

The Michif French Language: Historical Development and Métis Group Identity and Solidarity at St. Laurent, Manitoba

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This paper deals with the Michif French language as spoken by the author and by other Métis people at St. Laurent, Manitoba. I will attempt to demonstrate that Métis people at St. Laurent see the Michif French language as a symbol of their group identity. A symbol is any sign that has an arbitrary relationship to its referent, as in the case, for example, of a language. Identity is understood as the individual and collective perception that Métis people have of themselves based on their history and on their cultural practices. It also includes the perception that non-Métis people have of them and which is communicated and made known to the Métis. After reviewing some aspects of the linguistic history of the Métis at St. Laurent, I will look at some community recollections of initial language contact as well as some personal experiences by the local people in linguistic acculturation outside St. Laurent, including my own. In some ways, this paper is a drama, an adventure in ethnolinguistics and in sociolinguistics.

The research is based on methods of participant observation and of ethnographic interviewing. The main source of data is the transcription of fifty-three hours of interviews conducted in the Michif French language during an intensive three-month field-work experience in the fall of 1987, in my home village of St. Laurent, Manitoba. The focus of the study is St. Laurent, Manitoba, not to be confused with St. Laurent, Saskatchewan. The former is a Métis village in the Interlake region of the province of Manitoba and is situated on the eastern shores of Lake Manitoba or "L'Grand Lac Manitoba" as one elder called it, some 90 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg on Number 6 highway.

Discussion of the Michif French language entails many dimensions: some theories on its origin and historical development, the issue of linguistic assimilation, and language as a display of Métisness. The term

Métisness is understood here as the total way of life of the Métis people.

In June 1985, the first Michif languages conference was held in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In the introduction to the final report, one reads on page 1:

The name "Michif" attempts to elicit the pronunciation of the word 'Métis,' as it has been traditionally used in wide ranging areas of the Métis homeland. It also represents the spelling adopted by at least one researcher, Dr. John Crawford, of the University of North Dakota, to describe the language of some Michif people. The languages of the Métis people have received little attention by scholarly researchers. Although some of the aboriginal languages which are, in fact, spoken by some Métis such as Cree and *Saulteaux*, have indeed been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, little, if any research has focussed specifically on these as well as other languages which reflect and carry the particular cultural stamp of the Métis. The Métis moulded the aboriginal and settler languages into coherent patterns which reflected their own cultural and historical circumstances. Over the generations, grammatical structure, accent and idiom transformed into peculiarly Métis usages. And what was peculiarly Métis varied, of course, from place to place and from group to group, reflecting as it did the unique linguistic, cultural and historical antecedents of each group. [Michif Language Project, 1985]

The Michif Languages Conference identified four main Michif-related languages: Michif Cree, Michif French, Ojibway and Swampy Cree. Michif French is the language of the Métis of St. Laurent, the subject of this paper.

The Michif French language is a dialect of French. William Haviland (1989, pp. 302-15) states that a language is a system of communication using sounds that are put together in meaningful ways according to a set of rules, while dialects are varying forms of a language that reflect particular regions or social classes and that are similar enough to be mutually intelligible. As a dialect, Michif French is a non-standard form of the French language. As the mother tongue of the Métis people at St. Laurent, Michif French is a valid form of language and not a misuse of the standard form. The difference between the two lies mostly in phonology (sound system), with some syntactic (word order) adjustment and semantic distinctions (meanings that include understandings peculiar to Michif-speaking people). Michif French is not an exceptional language nor is it unique. It is similar to modern-day French dialects, such as the

many French Creoles, including Cajun, the provincial usages in France and Canadian French itself.

To illustrate the differences in phonology between the French spoken in France, the French spoken in Quebec and the Michif French spoken by the Métis of St. Laurent, I will use the following examples. Take the consonants *t* and *d*. In linguistics they are called dental consonants because we make use of our tongue and teeth when pronouncing them. Now take the word *culture*. In some areas of France, it would be pronounced: "culture," with a clear-cut pronunciation of the consonant *t*. In French Quebec, the *t* in the French word *culture* would be pronounced as *ts* ("cultsure"), while the Michif speaking people in St. Laurent would pronounce the *t* as *tch* ("cultchure"). What we have, then, is *t*, *ts* and *tch*.

Let's now take the consonant *d*. The French word *dur* means hard. In some areas of France, the *d* in the *dur* would be pronounced in a very clear-cut way: "dur." In French Quebec, the *d* would be pronounced as *dz*, "dzur," while the Michif French-speaking people in St. Laurent would pronounce the *d* as *dj*, *djur*. Similarly, we have *d*, *dz* and *dj*. Other examples of Michif French is the fact that the *é*, as in bay, becomes *ee*, as in bee. For example, *été* in Canadian French is summer in English; in Michif French, it becomes *eetee*. Another example is the *O*, as in row, becomes *ou* like in shoe. *Il fait beau* in Canadian French becomes *it is beautiful* in English, while in Michif French it becomes *il fait bou*, as in "shoe."

On the other hand, the Michif Cree language is somewhat different, especially in terms of syntax. For example, Michif Cree nouns are borrowed from the Michif French while the verbs are taken from the Cree language. Take the English sentence, "Bring me the hammer." In Canadian French, we say "*Apporte-moi le marteau.*" In Michif Cree, the verb is in Cree; the verb "bring me" is *paytamowin*. The noun, *marteau*, as in "row," is taken from Michif French, *li martoo*, as in "shoe." So the sentence "bring me the hammer" is translated in Michif Cree as "*Paytowamin li martoo.*"

However, it is difficult to determine the exact origin of Michif French in time and place. One can assume it originated at Red River in the 1800s due to the influence of the French voyageurs, *coureurs-de-bois* and missionaries. But then, it may well have been spoken along the St. Lawrence River and around the Great Lakes as early as the 1700s. Further scientific study is greatly needed in this area. Scholars can no longer satisfy themselves by saying that Michif French is the product of language contact between the Indians and early French-speaking settlers. Such linguistic studies would not only be beneficial to the discipline, but would also contribute immensely to our understanding of the origin and

development of Métis languages, cultures, history and world-view.

From an historical perspective, Arthur Ray (1974, p. 3) states that the Cree and the Assiniboine populated the Interlake region during the pre-contact period. It was an era characterized by Indian languages only. Around 1820, the Métis arrived at St. Laurent. I do not have any evidence that other people lived there permanently prior to the arrival of the Métis. During this period, Métis people spoke an Indian language: Cree or *Saulteaux* and the Michif French. Unfortunately, one can not find any convincing evidence as to the origin of Michif French, but as stated above, it presumably started elsewhere and was brought to St. Laurent. It appears that the Métis people who arrived at St. Laurent in the 1820s—among others, the Chartrands, the Lavalles, the Pangmans and the Sayers—already spoke Michif French and presumably had learned it at Red River.

None of the elders knew where the Michif French language came from. When asked as to its origin, an elder, Frank Ducharme, age eight-six, simply admitted he did not know: "We spoke it at home with my parents. My grandparents did not speak it: they spoke Cree and *Saulteaux*." Other elders, however, did have some ideas as to its origin. The majority of the people agreed that it was probably the result of the early linguistic contact between the Indians and the White people. Ducharme continued:

I have a theory about the origin of our language that we speak and it goes this way: It is, say, in the year 1800 at Red River. This French fur trader who works for the Northwest Company meets this beautiful Indian woman. They get together and, nine months later, I am born. My French father has to leave the household to hunt and trap the furs for the Company; sometimes he is gone for two or three months at a time. In the meantime, I am at home alone with my mother, who does not understand a word of French but who continually speaks to me in her mother tongue, either *Saulteaux* or Cree. I grow up learning my mother's language. When my father comes home from the hunt, he speaks to me in his language, which is French: he does not know either *Saulteaux* or Cree. So, I grow up learning both an Indian language and the French language. As I interact and play and speak with other children who were in the same situation as I was, we develop this new language, called Michif French. [translated from the interview transcript]

One interesting aspect of this elder's theory was that he saw Michif French as a unique language. In the early stages, Métis people saw it as their own language and, in an embryonic way, focused on it as their own

and related it to themselves as an ethnic group. Beginning in the late 1800s, the Métis people at St. Laurent used the Michif language as a unifying symbol of group identity.

Some elders recall speaking only *Saulteaux* or Cree as they grew up at home in the early 1900s. They knew neither French nor English because they learned those languages only when they started to attend school. Others admitted speaking Michif French as their mother tongue and speaking *Saulteaux* only when they did not want the children to understand what they were talking about. Thus, at St. Laurent a generation of Métis who knew only Michif French started marrying one another and having their own families of monolingual Michif-French children.

"The speaking in the Indian language stopped at my parent's generation," added Roy Chartrand, a former trapper. "I do not speak it, my cousins who are my age do not speak it and my children certainly have not learned it from me, simply because my parents never taught it to me." For Métis people at St. Laurent, speaking an Indian language was quickly becoming a thing of the past.

In the 1930s, missionaries and some Breton families made some attempts to assimilate the Métis people linguistically. These endeavours were accompanied by discouragement of speaking Michif French and by an emphasis on learning Canadian French. Some elders attribute the disappearance of the *Saulteaux* language among the Métis to the presence of the priests and nuns at St. Laurent and to the arrival of the families from Brittany, France, in or around 1907. These clerics introduced into the community the Canadian French language that in a short time became the status or prestige language. Thus, the missionaries and the Bretons were responsible for establishing a hierarchy of languages: Canadian French, Michif French and *Saulteaux*. These practices led in the 1940s to the gradual demise of the Cree and *Saulteaux* languages at St. Laurent.

To the missionaries and the Bretons, the Canadian French language was considered a superior language. To speak "proper" Canadian French was to be superior to those who did not. In their eyes, Michif French, as a language, did not have a status in its own right. As a non-standard form of the language, it was considered a bastardized language, a corruption of Canadian French. Teachers apparently targeted immediately Michif French as an impediment to assimilation.

And the Métis people quickly became conscious that their language, Michif French, was being portrayed to them as an inferior language. There was a social stigma attached to being Métis and to speaking Michif French, especially in inter-ethnic circles and interactions. Thus, for some Métis people, being Métis and speaking Michif French became a source

of inferiority and shame. As a result, the influence of the missionaries and Bretons in trying to establish Canadian French as the first language in the community had a negative impact on the Métis people.

Michif French is not an inferior form of language nor an improper way of speaking French. However, the Métis of St. Laurent were made to feel that it was. Biased nuns and Bretons encouraged them to switch to standard Canadian French usage. Despite this pressure, the Métis persisted in speaking Michif French because, I claim, it had become associated with being Métis—it was part of their identity. This was so much so that, in many instances, one is Métis if one speaks Michif and vice versa.

Over the years Métis people at St. Laurent were led by teachers and outsiders to believe that they did not speak proper French when they spoke Michif French. There are strong group memories reinforced by often retold stories of the bias they were subject to and its effect. A respondent, Veronique Gaudry, said a nun told her that the Michif-French language spoken in St. Laurent was an "incorrect language."

At school, we were supposed to speak "real" French, *le vrai français*, that is French as they spoke it. As a result, they never encouraged us to speak our own language. If we did not speak it well, we were told to repeat it in "proper" French. Michif French was not considered correct speaking, she continued, and for all the years that the nuns and priests have been at St. Laurent, I do not know of one single priest or nun who learned to converse fluently with us in our own Michif French language; on the contrary, they gave us the impression that if they were to learn to speak Michif French like us, it was as though they were degrading themselves or something! That only reinforced the feeling of inferiority we already had regarding our language. [interview transcript]

The effect of this bias was to create a generalized group sensitivity to using Michif in interethnic groups. A former high school pupil, Yvon Dumont, said:

I have nothing personally against the nuns; I think they were good teachers here. But, one thing I do not understand is why some of them had to tell us that we did not speak "good" French. Today, I am often shy to speak Michif in public, especially in front of French Canadians. I become very self-conscious and feel somewhat inferior.

The results of this sensitivity appear to be discomfort in speaking with non-Michif people. Dumont continues, "Some even try to hide the fact that they speak Michif by making an extraordinary effort to pronounce the words in "good" French, "*bon français*" as some people say, but most of the time their accent betrays them."

"To tell you the truth," added a former student, Dolores Coutu,

the nuns made us feel inferior whenever we spoke Michif at school. I am even too ashamed recently to be interviewed on French television regarding community affairs here, because I was told I do not speak good enough French, so why should I go on public TV? I remember, a few years ago, that the director at the St. Boniface Museum told me to keep and continue to speak my Michif French language. There are, after all, no good or bad languages, he said. There are no superior or inferior languages and that really surprised me. I had never heard that before!

So, the Michif French language had been portrayed to the Métis of St. Laurent as a deficient language. People were uncomfortable using it outside their own group. But people remember that other pressures to assimilate linguistically were applied as well.

In my generation, some former students recall attempts that were made in St. Laurent to change our way of speaking. Most of the priests and nuns came from Quebec. Thus, they sought to change us from speaking Michif French to their style of speaking Canadian French as they had spoken it in Quebec. They started encouraging this assimilation by using the "token system" in the early 1950s: At the beginning of each week, the nuns gave each student at school ten tokens, made of thin cardboard about the size of a dime. Each time you spoke Michif, this would entitle another student to stretch out his hand and demand a token from you. The student with the most tokens at the end of each week would be rewarded with a prize (usually a holy picture personally decorated by an elderly nun who had retired in the convent). Some students tried their very best to learn the Canadian French language and some succeeded. The majority, however, had to give away all their tokens after two or three days. Some of them lost them all on the first day! It seems the system just did not work. Informants relate that this was because the majority of the Métis students did not see any apparent reason why they should learn to speak Canadian French.

Métis people remember that further attempts to have Michif-speaking people learn Canadian French were made by some Breton families in the 1930s. The first families arrived around 1907 to cultivate the land and to

fish on Lake Manitoba. According to an informant, some Breton families were absolutely shocked when they overheard how the local people spoke Michif French. Encouraged by the priests and the nuns, the Breton people promptly organized meetings to devise ways and means to teach Michif people how to speak "proper" French. The Bretons, added the informant, ended up attending the meeting by themselves as none of the local Métis people showed up. In St. Laurent, Michif people remember with irony that the project seems to have backfired as some children and grandchildren of these same Breton families have, over the years, acculturated linguistically and now speak the Michif language as fluently as the Métis.

Some informants also said that the opening of the high school in 1939 was yet another factor in promoting the speaking of the "proper" French language. For some Métis students, having a high school education was equated with giving up their Michif language, and many were not willing to do so. Among the Métis students who attended high school in St. Laurent, only a few spoke Canadian French. Most of them have retained and still speak their Michif language. Thus, Métis students who obtained a high school education at St. Laurent did not, in the process, give up their language. They preferred their own language, as a symbol of their identity, to a higher education: so much so that in the 1950s, only a handful of elder Métis spoke Indian languages. This period also marked the beginning of a new kind of bilingualism for Métis people: Michif French and English languages.

St. Laurent was not the only place where Michif-speaking students encountered linguistic problems. St. Laurent Métis people have also been embarrassed by references to their non-standard French outside St. Laurent. In the 1950s, Michif-speaking students were encouraged by the priests and nuns to attend French-speaking colleges, juniorates and convent institutions in different towns and cities across the prairie provinces, including St. Boniface, Ste. Agathe, St. Charles or Otterburne in Manitoba, and Gravelbourg in Saskatchewan.

A few students did well at these institutions and graduated. However, the majority is reported to have encountered difficulties in being accepted, primarily, they felt, because they spoke Michif French. So, after a year or two, they abandoned their studies and came back home. Some students stayed only a few weeks or months. One said, "I was often ridiculed for speaking Michif French. At first I thought they were joking, but then I realized they were really making fun of my speaking Michif and that hurt me." Another related feeling socially isolated from the rest of the student body for speaking Michif French, and the staff did not pay any attention. "As a result, I quickly developed an odd feeling that there was something

wrong with me. I thought things would improve afterwards but they did not. So, I did not go back." Another respondent said she was laughed at in front of the others for not understanding and pronouncing French words in the "proper way."

What is of interest here is that these Métis students felt that they had become objects of prejudice and ridicule that, they recall, was directed at them because they spoke Michif French. Thus, their entire identity seems to have been represented by their language. People reacted to them not because of race, actions, dress or appearance but because of their language. It is not surprising that this language, Michif French, has become so intertwined with their image of themselves, with their identity. With the development of Métis political organizations in the 1960s and 1970s, a new consciousness of Métis culture emerged. This new awareness reinforced the speaking of Michif French at St. Laurent. This trend continued well on into the 1980s until today.

Allow me to end on a personal note. The following can serve to illustrate some of my personal experiences in linguistic acculturation outside of my home town. I was born in 1939 in an old log house, in St. Laurent, Manitoba. Both my parents spoke the *Saulteaux* Indian language, between themselves and especially with my uncles and aunts, and other elder relatives. They never taught the children how to speak *Saulteaux* and we never knew why. Our main language was the Michif French. All the Métis people of St. Laurent spoke Michif. And, for a long time, in my mind, the Métis people of St. Laurent were a unique people because I thought we were the only ones in the world who spoke Michif.

I attended school in my village until I was thirteen. During the summer of 1953, we had a priest from St. Boniface visit our house. He was inquiring about the possibility of my attending school there. My father asked me if I would like to go and I said yes, promptly and joyfully. I didn't realize it then, but that was to be a decision that was going to affect me for the rest of my life in more ways than I ever anticipated. Fifteen years later, on 6 July 1968, I was ordained a Roman Catholic priest as a member of the Order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O.M.I.).

On 10 September 1953, I arrived at the St. Boniface Juniorate boarding school with another young boy, E.R., a Breton from St. Laurent, who grew up speaking Michif. There were about one hundred students from grades seven to thirteen. All of them spoke French Canadian. E.R. and I naturally spoke the Michif French of St. Laurent. It didn't take long for some of the students to detect the differences in pronunciation between their French and our Michif French. During recess, E.R. and I

participated in a volley-ball game. On our way back to class, I observed three or four students giggling and snickering at us and I suspected it was because of our use of the Michif language. One of them walked by us and asked, sarcastically, "*Vous êtes des Tchiboys de la couli?*" ("You are little boys from the creek?"). There was nothing wrong with the question. It was obvious, however, that by the tone of their voices and by their sneering laughs that they were ridiculing us and our language. E.R. was upset and furious. He told me afterwards that he didn't have to put up with this nonsense, and that if it were to happen again, he was going home. It did and E.R. never came back after the Christmas holidays. His stay there lasted three and a half months.

In spite of my best efforts to learn the French Canadian language, there were many instances during my interactions when I would spontaneously use Michif words in casual conversation or at play. Each time, some smart-alec would make a sly remark about me, causing an instant uproar among the others. At first, I would walk away from these incidents and try to avoid them, being very self-conscious of not causing them. Often, I would feel somewhat confused and perplexed and, as time went on and these experiences repeated themselves, I felt more and more isolated, and on a few occasions, felt downright rejected.

As a result of this, for the first time in my life, I felt an overwhelming sense of fear and insecurity take hold of me. I was thirteen years old. I had never experienced anything like it before. I couldn't understand what was happening to me. I felt a pain in my stomach, like a lead ball pulling in every direction. That night I had a hard time getting to sleep. I kept asking myself questions: "What's going on?" "What's happening to me?" "Why are some students making fun of me?" The obvious questions surfaced effortlessly: "Is there anything wrong with being a Métis?" "What's wrong with speaking Michif?" Feelings of self-doubt slowly began to seep into my mind. My self-worth and self-esteem were being affected in a very negative way. I could still feel the stinging darts of discrimination emanating from those traumatic events. I suspected that to be a Métis was to be inferior to others, that to be a Métis just wasn't good enough to "make it" in this world. The possibility of denying being Métis and speaking Michif and having to become somebody else, like a French Canadian in this case, loomed before me. The inevitable stark reality appeared before me: Give up your Métisness and your Michif language—become a Canadian like the rest if you want to "make it" in this world!

The big clock downstairs struck 2:00 a.m. and I started to cry. I lay there, awake, looking at the dark ceiling illuminated only by the red exit bulb above the fire-escape door. Tears were filling my eyes. I firmly

reassured myself, "No, there is nothing to be ashamed of in being Métis and there's nothing wrong in speaking Michif." Down deep inside me I could feel seeds of bitterness and anger being planted. I fell asleep. The next day, I decided not to abandon, never to abandon my Métisness and Michif language. I also decided that I would learn to speak French Canadian to the best of my ability and I would restrict my speaking Michif to when I was in the company of Michif people.

To illustrate this, one last incident has remained in my mind—"Parent's Day." I would be as happy as any of the students to see my parents arrive. The fact that they spoke Michif, however, created a conflict, a dilemma, for me. I didn't want the other students or their parents to discover that we spoke Michif for fear of having my parents ridiculed and subjected to shame as I had been. I remember trying to deliberately divert my parents away from the crowds and urging them to come for a walk by ourselves so we would not be heard speaking Michif. Or I would make sure my parents had their backs turned to the other people whenever they spoke to me so that we would not be heard. Down deep, I was ashamed to speak my Michif French language in public. I did not like to be heard speaking Michif French—so much so that I didn't want to be associated with anyone who did speak Michif, and that included my own parents. Today, I am not ashamed to speak Michif French publicly.

What is important here about language is not that the Métis of St. Laurent came to see Michif French as an inferior language or an improper way of speaking Canadian French. The important point is that Michif French has persisted and come to be recognized by the Métis as a symbol of their Métis identity. As shown above, the Michif language is intimately interwoven with their group identity.

In summary, the evidence is as follows. The Métis people at St. Laurent persisted in speaking their Michif French language despite being actively discouraged from speaking it by missionaries and by the Bretons. Their persistence in speaking Michif, despite pressure to assimilate linguistically, appears to have been purposeful, as a way of articulating their identity. I argue that, implicitly or more self-consciously, they refused to assimilate to Canadian French in order to maintain Michif French as a symbol of their group identity and solidarity.

The Métis at St. Laurent continue to speak Michif French. As a respondent observed, "Most Métis people today, young and old, continue to speak Michif French at home; it is not a language that is disappearing." From what I gathered from some informants, Métis people speak Michif French in the work place but switch to English if they work in the city. Métis people at St. Laurent realize that outsiders feel their language is deficient and thus, while they use it as a symbol of Métisness within Métis

settings, they avoid it if possible in mixed interethnic groups. As one informant related, "I think it is O.K. to learn another language, even Canadian French, but not because we are ashamed or feel that our language, Michif French, is inferior." Although stigmatized and in spite of the high emotional and cultural price many have had to pay in speaking their language, Michif French remains for many Métis people at St. Laurent a source of pride in their cultural heritage and historical traditions, a symbol of group identity and solidarity.

Métis students who return home after having learned some Canadian French in a college or a convent elsewhere start to speak Michif French again on returning. This practice confirms that the Michif language is recognized as a value-laden symbol of Métis identity at St. Laurent. According to James Spradley (1979, p. 39), the function of any cultural practice refers to the consequences it has for the members of the society. When the members of a society recognize a particular function we refer to it as a manifest function. When the anthropologist, as an outside observer, identifies these consequences, we refer to them as latent functions. As a "latent function" of Michif, it might be proposed that it is the carrier of Métis culture and the principal vehicle of articulating that culture. But the "manifest function" of Michif according to informants is that it certainly is the most focal symbol of Métis identity.

From a bird's-eye view, I am a product of many generations, many experiences and many social contexts and determinations. I live in four worlds: The Michif world of St. Laurent, the church and clergy world, the French Manitoba and Quebec world and, finally, the English world. There is part of me in all of these worlds and yet not one of these contains all of me.

As a result, different people have different perceptions of me. Métis people back home look at me as one of them, as one who left the village and has done well in the world. French Canadians would perceive me as a Métis who has acculturated to their lifestyle. My confreres in the priesthood see me as an equal member of the order, entitled to its benefits and privileges; though many of them, especially the French Canadians, would perceive me as a Métis who acculturated and became one of them, at least linguistically. The English-speaking Canadian would be perturbed by my ability to speak French, English and Michif and by my ability to pass with relative ease from any of these worlds to another. At the same time that I am a cause of wonder to them, English-speaking Canadians probably wouldn't really know who I am. It's like being a kaleidoscope, partly in and partly out, with only the colours changing from world to world. In the Indian world, I am not Indian enough; in the English world, I'm too much French Canadian; in the French Canadian

world, I'm too much Métis. My basic personality is Métis, while the French, English and clergy worlds could be termed sub-personalities. My ethnic origin and family background tell me I'm Métis; my formal education and training, however, have made a White man out of me.

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