

SPEAKING MICHIF IN FOUR METIS COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author conducted a survey of Michif language use in three areas of Manitoba and one area of North Dakota. The data indicate that the language is not only a current one, but probably developed prior to the westward movement of the Metis.

L'auteur a fait une enquête sur l'usage de la langue michif dans trois régions du Manitoba et dans une région du Dakota du Nord. Les données ainsi obtenues indiquent non seulement que la langue reste vivante à l'époque présente, mais aussi que sa formation date de la période qui précède la migration des Métis vers l'ouest.

Given that Michif is a very unusual product of language contact, neither a pidgin nor a creole by ordinary definitions of those terms, anything that can be discovered about the special circumstances, linguistic and social, which brought it about should be of interest. Of possible approaches to this, the most accessible seems to be through the investigation of areas where the linguistic phenomena known as Michif are known or may be expected to exist, as well as areas similar in nature but where Michif does not seem to have developed. This paper reports preliminary phases of a research plan to investigate the [unction of Michif and the directions of change in four communities where Michif is or has been of considerable importance, a major vehicle of communication for the community: Belcourt, North Dakota, on the Turtle Mountain Reservation; San Clara and Bogy Creek, Manitoba; Camperville, Manitoba, at the southern edge of the Pine Creek Reserve; St. Lazare, Manitoba.

The places chosen are by no means the only possibilities. It is clear that Michif is or was spoken not only in Manitoba but also in extensive areas of Saskatchewan, and in other locations in the United States, at least at places in western North Dakota and Montana. The decision to confine the study to western Manitoba and to Belcourt does not deny the relevance of other locations: an extension of the study to include some sites in Saskatchewan should take place in the fairly near future. There are also other locations in Manitoba worthy of study, like St. Eustache and St. Laurent. Certainly locations like the one reported by Patrick C. Douad (1980), where many of the social characteristics assumed for the formation of Michif seem to apply without its formation, are important as points of comparison. The study has been limited to the four points chosen for manageability and because they provide a range of differences in situations and in apparent relicts. These differences are seen more in relationship to what has happened to Michif than to how it became established and maintained. It is hoped nonetheless that they will provide information valuable in its own right and with eventual relevance to the sociolinguistic origins of Michif.

In Belcourt Michif was the dominant language until replaced by English. Part of what makes this relevant there is that it is part of a reservation in the United States. San Clara and Bogy Creek constitute a community almost completely Metis and probably at one time almost completely Michif speaking, in relative isolation from other French and Indian groups. Camperville is a Metis community under strong influence from the neighboring Sautheaux reserve, with a resultant direction of change quite different from that of Belcourt. In St. Lazare the Metis community exists on the social and geographic edge of a French-speaking community.

Michif, also referred to as French-Cree (Rhodes, 1976; Peske, 1981) is a mixture of French and Cree in which the noun phrase, including articles and some adjectival modification, is French and maintains such characteristics as French gender distinctions as well as French phonological and morphophonemic patterns. Verbs come from Plains Cree, with a quite full representation of the complicated patterns of that language, although some speakers simplify at some points in favor of an increased dependence on prepositional patterns from

French. A significant detail is that the animate-inanimate gender distinction of Cree is maintained in verbs, as well as in a full set of demonstrative pronouns, from Cree, so that nominals are marked for both the French and Cree gender systems. Syntax is heavily based on Cree patterns, but again with varying degrees of influence from French. More detailed description of the linguistic characteristics of Michif as spoken on the Turtle Mountain Reservation may be found in Rhodes (1976), Crawford (1973, 1976), and Weaver (1982).

An important feature of Michif as seen thus far, and probably a useful diagnostic for distinguishing between persons who speak it as against those who are bilingual in French and Cree, is that the French domination of the noun phrase is almost complete, so that almost no Cree nouns are known to speakers of Michif in Belcourt, and even some words of Algonquian origin show up in Michif with French trappings, like *li skunk*, or even *li shikak* 'the skunk'. Borrowings from English get the same treatment. This reflects the integrity of Michif as the controlling linguistic environment for its speakers, that it is not merely an ephemeral interspersing of constituents from speakers of other languages.

In some ways of course the answer to the question of the origin of Michif has to be quite simple. In the same sense as it is obvious that Metis society and culture began shortly after the arrivals of the first Europeans, it must also be true that the factors which gave rise to Michif language also grew from those early contacts between native people and Europeans.

If from the above it is a given that Michif began its development in families with communications barriers, that is with no common language, it also seems obvious that there had to be a period of community bilingualism for a mixture like Michif to stabilize. Otherwise it is difficult to see how the relative complexity of the two languages could survive as it has in Michif. Even some characteristics lost in dialects of French under influence of Cree (Douad, 1980) are maintained in Michif. This suggests that during the formative period for Michif there were strong forces maintaining the full grammatical gender systems of both French and Cree. The materials published by Douad also indicate that a slate of French-Cree bilingualism or polylingualism does not necessarily give rise to Michif, even though it seems it is a necessary condition. These general inferences of course come up quite a bit short of indicating the nature of the contact which did in effect produce Michif.

Another way of restating some of the above is that it must have required some sort of sympathetic co-existence or a balance of prestige between Cree and French groups to produce Michif. Whereas in most contacts between languages one language dominates, to the eventual extinction of the other, in this case, at least during the period giving rise to Michif, the direction of such dominance is not clear. At least it must be accepted that the French component is strong and not typical of a language being absorbed into another.

The significance of the strength of the French survival must however be seen in relationship to the strength and perhaps the greater remarkableness of the Cree component. The most common pattern in language contact is for one language, often that of the intruder or colonist, to dominate over time. Thus

creoles tend to become more like the dominant (often European) languages involved in them. In the Michif case that would be expected to be French. The fact that this was not the case with Michif indicates that there were factors which made the Cree language and culture, if not dominant, at least strong enough to resist assimilation to French. Perhaps, given the prominence of French in education, religion, and commerce, it is likely that Cree had to be the primary element in the French-Cree mixture in the community where it developed, that is at the popular core of that community.

It may also be that the relatively recent and still increasing dominance of English over both Cree and French has something to do with this. That is, the arrival of English to the position of prestige may have prevented French from eventually absorbing Cree. But this does not contribute to the explanation of how the balance between the languages necessary for producing Michif could have come about.

It might be expected that a primary source of information about the development of Michif would be in historical records, yet there does not seem to be very much such evidence. Peterson (1981) reports a development like Michif in the Great Lakes area. Direct evidence of the early use of Michif would of course be most valuable, but lack of evidence does not indicate necessarily that Michif did not exist. There were and still are operating factors which make it highly likely that a development like Michif would be overlooked or not well reported.

The reasons for this come from language attitudes which assign a higher status to European languages, especially their written representations, and the lowest to products of language mixture. This is still seen in the slowness of speakers to Michif to recognize the integrity and cultural significance of their form of speech, and even in the fact that it is only now being noticed by students of native languages. 'Half-breed language' suffers the same disrespect that 'half-breed' people do.

The sketches that follow about the four places studied are impressionistic and tentative. The next step in research planning is to devise more detailed strategies for each site.

Belcourt, North Dakota (Turtle Mountain Reservation)

Of the places discussed in this study, it is on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota where Michif seems best preserved and with the greatest likelihood of survival. There are several indicators of this and some hints at a possible explanation.

The Metis element has been important during the entire history of the reservation. Although it has always been a Chippewa reservation, and there are still speakers of that language on the reservation and nearby, the evidence is strong not only that Michif is spoken by more people than is Ojibwa, but also that it has replaced Ojibwa in many cases. According to data collected in a survey in 1972 (unpublished), several respondents affirmed that they, or their parents or grandparents, had made a switch from speaking Ojibwa (or French)

to speaking Michif. No instances of the opposite movements were reported.

Another evidence of the relative strength of Michif is that there has been a fairly continuous effort to initiate and support programs for the preservation of the language over the past ten years. Programs for cultural values have operated in the primary, secondary and post.secondary levels, and focus on the tribal identity as Chippewa, but the language teaching, whenever it has been formally involved in such programs, has always to my knowledge been Michif. At present the evidence of programmatic interest in the language is best seen in the language being taught by a native speaker in the Turtle Mountain Community College, and also the college's continuing sponsorship of the preparation of a bilingual dictionary in Michif. Of some importance also is the teaching of the language at the University of North Dakota, one hundred and eighty miles from the reservation, the most relevant feature of this being that most of the students taking the course are members of the tribe. Most such students are supportive of efforts to preserve the language and enthusiastic about the prospect of seeing the dictionary in print.

It is not meant to imply that such opinions are held without exception on the reservation. There are those who, because of the mixed origin and nature of Michif usually considering it to be much less structured and more multi-faceted than is actually the case - do not think it worth serious consideration. There are also many who think that no language but English deserves attention in the present situation, and no lack of those who consider it more appropriate to invest time in the preservation of Ojibwa than of Michif. The fact remains, however, that the interest that has brought about the programs in Michif has occurred and has not been matched by corresponding (and appropriate) programs in the local variety of Ojibwa.

Nor should it be deduced from the above that the level of use of the language is high. The fact that members of the tribe take elementary language lessons at the University indicates that college age people do not by and large know the language of their grandparents. The general picture on the reservation is that people over about fifty years of age generally know the language, practically all over sixty-five or seventy learned it as a first language. But the level of use falls off quite rapidly with age, and young persons with familiarity are likely to be those who have spent more time with their grandparents. In a sense, the comparison in this study is between different patterns and rates of Michif being replaced by other languages, mostly by English. Still, in this comparison Belcourt shows more interest in the survival of Michif than the other places.

Factors which make the Turtle Mountain situation different from those in Manitoba seem to be molly connected with differences in the way native populations are treated in the two areas and can be summarized by saying that the Metis are treated more like Indians in the United States than in Canada. "[t]he preservation of Michif thus becomes an area of focus for the tribe and part of the overall drive for cultural and political survival.

Of the other three places examined, Camperville is similar in that there also Metis operate in a strongly Indian environment; however the patterns of

language change are quite different.

San Clara and Boggy Creek, Manitoba

By the same sort of broad characterization that makes Belcourt a sample of Michif on a U.S. Reservation, San Clara and Boggy Creek can be considered as Metis culturally and Michif speaking in relative cultural isolation. At least it is not under heavy influence from either neighboring native or French communities, and its location along the western edge of the Duck Mountain area of western Manitoba has given it a measure of geographic isolation or insulation from other groups. On the positive side, San Clara seems to be a town all of whose residents are Metis, and who seem to have almost all spoken Michif a generation or two back. In the neighboring rural community of Boggy Creek the same general picture holds; and, although there is some land owned by a large non-resident landholding corporation, control of property is largely in Metis hands, and the resident population is largely Metis also.

In spite of the cohesiveness that this reflects, the loss of language seems to have been abrupt and is almost complete, so that whereas most persons over sixty are fluent speakers, the rate of drop-off from that point is quite rapid. In the family that has been my major source of information, the oldest generation is a couple who both speak Michif obviously as their first language, but who are also fluent in English. Among their more than one hundred and fifty living descendants the oldest children are also fluent speakers, the most competent in my opinion being a son whose wife is also a fluent speaker. The younger members of this generation seem not to speak the language at all, although they doubtless understand it to varying degrees. Several members are married to non-Metis non-native people. In the succeeding generation there seems to be no one who gives any indication of knowing Michif, even though family and cultural connections are quite strong. Even so, it seems as though the transition from being only a member of the local community to identifying with the population of neighboring towns and the general area has been made easily and smoothly.

The difference between Belcourt and San Clara also is not so much a difference in the rate of loss of the language, the number of young speakers in Belcourt being low, but rather in the efforts in Belcourt to find means of perpetuating the use of Michif, something I haven't seen in San Clara.

Another factor of possible relevance to San Clara and Belcourt, although it seems to have no connection with the above, is that there is considerable communication between the areas. Some of the residents of San Clara have relatives and friends in the Turtle Mountain area, older people remembering when families now separated lived in a common area. This sort of connection is not unusual between the areas in this survey: people in Camperville have relatives in St. Laurent and in St. Lazare; a woman from San Clara married a man from St. Lazare, and an elderly woman interviewed in St. Lazare makes frequent visits to a close friend in Belcourt. Still, for San Clara, the closest ties seem to be to the Belcourt area.

Camperville and Duck Bay, Manitoba

Camperville and Duck Bay, both considered to be Metis towns, are situated at the southern and northern limits of the Pine Creek Reserve on Lake Winnipegosis. They may be characterized as Metis under strong cultural and linguistic pressure from the Reserve.

There are speakers of Michif in the area, and it would appear, from preliminary observation, that there were in the past more such speakers than at present. Five characteristics of change seem to distinguish this from other areas in the study. One, perhaps the most important, is that there seems to be a movement away from speaking Michif towards *Saulteaux* (Ojibwa). In a way analogous to that in which Ojibwa has been replaced in Belcourt by Michif, the reverse has happened in Camperville and Duck Bay. In one instance, a woman whose father was Metis and probably a speaker of Michif and whose mother spoke *Saulteaux*, knows some of both languages but is obviously more fluent in *Saulteaux* than in Michif or Cree.

The second difference is that some speakers seem to replace the French of Michif with Cree nouns. In one household in Duck Bay, my linguistic host carried on a conversation with a man about his own age in Michif; younger members of that family participated in conversations ancillary to the interview and not recorded, but there was no French component that I could identify listening to their speech. In another instance a man in his sixties was recording a personal history, and as he spoke his daughter chided him that he was not speaking in his natural manner (i.e. with French mixture) but was speaking instead a 'purified' or 'corrected' version of Cree.

A third difference between Camperville and the Turtle Mountain area was in response to the label 'Michif'. The word is not completely accepted in any area where investigations have been made; it seems always to carry negative connotations. In Camperville it seemed to have no communicative value; the most definite references to what we label Michif were 'Cree mixed with French' and 'tout meleé'. There were one or two references made to 'half-breed language' here, as well as in a couple of other places.

Another characteristic of the Michif of Camperville is that there seems to be more English in it than in San Clara or Belcourt. It might seem as though the French component had been replaced by English, but there is considerable difference in the way in which it operates in the language. Whereas in Michif noun phrase structure and lexicon have been made thoroughly and almost completely French, the influence of English is more sporadic. Some English nouns are used, without the French articles they are likely to have in Belcourt or San Clara. More noticeable is the interspersing of whole phrases and clauses from English in the stream of speech, so that "fifty miles, right across the mountains" is an insert in a Michif text collected in Camperville.

The fifth difference in the Michif of Camperville is that the speech melody patterns, the intonation, of the language is quite different from that of Belcourt and San Clara; its relationship to that of St. Lazare bears further investigation.

The kind of close connection that exists between San Clara and Belcourt seems also to hold between Camperville and St. Lazare, in that several persons talked to in Camperville had moved there from the St. Lazare Binscarth area. It is likely, however, that Camperville was well established as a Metis community long before the relatively recent influx of people from farther west.

It is of course difficult to know to what extent the differences between Camperville and Belcourt are due to the differences in Indian policy between the two countries. It does seem hard to escape the conclusion that they are a factor. In Camperville the relatively sharp line between Indian and Metis has kept Michif from any real likelihood of having a cultural impact on the reserve. Also the fact that Indian women may lose their status by marrying non-Indians makes for a concentration of Saukteaux speaking families in the nearby area, and this effect could easily intensify in a town like Camperville.

St. Lazare, Manitoba

St. Lazare is a community with a very strong French orientation. Streets have French names: French is the language of education and religion; French may be heard in most places and times. Much English is also heard, perhaps more than French in the business section of the town. At the edge of St. Lazare there is a small settlement, government housing, occupied almost completely by Metis (usually referred to as 'half-breeds'). They constitute a community within the larger French one.

This settlement is a relatively recent one, but it represents an older presence of Metis in the area between St. Lazare and Binscarth, about twenty miles north. Part of the population of the St. Lazare Metis are persons who formerly lived in Ste. Madeleine, a rural community that was evacuated by government order. The residents being moved mostly to another area close by, that was also later abandoned. There is a general scattering of Metis people in the area, with concentration in a few rural settlements. There is also a cooperative sheep farming experiment.

Less time has been spent in this area than in the other three, so only very preliminary comments can be made. First, Michif is still spoken, at least by certain individuals and families. An elderly woman in a community neighboring St. Lazare seemed to speak only Michif, while we visited. Her son spoke to her in Michif, to my linguistic host in Michif and English. A younger generation present seemed to speak no Michif, but seemed to understand the old woman. A sample text was recorded in the Ste. Madeleine area, and seems quite similar to Michif texts recorded elsewhere. The speech of my host, when he spoke Michif, seemed to include more French than most people from Belcourt or San Clara would use. This of course would be an expected result of the French influence, but much more evidence is needed to verify that expectation.

The most obvious conclusion from these studies so far stems not from the differences between these Michif-speaking communities, but from the commonality, that Michif seems to have been spoken in all of them. This suggests that the linguistic development of Michif antedates the westward movement of

Metis people. This seems too obvious almost to merit mentioning, but the almost complete dearth of early information about the language does give it some importance.

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