

Michif – Todd Paquin and Darren R. Préfontaine

Module Objective: The students will learn about Michif – a unique Métis language. They will also appreciate that the historic Métis were linguistic specialists whom used a variety of languages and that this skill allowed them to serve as a broker between First Nations and Europeans and Euro-Canadians. Finally, they will learn that the Métis faced discrimination for speaking Michif.

As inheritors of First Nations and European lifeways and culture, the Métis played the preeminent role in bridging the linguistic and cultural gap between First Nations and Europeans. The ability to speak a diverse range of Aboriginal languages, as well as French and English, ensured that the Métis would play a prominent role as fur-trade and treaty interpreters. These roles provided a niche that only the Métis could occupy, and it also reinforced and maintained multilingualism among the Métis for generations. With such a diverse background, multilingualism became an important aspect of this identity, and has been integral to the physical and cultural survival of the Canadian Métis. With their knowledge of various languages, the Métis developed two mixed languages: the now extinct Bungi, or Bungee – a mix of Cree and Gaelic and Michif, Mitif or méchif (maychif). The Métis also speak Michif French or Métis French (Manitoba and Lac La Biche, Alberta) and Métis Cree (northern Alberta).

This mastery of communication was never done for reasons of prestige or show, but rather allowed the Métis, with their mobile lifestyle, to adapt to a variety of speakers from a broad geographical range. With such skilled knowledge of several languages it was common for many Métis to flow back and forth between them, even in mid-sentence. This is recorded historically by the Earl of Southesk, who while visiting the prairies in 1870 witnessed, to his astonishment, a Métis man yelling the following to his idle dog-sled team: "Fox, ye ould sinner, pren'garde:crapaud that ye aire. Chocolat!michastim!". The use of English, French and Cree is clearly evident.

Indeed, the Métis have always had a talent for combining elements of First Nations and European culture and synthesizing these into their own distinct culture. Michif is perhaps the best example of this cultural synthesis since it is a mixed language based on Cree verb

phrases and French (and English) nouns. Nobody knows why Michif developed a Cree verb structure and a French noun structure. Conjecture indicates that Michif was based on the contributions made to fur trade families by their First Nations mothers and French-Canadian fathers. The mother did all the work for the family to survive – all the action. Thus, all verbs in Michif are in Cree. By contrast, the French-Canadian fathers brought all the material possessions to the family – the nouns. Michif's Cree verbs could then represent First Nations' communalism and its French nouns represent European individualism – two competing strains in the Métis persona.

Michif is a historically significant language, which is on the verge of becoming extinct. The word "Michif" derives from "méstif", an archaic variation of the French word "métis". Over time, the word came to denote the mixed language spoken by Métis of largely francophone and Cree heritage. Michif has been historically known as métif, méchif, Mechif, métchif, Metchif, Mitchif, MétisFrench, Métis-Cree, Métis-Salteaux, Turtle Mountain Chippewa, Turtle Mountain Michif, the Red-River Dialect, and Creole. This language based on Plains Cree (and Salteaux) verbs and French (and English) nouns was spoken by those Métis who lived, hunted and traded in what is now the southern Prairie Provinces and the American Plains.

Some linguists argue that adolescent Métis formed the Michif language, as young people the world over are adept at mixing languages and creating their own slang. Michif probably spread among those Métis who gathered biannually for the large, organized bison hunts. The Métis children growing up among the bison hunters would have learned Michif as their first language. Peter Bakker, one of the preeminent linguists studying Michif, feels that mixed-languages such as Michif arise when the grammatical system of the most familiar language is combined with the vocabulary of another language. The most familiar language is commonly a regional language or the maternal language of the first generation of speakers. For Michif, the grammar and verbs of an Algonquian language (Plains Cree) are combined with the nouns of an Indo-European language (French).

Yet, despite its mixed nature, Michif is not a random or haphazard mixture of languages. Cree verb structures are always combined with French nouns and noun phrases. Personal pronouns and question words are always Cree while possessive pronouns are almost always French. Interestingly, many or most Michif speakers know neither French nor Cree, but are aware of the mixed nature of the Michif language. Conversely, while French and Cree speakers can recognize French and Cree phrases in spoken Michif, the language is unintelligible to them. For instance, to ask, “where is my parka?” in Michif would be “Tawnday mon kapeau d’hiver?” By contrast, in French, it would be “où est mon capote (or manteau) d’hiver?”

Michif was spoken from what is now Northwestern Ontario to Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories and down into the northern United States. Today, Michif speakers largely reside in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, North Dakota, and Montana. There are regional variations of Michif, in which *Saulteaux* or words from other First Nations languages may be added. With any language, of course, there are regional differences in word choice and pronunciation. Michif is no exception. Nevertheless, despite differences in dialect and other regional variations, there is considerable consistency in vocabulary, word order, and pitch patterns among Michif speakers throughout the Prairie Provinces, Montana and North Dakota. Perhaps the best-known and largest variation of Michif occurs in northwestern Saskatchewan and focuses on the old fur-trading community of Ile-a-la-Crosse. The form of Michif spoken in this community is almost entirely in Cree, with a smaller sprinkling of French verbs than the more common variety. Ile-a-la-Crosse Michif developed independently of the more widely distributed southern Michif. Nevertheless, it possesses the same Cree verb and French noun structure.

Speaking Michif was also a way for the Métis to proclaim their identity. Since the 1869-70 Resistance in Manitoba and the 1885 Resistance in Saskatchewan, Michif, like other aspects of Métis culture, fell into disfavour by the dominant society. From the late nineteenth century until recently, missionaries, educators, state officials and other Euro-Canadians actively tried to force the Métis to speak either French or English. Children were

taught that it was not socially acceptable to speak Michif. With such stigma, many Métis either hid or abandoned their identity, language and culture.

Among the Métis of St. Laurent, Manitoba, in the 1930s, attempts were made by missionaries and some francophone families to assimilate the Métis linguistically. The speaking of Michif French was discouraged in the community because it was an "incorrect language", while an emphasis was placed on learning "real" or Canadian French. A hierarchy of languages was established in which Canadian French became the prestige language introduced by the clerics, followed by Michif French, which was the corruption of Canadian French, with the lowest status language being Saulteaux. In the early 1950s the nuns teaching at the school adopted the Token System in efforts to stop the children from speaking Michif French. At the beginning of each week the students would be given ten tokens. Every time an individual spoke Michif French another student was allowed to collect a token from them. At the end of each week the student with the most tokens would be rewarded a prize, usually a picture of a holy person decorated by one of the elderly retired nuns at the convent. Some students did try hard to learn Canadian French, but by and large the system failed as the majority of students did not see the point in learning Canadian French – by this time more and more people began speaking English.

With Michif French being portrayed as an inferior language within the community, a social stigma was placed on being Métis and speaking Michif. A feeling of shame was associated with Métis identity, an identity in which language played a very important role. Despite this pressure, however, Michif French persisted in St. Laurent, as did the unrelenting spirit of the Métis. As a result of such wide-scale discrimination, the degree to which Michif and Michif French is spoken in Métis communities varies but most fluent speakers are over sixty years old. Almost no young Métis today learn Michif as a first language, and few speak more than English – a fact most Métis deeply lament.

Michif or Métis French is a dialect of French, and is spoken in a large area in such communities ranging from St. Laurent, Manitoba in the east to Lac La Biche, Alberta in the west. The difference between standard French and Michif French lies mainly within the

phonology (sound system or pronunciation), with some syntactic (word order) changes as well as semantic distinctions (meanings of words).

There are four fundamental characteristics of Michif French. The first deals with the pronunciation of what are known as the dental consonants and fricatives. Dental consonants are those sounds made at the front of the mouth with the tongue pressed behind the upper incisors such as “t” and “d.” In areas of France “t” and “d” are pronounced very clearly as hard consonants. However, in Michif the sounds of these letters are transformed into “tch” and “dj.” Therefore “Tu dis” becomes “Tchu dji”. This was evident in what is now Alberta as early as 1860 where a Métis man was known as Butcheesh by the local anglophones, no doubt a phonetic variation of the name Baptiste. In addition to the transformation of the dental consonants, fricatives are also altered. These sounds are also pronounced at the front of the mouth, but with the tongue pressed behind the lower incisors such as “s” and “z.” In Michif these sounds become pronounced “ch” and “j” respectively. These different sound systems concerning the dental consonants and fricatives undoubtedly originated from French dialects imported to North America. However, they would have been reinforced and systematized by the coexistence of the Cree language in which the sounds used to pronounce “t,” “d,” “s,” and “z” are very similar and almost interchangeable.

The second characteristic of Michif French is the raising of the semi-high vowels “e” and “o.” In this instance the French word *ble* would be pronounced *bli* in Michif. Likewise, the word “gros”, which in France would be pronounced with a long “O” sound becomes “grou” as in “shoe”. Again, this is the result of certain French dialects raising the semi high vowels, but it is reinforced by the instability of the Cree high vowels where “e,” “i,” “o” and “ou” are often combined in Prairie dialects.

The third characteristic relates to morphology. There is no gender in Cree, no masculine or feminine words as there are in French. Distinctions based on gender, therefore, are irrelevant to Cree speakers and this often results in confusion between pronouns among trilingual and Michif French speaking Métis. In Michif French *il* and *elle* are often

interchanged, as well in English *he*, *she*, and *it* are often interchanged. For example, the following phrase was heard spoken by a Métis at Lac La Biche, Alberta: "My grandmother, when he died he was a hundred and five."

The final characteristic of Michif French deals with the Cree influence on the syntactic expression of possession. In Cree if the possessor is represented by a possessive adjective, the order is the same as in French or English: /adjective + object/ such as "his book". However, if the possessor is represented by a noun the order becomes: /(adjective); noun;/ + /adjective; + object/. For example: "your son, his book". Such construction does occasionally occur in the French and English languages, but it is so common among Michif speakers that it must be considered a normal possessive construct.

Recently, Métis cultural and political groups have made great strides to promote and preserve the Michif Language. The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota was the first agency to print a dictionary, curricula and adult courses in Michif. The Gabriel Dumont Institute has begun development of a video series dedicated to exploring traditional Métis lifeways, Traditional Knowledge and the Oral Tradition in Michif. Norman Fleury, Michif Languages Coordinator for the Manitoba Métis Federation, has produced instructional booklets and dictionaries. The Métis Resource Centre in Winnipeg also offers Michif language courses.

A Brief Historiography of Michif

Métis languages – syncretistic adaptations based on a dual Aboriginal and European heritage, despite some scholarly attention – require further study (and promotion). The Prairie Métis have traditionally spoken a host of First Nations languages, as well as English and French. The Métis have long had a tradition of adapting aspects of First Nations and European culture, to better suit their needs. Language is no exception. The adapted languages most widely used by the Prairie Métis were Michif-French, Michif-Cree, Métis-Cree and Bungee or Bunji/Bungee. Bungee and Michif-Cree are mixed languages, the

former, now extinct, consisted of Gaelic and Cree and the latter consists of Cree (and some Saulteaux) verbs and French (and some English) nouns.

There is not a great deal of literature on the development and use of Métis-Cree and Michif-French. Michif-French or Métis-French is a fading dialect of Canadian French. Patrick C. Douaud analyzed the development of Métis-French in northern Alberta and concludes that it is similar to Acadian French.¹ Others contend that Métis-French is very much like joul, the working-class language of the Québécois.² Father Guy Lavallée has done extensive research on the development of Métis-French in St. Laurent (in the Inter Lake region of Manitoba), where missionaries, Bretons and French Canadians, persecuted the Métis for speaking this old, non-standardized French dialect.³ Father Lavallée's prayer book has several prayers in Métis-French.⁴ Métis-Cree, on the other hand, has not been a subject of any analysis other than a useful dictionary compiled by the late Dr. Anne Anderson.⁵

The Prairie Métis created a distinct and structured language known as "Michif-Cree" or "Michif", which consists of Cree, Saulteaux, French and English components. Michif is not a random mixture of languages; its first speakers must have been perfectly bilingual.⁶ It is interesting to note that some Michif speakers know neither French nor Cree, but are aware of the mixed nature of the Michif language. Conversely, while French and Cree speakers can recognize French and Cree phrases in spoken Michif, the language is unintelligible to

¹ Douaud, Patrick C. , "Mitchif: An Aspect of Francophone Alberta", *The Journal of Indigenous Studies*. Summer 1989, Vol. 1, No2, (pp. 80-90), p. 86.

² Bakker, Peter. *A Language of Our Own: The Genesis of the Mixed Cree-French Language of the Canadian Métis*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 149-53 and 250-54.

³ Lavallée, Father Guy. *The Métis People of St. Laurent, Manitoba: An Introductory Ethnography*. Unpublished M.A thesis. Vancouver: Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 1988.

⁴ Lavallée, Father Guy. *Prayers of a Métis Priest: Conversations with God on the Political Experiences of the Canadian Métis, 1992-1994*. Winnipeg: Kromar Publishing Limited, 1997, pp. 1, 6, and 38-39.

⁵ Anderson, Dr. Anne. *Dr Anne Anderson's Metis Cree Dictionary*. Edmonton: Metis Nation of Alberta and Duval House Publishing, 1997.

⁶ Bakker, *A Language of Our Own*, p.11.

them.⁷ Despite such extensive adaptations by the Métis, other scholars feel that Michif is not a language in its own right, but a special dialect of Cree.⁸

There is little documentation about Michif's development. Peter Bakker, a prominent Dutch linguist, is the leading scholar in the field. Bakker's analysis of Michif's origins is groundbreaking. He interviewed dozens of Michif speakers and carefully constructed his arguments. The result is the most thorough monograph on the Michif language to date. Bakker postulates that a language of Ojibwe and French elements could have been spoken in the Great Lakes area during the eighteenth century.⁹ This language, or alternatively, Ojibwe itself, could have spread among the Métis who gathered biannually for the large, organized bison hunts on the plains, where the linguistic influence of Cree was significant. However, Bakker also suggests that ethnic western Ojibwe people spoke Cree as a second language, and this this could explain the Ojibwe influence or substrate on Michif.¹⁰

Today, Michif speakers are mostly found in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, North Dakota, and Montana.¹¹ Because of this linguistic diffusion, most Michif studies are community-based with much focus on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, and the inter-lake region of Manitoba, southeast/south-central Saskatchewan and northwest Saskatchewan. The Gabriel Dumont Institute has produced a series of videos on Michif communities in Michif including "Li Michif: Kakee-Payshee-Peekishkwaywuk-Oma/ Michif: The Language of Our Families", "Crescent Lake: Our Life on the Road Allowance", which document the former Michif-speaking of Crescent Lake, Saskatchewan. Another video on the northern Michif-speaking community of Ile a la Crosse,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Crawford, John C., "What is Michif? Language in the Métis tradition", in Peterson and Brown, *The New Peoples*, pp. 237-39.

⁹ Bakker, Peter, *A Language of Our Own*, pp.269-70.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 279.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 76. See also: Rhodes, Richard, "Métchif – A Second Look", *Actes du Dix-Septième congrès des Algonquians*. Edites par William Cowan. Carleton University Press, 1986.

Saskatchewan entitled “Kitaskînow î Pî Kiskinohamakoya: The Land Gives Us Our Knowledge” was also produced.¹²

The survival of Michif has generated a great deal of interest within the Métis community since most fluent speakers are over sixty years old and few children learn Michif as their first language. There is a real danger Michif could become extinct. Therefore, several groups have compiled Michif dictionaries¹³ and efforts are being made to introduce Michif into the school curricula. Other useful resources for children to get acquainted with Michif include the interactive “Kim CD ROM” by the Manitoba Association for Native Languages which allows children to learn words in Cree, Dene, Dakota, Oji-Cree, Saukteaux, Ojibwa and Michif. GDI has also published a series of five children's books in Michif known collectively as The Alfred Reading Series. Finally, Métis Elder Chris Blondeau Perry speaks her Michif dialect in the read-along companion to the Alfred Reading Series, “Come and Read With Us”¹⁴ Pemmican Publications has also developed a Michif Children’s Series, with the first book by Bonnie Murray entitled Li Minoush¹⁵.

There has been very little curriculum development for Michif-language resources. We know of only 13 Michif-language resources, which can be used by primary and secondary students. By contrast, we know that there are at least 61 academic resources on Métis languages and at least 13 reports submitted by Métis groups regarding the need to

¹² Crawford, John C., “Speaking Michif in Four Metis Communities”, *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, III, 1(1983), pp. 47-55. Dorion, Leah. Producer. “Li Michif: Kakee-Payshee-Pekishkwaywuk-Oma/ Michif: The Language of Our Families”. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2000. Dorion, Leah. Producer. “Crescent Lake: Our Life on the Road Allowance”. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2002. Troupe, Cheryl. Producer. “Kitaskînow î Pî Kiskinohamakoya: The Land Gives Us Our Knowledge”. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2002.

¹³ Laverdue, Patline, Allard, Ida Rose and Crawford, John C. Editors. *The Michif Dictionary: Turtle Mountain Chippewa Cree*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1983. Rossignol School, Ile-a-la Crosse School Division #112, *Cree-Michif Dictionary*, 1995. Ahenakew, Vince. *Michif-Cree Dictionary: Nehiyawewin Masinahikan*. Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre, 1997. Fleury, Norman. *La Lawng: Michif Peekishkwewin*. *The Canadian Michif Dictionary*. Winnipeg: The Manitoba Métis Federation, 2000.

¹⁴ Allard, Ida Rose. *Chippewa/Cree language. (First Edition)*, no date and no publisher. The Manitoba Association for Native Languages, *Kim CD ROM: An Interactive Guide to Seven Aboriginal Languages*. Pelletier, Darrell. Translation by Chris Blondeau Perry. *Alfred’s First day at School, Alfred’s Summer, The Big Storm, The Pow Wow, and Lisa and Sam*. Saskatoon: The Gabriel Dumont Institute, 1993. Dorion, Leah. “Come and Read With Us”, Narration in Michif by Chris Blondeau Perry. Saskatoon: The Gabriel Dumont Institute, 1998.

¹⁵ Murray, Bonnie. *Li Minoush*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 2001.

preserve this unique language. Obviously, if the language were to have any chance of surviving, resources are needed for primary and secondary students since they are the future of the Métis community.

Questions and Activities:

Fast Facts:

Sample words and phrases in Michif:

Hello – *Tawnshi*

How are you? – *Tawnshi kiya?*

We are going to eat at the restaurant – *Dan li café meetshoonan.*

What is your name? – *Tawnshi en shinikawshooyen?*

Mother – *Ni mawmaw, ma mayr*

Father – *Ni pawpaw, mon payr*

Hair – *lee zhveu*

Questions and Activities:

- 1) How is the Michif language unique?
- 2) Is Michif an example of the Métis adapting cultural attributes from two parent cultures (Cree First Nations and French Canadian) and making them their own? Are there other examples of such cultural adaptation in Métis history?
- 3) Visit a library or the World Wide Web and search for languages that have similar origins to Michif. How is Michif similar to these languages such as Sawheeli, Chinook or Yiddish? How is it different?
- 4) Consult Cree, French and Michif dictionaries. Then choose a sample of common words such as “Hello”, days of the week or people. Then look for these words in each dictionary. Write down or make a chart of the various spellings. Why are Michif words spelled differently than Cree and French ones?
- 5) Why do you think Michif was an ideal language to preserve traditional Métis cultural and identity?
- 6) Do orally based, non-written languages such as Michif have a rich folkculture? Consult Maria Campbell. *Stories of The Road Allowance People*. (Penticton, British Columbia: Theytus Books, 1995), or the Gabriel Dumont Institute’s video *Our Life on the Road Allowance* for some traditional Michif stories.
- 7) Write your own story of how the Michif language started. This could involve a fur trade romance between a Cree woman and a French-Canadian voyageur.

- 8) Do you think current efforts to preserve and promote Michif will be successful? Visit the Métis National Council (www.metisnation.ca), Manitoba Métis Federation (www.mmf.mb.ca) and the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan (www.metisnation-sask.com/index.html) websites for political initiatives to promote Michif.
- 9) Make a map showing the historic distribution of Michif. Does this territory correspond to other cultural boundaries such as the fur trade or the historic distribution of the Métis.
- 10) How is Ile-a-la-Crosse Michif different than the more widely distributed format? Consult various Michif dictionaries and websites as outlined in the bibliography for answers.
- 11) Was speaking Michif problematic for past generations of Métis? Did the actions of state and religious authorities in the past imperil the use of Michif among the Métis?
- 12) Are other Aboriginal languages in Canada in danger of extinction? Make a list of Aboriginal languages other than Michif and determine the extent to which past assimilation policies have affected the preservation of Aboriginal languages in Canada.

A list of known Michif resources

Curriculum Resources

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