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CREATIVE WRITING IN AMUESHA BILINGUAL SCHOOLS¹

Martha Duff Tripp

In the few years since the Amuesha² language has been given an alphabet, the people have become ardent fans of pencil and paper. To the Amuesha children in the bilingual schools writing is a most fascinating game, and each child has one notebook especially for his own creative writings. In their spare time, as well as during regular writing periods, they are eagerly writing down the things that they experience in their own world.

The child may be recording a recent fishing trip, a recent trip out to where the white people live, a turnover in the rapids, or a trip to cut down a bird's nest high up in a tree. He may be describing the jungle world he knows so well—birds and animals, trees and plants, and their domestic or medicinal uses. Or he may be recording a legend that he knows well from having heard the older people in the community tell it over and over, stories that each generation has passed on to the next orally, and now, as he records it in his little school notebook, the familiar words of the legend take on a strange new form—for the first time they are written!

1 Revised edition of an article entitled "El grabado en papel," which appeared in *Perú Indígena* 10, No. 24-25: p. 79-81, 1963.

2 The Amuesha, who number some four to five thousand, live in the foothills of the Andes in the states of Pasco and Junín. Their language is Arawakan. There are currently 13 Amuesha schools (the oldest of which is 25 years old) with 21 native bilingual teachers.

On the other hand, it may be just a simple essay such as one little boy wrote on the use of fire:

Fire very much serves us. There we boil our bananas, our manioc, our fish, our birds. It also serves to burn our fields. Fire very much serves all people. There are no people anywhere who can say fire does not serve them.

The Amuesha like to write their thoughts and feelings, as is illustrated by the boy who wrote with great love concerning the new school:

Now I enter there. There my teacher teaches me. The words that I learn in this school are very good. If there had been no school, even now I would not know anything.... But already I have learned what our teacher teaches us. That's why I pray to God for our teacher. Now I am sad because the time has come to part from my companions [vacation]. When I think of my school after the classes have ended I become very sad having parted from my companions. I leave crying.

The linguists who work with the Amuesha have scores of notebooks filled with the writings³ and drawings that the children have proudly presented to them. Subject matter is as varied and interesting as the individual children who write them. Many of the compositions have been used, with some minor editing, to make new intermediate primers and extra reading materials. The child's name is printed along with the story. For this reason, whenever the children have presented written stories to the linguists they have written on them very prominently, "written by the student so-and-so," hoping that their stories, too, will be made into a book and sent to all the other Amuesha schools (see figures 19.1 and 19.2).

In order to take advantage of the Amuesha's urge to write, a special series of books, called *The Amuesha Library*, was initiated. The purpose of this series was to stimulate the

3 These writings are on file in microfiche and are available from the Instituto Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación in Lima, Peru.

development of indigenous creative literature, while at the same time preserving in written form many aspects of the rich heritage of this indigenous group of the Peruvian jungle.⁴

In one of the Amuesha bilingual schools where the children were just learning to write words they had never seen, a contest was conducted to see who could write the most bird names. The aim of this contest was to encourage the children to start writing creatively. The children enjoyed writing down the names of all the birds they knew, and they easily wrote all the bird names, even though they had never seen them in writing. Each child's list was well into the hundreds, but the boy with the highest total had a list of 336 different names. A linguist later correlated all the children's lists, coming up with a total of 470 different bird names. A book, entitled *A Dictionary of Birds* was made of the listing, and included drawings of many of the birds made by one of the students. Afterwards, as the book was being used in the school, the children one day, in a very scholarly manner, presented the linguist with an additional list of over 30 bird names, informing her that these names were not included in the book.

There was such interest in the bird contest that the children themselves suggested another contest on trees and plants. Although the linguists have not yet made a composite list, one boy alone wrote 661 different tree and plant names. Not only were the contests fun, but they helped the children realize they could write anything they wanted to, which further fostered their interest in creative writing.

The following is a sample of a bird description, which seems to be a favorite subject in their creative writing (see figure 19.4):

I am the bird *morraco'quer*. I live in the jungle. I feed there in the jungle. I look for all kinds of little insects which I eat. I taste them as very good. I finish my food, I scratch out a place where I will squat down. When it is noontime I sit with my buddies (like kind). Also when it is

4 Later, when other Amazonian groups began similar series, this series was renamed *Colección Literaria de los Grupos Idiomáticos de la Selva*.

late in the afternoon I sit with my buddies. When it is late in the afternoon I get up on a high tree branch where I will sleep. When I have perched on the high branch, I sing there. I do thus: *Po'cro, po'cro, po'cro*. In the morning I go down. This is just the way I do. (see figure 19.4).

The bilingual teachers themselves like to write things they think will be interesting reading for their students. One teacher wrote a long tribal legend. Another wrote about his experiences when he was lost for two days in the jungle. When the same teacher later went to Lima for an eye operation, he again spent a great deal of time writing. While he waited for the operation, friends showed him things of interest in Lima. They reported to the Amuesha linguists by radio: "Pedro scarcely looks at the things we show him for being so intent on writing it all down." Talking with his linguist friend by radio, he said, "I'm writing down everything I see and do. I thought we could make it into a book for our students and call it something like *Adventures in Lima*."

Reading and writing have opened up a whole new mode of expression for the Amuesha people "ever since [as one boy wrote in an essay on the value of ink] we learned ink was to write with." The Amueshas have been making good use of it.

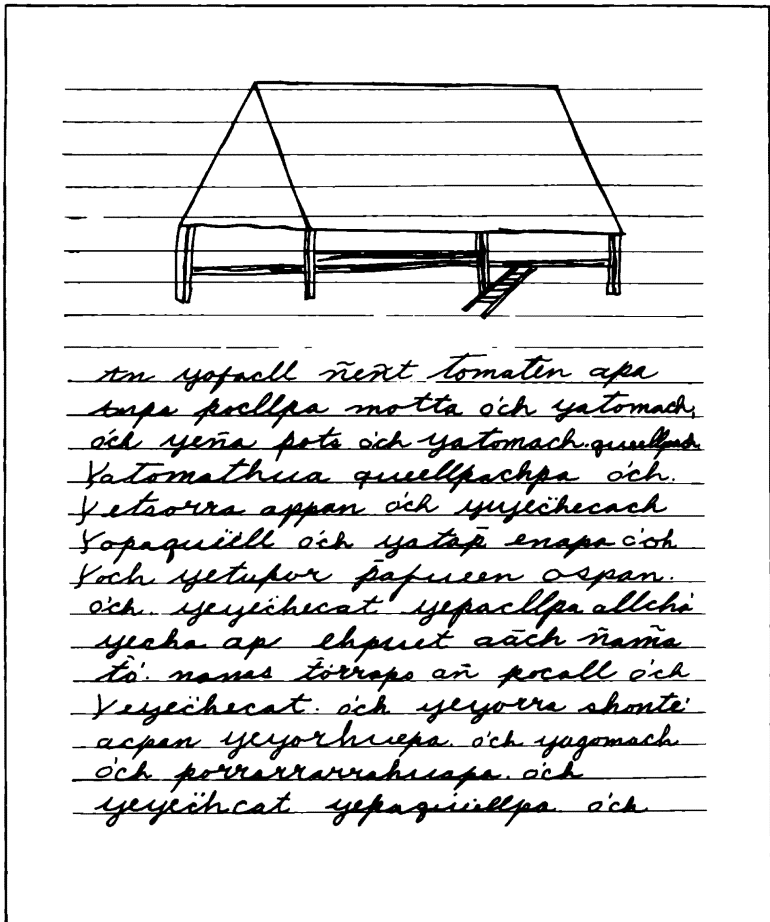
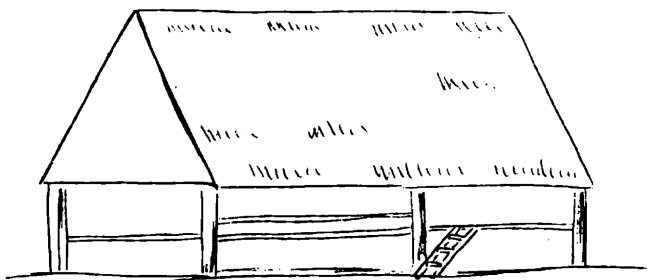


Figure 19.1. A page from a child's notebook.



E. L.

Yopaquëll

Añ yopaquëll ñeñt̃ ñomaten
 apa. Añpa' pocollpa' moñta o'ch
 yañomach. O'ch yeña pats o'ch
 yañomach quellpach. Yañoma'tua

Nuestra Casa

Mi papá hizo esta casa. Comenzó plantando los postes. Se cava la tierra para plantar los postes. Después de plantar los postes se cortan las hojas, para hacer la casa.

Figure 19.2. The same story in a primer.

22

quellpachpa' o'ch yetsorra
 aspan o'ch yeyeĥcach yopaquëll.
 O'ch ya'tap enopa' o'ch yoch
 yeťapor, "ĥapuen aspan." O'ch
 yeyeĥcat yopaquëllpa' allcha'
 yeyĥa, apa epuet ĥaĥa ťo'.
 Nanac ťorrapo' aň pocoll.

Emilia López

ťomatenan
 yaťomach
 yaťoma'tua

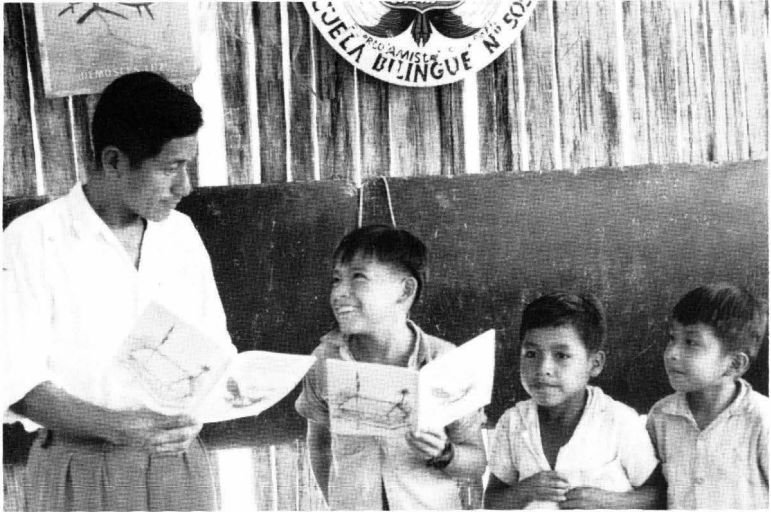
El hombre sube al techo y, desde allí, le dice a su esposa, "Alcánzame las hojas". Después de terminar la casa, vamos a vivir allí con nuestros papás y nuestros abuelos. Es muy difícil hacer una casa.

está plantando —
 la plantamos
 ya hemos plantado

Figure 19.3. Continuation of the same story.

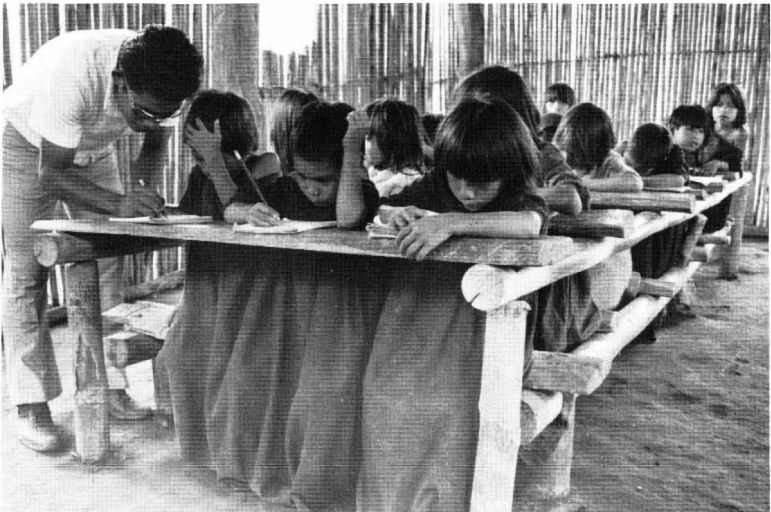


Figure 19.4. A page from a book on birds.



(Bondurant, 1962)

A wide grin gives evidence of the pleasure of an Amuesha child in seeing his own composition in a reading book used in the bilingual school (see chapter 19).



(Smotherman, 1973)

A bilingual teacher helps Campa children understand their assignments (see chapter 7).