

Bungee (Bungi) Language

Bungi, Bungee, or Bungay, was a dialect of English spoken in the Red River valley north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Its origins are linked to families of employees of the Hudson's Bay Company who were of Orkney descent and the Cree women whom they married.

Often, the term Bungi or *Bungee* (from *bangii* meaning "a little bit") has been used to refer to either the Manitoba *Saulteaux* (who are a little bit like the Cree) or their Métis population (who are a little bit Anishinaabe). The language of their Métis population is described as the Bungi language. The vocabulary and word order of Bungee were primarily English, but the speech was lilting, like that of Gaelic speakers, and Bungee included vocabulary, structures and speech patterns borrowed from the languages around it.

Bungi, also called the Red River Dialect, is a creole described as code-switching based on Cree language syntax. It consists of Scottish-English influenced by Gaelic and Cree and *Saulteaux*. Like the Michif language Bungi makes no distinction between masculine and feminine third person singular pronouns. Thus a Bungi speaker might say "My wife he is going to the store." Like Michif there is also repetition of the noun and pronoun for emphasis. "My brother is coming, him."

There is an evident influence from Plains Cree, a language which does not pronounce the sound "sh": thus, in Bungee, *shawl* became *sawl*, and *she* became *see*. Bungee speakers would often reverse this process, turning words like *story* and *sniff* to *shtory* and *shniff*. Sounds like *ch* and *j* also underwent a change, so that *catch* came out as *cats* and *jump* as *asdzump*. One speaker had this advice for a careless child: *You sould never shtop when you are goin on a messidze [message] and never tawlk to strainzers in the buss [bush]*. Robert Papen comments:

The language consists of about 10% Cree or *Saulteaux* words as well as a few terms borrowed from French. Bungee is said to often substitute /s/ (as in "sip") for /sh/ (as in "ship"), and vice versa. Words such as "shot," "marsh," "shallow," "sure" and "she" would frequently be pronounced "sot," "mars," "sallow," "sewer," "sall" and "see;" conversely, words like "start," "string" and "sell," could be pronounced "shtart," "shtring" and "shell" (Osborne, Scott and Mulligan, 1951). This phenomenon can be explained, as in Michif French, by the fact that the Cree language does not differentiate these consonants.

Bungee also borrows words and structures directly from the Cree and *Saulteaux* languages. The standard Bungee greeting "I'm well, you but?" comes directly from Cree. The influence of Cree also appeared in words such as *apeechequanee* (to somersault), *kaykatch* (nearly), *chimmuck* (splash¹) and *keeyam* (never mind). Similarly, the sentence *I'm just slocked it the light* uses a Scots verb *sloken* (to put something out, to extinguish) with an Orkney past tense *I'm slocked* (I have extinguished).²

¹ An example of onomatopoeia.

² Scott and Mulligan (1951).

How's your Michif and Bungi?

Mark Abley, Freelance
The Gazette

Saturday, April 13, 2013

We are the inheritors of silence, the heirs of languages that have fallen over time. In 1535, when a baffled Jacques Cartier sailed upriver to what we know as the island of Montreal, he was discovered by the people of Hochelaga. But they and the language they spoke - some call it "Laurentian," others "St. Lawrence Iroquoian" - soon disappeared. Over the ensuing centuries, the river and the island would echo with voices speaking Huron, Mohawk, Algonquin, Gaelic, Yiddish and other languages that struggle now to survive. What most of us take for granted - a city whose two main languages are French and English - is the product of a particular history. For better or worse, history could have taken a different course.

The only place in Canada that can rival Montreal in the richness of its linguistic past is the first major city of the west: Winnipeg. Apart from the variety of aboriginal and European tongues that were and are still spoken there, the Winnipeg region also witnessed the growth of a unique language - and of a remarkable dialect of English.

The language, which goes by the name of Michif, is a byproduct of the 18th- and 19th-century fur trade. French-speaking voyageurs venturing west formed alliances with aboriginal women, and their children became fluent in the languages of both parents. The Métis culture that grew up around the Red River in southern Manitoba relied not only on French and Cree (and, to some extent, Ojibwa and Assiniboine), but also on a rich and subtle blend of these languages: Michif. Its nouns consistently come from French, its verbs from aboriginal tongues. Until they found out about Michif, experts considered such a language impossible.

Today, hundreds of Métis people across Western Canada know some form of Michif, and efforts are underway to preserve it for the future. You can watch kitchen-table conversations in the language on YouTube. The problem is that Michif, always an informal means of conversing, has no standard or accepted version. The vocabulary differs from place to place, depending largely on which aboriginal nation the voyageurs made contact with generations ago.

Michif is, at least, alive. Which is more than can be said about Bungi (also spelled Bungee), a dialect of English that has nothing to do with jumping into oblivion while attached to an elastic cord. It's a counterpart to Michif: an idiom that developed in what's now northern Manitoba, among the children of aboriginal women and Scottish traders employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. Unlike Michif, however, Bungi was not a separate language. A dialect of English, it incorporated both Cree and Scottish words (the name itself probably comes from the Ojibwa word "panki," meaning "a little"). Eventual-

ly, it spread south as far as Winnipeg. The final speakers are thought to have died in recent years.

Some words typical of Bungi would be familiar to most people with a British background, such as "cheeky" (impudent) and "tuck" (a square meal). Less familiar are expressions like "kitchen sweats" (a dance in a private home) and "moo-ley" (dehorned), which clearly had a Celtic origin. Then there are the Cree terms. "Chimmuck" meant to die suddenly, as in "When I die, I'll go chimmuck." If a boat went "apichekwani," it turned upside down. "Keeyam" meant "never mind." And so on. Speakers of Bungi had a distinctive pronunciation, too - influenced by Cree, they gave equal weight to the syllables in words like "bannock" and "canoe." They also talked in a lilting, singsong tone.

Bungi might be alive yet if only its speakers hadn't grown self-conscious, even ashamed. I grew up in Western Canada, yet I never heard a word about either Michif or Bungi. Much of the information in this column is derived from a 1986 thesis by Eleanor Blain, a linguist in Manitoba who recorded a few of the remaining speakers. One of them, a lady over 70, told her "that I don't like to hear myself on tape because 'I sound just like an old Indian.'" Bungee, in short, was stigmatized. Like so many rural dialects, it carried a social disadvantage.

The mainstream, by contrast, shone with a pale and terrible glamour. As usual, Joni Mitchell was right: "You don't know what you got till it's gone."

markabley@sympatico.ca

© Montreal Gazette 2013

Bungi might be alive yet if only its speakers hadn't grown self-conscious, even ashamed. I grew up in Western Canada, yet I never heard a word about either Michif or Bungi. Much of the information in this column is derived from a 1986 thesis by Eleanor Blain [see below], a linguist in Manitoba who recorded a few of the remaining speakers. One of them, a lady over 70, told her "that I don't like to hear myself on tape because 'I sound just like an old Indian.'" Bungee, in short, was stigmatized. Like so many rural dialects, it carried a social disadvantage.

The mainstream, by contrast, shone with a pale and terrible glamour. As usual, Joni Mitchell was right: "You don't know what you got till it's gone."

markabley@sympatico.ca

Biography of Eleanor M. Blain

Eleanor M. Blain was a graduate student (Linguistics) at the University of Manitoba. She graduated with a Master degree in 1989. While working on her thesis *The Bungee dialect of the Red River Settlement*, she collected an oral history of the Red River Settlement and

Bungee dialect. The part of this collection also contains material collected by Frank Walters (Pieces of the Past: Collection of Tales of Old Red River).

Reading List:

Blain, Eleanor. "Speech of the Lower Red River Settlement." In William Cowan (Editor): *Papers of the Eighteenth Algonquian Conference*. Ottawa: Carleton University, 1987: 7-16.

Blain, Eleanor. "The Bungee Dialect of the Red River Settlement." Winnipeg: M.A. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1989.

This is the only major academic study of the Bungee language. Blain interviewed about six Bungee speakers, not all of whom agreed to be taped. The small sample really limits the value of this thesis.

Brian Orvis, a Bungee-speaker who grew up in Selkirk, Manitoba, takes issue with Blain's description of the language as a dialect. He asserts that there are still Bungee speakers and that it is a language like Michif, and not a dialect (Swan, 1991: 133).

Blain, Eleanor. *The Red River Dialect*. Winnipeg: Wuerz Publishing, 1994.

Cansino, Barbara. "Bungi in Petersfield: An 81 Year Old Writes About the Red River Dialect." Winnipeg: *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 26, 1980.

Gold, Elaine. "Aspect in Bungi: Expanded Progressives and Be Perfects." *Congrès de l'ACL 2007 / CLA Conference 2007*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2007.

Gold, Elaine. "The Case of Bungi: Evidence of Vernacular Universals." In Markku Fippula (Ed.), *Vernacular Universals and Language Contacts*. New York: Routledge, 2009: 163-175.

Papen, Robert A. "The Heritage of Métis Language in Western Canada," *The Encyclopaedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America*.

http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/article-532/The_Heritage_of_M%C3%A9tis_Language_in_Western_Canada.html

Pentland, David H. "Métchif and Bungee: Languages of the fur trade." (Paper presented in the series *Voices of Rupert's Land: Public Lectures on Language and Culture in Early Manitoba*. March 9, 1985.

Scott, S. Osborne; & Mulligan, D. A. (1951, December). "The Red River Dialect." *The Beaver*, 42-45.

_____. "The Red River Dialect." In J. K. Chambers (Ed.), *Canadian English: Origins and Structures*. Toronto: Methuen, 1951: 61-63.

Stobie, Margaret. "Background of the Dialect Called Bungi." *Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, Series III, No. 24, 1967/68: 65-75.

Stobie, Margaret. "The Dialect Called Bungi." *Canadian Antiques Collector*, 6(8), 1971: 20.

Walters, Frank J. "Bungee As She Is Spoke." *Red River Valley Historian and History News. The Quarterly Journal of the Red River Valley Historical Society*, 3 (4), 1969–1970: 68-70.

Walters, Frank J., *Pieces of the Past : A Collection of Tales of Old Red River*. West Selkirk, Man: F.J. Walters, c1989.



LOUIS RIEL INSTITUTE
Knowledge • Culture • Heritage

Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Métis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute