

400 YEARS OF LINGUISTIC CONTACT BETWEEN THE MI'KMAQ AND THE ENGLISH AND THE INTERCHANGE OF TWO WORLD VIEWS

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Abstract / Résumé

During the last 400 years in Acadia the original inhabitants of the area, the Mi'kmaq people, have had contact primarily with French and English language speakers. English and French are Indo-European languages which are tense based. They are event-time languages. This contrasts with Mi'kmaq which is an Algonquian language organized around a system of evidentials. Evidentials are markers of speaker's knowledge source. Mi'kmaq is not a tense based language. This paper presents a comparison between the world view of the Mi'kmaq, as evidenced through their language, and the world view of the English colonists in Acadia. The focus of the discussion will be on examples of linguistic contact and the interchange of the two world views, Mi'kmaq and non-Mi'kmaq (English), as evidenced by their relevant linguistic systems.

Au cours des 400 dernières années, les habitants originaux de l'Acadie, les Mi'kmaq, ont établi des liens principalement avec des locuteurs francophones et anglophones. L'anglais et le français sont deux langues indo-européennes fondées sur le temps des verbes. Ce sont des langues inscrites dans un cadre temporel, contrairement à la langue mi'kmaq qui est une langue algonquienne organisée autour d'un système de faits probatoires. Ces faits sont des marqueurs de la source de connaissances du locuteur. La langue mi'kmaq n'est pas fondée sur le temps. Le présent article compare la vision du monde des Mi'kmaq, telle que manifestée dans leur langue, et la vision du monde des colonisateurs anglais en Acadie.

Introduction

Four hundred years in Acadia has meant 400 years of contact between the colonizing French and English speaking settlers and the original inhabitants of the area, the Mi'kmaq. Linguistic contact between Mi'kmaq and French and English speakers has had several consequences: the first has been the linguistic dominance by the two Indo-European languages of French and English. The second consequence has been more severe. Four hundred years after contact the Mi'kmaq language is currently showing serious signs of language death (Inglis, 1998). The focus of this discussion is to articulate what is being lost as the Mi'kmaq language dies.

Mi'kmaq

Mi'kmaq is a North American Indigenous language of the Algonquian language family. Algonquian languages were once spoken extensively throughout eastern North America from Labrador to the southern United

Table 1
Central and Eastern Algonquian: Language Subgroups of the Algonquian Language Family

ALGONQUIAN	
CENTRAL ALGONQUIAN	EASTERN ALGONQUIAN
Blackfoot	Mi'kmaq
Cheyenne	Maliseet
Arapaho	Passamoquoddy
Cree	Eastern Abenaki
Ojibwa	Western Abenaki
Potawatomi	Loup
Menominee	Massachusett
Fox	Narraganset
Illinois	Mohegan-Poquot
Shawnee	Montauk
	Quiripi
	Unquachog
	Mahican
	Munsee (Delaware)
	Unami
	Nanticoke
	Powhatan
	Carolina

(Goddard 1978:70 - orthography slightly modified)

States and from the Eastern seaboard to the Canadian Rockies. Two main language subgroups characterize this language family: Central Algonquian and Eastern Algonquian. Mi'kmaq is an Eastern Algonquian language (see Table 1). Of the eighteen Eastern Algonquian languages originally spoken, all are now extinct except for a few hundred speakers of Maliseet, a few speakers of Passamaquoddy, five to ten Delaware speakers (O'Grady and Dobrovolsky 1996:376) and approximately 2,500

Table 2
Status of the Eastern Algonquian Languages, 1970

Language or Dialect, and Locality	Number of Speakers	Date of Extinction
Mi'kmaq	ca. 6,000	
Maliseet	ca. 600	
Passamaquoddy	ca. 200	
Etchemin	Extinct	17th c.
Eastern Abenaki:		
Penobscot (Old Town)	Extinct	Note: In 1970:ca. pop. 10
Saint Francis, P.Q.	Extinct	
Bécancour, P.Q.	Extinct	
Western Abenaki	Extinct	Note: In 1970: ca. pop.22
Loup A	Extinct	18th c.
Loup B	Extinct	18th c.
Massachusetts	Extinct	End of 19th c.
Narraganset	Extinct	Early 19th c.
Mohegan-Poquot	Extinct	Early 20th c.
Montauk	Extinct	Early 19th c.
Quiripi	Extinct	18th c.
Unquachog	Extinct	Early 19th c.
Mahican	Extinct	Early 20th c.
Munsee (Delaware)		
Moraviantown	5-10 ¹	Note: In 1970: ca. pop. 30
Muncey	Extinct	Note: In 1970: ca. pop. 3
Six Nations Reserve	Extinct	1965
Cattaraugus	Extinct	Early 20th c.
Wisconsin	Extinct	19th c.(?)
Kansas	Extinct	Early 20th c.
Oklahoma	Extinct	Early 20th c.
Unami (Delaware)		
Northern	Extinct	Early 20th c.
Southern	Extinct	Note: In 1970: ca. pop. 25
Nanticoke	Extinct	Mid-19th c.
Powhatan	Extinct	18th c.
Carolina	Extinct	18th c.

(Goddard 1978:71 - orthography slightly modified)

- (2d) Pataluti ji'nm nemitoq. 'The man sees the table.'
 (2e) Ji'nm nemitoq pataluti. 'The man sees the table.'
 (2f) Ji'nm pataluti nemitoq. 'The man sees the table.'

Mi'kmaw Indigenous Knowledge

Mi'kmaq is the last Eastern Algonquian language to be still spoken with any degree of functional use – in the world. As this language dies we lose the linguistic structures which are the road maps which can guide us in understanding the cognitive categories and knowledge frames which underlie the Mi'kmaw linguistic structure. As pointed out by Wardhaugh (1986:212) groups of people

...come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do. In this view, cultural requirements do not determine the structure of a language—the claim is never that strong—but they certainly influence how a language is used and perhaps determine why specific bits and pieces (of the language) are the way they are.

Through the use of functional linguistic analysis, that is the analysis of these bits and pieces of language, we can begin to understand the meaning or semantic frameworks which provide the building blocks for various knowledge patterns Indigenous to specific groups of people who share a common language. These knowledge patterns are often referred to in current non-Algonquian linguistic literature (Battiste 2002) as “Indigenous knowledge” or “Ways of knowing.”

Mi'kmaw Indigenous Knowledge: What the Grammatical Categorization of Mi'kmaw Nouns Tells Us

Let us return to the Mi'kmaw language—a language currently battling language death as a consequence of 400 years of French and English linguistic dominance. Let us begin simply with Mi'kmaw nouns. Nouns in Mi'kmaq generally take a *-k* or an *-l* plural ending. The question being is there an underlying semantic framework which determines, based on meaning, which plural ending a Mi'kmaw noun will take. Historically the non-Aboriginal Linguistics (Bloomfield 1946 through to Clarke 1982) have labeled the two classes of Algonquian nouns as animate (living) and inanimate (non-living).

However let us look a little more deeply. The Mi'kmaw words on the left in Table 3 below are so called animate nouns while the nouns on the right are inanimate.

The difference between a 'mountain', *kmtn*, and a 'rock', *kuntew*, is not a difference of living or non-living—animate or inanimate. According

Table 3
Mi'kmaw Noun Classification

Animate (wholeness/connected)		Inanimate (disconnected)	
<i>kmtn</i>	'mountain'	<i>kuntew</i>	'rock'
<i>nkamlamun</i>	'my heart'	<i>npitn</i>	'my hand'
<i>npⁱ-n</i>	'my lungs'	<i>nkat</i>	'my foot'
<i>klitaw</i>	'strawberry'	<i>pkwiman</i>	'blueberry'
<i>kmu'jemin</i>	'raspberry'		
<i>fridge</i>	'fridge'	<i>stove</i>	'stove'

to Marshall (1992:pc) a mountain is "connected into" or "part of" the "greater whole." A mountain is dependent or intrinsically connected to a larger essence. A rock has become separated off from the whole—it is "less connected." So too 'a strawberry plant,' *klitaw*, and 'a raspberry plant,' *kmu'jemin*, reproduce by use of runners which require connection back to the mother plant i.e. connection to a larger whole. Blueberry bushes are each unique individual plants which do not reproduce by runners. When we examine the human body we see that a hand or foot may be cut off and the person will still live but to remove an internal organ will kill the whole person. There is a sense of connectedness of the lungs and heart to the greater whole of the self. With respect to the borrowed English words 'fridge' and 'stove', if we think historically of a wood stove or an ice box, the ice box functions only as long as it has continuous ice in it. It is dependent for continuous coldness on ice while the function of a wood stove requires only have a fire when heat is needed. It does not require a continuous dependency or an unseverable connection of continuous heat yet an icebox to be functional must have continuous coldness. Therefore the borrowed word 'stove' takes the Mi'kmaw plural *-l*. Thus we can begin to understand that in the Mi'kmaw language there is an underlying semantic theme based on a dichotomy of "connectedness" or "belonging to a greater wholeness" or "oneness" versus "lack of connection" or "disconnection."

What a Functional Analysis of the Mi'kmaw Verb System Tells Us About the Mi'kmaw Conceptual Categorization of "Wholeness" versus "Disconnection"

So too the Mi'kmaw verb is built on verb endings which tie into the cognitive categorization system of "connectedness," "wholeness," vs. "disconnection" or "lack of oneness." Though it must be noted that within the field of traditional Algonquian linguistics the Mi'kmaw verb system,

has not been grammatically analyzed using the framework just described. Traditionally Algonquin verb systems, including Mi'kmaq, have been analyzed into tense systems—similar to those of Indo-European languages. (See for example Hewson and Francis, 1990).

To understand this let us look briefly at a very general explanation of a language which is tense based – English. English verbs grammatically encode for tense and aspect. Tense makes reference to the semantic category of time or temporality while aspect (perfected and imperfected) makes reference to the complete or incomplete state of the event or action being discussed. For example examine Table 4 below.

Table 4
The Event-Time System: English

(3) I am walking.	Event	WALK
	Time (tense)	present
	Aspect	incomplete event (ongoing event)
(4) I walked.	Event	WALK
	Time (tense)	past
	Aspect	completed event
(5) I was walking.	Event	WALK
	Time (tense)	past
	Aspect	incomplete event (ongoing in relation to a 2nd event)

The underlying meaning framework of the English verb system can in simple terms be called an event-time system. This means that in English when we utter a sentence we linguistically give information through our verb structure about the positioning of the event under discussion, in this case the event of 'walking', with respect to the time that the event occurred i.e. past, present or future and also we indicate by use of our English verbs whether or not the event was completed or incomplete as in number (5) of Table 4 'I was walking' (incomplete event in the past) or number (4) of Table 4 'I walked' (complete event in the past). Thus, in summary, we see that semantically one of the main frameworks which drives the English verb system is the positioning of an event within time. This is the "Way of Knowing" about an even that we communicate when we speak English.

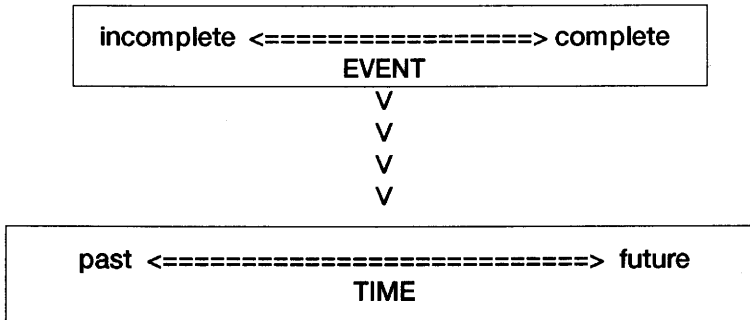
However if we speak Mi'kmaq and have a discussion about this same

event i.e. 'walking' a different perspective of the event will be presented. The speaker will not focus on how the event was positioned in time or whether the event was completed or not. The Mi'kmaw speaker when using the Mi'kmaw language to talk about the 'walking' scenario will communicate another way of knowing with respect to the 'walking'.

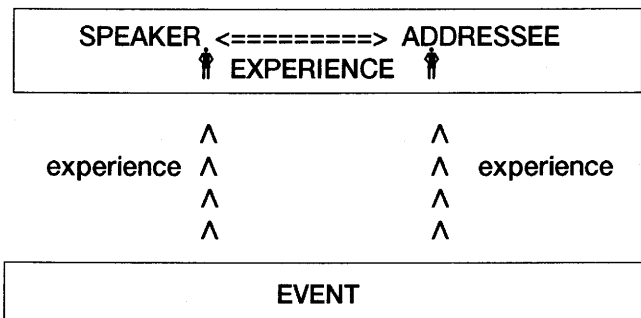
We have shown through our linguistic research (Inglis and Johnson 2002 and Inglis 2002), that the Mi'kmaw language is not a tense based language. If it is not a tense based language then what semantically drives the Mi'kmaw verb is not the positioning of an event within time but the positioning of the Speech Act Participants relative to how they came to "know of" or "experience" the event. The Speech Act Participants are the speaker and the person spoken to (Searle, 1988). Figure B illustrates schematically the difference between the two cognitive linguistic systems: Event-time vs. Knowledge source or what is known as Evidentiality.

Figure B
The Interplay of Two Cognitive Linguistic Systems
Event-Time vs. Evidentiality

The EVENT-TIME System: English



The EVIDENTIAL System: Mi'kmaq



The Mi'kmaw Verb System and a Different Set of Conceptual Categories

The Mi'kmaw verb system is built on verb endings which indicate how speakers and listeners during a speech act i.e. conversations are connected to each other in terms of shared knowledge and experience. The encoding of an event relative to time or tense is not the semantic basis of the Mi'kmaw verb. In the Mi'kmaw language the positioning of events within time frames is not a relevant piece of information and is not explicitly coded by the verb endings. What a Mi'kmaw speaker will focus on during the discussion of an activity or event i.e. 'walking' is how the speaker came "to know" of the event. In Mi'kmaq 1st hand evidence requires a *-p(n)* ending on the verb while 2nd hand information requires a *-s(n)* ending. In linguistics we call these endings evidentials. Evidential are linguistic devices which mark "...the ways in which ordinary people...naturally regard the source and reliability of their knowledge" (Chafe and Nichols 1986:vii).

There is also a second level of semantic processing which happens when you speak of an event in Mi'kmaq. The grammar of the language requires that the speaker indicate through the use of absentative suffixes when the subject of the discourse is inaccessible. This linguistic marking is done through the use of a set of verb and noun endings called absentative markers. Proulx (1978:14) describes Mi'kmaw nouns which have been marked inaccessible or absentative in the following way: "An originally living being who is sleeping or dead or has disappeared is *inaccessible*, as are things which have been lost, consumed, or destroyed." There are various absentative suffixes in Mi'kmaq which mark for subject inaccessibility but for this discussion we will refer only to Mi'kmaw verbs with the *-ek* absentative ending. Given the Mi'kmaw verb system of evidentiality and absentativeness the English sentence 'He walked' can be translated three (3) ways in Mi'kmaq. See Table 5 below.

Table 5
The Evidential and Absentative System: Mi'kmaq

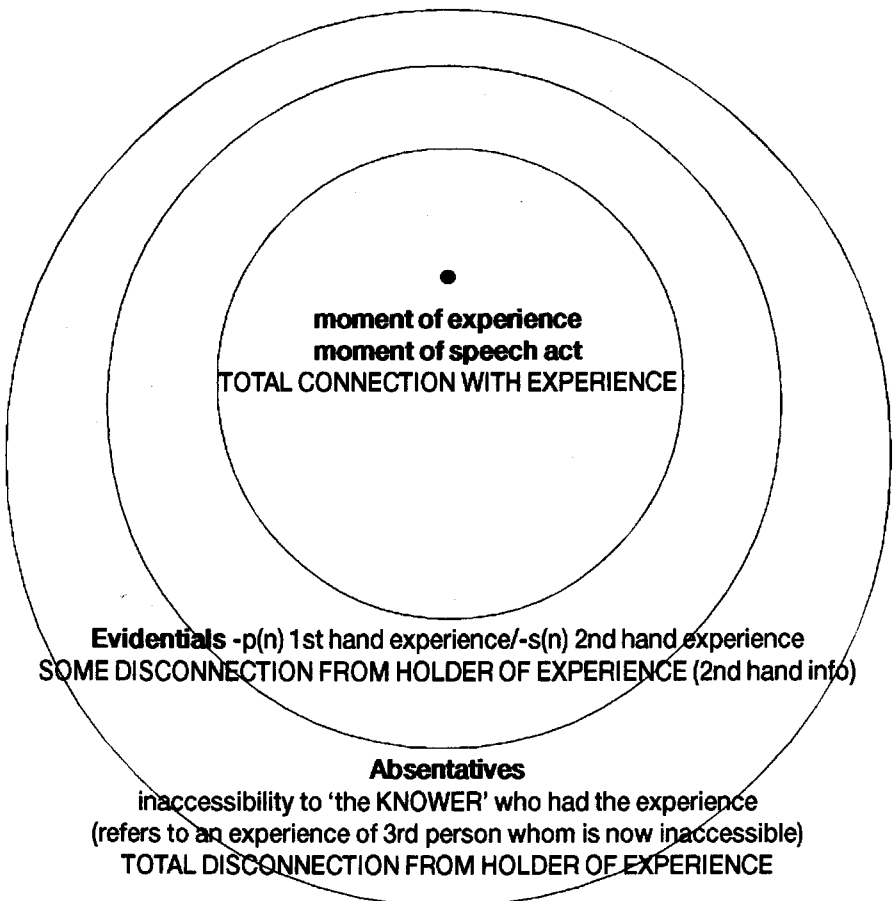
(5) Pemlekap.	'S/he walked.' (1st hand information source)
(6) Pemlekas.	'S/he walked.' (2nd hand information source)
(7) Pemlekapnaq.	'S/he walked.' (1st hand information source but now 'the walker' is dead)

Mi'kmaq professors at the University College of Cape Breton who teach Mi'kmaw language courses and who are fluent Mi'kmaw speak-

ers often refer in their courses to the short past vs. the long past. The short past is described as “the past which the speaker can remember” (Johnson, P. 1999:pc) while the long past refers to things passed on by way of oral histories or community knowledge. When you examine the forms taught in class the short past is not referring to time but is referring to the fact that either the speaker experienced the event himself/herself (1st hand evidence) or was told of the “recent” event by someone else (i.e. 2nd hand evidence). The long past it turns out is referring to long ago evidentiality or inaccessible evidentiality—that is evidence sources that cannot be verified or checked but which may be taken as oral history.

Figure C

Degrees of Experiential Removal from the “Moment of Experience” as Indicated by Mi'kmaq Evidentials and Absentatives



has now been torn down.

(13) Meski'kipnek. 'It was big.' -p(n) = 1st hand evidence
-ek = absentative marker

(1st hand evidence + absentative)

(Item destroyed so visual verification of bigness is no longer possible.)

Conclusion

In conclusion Leroy Little Bear (Battiste 2000:80) when writing about the world view of North American Aboriginal peoples comments that

...no one can ever know for certain what someone else knows. The only thing one can go on is what the other human being shares or says to you or others. And, in all of this, there is an underlying presumption that a person is reporting an event the way he or she experienced it.

By examining the details of the Mi'kmaw linguistic system we see that the Mi'kmaw language grammatically encodes details concerning how speakers experience the world and how a speaker and the person spoken to connect with and evidence this experience. This is very different from the semantic system of event-time previously described for the English language.

As documented by Inglis (2002) and Inglis and Johnson (2002) the Mi'kmaw language has no tense contrasts and this differs greatly from the English and French languages. Fleischman (1989:38) notes the following when writing about evidentials in Wintu, a North American Aboriginal language

...the centrality of tense/temporality...in universal grammar may be but another example of statistical tendencies that have been promoted to universals by linguistics that still operates to a large degree under the grammatical hegemony of the Indo-European tradition.

With respect to the nominal and verbal structure of the Mi'kmaw language we are beginning to understand that what drives the morphology is an underlying categorization system which could be understood as "connectedness", "wholeness" or "oneness" verses "disconnection" and as we lose this language so too do we lose this "Way of knowing."

Notes

1. The figure of 5-10 Canadian Delaware speakers is taken from O'Grady and Dobrovolsky (1996:376).
2. All Mi'kmaw words are written using the Smith-Francis Orthography.
3. The Smith-Francis orthographic symbol / π / represents a schwa.

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