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One Less Crazy Rule

Stephen A. Marlett

An earlier description of Seri morphology contained a crazy metathesis rule. This rule is shown to be spurious, that what was thought to be one morpheme is actually the combination of two independently attested and previously described morphemes. The combination of the two has the illocutionary force of a hortative.

Perhaps every descriptive grammar contains at least one crazy-looking rule. The description that I gave of Seri (Marlett 1981) was no exception. In this brief article I show that one of the worst of these rules can be dispensed with.

First person plural imperatives in Seri are illustrated by the following data (presented with the third person plural realis form for comparison):

(1)	<i>Affirmative</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Realis</i>		<i>Root</i>
	sapkóoyo	smapkóoyo	itpkóoyo	<i>taste (it)</i>	-pkooyo
	sánæk	smánæk	itóonæk	<i>carry (it)</i>	-oonæk
	skamáix	somkamáix	tmáix	<i>be quiet</i>	-maix
	skóoša	somkóoša	tóoša	<i>talk</i>	-ooša

The prefix for first person plural imperative was described as having two suppletive allomorphs: /ska/ in finally intransitive clauses,¹ and /sa/ plus an Ablaut process (to account for the change from /oo/ to /æ/ in verbs like *carry* in finally transitive clauses.) The final vowel of these prefixes deletes before a vowel. Therefore underlying {sa-oonæk} becomes /sánæk/, and {ska-ooša} becomes /skóoša/.

All this is fairly ordinary and typical of Seri verb morphology. The crazy rule which I proposed was to deal with the odd placement of the negative prefix /m/. Note that it comes after the /s/ rather than after the /a/, and precedes the /k/ in the 'intransitive' allomorph. The following crazy metathesis rule was given:

$$(2) \quad \begin{array}{cccccccc} s & (k) & a & + & m & & & \\ 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & & => & 1 & 4 & 2 & 3 \end{array}$$

This rule, highly suspect, was meant to change {sa-m-pkooyo} to /smapkóoyo/, and {ska-m-maix} to /somkamáix/. (An independently motivated rule epenthesizing /o/ also applies to the latter form.)

A solution for this problem can be found by examining other parts of the morphology. I now propose that there is no such thing as a first person plural imperative prefix in Seri. Instead, a combination of prefixes (described elsewhere in the grammar already) has the illocutionary force of an imperative or hortative. One prefix is /si/, the common independent irrealis prefix which appears in simple future clauses and nominalized future clauses. It may also have the force of a hortative in sentences such as the following:²

(3)	ispkóoyo	?a?a.	
	i-si-pkooyo	?a-?a	
	OM-Ir-taste/Pl	Aux-Decl	
	<i>They should taste it.</i>		

¹ The terminology is from Relational Grammar. A finally intransitive clause is roughly equivalent to a superficially intransitive clause.

² Abbreviations: 1EmPro - first person emphatic pronoun, 1EmS - first person emphatic subject agreement, Aux - Auxiliary, Decl - Declarative, Ir - Irrealis, OM - Object Marker, Pl - Plural.

The other prefix is the first person emphatic prefix. This prefix isn't very commonly used, but is well-documented nevertheless. If the pronoun /ʔatáæ/ *as for me* is used, the verb is inflected with the emphatic subject agreement morpheme. This morpheme replaces the normal first person singular subject prefix, although it does not have the same position class.

- (4) ʔatáæ sapíi ʔaʔa
 ʔatáæ si-aa-pii ʔa-ʔa
 1EmPron Ir-1EmS-taste Aux-Decl
 As for me, I will taste it.

The morpheme has two suppletive allomorphs: /aa/ (plus Ablaut) in finally transitive clauses, and /kaa/ in finally intransitive clauses.

Although other morphemes in the language also use the Ablaut rule, the facts that (1) the first person plural imperative and the first person emphatic form utilize Ablaut, (2) both morphemes have an *s*, and (3) both have a *k* in the intransitive allomorph, suggest that something is being missed.

The solution to the problem is now quite obvious. The negative morpheme occurs where it does because that is where the morphology puts it. There is no metathesis rule. The combination of the irrealis prefix and the first person emphatic prefix is used for first person plural imperatives.³ The form *somkamáix* *let's not be quiet* is derived from underlying {*si-m-kaa-maix*} (Ir-Negative-1EmS-be.quiet/Pl) simply by the application of the phonological rules and without any crazy rule at all.

References

Marlett, Stephen A. 1981. *The structure of Seri*. Dissertation, University of California, San Diego.

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³ The difference in vowel length between /ska/ (of the original description for the first person plural imperative) and /kaa/ (the first person emphatic prefix) is presumably an error. The difference between positing an underlying long vowel and an underlying short vowel would show up in surface forms only in a very limited environment and would be barely discernible. It needs to be checked, however.