano in collaboration with the Secretaría de Educación Pública. Certain conventions have been adjusted as a result of improved understanding of the language and with experience in practical matters. The presentation of words and sentences in M. Moser and S. Marlett (2010), guided by some key writers in the community, quite closely represents current practice (S. Marlett, 2019a), which is also reflected in SC and INALI (2019).

The spelling of Seri words, including incorporated loanwords, uses the conventions shown below to write the sounds corresponding to the symbols of the International Phonetic Association (IPA, 1999).

Orthography	IPA	Orthography	IPA
<i>a, aa</i>	a, aa [a:]	<i>m</i>	m
<i>c</i>	k	<i>n</i>	n
<i>cö</i>	k ^w	<i>o, oo</i>	o, oo [o:]
<i>e, ee</i>	ε, εε [ε:]	<i>p</i>	p
<i>f</i>	ϕ	<i>qu</i>	k
<i>h</i>	ʔ	<i>r</i>	r
<i>i, ii</i>	i, ii [i:]	<i>s</i>	s
<i>j</i>	x	<i>t</i>	t
<i>jö</i>	x ^w	<i>x</i>	χ
<i>l</i>	ł	<i>xö</i>	χ ^w
<i>l̄</i>	l	<i>y</i>	j
		<i>z</i>	ʃ

The sequences *cm* and *cöm* are pronounced [k^{w̃}] when the consonants are tautosyllabic. This causes the following vowels of that syllable to be nasalized. See the word *cmāax* ['k^{w̃}āāχ] in line [2.6] in the text below.

The bilabial nasal assimilates to the point of articulation of a following consonant when it is not in a stressed syllable. See the word *comcaac* [koŋ'kaak] in line [1].

False geminate consonants result from morphological concatenation; they are realized phonetically as long consonants, as in the word *ccam* ['k:am] in line [11.1]. True geminates result from the phonetic effect of stress on a word; a word like *satoj* /'satox/ 'mussel', is phonetically ['sat:o:x]. As a result, a word like *cama* 'big skate' (*Raja binocu-*

lata) is phonetically quite different from *cama* ‘bed’ in Spanish, a fact that naive writers are unprepared to deal with, but which a little training easily helps overcome.

Various other details of the pronunciation of consonants and vowels are explained in S. Marlett *et al.* (2005) and S. Marlett (2019a, forthcoming).

In the glossed texts that have been archived and also in the dictionary, acute accent indicates primary word stress when stress does not follow the general rules, as explained in M. Moser and S. Marlett (2010), while in much material created for local use, the accents are usually omitted as being superfluous. An acute accent is written on interrogative pronouns and adverbs (as in Spanish), and sometimes on other words, when helpful to the reader.

4. *State of the art of documentation*

Before the middle of the twentieth century, Seri may have been one of the most poorly documented and known languages in North America. Its speakers were few, isolated, and living in extreme poverty, while residing in their traditional area in the state of Sonora. All of these factors may have contributed to the high vitality of the language at that time, with virtually everyone being a fluent speaker. Today, with the massive and persistent influence of Spanish in the communities through the schools, television, social media, the Internet, churches, clinics, government agencies, NGOs, politicians, non-Seri residents, fishermen, construction workers, tourists, weekend visitors, hunters, photographers, reporters, scientists, musicians, merchants, spouses, lovers, drop-outs, and thrill-seekers, there is greater interaction with Mexican society and the outside world. At the same time, new social, physical and mental health issues have been unwelcome cotravelers, and the tipping point in favor of abandoning the language in favor of Spanish has arrived for many families, including for perhaps a majority of children, although no solid survey data are available; see O’Meara *et al.* (2022).

The earliest known extant documentation is not from the Jesuits or Franciscans who had a presence in Sonora (Spicer, 1962; Sheridan, 1999; Reséndez, 2016) —if they collected something, the whereabouts are not known— but rather from various other men who collected word lists that, problems of use notwithstanding, are extremely interesting: Bartlett (1852), Pinart (1879), Kroeber (1931). With respect to the documentation and development of the language, the turning point began with the arrival of Edward W. Moser and Mary Beck Moser in 1951. Trained in phonetics and basic linguistics through the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano (Summer Institute of Linguistics), later with a master’s degree from the University of Pennsylvania in the case of Edward, they devoted themselves to learning to speak the language and doing careful basic research on as many

aspects of it as they could, as well as on historical and anthropological topics. They were undeterred by the complexity of the phonetics and morphology. While they interacted with, and obtained recordings of, various people during the next few decades, their major collaborator for years was Roberto Herrera Marcos (1916-1988, once known as Roberto Thomson). Roberto was a talented and knowledgeable person, but apparently he never learned to read and write his language; his significant contribution, made over many years, was entirely in oral form. Various stories and histories published for use in the community bear his name. A great amount of the lexical material collected by the Mosers and included in the dictionary (M. Moser and S. Marlett, 2010) is directly attributable to him. Members of his family, including his son Lorenzo Herrera Casanova, grandson Xavier Moreno Herrera, nephew René Montaña Herrera, and grandniece Julia Montaña Barnett, have continued to create new written material as contributions to the documentation of the language.

The Mosers were instrumental in developing a functional practical orthography, which, with modifications based on improved understanding of the complicated phonology, has served as the basis for all of the documentation and literacy work that has been undertaken since that time, which primarily saw the Seri community as its main audience. At the same time, the Mosers published on various topics of significant anthropological and linguistic interest (see S. Marlett 2022a for more information).

The early and unexpected death of Edward in 1976 happened in the same year that his daughter Cathy married Stephen Marlett. While descriptive and theoretical publications about Seri appeared during the next few years (again, see S. Marlett 2022a for details), major additional work on the documentation of the language did not start for another twenty years. Aided by a National Science Foundation grant, the lexical files of the Mosers, spanning more than fifty years, were pulled together, with significant input from community members, to produce M. Moser and S. Marlett (2005). A National Endowment for the Humanities grant later was an enormous help in moving deeper into the grammar, the results being published in numerous articles and in S. Marlett (2022b) and S. Marlett (forthcoming). Grants from the Christensen Fund have also been most decidedly important in helping to introduce a younger generation of Seri people to reading, writing and understanding grammatical topics in their language as they also videotaped monolingual interviews between themselves and older people. It is interesting that, through this process, young women are now much more engaged with their written language; in the past, it was only men. However, the number of people who are engaged in reading and writing in the language is still very low, although people are now, more than ever, able to pick up a newly printed item and begin reading. Formal instruction in the language through the schools is virtually non-existent.

In all of these efforts, the supportive structure of the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, representing SIL International, has been present. Results have been archived at the Arizona State Museum (Tucson), the Archive of Indigenous Languages of Latin America (Austin), SIL International, the University of California (Berkeley), and Fonoteca Nacional (Mexico City). The work has also been integrated with efforts to document more of the culture in the areas of botany (Felger and M. Moser, 1985), malacology (C. Marlett, 2014), ornithology (Morales Vera, 2006), astronomy (Hernández Santana, 2015), medicine (Narchi *et al.*, 2002; Narchi, 2003), ichthyology (Torre Cosio, 2002), and more. (The references here are only partial; see S. Marlett (2022a) for more information.)

As for topics of the language and their degree of documentation, there are strong points and there are gaps. In the following paragraphs, only the major and most recent references are given; other works are found in S. Marlett (2022a). For all of them, there are certainly theoretical and technical issues that could be addressed; most of them are also discussed in S. Marlett (forthcoming).

Areas with substantial work done: phonetics (S. Marlett *et al.*, 2005); syllable structure (S. Marlett, 1988); stress (S. Marlett, 2008b); phonology (S. Marlett, 1981); morphology (E. Moser, 1961; S. Marlett, 2008d, 2017; Baerman, 2016); syntax (S. Marlett, 2010, 2012, 2019b); semantics and lexicon (S. Marlett, 2008a; M. Moser and S. Marlett, 2010; C. Marlett, in press; Pasquereau *et al.*, 2022); contact with other languages (S. Marlett, 2014); texts (Kozak, 2012; O'Meara *et al.*, 2012; S. Marlett, 2013; Montañó Herrera and S. Marlett, 2016; S. Marlett *et al.*, 2018; Morales *et al.*, 2019; Pasquereau and Perales, 2021; S. Marlett, 2022b).

Areas in which work is only covered in a basic way, if at all: intonation (nothing), sociolinguistics (S. Marlett, 2006); typology (S. Marlett, 2005); conversation analysis (nothing), discourse analysis (nothing); comparative and historical linguistics (not enough has been done that makes use of internal reconstruction and better information from other languages), child language acquisition (nothing). There are no videos with subtitled text in the archives, although the archived video that was made at the late Efraín Estrella's request (of him telling an important legend), would lend itself well to this.

A significant amount of monolingual material appears in texts published for use by the community, including ones written using orthographic conventions that have been superseded, including Romero *et al.* (1975) and Herrera *et al.* (1976); O'Meara (2014) and other material listed in S. Marlett (2022a), some of which reprises earlier work, utilize the current conventions. Significant amounts of translated material are also valuable, in their own way, and include E. Moser and M. Moser (1964); Liga del Sembrador (1982); M. Moser (1996), and INALI (2013); some of these materials are also now being updated.

5. *About the text*

The late Lorenzo Herrera (1947-2019) wrote this text in response to a request I made of several people to obtain material of interest for studying the grammar of Seri and for eventual use by young people to learn more about their own language and culture. My immediate interest was in having a larger corpus of well-constructed texts to study without having to go through the tedious process of transcription from a recording. Lorenzo was a good writer, having participated in earlier training events and having worked on the editorial committee for the dictionary (M. Moser and S. Marlett, 2005, 2010). His father was Roberto Herrera, who was mentioned in §4. He was also very interested in history, as he later showed by making an important contribution to our knowledge of Seri history through his writing up of what he had learned in his youth from his grandfather, Antonio Herrera; the essay was published as Herrera Casanova (2012). That work went through a much more prolonged process than the essay presented here, as he was always interested in adding another detail, revising some wording, or making any number of changes.

As I recall the sequence of events, Lorenzo chose the topic of the North Star from an almost arbitrary list of things that I had pulled out of the dictionary, items that I thought might be easy to reflect on and then write about. He wrote the essay in short order and I then keyboarded it and helped with whatever spelling and punctuation issues that it may have had, if any. Working through issues of comprehension of a text is certainly much easier, and richer, when one is interacting with the very author. Lorenzo recorded a personal reading of the text (available on *Tlalocan's* website) in early 2007; he was an excellent reader if the material was written well, made sense, and had good style. He was an author who enjoyed ruminating about every phrase in order to have it be properly said and accurate. The essay was included with a number of other essays by various other authors in Montaña Herrera *et al.* (2007), an informal monolingual booklet for use in the community.

While the prompt was simply the expression for the North Star (*Azój Canoj Imatax*, literally ‘star that does not go’, that is, ‘that does not move’),⁴ Lorenzo chose to firmly place the essay in the context of Seri history, presenting a perspective on events that we know little about. The essay in fact tells little about the North Star, and much more about the captain who was given the responsibility of inciting warriors to reprisals. (Indeed, Xavier Moreno has suggested that the title of the essay really should be “About the cap-

⁴ The name for this star in nearby languages has the same or a similar meaning, as reported for Walapai and Havasupai (Yuman languages) and Upper Pima (Uto-Aztecan) in Kroeber (1931: 41) and Miller (1997: 205).

tain”). The essay gives us a small example of the rhetorical devices used to accomplish the goal of moving warriors to action.

The style in which the subject noun phrase is placed in sentence final position, with a low-frequency intonation, as in [6], [7.2] and [13], was commonly used by Lorenzo in material that he wrote, such as in Herrera Casanova (2012).

The text mentions several characters or parties. These are:

1. The *Comcaac*, line [1], that is, the Seri people. The term is used most commonly, but not exclusively, as the name of the ethnic group in contrast with others. The singular form is *Cmüique*. It should be noted, however, that later in the text, when the captain is talking about deceased people, he twice uses the expression *xiica quiistox*, literally ‘things with breath (that is, with life)’, a term that is a more general term for referring to people (see §5 below).
2. The *Azój Canoj Imatax*, line [1], the North Star. While *azoj* means ‘star’, *azoj canoj* is the more commonly used expression for the same. (The planets are also covered by these terms.) The word *imatax*, literally, ‘that which does not go’ is better expressed here as ‘that which does not move’, or ‘that which does not change its position’. The name indicates that the Comcaac, who depended on the stars for many things, were aware of the North Star’s special status in the night sky.
3. The *sixoaaj ca*, line [3.1], the warriors. The expression here is not lexicalized; it is just ‘those who were going to fight’. These would have been young men.
4. The *ctam czaxö*, line [4.2], the captain, literally ‘man who talks to him/her/ them’. The translation as ‘captain’ was suggested to me by Xavier Moreno. This expression, in contrast to the preceding, is lexicalized (as indicated by the translation suggested by Xavier and by our discussion of it at the time), although it was not registered in time to appear in M. Moser and S. Marlett (2010). The verb *czaxö*, here in its subject nominalized form, is a transitive verb with an interesting set of subcategorization frames, as laid out in M. Moser and S. Marlett (2010). It is used in line [4.3] with the addressees as the direct object, and in line [5.2] with both the topic and the addressee; as a ditransitive, it requires the prefix *cö=*.
5. *liba mocoaj*, line [8], your relatives. The expression is literally, and enigmatically, ‘those whose limb you know’. The first word, *iiba*, is the third person possessed form of the noun that refers to the limbs of the body and is invariably singular in this idiom. The second word is the object nominalized form of the verb *quiya* ‘to know’, which is used for knowing a fact (knowing a person requires more lexical material); the form varies by person (using a possessor prefix) and number (using the plural suffix that is lexicalized for that verb): *hocoaa*, *mocoaa*,

ocooa, *hocoaaaj*, *mocoaaaj*, *ocooaaj* ('which I know', 'which you know', 'which s/he knows', 'which we know', 'which you (pl.) know', 'which they know', respectively). See also the expression *iiba hapaa* 'relatives' (with no mention of whom). These relatives are described as being *imiipla haaj* 'deceased'. This euphemistic expression for referring to a person who is no longer living has replaced other expressions when referring to loved ones. It is interesting to note here that even when using words to incite revenge, the captain must still not show disrespect for the deceased relatives. The respect is augmented even more, both in line [5.1] as well as line [8], by the employment of the more general and indirect expression *xiica quiistox* 'those who breathe, those who live' for the (deceased) people, rather than the more direct term *Comcaac*.

Unnamed in the text are those who have committed the atrocities for which the reprisals are being planned. These would have been *Cocsar*, a term that applies especially to Spanish-speaking non-indigenous peoples. (The term is a loanword of unknown origin. First documented in the Seri lexicon in Pinart, 1879, a cognate for it was recorded in the Uto-Aztecan language Eudeve in Lionnet, 1986.) Since the essay gives no clue as to the period of history in which it is taking place, we do not know whether the unnamed enemies are Spaniards, *criollos* (Spaniards born in New Spain), or Mexicans. Each of these contributed to the pain that the Comcaac suffered at the hands of outsiders intent on subduing them or dispossessing them of their territory. For more information about the history of the Comcaac in this regard, see Spicer (1962), Sheridan (1979, 1999), Bowen (2000), Hölck (2016), and Mellado (2020).

6. Text and translation

¹Azoy Canoj Imatax quij — comcaac coi hizaax oo cöitapactoj x, ziix quih ihaseaalam iha. ²Hant quih iti toii x, toox pte toii xox, azoj canoj yaqueeelcam timoca hapx tap ma x, ihooctam iti x, Azoj Canoj Imatax tiquij iti itaait ma x, cmaax tseaalam x, hant quih iiqui isitooij hac iiqui mitooij. ³Comcaac ctamcö quih sixooaj ca coi ox ano pte titaa ma x, hant quih iti paii, isiilh hac iti miizcam. ⁴Ox tpacta ma x, ctam czaxö hapáh quij sixooaj ca coi ptiti itaquim x, inzaxö. ⁵Xiica quiistox quih oyácalcam quih ziix quih cöicamsisiin quih iti cöiihj hac, taax ah cöinzaxö. ⁶Ziix quih cmiipla quih cöisaaizi hac iiqui ootni ha, ziix quisax ctam czaxö ticap. ⁷Ox tpacta ma, ox imii, ctam czaxö cop: ⁸Xiica quiistox quih iiha mocoaaaj quih hehe án com ano toom, imiipla haaj coi, taax hizaax oo cöhapacta ha. ⁹Hai quih intooit, hant zo cötap ma x, ilít quih copxöt coi hai

cop itasiijim ma x, hehe quih ihmaa quih ihiini cöimiih. ¹⁰Ox tpecta ma x, taax oo tfit, iitax quih iihax coma. ¹¹Ziix quih ccam quih haquix tiih, itaho x, ítajc coi z itcazni x, hant quih ihmaa, taax it hant imiixquim. ¹²Taax oo tfit, iitax quih iihax coha ha,” ox imii, ctam czaxö cop.



¹The Comcaac did this with respect to their use of the North Star. ²When they were somewhere but separated from each other and the awaited star appeared and they saw it align with the North Star, then they did things and they went to the [prearranged] place of meeting. ³The Comcaac warriors came together and arrived at the place from which they would go on their planned revenge attacks. ⁴Then the one called the captain called the warriors together and talked to them. ⁵He talked to them about the deaths of the people who were their brothers and sisters. ⁶The captain incited them to commit violent acts. ⁷So the captain said to them: ⁸“Your relatives are lying dead in the countryside [because of some atrocity by outsiders], and this is how they are. ⁹The wind comes up and moves their hair [of their corpses] and puts it up against a bush. ¹⁰Then, it is as if [the deceased relative] had stood up and walked. ¹¹Some animal comes along and sees [the corpse], and it bites one of his bones and puts it down in another place. ¹²It is like [your deceased relative] has gotten up and walked.” [But the tragedy is, of course, he has not.]



¹Los Comcaac hacían esto con respecto a su uso de la estrella Polar. ²Cuando estaban allí separados unos de los otros y la estrella esperada apareció y vieron que se alineó con la estrella polar, entonces se pusieron activos y fueron al lugar [previamente acordado] para reunirse. ³Los guerreros comcaac vinieron y llegaron al lugar de donde saldrían para sus represalías. ⁴Entonces el llamado el capitán llamó a los guerreros y les habló. ⁵Les habló de las muertes de las personas que eran sus hermanos y hermanas. ⁶El capitán les incitaba a hacer actos violentos. ⁷Entonces el capitán les dijo: ⁸“Sus parientes están allí en el monte, muertos [por causa de alguna atrocidad cometida por algún foráneo], y esto es cómo son. ⁹Viene el viento y les mueve el cabello [de sus cadáveres] y lo hace parar en algún arbusto. ¹⁰Entonces, es como si fuera [el pariente] se hubiera parado y caminado. ¹¹Viene algún animal y lo ve [el cadáver] y muerde uno de los huesos y lo pone en otro lugar. ¹²Es como [su pariente fallecido] se ha levantado y caminado”. [Pero la tragedia es que, por supuesto, no es así.]

7. Text and analysis

The five lines used in the presentation of the text are: 1) the text as written in the community orthography; 2) the words of the first line divided in their glossable parts; 3) the glosses of those parts; 4) the citation form for the word in the dictionary, M. Moser and S. Marlett (2010); 5) a relatively close free translation. Detailed discussion of glossing conventions is given in S. Marlett (2022b: 43-81). In general, a hyphen is used only if it will not lead to a misunderstanding of the nature of the morpheme (such as when there is fusion). For example, words such as *iti* (see 2.1) and *iiqui* (see 2.7) are not divided *i-ti* and *ii-qui* because the roots are not *ti* and *qui*, respectively, but rather *Vti* and *Wqui*. Consonant-initial roots and vowel-initial roots are distinguished by their stress patterns. Etymological glosses for words like the demonstratives are not given. Derivational affixes, such as the causative (see 1), are not separated, although they may be transparent, so that connections with the dictionary may be more direct. Nonetheless, the gloss gives a hint of the etymology.

1. Azoj Canoj Imatax⁵ quij — comcaac coi hizaax oo cöitapactoj x, ziix quih ihasealam iha.

azoj	c-anoj	i-m-atax	quij
star	SBJ.NMLZR-burn	SBJ.NMLZR.NEG-NEG-go	DEF.CMPC
azoj	canoj	catax	quij
comcaac	coi	hizaax	=oo
Seri.person;PL	DEF.PL	DEM.PROX.PL	=DELIM
comcaac < cmiiique	coi	hizaax	oo
cö=i-t-apact-oj			=x
3.IND.OBJ=3.SBJ-RLS.T-CAUS:be.in.appearance\NUM-PL			=UNSP.TIM
capacta			x
ziix	quih	i-h-aseaal-am	=iha
thing	DEF.FLX	3.SBJ-PR.NMLZR-CAUS:move\PL-PL.MULT	=DECL
ziix	quih	casijim	ha

The Comcaac did this [with respect to] their use of the North Star.

⁵The name indicates awareness of the special characteristic of this star that was distinctive and critically important to so many cultures. It is of interest that the name is similar (in meaning) in neighboring cultures (Kroeber, 1931; Miller, 1997).

2.1. Hant quih iti toii x,

hant	quih	iti	t-oii	=x
land	DEF.FLX	3.POSS:SUP	RLS.T-be.FLX;PL	=UNSP.TIM
hant	quih	iti	coii < quiih	x

(When) they were somewhere,

2.2. toox pte toii xox,

toox	pte=	t-oii	=xox
at.far.distance	RCP;3.IND.OBJ=	RLS.T-be.FLX;PL	=although
toox	pte	coii < quiih	xox

(and) although they might be quite far apart from each other,

2.3. azoj canoj yaqueeelcam⁶ timoca hapx tap ma x,

azoj	c-anoj	y-aqueeel-cam		
star	SBJ.NMLZR-burn/roar	[3.POSS]OBJ.NMLZR-wait.for\NUM-PL		
azoj	canoj	caqueeejim		
timoca	hapx	t-ap	=ma	=x
MED:VEN	outside	RLS.T-be.standing	=DIFF.SBJ.RLS	=UNSP.TIM
timoca	hapx	caap	ma	x

(when) the star that they were waiting for appeared,

2.4. ihooctam iti x,

i-h-ooctam		=iti	=x
	3.POSS-PR.NMLZR-look.at\NUM-PL	=3.POSS:SUP	=UNSP.TIM
coocta		iti	x

upon their observing it,

2.5. Azoj Canoj Imatax tiquij iti itaait⁷ ma x,

azoj	c-anoj	i-m-atax	tiquij
star	SBJ.NMLZR-burn	SBJ.NMLZR.NEG-NEG-go	MED:CMPC
azoj	canoj	catax	tiquij

⁶ We are not told what star is in mind here. The prearrangements for the meeting would have indicated that when a particular star would align in a certain way with the North Star, the meeting would take place in a specified location.

⁷ The plural verb here is talking about the alignment of the two stars in a way that was understood to mean that the date of the meeting had arrived.

iti	i-t-aa-i-t	=ma	=X
3.POSS:SUP	3.SBJ-RLS.T-pass.by\NUM-PL	=DIFF.SBJ.RLS	=UNSP.TIM
iti	caait < caao	ma	X

it and the North Star were aligned

2.6. cmaax tseaalam x,⁸

cmaax	t-seaal-am	=X
now	RLS.T-busy\NUM-PL.MULT	=UNSP.TIM
cmaax	csijjim	X

(and) then they did things,

2.7. hant quih iiqui isitooij hac iiqui mitooij.

hant	quih	iiqui	i-s-itooij
land	DEF.FLX	3.POSS:towards	3.POSS-IRR.I-direct.motion;PL
hant	quih	iiqui	quitooij < quiin

hac	iiqui	m-itooij
DEF.LOC	3.POSS:towards	RLS.MI-direct.motion;PL
hac	iiqui	quitooij < quiin

they went to the [prearranged] place of meeting.

3.1. Comcaac ctamcö quih sixoaaj ca coi ox ano pte titaai ma x,

comcaac	ctam-cö	quih	s-ixoaaj
Seri.person;PL	male-PL	DEF.FLX	IRR.I-plan.to.fight-PL
comcaac < cmiiique	ctam	quih	quixoaaj

=ca	coi	ox	ano	pte=
=SBJ.NMLZR.AUX	DEF.PL	thus	[3.POSS]CNTN	RCP;3.IND.OBJ=
ca	coi	ox	ano	pte

t-itaai	=ma	=X
RLS.T-coincide	=DIFF.SBJ.RLS	=UNSP.TIM
cöquitaai	ma	X

The Comcaac warriors came together;

3.2. hant quih iti paii, isilx hac iti miizcam.

hant	quih	iti	paii	i-silx
land	DEF.FLX	3.POSS:SUP	IRR.D:be.FLX;PL	3.POSS-IRR.I:go;PL\NUM
hant	quih	iti	coii < quiih	calx < catax

⁸This verb refers generally to any activity.

hac	iti	miizc-am
DEF.LOC	3.POSS.SUP	RLS.MI:arrive;PL\NUM-PL.MULT
hac	iti	caazcam < caafp
<i>they arrived at the place from which they would go [on their planned revenge attack].</i>		

4.1. Ox t̄pacta ma x,

ox	t̄pacta	=ma	=x
thus	RLS.T-be.in.appearance	=DIFF.SBJ.RLS	=UNSP.TIM
ox	hapacta	ma	x
<i>Then</i>			

4.2. ctam czaxö hapáh quij sixoaaq ca coi ptiti itaquim x,

ctam	c-zaxö	ha-p-áh	
male	SBJ.NMLZR[TR]-talk.with	SBJ.NMLZR.PSSV-PSSV-say.FLX	
ctam	czaxö	quíh	
quij	s-ixoaa-j	=ca	coi
DEF.CMPC	IRR.I-plan.to.fight-PL	=SBJ.NMLZR.AUX	DEF.PL
quij	quixoaa	ca	coi
ptiti	i-t-aquim	=x	
together	3.SBJ-RLS.T-put.small.things	=UNSP.TIM	
ptiti	quiquim	x	
<i>the one called the captain had all of the warriors stand together,</i>			

4.3. inzaxö.

i-n-zaxö
3.SBJ-RLS.MI-talk.with
czaxö
<i>(and) be talked to them.</i>

5.1. Xiica quiistox quih oyácalcam⁹ quih ziix quih cöicamsisiin quih iti cöiih¹⁰ hac,

xiica	qu-iistox	quih
thing;PL	SBJ.NMLZR-HV.breath\PL	DEF.FLX
xiica < ziix	quiistox < quiiisax	quih

⁹This term for siblings, a deverbal noun, does not distinguish between males and females. It is presented here with the expression for ‘people’; the translation is given as past tense (‘who were’) because of the context.

¹⁰This is not a simple expression for death, but rather a very emotive one. It is literally something like “their experiencing unfortunateness”.

o-yácal-cam	quih	ziix	quih
[3.POSS]OBJ.NMLZR-call.sibling\NUM-PL	DEF.FLX	thing	DEF.FLX
cyacj	quih	ziix	quih

cö=i-ca-msisiin	quih
3.IND.OBJ=3.POSS[PR.NMLZR]-UNSP.SBJ-unfortunate	DEF.FLX
camsisiin	quih

iti	cö=ii-h-j	hac
3.POSS:SUP	3.IND.OBJ=3.POSS-PR.NMLZR-be.IRREG;PL	DEF.LOC
iti	coha	hac

The deaths of the people who were their brothers and sisters,

5.2. taax ah cöinzaxö.

taax	=ah	cö=i-n-zaxö
DEM.DIST.PL	=FOC	3.IND.OBJ=3.SBJ-RLS.MI-talk.with
taax	ah	czaxö

that is what he talked to them about.

6. Ziix quih cmiipla quih cöisaaizi hac iiqui ootni ha, ziix quisax ctam czaxö ticap.

ziix	quih	c-miipla	quih
thing	DEF.FLX	SBJ.NMLZR-in.bad.condition\NUM	DEF.FLX
ziix	quih	cmiipla	quih

cö=i-s-aai-zi	hac	iiqui
3.IND.OBJ=3.SBJ-IRR.I-make-PL	DEF.LOC	3.POSS:towards
caai	hac	iiqui

ootni	=ha
[3.POSS]OBJ.NMLZR:touch.with	=DECL
quitni	ha

ziix	qu-iisax	ctam	c-zaxö	ticap
thing	SBJ.NMLZR-HV:breath	male	SBJ.NMLZR[TR]-talk.with	MED:VRT
ziix	quisax	ctam	czaxö	ticap

That captain incited them toward committing violent acts.

7.1. Ox tpacta ma,

ox	t-pacta	=ma
thus	RLS.T-be.in.appearance	=DIFF.SBJ.RLS
ox	hapacta	ma
So		

7.2. ox imii, ctam czaxō cop:

ox	i-mii	ctam	c-zaxō	cop
thus	3.SBJ-RLS.MI:say.to	male	SBJ.NMLZR[TR]-talk.with	DEF.VRT
ox	quii	ctam	czaxō	cop

the captain said to them:

8. «Xiica quiistox quih iiha mocoaj quih hehe án com ano toom, imiipla haaj coi, taax hizaax oo cōhapacta ha.

xiica	qu-iistox	quih	iiha	
thing;PL	SBJ.NMLZR-HV.breath\PL	DEF.FLX	3.POSS:body.limb	
xiica < ziix	quiistox < quiiisax	quih	iiha	
m-ocooa-j	quih	hehe	án	com
2.POSS-OBJ.NMLZR:know-PL	DEF.FLX	plant	[3.POSS]area	DEF.HRZ
quiya	quih	hehe	án	com
ano	t-oom	i-miipla		
[3.POSS]CNTN	RLS.T-be.lying.IRREG	3.POSS[PR.NMLZR]-in.bad.condition\NUM		
ano	coom	cmiipla		
h-aa-j	coi	taax	hizaax	=oo
SBJ.NMLZR.IRREG-be.IRREG-PL	DEF.PL	DEM.DIST.PL	DEM.PROX.PL	=DELIM
haa	coi	taax	hizaax	oo
cō=ha-pacta		=ha		
3.IND.OBJ=SBJ.NMLZR.IRREG-be.in.appearance		=DECL		
hapacta		ha		

“Your relatives are lying dead in the countryside [due to some atrocity committed against them], (and) this is how they are.

9.1. Hai quih intooit,

hai	quih	in=t-ooit
air	DEF.FLX	VEN=RLS.T-descend
hai	quih	imcooit

The wind comes up,

9.2. hant zo cõtáp ma x,

hant	zo	cõ=t-ap	=ma	=x
land	INDF.SG	3.IND.OBJ=RLS.T-be.standing	=DIFF.SBJ.RLS	=UNSP.TIM
hant	zo	caap	ma	x

*it is there in a place,*¹¹

9.3. ilít quih copxõt coi hai cop itasijim ma x,¹²

i-lit	quih	c-opxõt	coi	hai
3.POSS-head/hair	DEF.FLX	SBJ.NMLZR-loose\NUM	DEF.PL	air
ilít	quih	copxõt	coi	hai
cop	i-t-asij-im	=ma	=x	
DEF.VRT	3.SBJ-RLS.T-CAUS:move-MULT	=DIFF.SBJ.RLS	=UNSP.TIM	
cop	casijim	ma	x	

the wind moves their hair,

9.4. hehe quih ihmaa quih ihiini cõimiih.

hehe	quih	ihmaa	quih	ihiini	cõ=i-miih
plant	DEF.FLX	other	DEF.FLX	against	3.IND.OBJ=3.SBJ-RLS.MI:put.FLX
hehe	quih	ihmaa	quih	ihiini	quih

(and) it puts it up against another plant.

10.1. Ox tpaçta ma x,

ox	t-paçta	=ma	=x
thus	RLS.T-be.in.appearance	=DIFF.SBJ.RLS	=UNSP.TIM
ox	hapaçta	ma	x

Then,

10.2. taax oo tfit, iitax quih iihax coma.¹³

taax	=oo	t-fit	iitax	quih
DEM.DIST.PL	=DELIM	RLS.T-stand	3.POSS[PR.NMLZR]go	DEF.FLX
taax	oo	cfit	catax	quih

¹¹ The correctness of the different subject marker in this example was confirmed to me by Xavier Moreno Herrera and Misael Ortega Montaño, but like they, I am unable to explain it or the one at the end of 9.3. The same men also confirmed the correctness of the interpretation of the sentence given here.

¹² While this looks like an OSV word order, it is most likely a case of fronted NP, which happens to be an object, followed by SV.

¹³ The idea here is that the observer sees moving hair and thinks that the relative is still alive. But s/he is not, and hence there is pain from the reality that sinks in, which is meant to provoke them to act with revenge.

iihax	co=m-a
3.POSS.COMIT.SG	3.IND.OBJ=RLS.MI-be.IRREG
iihax	coha

it is as if (the deceased relative) had stood up and walked.

11.1. Ziix quih ccam quih haquix tiih, itaho x,

ziix	quih	c-cam	quih	haquix
thing	DEF.FLX	SBJ.NMLZR-alive\NUM	DEF.FLX	somewhere
ziix	quih	ccam	quih	haquix

t-iih	i-t-aho	=x
RLS.T-be.FLX	3.SBJ-RLS.T-see	=UNSP.TIM
quiih	quiho	x

Some animal comes along and sees him,

11.2. ítajc coi z itcazni x,

íta<j>c	coi	z	i-t-cazni	=x
3.POSS:done<PL>	DEF.PL	INDF.SG	3.SBJ-RLS.T-bite\NUM	=UNSP.TIM
itac	coi	zo	ccazni	x

it bites one of his bones,

11.3. hant quih ihmaa, taax it hant imiixquim.

hant	quih	ihmaa	taax	it	hant
land	DEF.FLX	other	DEM.DIST.PL	3.POSS:SUP	land/down
hant	quih	ihmaa	taax	iti	hant

i-miixquim
3.SBJ-RLS.MI:put.HRZ
quixquim
(and) it puts it down in another place.

12. Taax oo tfit, iitax quih iihax coha ha»¹⁴

taax	=oo	t-fit	iitax	quih
DEM.DIST.PL	=DELIM	RLS.T-stand	3.POSS[PR.NMLZR]go	DEF.FLX
taax	oo	cfit	catax	quih

¹⁴Again, the contrast is between what one might imagine by seeing a bone move, and the reality. This time there is the additional ignominy of the fact that an animal has moved the bone of the relative who has died at the hands of the enemy.

iihax	co=h-a	=ha
3.POSS.COMIT.SG	3.IND.OBJ=SBJ.NMLZR.IRREG-be.IRREG	=DECL
iihax	coha	ha

It's like he has gotten up and walked."

13. ox imii, ctam czaxö cop.

ox	i-mii	ctam	c-zaxö	cop
thus	3.SBJ-RLS.MI:say.to	male	SBJ.NMLZR[TR]-talk.with	DEF.VRT
ox	quii	ctam	czaxö	cop

thus the captain would say to them.

Abbreviations

2	second person	NEG	negative
3	third person	NUM	number-related change in root
AUX	auxiliary	OBJ.NMLZR	object nominalizer
CAUS	causative	PSSV	passive
CMPC	compact	PL	plural
CNTN	containment	PR.NMLZR	proposition/oblique nominalizer
COMIT	comitative	POSS	possessive
DECL	declarative	PROX	proximal
DEF	definite	RCP	reciprocal
DELIM	delimiter	RLS.MI	realis "mi" form
DEM	demonstrative	RLS.T	realis "t" form
DIFF.SBJ.RLS	different subject (in realis clauses)	SBJ	subject
DIST	distal	SBJ.NMLZR	subject nominalizer (non-negative, non-passive)
FLX	flexible	SBJ.NMLZR.NEG	subject nominalizer (before negative)
FOC	focus	SBJ.NMLZR.PSSV	subject nominalizer (before passive)
HV	have (verbalizing prefix)	SG	singular
HRZ	horizontal	SUP	superposition
INDF	indefinite	TR	transitive
IND.OBJ	indirect object	UNSP	unspecified
IRR.D	dependent irrealis	UNSP.TIM	unspecified time
IRR.I	independent irrealis	VEN	venitive (motion toward)
IRREG	irregular	VRT	vertical
LOC	location		
MED	medial		
MULT	multiple		

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