

*Michif and other languages of the Canadian Métis - Peter Bakker & Robert A. Papen.*  
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### Introduction: the Métis

The word 'Métis' is the French word for "mestizo", a person of mixed Amerindian and European descent. It is used in Canada with two different meanings.

On the one hand, it is used for any person of partly Amerindian and partly European descent. These people are as varied as the possible combinations of Europeans and Natives. Although in a sense they do form a political group, they are not a uniform group from a cultural point of view.

On the other hand, the word 'Métis' is used for a specific group, limited to people of French and Ojibwe/Cree ancestry in the Canadian Prairie Provinces, a group of "mestizos" who came about as a distinctive group due to the fur trade. Ojibwe and Cree are Amerindian languages of the Algonquian family. French speaking fur traders from New France (now Eastern Canada), called "voyageurs" or "coureurs du bois" who stayed in the west from the late 18th century married Amerindian women and had families with them. This happened to such an extent, that they were by far the biggest group in Manitoba in 1870 and they considered themselves a separate group at least from the 1810s, with the self-designation "Métis" or in their own dialect "Mitif" [mi\_lf].

Here we will discuss only the languages of the second (but chronologically first) group of Métis, the Red River Métis. They used to live or gather regularly around the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers at present-day Winnipeg from around 1800. Many of these Métis claim that, from their European side, they have only French ancestors. On the Amerindian side it is mostly Ojibwe and Cree. Virtually all have French family names. In the area where they live, one can usually tell by the family name whether a person is Métis or French Canadian.

The Métis number some 100.000 and they live mostly in the Canadian Prairie Provinces Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the Northwest Territories and in the United States mostly in North Dakota and Montana, with some in Oregon. Since many of them were nomads, they can also be found as far as the Grande Ronde Reservation in Oregon and as far north as the Northwest Territories.

The Métis do form an ethnic unit – although they do lack the most important attribute of the definition of an ethnic group, namely a common language. They do share part of their history in that they centred around the “Red River Settlement” around present day Winnipeg in the early 1800s. They are generally Roman Catholics. They tend to choose their marital partners from their own group. They have a distinct music: dance music produced with the 'fiddle', ballads and other songs sung on official occasions in French and in some groups also in-group songs in Michif (the most typical language of the Métis, a mixture of Cree and French, to be discussed later). As they are not officially 'Indians', they are treated legally like Euro-Canadians and thus they are not allowed to live on the Canadian reserves (although they do live on U.S reservations). Many Canadian reserves in the Prairie Provinces and elsewhere have 'satellite' Métis communities, where Métis who are not allowed to live on the reserves, settle just outside the reserves.

The Métis, although they readily recognize French and Amerindian ancestry, do not want to identify as either French or Indian, but as a distinct people. The term “Natives” is often used as a cover term for both “Indians” and “Métis” in English.

### **The Languages of the Métis**

The Métis clearly form an ethnic group, despite the fact that one of the main conditions for ethnicity is not met with: a common language. In fact, the descendants of the Red River Métis speak a variety of languages, such as Swampy

Cree, *Saulteaux*, *Michif*, French and English, almost always in readily recognizable varieties. For a listing of publications on Métis languages, see Bakker (1989).

Before we will discuss these languages, we have to deal with some confusion of the names. The word *Métis* is a French modern word for which the Métis themselves use the word *Métif* or *Mitif*, the old French word with the same meaning. This word is pronounced in Métis French as /ml\_lf/, and the anglicized spelling is *Michif*. As it denotes first and foremost the people, it is also used for several languages spoken by the Métis. In the first place of course *Michif*, the mixture of French and Cree, in the second place the distinct variety of French spoken by the Métis. In fact, on a meeting of the Manitoba Métis Federation on Métis languages which was organized by the *Michif Languages Committee* in 1985, all the languages were called *Michif*: *Michif French*, *Michif Saulteaux*, *Michif Cree* (this is our *Michif*) and *Michif Swampy Cree*.

Here we will only use the word *Michif* for the mixture of French and Cree. The other Métis languages will be denoted by the name of the language with the modifier “*Métis*”. Apparently the Métis themselves consider their varieties as distinct from other varieties of the same language.

### **Métis Languages Now: Numbers.**

The Métis speak a variety of languages, due to their origin from peoples of both European and Amerindian stock.

No specific study has been undertaken by Canadian government agencies concerning the languages of the Métis (Letter from Indian and Northern Affairs, 1987). Documents relating to the data collected for the 1981 Census in Canada, show that (for the whole of Canada), almost 14 percent of the Métis speak an Amerindian language. These are the figures for all of Canada; the ambiguity of the term *Métis*

outside the Prairie Provinces makes it hard to evaluate these data. Almost all of these are speakers of Cree (10.3 percent) and Ojibwe (2.3 percent). Almost 9 percent of the Métis reported French as a mother tongue, but the vast majority of the Métis (75 %) learned English as their first language (Statistics Canada 1984).

Fortunately there is also some information about the Prairie Provinces available. According to the same Census of 1981, about three quarters of the Métis in the prairie provinces reported to have English as their mother tongue. Fewer than twenty percent spoke an Aboriginal language as a first language and three percent reported to have French as a mother tongue (Priest 1985: 15). The aboriginal languages are not specified. The figure for Native languages is higher for the prairies than for Canada as a whole, but the figures for French are lower.

There are also data available on the language of the Métis in Manitoba. In 1983 the Manitoba Metis Federation (MMF) inquired as to the knowledge of aboriginal languages of the Métis at the 1983 Annual Assembly. The figures (published in Barkwell *et al.* 1989) are:

French	8,25 %
Cree	26,58 %
Saulteaux	19,40 %
Dakota	0,20 %
Chipewyan	0,10 %

I am unaware whether this was the result of an inquiry among all the members or just those who came to the annual meeting. Unfortunately Michif was not inquired about; as Michif is also called 'Cree', Michif may be among those numbers.

A 1989 survey, by the University of Manitoba, had a sample of 1.011 members of the MMF. No more than 16 % of the members reported to speak "French, Cree or Saulteaux" at home. There was some regional variation reported:

	Winnipeg	Southern Manitoba	Northern Manitoba.
French	14,0 %	21,0 %	6,4 %
Cree	3,6 %	3,6 %	14,3 %
Saulteaux	12,7 %	6,5 %	12,1 %

Neither in this survey, it is clear how many Michif speakers there are among these.

From these figures we learn, that only a minority of the Métis nowadays speak languages other than English at home. This is of course in line with other observations on Métis language use. It is not a very encouraging result for the future of these languages. Unfortunately the Métis are massively shifting towards all-encroaching English.

The Métis languages will be discussed now one by one. We start with the Michif language, the most distinctive language of the Métis.

### **Michif**

Michif has been called the 'nec plus ultra' of mixed languages (Papen 1987). It is probably the most devastating counterexample against any linguistic theorizing, which claims that mixed languages do not exist. At first sight, the language combines Cree verbs with French noun phrases, and in both components virtually all the complexities of both source languages are preserved. Cree is an Amerindian language of the Algonquian family, French is a Romance language. Although the speakers in general know neither Cree nor French, they are very much aware of the mixed character of the language. They also know very well which elements come from Cree and which ones come from French. The language is still spoken by less than 1000 people, perhaps as little as a few hundreds, in Canada and the northern USA, but all speakers are elderly. The language is no longer transmitted to children

and almost all of its speakers are now older than 60, and the extinction of the language is probably not avoidable, despite attempts to teach the language to young people in Belcourt on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota.

All speakers of Michif learned Michif as their first and often only language, although nowadays all speakers also know English as well. The present generation of speakers do not speak or understand Cree and only a minority knows French, mostly those who live in communities with speakers of French.

If we look at the distribution of the distribution of the two languages across the various grammatical categories, a reasonably neat distribution is found.

Nouns are roughly 90 % from French, the remainder from English, Ojibwe and Cree (in that order of importance with regards to numbers). The English words are clearly recent borrowings. The core of the Ojibwe words found in Michif is the same in all communities, although Michif-Ojibwe bilingual communities like Camperville has more of them.

Verbs are almost all from Cree. These verbs have all the complexities of the Algonquian verb, with a rather intricate verbal morphology. There are also a few French verbs in use, but there seems to be no core of French verbs common to all speakers. French copulas, however, are regularly used by all speakers, as well as some forms of the French verb *avoir* "to have". There are also a few verbs (probably not more than twenty altogether) which have a French or English core but Cree inflectional morphology.

Possessive pronouns are almost always from French, simply because the nouns they modify are French. Those few Cree nouns used in Michif would have Cree possessive elements.

Question words are always from Cree, with very rare exceptions.

Personal pronouns are always from Cree, with very rare exceptions.

Demonstratives are always from Cree, except for a few French demonstratives in frozen expressions.

Adpositions vary according to their position relative to the noun they modify. Cree has both prepositions and postpositions, French has only prepositions. Prepositions in Michif are mostly from French. Postpositions are always from Cree. Some speakers do not use any Cree adpositions at all, others up to 40 % (mostly depending on the community).

Adverbial particles are mostly from Cree (70 %), but many are from French. In some cases both the Cree and French adverbs with roughly the same meaning are used, but more often semantic elements can be expressed only by a Cree adverb, others only by a French adverb.

Negative elements are 70 % French, 30 % Cree.

Coordinate conjunctions are 55 % from Cree, 40 % from French, 5 % from English.

Numerals are always from French. The Cree numeral *pêyak* 'one' is almost universally known, but few Michif speakers can count beyond two or three in Cree.

Other grammatical categories are only present in either of the languages, so that these are naturally always from that language. Only French has articles, so in Michif the articles are always from French. Only French has adjectives, so that all adjectives in Michif are from French.

In short, Michif is a language with French nouns, numerals, articles and adjectives, Cree verbs, demonstratives, postpositions, question words and personal pronouns, and further possessives, prepositions and negative elements from both languages.

Not only is there a fairly neat distribution of the two languages across these grammatical categories, both languages lost little or nothing of their complexities. The Cree verb can have up to ten derivational and inflectional morphemes in a row and even the stems can be divided into smaller morpheme-like elements. Some of these slots can have only a few morphological markers paradigmatically, other derivational slots up to ten elements and some of the stem slots are open classes and can contain an infinite number of fillers.

As for the phonology, the language clearly has two separate phonological systems, which must have coexisted in the same language since its inception without influencing one another (Bakker 1992). This is all the more remarkable since in so many cases widespread bilingualism led to phonological adaptations in languages.

As an illustration a short text fragment follows, in standard orthography with Cree elements italicized:

un vieux *opahikê-t ê-nôhchikê-t*,  
an.M old trap-he.CONJ COMP-trap-he.CONJ

*êkwa* un matin *ê-waniskâ-t ahkosi-w*,  
and an.M morning COMP-wake.up-he be.sick-he

but *kêyapit ana wî-nitawi-wâpaht-am* ses pièges.  
but still this.one want-go-see.it-he.it his.P trap.

*sipwêhtê-w. mêkwat êkotê tasîhkê-t*, une tempête.  
leave-he. meantime there be.busy-he.CONJ a.F storm

*maci-kîsikâ-w. pas moyên si-misk-ahk* son shack. *wanisi-n*.  
bad-weather-3. no way COMP-find-he.it. his cabin be.lost-he

"An old man, a trapper, was trapping and one morning when he woke up he was sick, but still he wanted to go and check his traps. He left. In the



meantime, when he was busy, a storm [came up].. It was bad weather. He was unable to find his shack. He was lost...."

Michif is spoken in a great but unknown number of scattered locations in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, North Dakota, Montana and probably also in Alberta. The language is remarkably homogenous throughout this immense area, although there are some clear real differences (e.g. Cree and French adpositions in Camperville, only French adpositions in Saint Lazare). Many of these communities were settled already in the first half of the nineteenth century and the language must have crystallized by then already. There is independent evidence that the language was already spoken in the 1820s (see Bakker 1992), although it was only 'discovered' by linguists in the 1970s.

Bakker (1992) argues that the language came about by a process called 'language intertwining', the combination of the grammatical system of one language with the lexicon of another language. The Michif case looks different (nouns versus verbs, instead of lexicon versus morphosyntax) from other cases he mentions because of the polysynthetic nature of Algonquian languages. He also argues that Cree was a second language, even for the first generation of Indians who were in contact with the French fur traders, since these were mostly Ojibwes who used the *lingua franca* Plains Cree. This Ojibwe substrate also explains the presence of Ojibwe words and phonological influence from Ojibwe in Michif, such as nasalization and some patterns of voicing and devoicing of stops (Bakker 1991, 1992).

### **French Cree (Northwest Saskatchewan)**

Michif is not the only mixture of Cree and French spoken by the Métis. There is a variety of Cree with abundant borrowings from French (more than 200) spoken in Ile-a-la-Crosse and some neighbouring communities. It is unrelated to Michif (the very name of which is unknown), since both the Cree and French components are different from Michif, as well as the nature of the mixture (Bakker 1992, ch. 5).

The older people in Ile-a-la-Crosse generally also know French, and they may use as much French (although almost exclusively noun phrases) as seems appropriate in their Cree, but generally they do know the Cree equivalents of those French words. Some 200 of these (mostly referring to technological innovations) are in general use. Younger people (in their twenties, since very few under 20 speak anything but English) are often not able to identify the French words in their speech.

Not in all communities the number of French words is equal. The amount of French used differs from community to community, according to Bakker's observations and conversations with local Natives, probably as follows (from many French borrowings to few borrowings):

Ile-a-la-Crosse, Beauval, Buffalo Narrows, Pinehouse, Green Lake

The origin of these people is not all clear. Some have links to Red River, but in general it seems to be an independent development, both historically and linguistically.

### **Métis French.**

The French language as it is still spoken by the Métis (and by some few Indians on the reserves in the West, always of advanced age) is readily distinguishable from any other variety of French. Although historically derived from Québécois French, and possibly Acadian French, it has undergone a different evolution, being isolated from its Quebec roots and coexisting with Cree and Ojibwe and now English. This French dialect was discussed by Papen (1984a, 1984b) and Douaud (1980, 1982, 1985, 1989).

This French dialect differs from other Canadian French dialects in a number of respects. It must be said that not all these differences can consistently be found in

all speech of the Métis. Many speakers have been to French schools or have otherwise been in contact with standard Canadian French, which had some influence on their speech. Although Métis French is readily distinguishable from all other varieties of Canadian French, it remains a French dialect, with only a few syntactic and morphological differences and a number of conspicuous phonological differences.

Semantically and syntactically, there are a few minor differences between Canadian French and Métis French, such as a different possessive construction (French has *le cheval à Pierre* "Pierre's horse", Michif *Pierre son cheval*, literally "Pierre his horse", cf. Douaud 1985 and Papen 1984b: 129), and the loss of gender distinction in pronouns (as *i* (< *il* and *a* (< *elle*), and even *ça* "it", are used for men and women). There are also lexical differences and phonological differences.

Métis French differs lexically from other Canadian French dialects. Although the bulk of the lexicon is also known in conservative Western Canadian, Québécois or Acadian French dialects, some lexical items seem to be typically Métis: *boulet* ([bul\_] for "ankle" (it means "fetlock" in standard French), *ponque* [põk] for "rectum" (possibly related with the Ojibwe word for farting *boogidi?*), etc. A number of Michif words of French origin have a meaning which differs from other dialects, e.g. French *taureau* "bull", Métis french *tu:ru*: "pemmican", F. *cérise* "cherry", M. *sriz* '[certain] berry' (Papen 1984b). Furthermore all Métis French dialects use a number of Cree or Ojibwe words, in number and kind differing from place to place and even one Assiniboine word *piz\_n* "gopher".

Phonologically, there are also a few differences between Métis French and Canadian French, but these are so frequent and salient that these make a speaker of Métis French readily recognizable as such. The most obvious difference is "mid vowel raising", whereby the French mid vowels /e/, /ø/ and /o/ have merged with the

French high vowels /i/, /y/ and /u/ respectively, especially in open syllables. For instance the French words *l'eau* [lo] and *loup* [lu] have become homophones in Michif ([lu]). Another difference between Métis French and Canadian French is that the dental stops are realized as palato-alveolar affricates before front vowels in Métis French, whereas they are realized as palatal affricates in other Canadian French dialects. The stops /t/ and /d/ are pronounced [tʃ] and [dʃ] before front vowels in Métis French. In Québécois French these plosives also become affricates, but [tʃ] and [dʃ] rather than palato-alveolar. These are the most conspicuous differences. Other are the merger (especially within one word) of /s/ and /ʃ/, the presence of a flapped /r/ in Métis French instead of the uvular /r/ and a few others.

For some of these Métis French features it is clear that they are due to an Amerindian substrate: in Algonquian languages /u/ and /o/ are allophones of one phoneme, as are /s/ and /ʃ/, but for other phenomena it is less clear.

All of these features of Métis French are also present in the French part of Michif.

### **Métis Plains Cree**

Cree as it is spoken by the Métis also seems to differ in some ways from the Cree as spoken on the reserves, although it is not evident that this was always so. Nevertheless, these differences are readily acknowledged by the Métis. Douaud (1985: 85), for instance, cites one of his Métis informants about his language: "It's not good Cree, not like on the reserves."

At this stage of our knowledge of Cree dialects, it is not possible to say with any degree of certainty, which features are to be considered as typical of Métis Cree. It might be that Métis Cree tends to be more analytical than Indian Cree. A sentence like "he takes it for him" which on the reserve would be

(1a) otin-am-aw-êw  
take-TI-IO-3->3'  
take-it-for him-he

would be rendered in Métis Cree as:

(1b) otin-am wiya kici  
take-TA-1->4 him namely  
take-it-(he) him for

where a postpositional phrase (the postposition is derived from an adverb meaning "namely") replaces a verb morpheme. Similar changes have also been noted elsewhere in the Cree as used by Métis.

A study of further differences between Cree as spoken by the Métis and Cree as spoken by the Indians (e.g. in the passive constructions) remain to be undertaken.

### **Métis Swampy Cree**

Swampy Cree is a dialect of Cree which is distinguished from other dialects in that it has /n/ for Proto-Algonquian \*l. Plains Cree, for instance, has /y/.

Swampy Cree has been very little studied, and the variety as spoken by the Métis in Northern Manitoba is virtually unknown (as is, by the way, Indian Swampy Cree). The speech of one woman with whom Bakker worked briefly in 1990 was characterized by a great number of English lexical borrowings and more analytic constructions like those reported on in the section on Métis Plains Cree.

### **Métis Saulteaux (Ojibwa)**

Our information about Métis Saulteaux (Canadian Ojibwe) as opposed to Indian Saulteaux is both scanty and contradictory. In Manitoba, a significant number of Métis speak Saulteaux as their aboriginal language. Some Saulteaux speakers claim that the Indian version of the language and the Métis version are recognizably different. Our knowledge of the language is almost nihil, so we had to rely on the judgment of others. We tested it with one Saulteaux speaking Indian from Central Manitoba who had a lot of Saulteaux speaking Métis (and Saulteaux) friends and

acquaintances. We had him listen to tape recordings of Métis who spoke *Saulteaux* and he rightly identified the speakers as Métis without any hesitation. A linguist with good knowledge of Ojibwe, however, could not discern any difference. In the Métis community Camperville, which borders on the *Saulteaux* reserve Pine Creek, *Saulteaux* is spoken beside Michif. Local people remark that the *Saulteaux* of the reserve does not differ from the *Saulteaux* spoken in the Métis community. However, as there is considerable intermarriage, it is very likely that in this community the indigenous language Michif was ousted by the *Saulteaux* language from the reserve, so that it is indeed the same language in both of these communities.

In 1985 the Manitoba Métis Federation organized a meeting on the languages of the Métis. In this meeting Métis *Saulteaux* was one of the Métis languages discussed, and treated as a distinct language (Michif Languages Committee 1985).

In short, the conjecture that Métis *Saulteaux* is different in some marked ways from Indian *Saulteaux*, could not be confirmed nor disconfirmed due to lack of information. More research is necessary on this subject matter.

### **Bungi: the Scottish dimension**

Bungi (/ba\_gi/) is the name of a language as well of an Indian tribe and apparently of mixed ancestry. In 1817 Edward Chappell writes about an Indian from Red River:

"As far as I could collect, his tribe are properly called the *Sotees* [*Saulteaux*], or people who go up and down the falls of rivers. But they have been styled *Bongees* by the British, from their being addicted to mendacity; and as they are always crying out "*Bongee!*" which, in their tongue, signifies 'a little'." (Chappell 1817:199)

This is very close to what Peter Fidler wrote in his *General report of the Manetoba District for 1820*:

*"Bungees or Soteaux... obtained the name of Bungees by us from the word Bungee in their language signifying small or little which they so frequently repeated when their supplies was not adequate for their wants, that they have thus obtained the word as a fixed term to the whole tribe. These Indians are not originally natives of these Parts, but were first introduced by the North West Company about the year 1797 - before this there were very few Straglers -they being then Industerous they was induced by the Reports of the Canadians that Beavers abounded here & was invited to leave their original Lands about the rain lake & the Western borders of Lake Superior - now they finding this Country so much more plentiful in Provisions than their own & the Beaver being then plentiful - they have become quite habituated to thee parts & I believe will never return to their own lands again."* (Johnson 1967:6 n.2)

In the Edmonton House Journals Bungees were already mentioned for August 9, 1795 (Johnson 1967:6 n.2). The earliest mentions of the name Bungee date from 1759 and 1741, both from the HBC records of York Factory (Stobie 1967-68: 66 n. 4). Up into this century, that term denoted a Manitoban subdivision of the Ojibwes. Simms (1906) equates the "Bungees" with "Swampy Indians" at Lake Winnipeg. Howard (1965) equates the Bungee with the Plains Ojibwe.

In linguistics, the name Bungee (or Bungi) has another meaning again: here it is a variety of English with some Cree and Ojibwe admixture. Only a handful of people still speak Bungee. Blain's studies (1987, 1989) show that most of them are ashamed to speak it; it is associated with the discriminated group of Natives. For its speakers, the word "Bungee" seems to mean primarily "Native", not a particular language. One of Blain's informants defined Bungee as "someone who is half Indian and half Canadian or Icelandic, or something." (Blain 1989: 256). Nevertheless, the few linguistic studies there are, show that this language is best characterized as a dialect of English (Blain 1987, 1989, Walters 1969-1970), here and there interspersed with some Cree (from different dialects) and Ojibwe words (cf. Blain 1989: 309-320).

The language is associated with the Lower Red River Settlement (Blain 1987), probably more in particular with the parish of Saint Andrews, where HBC traders with their native families had retired. The fathers were often speakers of Gaelic

(with English as a second language), or Orkney English, whereas the mothers were probably Cree and Ojibwe speakers (Stobie 1967-1968: 69).

Blain's (1989) thorough study of what could still be recovered of Bungee, shows that it is an English dialect, with some phonological substratal influence from Cree, Gaelic, Scottish English and Orkney English. She concludes her study with:

"The most prominent and salient features of Bungee are indeed its sounds. Aside from a handful of grammatical features, voice quality seems to be the most 'marked' feature; (..)." (Blain 1989: 210)

It is therefore neither a mixed language nor a new language, but an English dialect associated with retired HBC fur traders and their native families and their descendants.

### **Brayet: Ojibwe and French?**

A language, which is now as far as we know extinct and about which information would be most welcome, is Brayet. This language is supposed to be a mixture of Saulteaux (a dialect of Ojibwe, Algonquian) and French formerly spoken around the Great Lakes. Our only source is Stobie (1970), who says:

"[Bungee] has its French counterpart in Braillais, which grew up between Saulteau [sic] and Quebecois along the southern trade route from Sault Ste. Marie through the Lake of the Woods passage and on west."

The *Brayet* language is mentioned again in Stobie (1971) as being a mixture of French and Ojibwe. The quote from Stobie suggests that this may have been a predecessor of Michif. Unfortunately she does not give any sources, neither for the name, nor for the general information. It is not known how Ojibwe and French were mixed, nor do we know where and when. We have no language data at all, and all we know are one or two 20th century side-references in work by Stobie on the Bungee language, who does not specify her sources.



The etymology of the name is the only clear thing about Brayet. It is derived from the French word *braguette* meaning "breech-clout". In northwestern Saskatchewan Métis French it has also taken the derived meanings "Indian" and "diaper". This French word must have been part of the vocabulary of the English speaking North West Company fur traders in that area at least, since the English River Book gives "a Bryett" as the translation for the given Cree word *assesian* "breech-clout" (Duckworth 1990: 6). Northwest Company men also received "braillets" as part of their equipment and clothing (Innis 240 n. 244).

There are a few independent substantiations. A mixture of French and Ojibwe is also mentioned by Peterson (1981:178-179) referring to the Métis of the Great Lakes around 1800. The final bit of information which may be useful is the (oral) information from a Minnesota Métis (1990) that his now deceased grandfather spoke a mixture of French and Indian which, in his own view, was "very different" from Michif (as judged from examples in the dictionary of Laverdure & Allard 1983). No further data on this language are known to us.

Finally one remark, which relates to this. Thomas (1985: 248) writes the following in a comment on a paper on Michif:

"Michif, as he describes it, appears to be basically Cree-Ojibwa in structure but with a sizable French vocabulary, particularly in nouns. I have heard of areas where the opposite process has taken place, that is, where the language is French in structure but Ojibwa in content. The language spoken by a large part of the population on the Garden River Ojibwa reserve near Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, is such an example."

When Bakker tried to verify this on this reservation in 1987, he was unable to find any trace of a mixed language. A man in his nineties knew some French, but he denied the existence of such a mixture, and so did an anthropologist who had made a study of this reserve. We have serious doubts about the existence of the mixed language he describes, now or in the past.

## Métis English

English should also be mentioned here. Virtually all speakers of Michif are also fluent in English. In fact, most of them nowadays speak English as their only everyday language. Many Canadian Métis (and Cree) have a particular accent in their English. The pressure of English is quite great and it has had a pervasive influence on Métis French. English words used in Michif sometimes retain their original pronunciation, and sometimes they show phonological adaptation. For example *le siding* [sajdl\_], *un black eye* [blækaj], *le cutter* [k\_d\_r], but *la steam* [s\_im], *la factory* [fæktri]. In English spoken by Cree Indians and Métis, the same confusion of gender exists as for Métis French: "he" and "she" are used for both men and even – even by some with a university degrees.

## Métis Multilingualism

The above information on Métis languages must not be interpreted as meaning that the Métis were or are monolingual. In fact, there is a long tradition of Métis multilingualism, even before the massive acquisition of English and the shift towards this language. As examples, we give some quotes from historical sources commenting on Métis multilingualism, their abilities as interpreters and also code-mixing.

James Hargrave, a Hudson's Bay Company clerk, remarks the following about a Métis ferryman at the Red River forks, by the name of McDougall (Hargrave 1871: 184):

"The name of the ferryman is Duncan Mcdougall. He is a linguist, being competent to speak English, French, Cree and Gaelic, and in consequence of his abilities and usefulness as an interpreter, ought long before his present time of life to have occupied a good position."

Authors mention French, Ojibwe (=Chippewa) and Cree as languages of the Red River settlement. In 1849 the French Catholic priest G.A. Belcourt mentioned Chippewa, Cree and French, but French is spoken less than the Indian languages:

"I have already opened two schools for the instruction of the half-breeds; *one in French and the other in Chippewa, for these tongues, conjointly with the Cree, are the only ones now in use here*, and even the French is not much spoken." (Wood 1850: 43) [my emphasis]

As for language mixing (code-mixing), the following description is typical:

"Vital, our buffalo hunter, alone spoke very bad English. He succeeded in intermixing French, English and Cree to a degree unequalled by any person of my acquaintance." (Erasmus 1976: 67 about the 1850s, cited in Douaud 1985:30)

Even today, many Métis speak more than one language (beside English, which is spoken by virtually all today).

## Conclusions

The Métis are an ethnic group, which is not defined by a common language - although some do speak a language, which is only spoken by this group, Michif, which is unique to the Métis and in its kind of mixture unique in the world. Perhaps they are an ethnic group not because of the language speak, but because of the variety of languages they speak. In fact, their (traditional) multilingualism may be one of the distinctive ethnic traits of the Métis. In part their multilingualism may have been an inheritance of their French ancestors the voyageurs, who generally spoke one or more Amerindian languages, and also mixed them:

" They [the voyageurs coming to Red River] are generally great talkers, have long yarns to tell, and are not over scrupulous in their narrations, which are made up of an *almost unintelligible jargon of the English, French and Indian languages*." (A. Ross 1856 [1962]: 79)

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