Michif studies: Challenges and opportunities in collaborative language research

Maria Mazzoli
University of Bremen
mazzoli@uni-bremen.de

Abstract
Michif is a mixed language combining Plains Cree verb phrases and Metis French noun phrases. A critical reading of the 2011 Census data suggests that the language is severely endangered, having around 100–150 speakers located in different communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan (Canada), and North Dakota (USA). In this paper, I describe current initiatives of language documentation and revitalization, and I discuss the challenges and opportunities of conducting collaborative linguistic research on Michif. I discuss the involvement of learners and semi-speakers in language-related research activities, as for instance in the Mentor-Apprentice programs organized in different locations in Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the last decades; moreover, I point out some methodological challenges in doing morphological research on an oral and polysynthetic language, given that methods and theories in linguistics have mostly come out from research on European languages with a strong written tradition.

Keywords: Michif, language endangerment, fieldwork, Indigenous languages, community-based research.

1. Introduction[1]

Michif is an endangered mixed language that combines Plains Cree (autoglossonym *Nēhiyawēwin*, ᓀᐦᐃᔭᐍᐏᓐ) verbs and Metis French nouns. The language mixing in Michif has been described as exceptional with respect to general cross-linguistic

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tendencies (Papen 1987a; Gillon & Rosen 2018; Sammons 2019; Mazzoli, Bakker & DeMontigny forthcoming 2021). Michif is spoken today in traditional Metis communities within the Metis homeland, which is a vast territory spanning from the Rocky Mountains to the Great Lakes, including the three Canadian prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta) up to the Northwest Territories, as well as North Dakota, Montana, and Minnesota in the USA.

In this paper, I will provide an overview of Michif documentation efforts to date, highlighting community members' own role in this work, and discuss how to build upon speakers' knowledge(s) about the Michif language in future efforts, outlining some expectations and challenges connected to fieldwork in this endangered language community.

Language endangerment is an urgent issue. Of the world's 7,000 languages, nearly half will become extinct in the current century (Austin & Sallabank 2011). Although languages experience cycles of growth and decline in number of speakers, forming and dying naturally, the pace of language extinction has accelerated in recent times as a direct result of colonial and postcolonial policies. Aggressive ideologies on language status and economic value have become widespread, especially within the schools, in the urban workplace, and in official nation-state contexts. The resulting trend of language and cultural loss is affecting Indigenous peoples and minorities around the globe. In the Canadian context, the imposition of the English language (and French, to a lesser extent) had its most violent expression in the context of residential schools, government-sponsored religious institutions established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. In about one century, an estimated 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Metis children were taken away from their families and communities. At least three generations of people were affected and their families disrupted; most of the children involved lost connection with their culture as well as languages, and some of them lost their lives (cf. the Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology in 2008, and the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released in 2015). Today, of the circa 60 Indigenous languages in Canada, just three have communities numerous enough to balance the pressure of language shift: Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibwe (Statistics Canada 2012; Langlois & Turner 2014). The other languages are at risk, including Michif.

An emergent view in the field of language endangerment and revitalization, especially in the North American context, views language endangerment as being tied to land rights, respectful use of resources, cultural maintenance, healing and reconciliation after the colonization-related trauma, and ultimately wellbeing and health (cf. for instance, the experience of the Rediscovery camp, started in 1978 in Canada). Research conducted in North America among Latino children and Indigenous students revealed that there is a particularly strong link between self-esteem and knowledge of the heritage language and culture. Secured ties with the culture of origin nurture a whole sense of self and represent a protective factor for kids and adolescences, while they do not derail the acculturation of the pupils in the language of the environment (Wright & Taylor 1995; McIvor, Napoleon & Dickie 2009). Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde (2007) have linked knowledge and practice of ancestral culture to a health benefit and to

suicide prevention among at-risk youth in Indigenous communities in the USA. Metis children and youth have low rates of Indigenous language use: Iseke (2013: 97) shows that just 12% can speak or understand an Indigenous language. Is it also known that Metis suffer from poorer health than other Canadians (Statistics Canada 2009).

Linguistic documentation of minor languages often involves language varieties normally outside the focus of mainstream academic-based linguistics, such as pidgins and creoles, stigmatized registers, or marginalized Indigenous languages. In these contexts, both researchers and research contributors have special needs and rights. Research ethics in linguistic research has emerged as a subfield (Rice 2006; Austin 2010), which has made explicit remarks about (1) the relevance of the "new speakers" or the inclusion of heritage speakers/learners as important research collaborators (Grinevald 2007); (2) the difference in priorities between the linguist and the language community (Posey & Dutfield 1996; Gerdts 1999); and (3) the existence of ideological constructs that should be the object of the research instead of the research premises (as in any sociolinguistic research, cf. Cameron et al. 1992; Bucholtz 2003). Also, established research procedures and analytical tools may not be appropriate when researching some threatened languages and communities. For instance, Rice, Libben, and Derwing (2002) envisage as a research program the opening of experimental linguistics to lesser-known and typologically diverse languages and claim that the methodology of data collection for non-written languages and from older speakers, especially when conducting experiments, should be tailored to the specific situation.

Since 2016, I have been conducting research that aims to describe Michif morphology, especially verb stem structure and derivation. Building on the available Michif texts and on collaborative work with the speakers, I am building a database using the software Fieldworks Language Explorer (FLEx), which will output a dictionary of morphological components that will be of use to the Metis community, including Michif learners. My work includes the design of elicitation techniques and tests aimed at assessing morphological knowledge, awareness, and patterns of productivity in elder speakers who have never written in their language. At the same time, the project involves heritage speakers and Michif learners with different proficiencies in the research activities. According to the needs and the resources available in the community, these members take part as consultants and research assistants, or learners in the context of a Mentor-Apprentice Program (cf. section 3). This approach facilitates the exchange in cultural knowledge and experience among the participants and with the researcher and contribute to build connections between two generations of Metis, focusing on the transmission of the Michif language.

The paper unfolds as follows: in section 2, I present the Michif languages and the Metis people. I also provide up-to-date information on the number of Michif speakers of the mixed variety and their approximate location. In section 3, I provide an account of the past and present documentation and revitalization activities about Michif. In section 4, I discuss some challenges and opportunities connected to fieldwork on Michif and other endangered languages. In section 5, I present my conclusions.

2. Who are the Metis, and What are the Michif Languages?

The Metis were formally recognized in the Constitution Act of 1982 as one of three Aboriginal peoples in Canada along with the Inuit and the First Nations. However, Chartrand (1991) notes that the Metis were already constitutionally recognized as an Indigenous people in the Manitoba Act of 1870, which was referred to as the Manitoba Treaty by Louis Riel. The Canadian government discontinued this early recognition and several related provisions. The Manitoba Metis Federation has been fighting in the courts over the failures of governments to abide by the Manitoba Treaty since 1981.

Today, the Metis people are a distinct Aboriginal nation with a shared history, common culture, extensive kinship connections, distinct way of life, traditional territory, collective consciousness, and nationhood. Michif, including its various regional varieties, is identified by the Metis as a unique language that is symbolic of the Metis identity (cf. the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996: 138–145, 606). Michif was adopted as the historical and official language of the Metis Nation in July 2000 through a resolution passed by the Metis National Council (Barkwell 2004a: 1).

The Metis people are known under a plurality of names. The Cree term for the Metis is *âpihtawikosisân,* from *apihtaw* 'half' and *-kosis* 'son' (Bakker 1997: 65). There are similar names in other Indigenous languages (e.g., in the Odawa dialect of Ojibwe, it is *aya:pittawisit* 'one who is half'). Metis were also known as *otipemisiwak,* which means 'the people who own themselves', rendered as *free people* in English, and *gens de libre* in French, which is the name preferred by many Metis today. They are also known as *bois brûlés* 'burned wood'.

The history and emergence of the Metis nation is related to the fur trade and the dynamics of the European settlement in what is today Canada. In the second half of the eighteenth century, marriages between fur traders, or *voyageurs* (mostly of French origin), and Indigenous women became common in Western Canada. Most of the marriages involved Saulteaux women (branch of the Ojibwe, autoglossonym *Anishinaabe*). However, Plains Cree was commonly spoken as a vehicular language outside the immediate family (Rhodes 1982). Since the 1750s, early mixed communities arguably developed near the trade posts in the area surrounding the Great Lakes (present-day southern Ontario). After the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the British took over the area from the French, and the Great Lakes mixed communities were pushed toward the Plains in the West. They gathered in great number at the forks of the Assiniboine and Red rivers in the Red River settlement (present-day Winnipeg).

These communities were originally multilingual in French, Ojibwe, Cree, and other Algonquian languages. Code-switching and language mixing were likely common practices; however, the specific combination of Plains Cree verbs and French nouns, which constitutes the Michif mixed language as we know it today, must have crystallized after, probably in the first decades of the nineteenth century, in the area of the Red River settlement (Bakker 1997). The Metis' ethnogenesis coincides with the socio-political events in the North American plains leading to the Red River and the Northwestern resistances of the Indigenous populations against the Canadian colonial expansion towards the West. Since the early nineteenth century, ancestral Metis were

fully integrated in the aboriginal society of the North American Plains, and specifically within the political and cultural alliance of the *Nehiyaw Pwat* Confederacy (Vrooman 2010: 192–210). From the 1820s to the 1870s, annual buffalo hunts and related camp activities took place throughout the prairies but were concentrated around the Red River settlement. The Metis had a leading role in these hunts, which allowed for the development of early forms of Metis governance and political organization. The land in which Metis communities were thriving was claimed first by the Hudson Bay Company in 1812 (cf. Selkirk Grant), and then by the newly formed Canadian Federation in 1868 (Annexation of Manitoba). The resulting conflict led to violent clashes on several occasions between the Metis and the European settlers. In fact, the years of the resistance to Canadian colonialism, under the leadership of Louis Riel, strengthened the sense of Metis nationhood, but also forced the population to disperse towards the West, which resulted in pockets of Michif speakers being found today primarily in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and North Dakota (and some moved as far west as Alberta and Montana).

Historically, the Metis nation used a variety of languages due to their mixed ancestry and their nomadic lifestyle (Bakker & Papen 1996). Among the Metis languages one finds different varieties of Michif resulting from the mixture of French and Algonquian languages (that I will present below in the section, cf. Figure 1). Other Metis languages are Bungi (English with Cree and Ojibwe admixture, now extinct, Blain 1989), Brayet (probably a mixture of French and Ojibwe, now extinct, Stobie 1971), Metis English, and several varieties of Algonquian languages, such as Metis Plains Cree, Metis Swampy Cree, and Metis Saulteaux (of which not much is known except that they are supposedly more analytic than the First Nation varieties of Cree and Saulteaux).

In the 1980s, Bakker (1997) documented the varieties of mixed French and Cree spoken in Manitoba, Saskatchewan (Canada), and North Dakota (USA). After fieldwork in several distinct locations, Bakker observed the homogeneity of the language called Michif, consisting mainly of French-derived noun phrases and Plains Cree-derived verb phrases (mixed Michif in Figure 1). In the communities of St. Lazare and Camperville (Manitoba), the Qu'Appelle valley (Lebret and Lestock, north of Regina in Saskatchewan), and the Turtle Mountain reservation (across the USA border, in North Dakota), the communities spoke virtually the same variety of Michif. This led Bakker to conclude that Michif must have been formed, and with a consistent structure, *before* the dispersion of the Metis people began (cf. also Crawford 1985). Bakker (1997: 144, 176) considered varieties like the ones founded in Ile-a-la-Crosse and Buffalo Narrows to be a different type of mixture, in which French borrowing is less consistent due to a different origin (Michif Cree in Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows the distribution of Michif-speaking communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and North Dakota, mainly relying on data from Statistics Canada and the *Kitchitwa Ondwewe Nooding* report for North Dakota.[2] The map gives the

[2] Other sources: Bakker and Papen (1996), Souter (2007), Bakker (pers. comm.), McCreery (pers. comm.), Heather Souter (pers. comm.) and Rosen (pers. comm.).

approximate location of Canadian and US citizens who identified themselves as having Michif as a mother tongue, as well as available information on the Michif variety they speak.

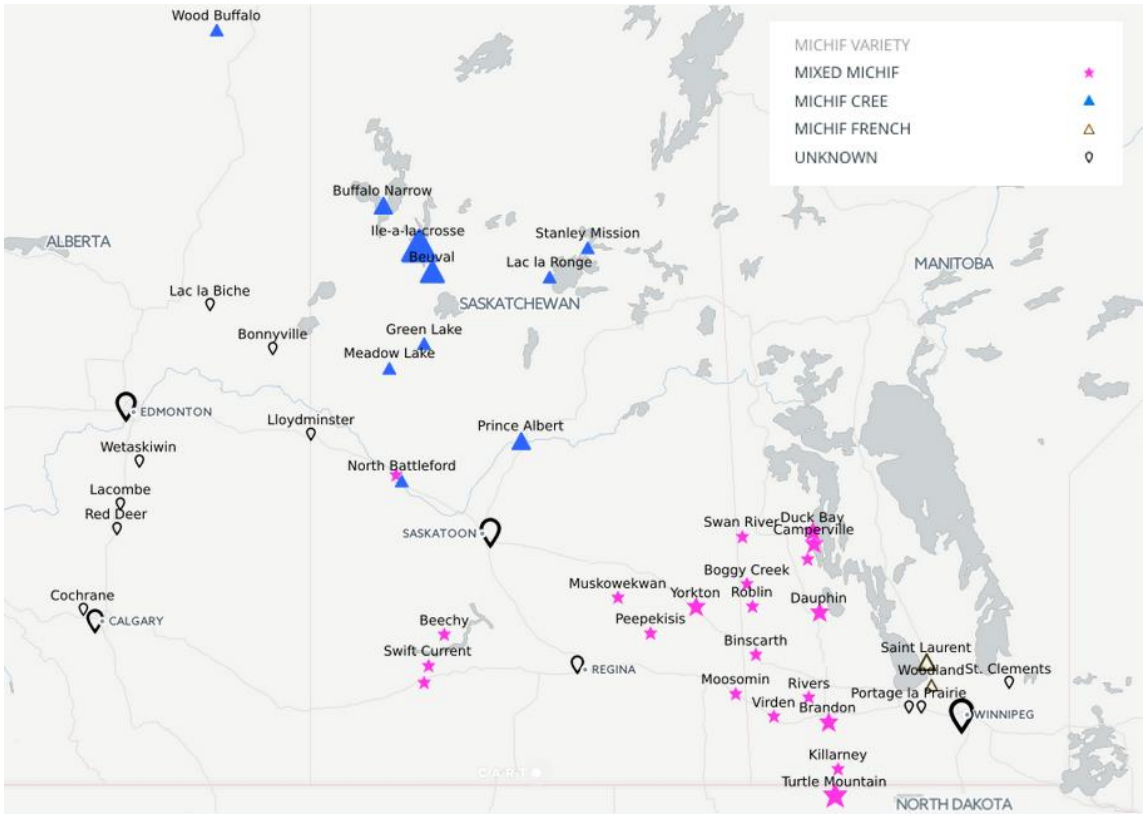

Figure 1. *Distribution of Michif speakers and Michif varieties*

In the Metis community, the term "Michif" is used to refer to multiple language varieties.[3] Instead, from the perspective of descriptive linguistics, academics have identified three distinct languages among these varieties (Bakker 1997: 119–139; Rosen 2007: 3; Bakker 2013), although the ISO code for Michif is unique (639-3 cgr). The different approaches to the Michif language(s) are based on specific views and language ideologies and may hide incompatible perspectives. The varieties identified by linguists are:

- Michif (southern Michif, or mixed Michif, as it is referred to in Figure 1) is the mixed Plains Cree/French, the main object of this paper. It is spoken mainly in southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba as well as in North Dakota in the USA (i.e., in the Turtle Mountain Reservation), and it has probably a few speakers in Montana. In Figure 1, this language is marked with a star.

Archived version at https://tefra.carto.com/builder/faac7b7a-2ac2-11e7-b7e0-0e3ff518bd15/embed (21 May, 2020).

[3] Cf. also: http://www.metismuseum.ca/exhibits/voices/index.php (21 May, 2020).

- Michif Cree (northern Michif) is basically Plains Cree with extensive French noun borrowing, including in the basic lexicon. It is spoken in Northwestern Saskatchewan, approximately between Meadow Lake and Buffalo Narrow, with most of the speakers to be found in the area of Ileala Crosse (cf. Anderson 1997; Bakker 1997: Ch. 5). Supposedly, Michif Cree extends as far as Lac la Biche and probably other Metis communities in Alberta (Bakker 1997: 145). In Figure 1, this language is marked with a filled triangle.
- Michif French is a variety of Canadian French, such as the one spoken in Saint Laurent (Manitoba), with great Algonquian influence in the phonology, syntax, and lexicon (cf. Douaud 1989; Papen 1993). In Figure 1, this language is marked with an empty triangle.

The genesis of these varieties involved the influence of Plains Cree, French, and Ojibwe. Nonetheless, they differ in the extent to which the features of the languages involved in their genesis are represented in the lexical, grammatical, and phonological domains. Although the three varieties above are referred to as different languages by scholars, Michif can be seen as a continuum of speech forms, created by multilingual speakers in a multilingual environment (Papen 1987b: 248). Depending on the individual proficiencies, local practices, and needs in the different communities, language contact had quite different results in the different ecologies. Michif varieties identified with the star in the map of Figure 1 are structurally homogeneous and therefore share a common origin; however, Michif dialectal variation is relevant among these communities (Crawford 1985).

The mixed variety of Michif was originally spoken by a few thousand people in the Fort Qu'Appelle Valley, Yorkton and surrounding area (Saskatchewan), Duck Bay, Camperville, Boggy Creek and San Clara, Ste. Madeleine, Binscarth, Ste. Lazare (Manitoba), and Turtle Mountain (North Dakota, USA) (Bakker 1997: 3). Today, it is very difficult to estimate the number of speakers due to their geographical spread and probably to the reluctance of some elders to speak Michif in public. Because the Metis Nation consists of a non-contiguous group of speech communities, Michif speakers are always a minority within their local areas, even among their fellow Metis and within their age groups. Most of the communities represented in Figure 1 host less than 20 Michif speakers, and the majority fewer than 5, according to the census. Most speakers presumably live in cities today, there are supposedly a number of them in Saskatoon, Regina, Brandon, and Winnipeg (Bakker 2013: 159).

The level of endangerment of Michif in relation to the actual number of speakers is also difficult to assess. Lewis, Simons, and Fennig (2016) report 640 Michif speakers in Canada as well as 75 in the USA (for a total of 715 Michif speakers, both numbers from the official Census data), and this data is cited in most of the recent publications related to Michif. However, the data should be taken with caution with respect to the variety of Michif spoken.

In 2011, Statistics Canada reported 640 Michif speakers located mainly in Saskatchewan (40.6%), Manitoba (26.6%), and Alberta (11.7%). In the cross-reference provided by Statistics Canada, we also learn that of these 640 speakers, thirty are below

24 years of age. Furthermore, 85 people declared Michif to be their main home language (45 *the sole* language). These numbers do not reflect the actual number of speakers of the mixed variety of Michif in Canada, since the statistical survey did not differentiate among speakers of the different varieties of Michif Cree, Michif French, or mixed Michif. Therefore, the map in Figure 1 is an attempt at putting the information provided by Statistics Canada into context.

On the other hand, the 2010 US Census provides an estimate of 75 Michif speakers drawing upon sample data collected between 2006 and 2008. The US statistics for the years 2009–2013 give an even higher estimate, for a total of 170 estimated speakers of "French Cree"[4] (as it is labeled in both of the US surveys), of which 25 speakers reside in North Dakota.[5] However, to assess the number of speakers in North Dakota for the purpose of the map in Figure 1, I relied on data collected in a community-level project conducted by the Turtle Mountain Community College in 2009–2011, which provides the number and fluency of Michif speakers in the North Dakota Turtle Mountain Reservation.[6] The survey results indicates that there are 24 fluent Michif speakers (and 21 less fluent speakers), and 4 Ojibwe-Michif bilinguals on the reservation.

In the light of the numbers provided by the Canadian and US Census, Lewis, Simons and Fennig (2016) declared that the Michif language is "shifting", in a cline of endangerment that goes from "international" to "extinct."[7] However, the data provided here permit us to re-evaluate the vitality of the mixed variety of Michif. The estimated number of Michif speakers are about 100–150 mother tongue speakers in Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and North Dakota.[8] Intergenerational transmission ceased

[4] Taking into account the margin of error, the real number of speakers is estimated between 45 and 295.

[5] Quite surprisingly, according to the 2015 US Census, French Cree speakers are registered in Iowa, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Texas, West Virginia, and Wisconsin (though none in Montana, Minnesota, or Michigan). Due to "data withheld to avoid disclosure", the speakers' number in each state is not made public. These data are based on self-reports of the languages spoken in the home (other than English) in a population sample and may refer to any of the Michif varieties described in section 2. They may point to the presence of Michif speakers expatriated in the US, or to second language learners. I thank Peter Bakker for the help in interpreting the data.

[6] The initiative called *Kitchitwa Ondwewe Nooding*—Sacred Voices in the Wind—(funded by the US Department of Health & Human Services) aims to identify speakers of Ojibwe and Michif in the Turtle Mountain Reservation, and to involve them in planning a language preservation program.

[7] https://www.ethnologue.com/cloud/crg (21 May, 2020). Cf. the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) levels in Lewis, Simons, and Fennig (2016), which are designed to largely coincide with Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Fishman 1991).

[8] Bakker (1997: 76, 2013: 159) estimated both in the early 1990s and in 2010 the number of people who have knowledge of mixed Michif ranged from 200 to 1000, specifying that only "a handful of people use Michif on a daily basis." Probably all

around fifty years ago, and no children or people of parental age speak the language. All dominant, fluent speakers of Michif are in their 70s or older. Therefore, mixed Michif should be considered to be not "shifting" but "nearly extinct."

Although there exists a strong sense of nationhood and a general affection towards the language, the chances Michif has to survive are dependent on an intensive intervention. At this point, restoring natural transmission within the household cannot occur as a spontaneous process.

3. Michif Description, Resource Development, and Community Efforts

Michif has attracted linguists due to its unusual mixed make up, especially in relation to the lexical split in its sources for verbs and nouns. In fact, no such mixture of two languages had been reported prior to Bakker's study (1997: 19–21), although later scholars became aware of mixed languages with similar characteristics, such as Okrika-Igbo in Nigeria (Wakama 1999). Most of the Michif verbs come from Plains Cree, as well as the question words, demonstratives, personal pronouns, adverbs, and word order; however, most of the Michif nouns are borrowed from French, as well as qualifying adjectives, possessives, articles, and numerals. Moreover, the resemblance of some Michif features to Cree dialects other than Plains Cree suggest a potentially complex history of contact with other Algonquian languages (Bakker 1997: Ch. 8–9). Evidence of contact with Ojibwe has also been reported (Rhodes 2008). Michif appears to keep relatively intact certain salient grammatical features of the source languages, such as French sex-based gender in the noun phrase (Sammons 2019: 232–234) and the complex Algonquian structure of the Cree verb (Mazzoli accepted). Linguists focused on the nature of Michif as a mixed language, questioning whether or not it presents exceptional features and structures (Papen 1987a; Matras & Bakker 2003; Rosen 2007; Prichard & Shwayder 2014; Gillon & Rosen 2018). In spite of its relevance for theories of language evolution and grammars in contact, Michif is an under-described language. There is no published descriptive grammar. The largest-scale published work on Michif to date has been Bakker's (1997), which focused on the socio-historical context and the genesis of the language.

Three Michif dictionaries are currently available. Laverdure and Allard (1983) was edited by John Crawford and compiled by two speakers of Turtle Mountain Michif. The Gabriel Dumont Institute hosts on its website an English-Michif dictionary featuring 11,500 entries with accompanying sound files, compiled and edited by Norman Fleury.[9] The dictionary is available as a smartphone application (*Michif to Go*).[10] Furthermore, there is an online Michif dictionary edited by Nicole Rosen (and collaborators) as part of the project *Word-Building in Michif*.[11] It features several examples per entry and

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scholars would agree that the actual number of speakers is today below 150, and the speakers active in revitalization, or in contact with the researchers, are less than fifteen (Golla 2007: 6; McCreery pers. comm.; Heather Souter pers. comm.).

[9] http://www.metismuseum.ca/michif_dictionary.php (21 May, 2020).

[10] https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.emap.michif (21 May, 2020).

[11] http://michif.atlas-ling.ca/ (21 May, 2020).

follows the Flamand-Papen spelling system (cf. note 23 later in this section), further refined by Rosen and Souter (2009, 2015) in the Michif teaching manual *Piikishkweetak aañ Michif*.

Many Metis people and Michif speakers are working to document, describe, preserve, teach, and revitalize Michif.[12] Community-based efforts have been mostly directed to the creation of teaching material and resources in Michif, while also focusing on the celebration of culture and folklore (cf. Bakker 2011).

In the USA, the language has been taught for decades at the Turtle Mountain Community College in Belcourt, North Dakota, but has not been offered for about four years, as of 2020. Local schools also incorporate it occasionally into their bilingual programs (e.g., Dunseith Elementary School, Turtle Mountain Community School). In the Turtle Mountain Reservation, local radios used to broadcast in Michif (Golla 2007: 62), but Michif has not been heard on Keya FM as of 2020.

In Canada, interested Metis gathered for the Michif Speakers' Conference in Saskatoon in 2006 and 2008, and in 2008 the conference was preceded by a Michif storytellers' workshop.[13] Several Canadian institutes are likewise working to teach and produce materials. The Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI), which is based in Saskatchewan with several branches, is probably the most prolific source of Metis-related materials; their activities span from resource creation and dissemination to applied research for educational purposes. The full list of children's books written or translated into Michif (often labeled Michif-Cree by the GDI) is available on their website.[14] Within their collection, the *Alfred Reading Series* is of particular value. It consists of five children's books written and read aloud in Michif and available online. They were written and illustrated by Darrel W. Pelletier and translated into Michif by Bruce Flamont.[15] Also produced by the GDI, the *Taanishi Books (Michif/English Edition) - Emergent Reader Series* consists of 27 books written in Michif and English, also available in audio (translated and narrated in Michif by Norman Fleury). *Bringing Métis Children's Literature to Life* is another resource kit, which includes 15 traditional stories narrated and illustrated by Metis authors. Michif speakers Grace Zoldy and Rita Flamand have also translated children books for the GDI.

The Louis Riel Institute (LRI), which is the education department of the Manitoba Metis Federation in Winnipeg, is an adult learning center committed to the development of community-based educational programs directed towards the whole family. The Institute has released DVD beginner lessons for both Michif and Michif French, which

[12] The Michif language program at the Rossignol School in Ileala Crosse, a Metis community in northwest Saskatchewan, uses Michif Cree from kindergarten to grade 5. However, none exists for mixed Michif yet.

[13] http://www.metismuseum.ca/browse/index.php?id=1075 (21 May, 2020). The videos and partial transcriptions of these events are available on the Gabriel Dumont Institute website and on YouTube.

[14] http://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/148474 (21 May, 2020).

[15] http://www.metismuseum.ca/browse/index.php/1187 (21 May, 2020).

are also available online.[16] As part of the Michif Language Program, the Manitoba Metis Federation published a collection of papers in two volumes, edited by Lawrence Barkwell (2004a, 2004b), which focus on various aspects of the Michif language. The LRI also published *Li Liivr Oche Michif Ayamiiawina - The Book of Michif Prayers*, including sixteen Michif prayers and their English translations, provided by Grace Zoldy and transcribed by Arthur J. C. Schmidt. Pemmican Publications, a publishing company with close ties to the Manitoba Metis Federation, has also published children's books written by Bonnie Murray and translated into Michif by Rita Flamand (among others, Murray 2008).

The Metis Resource Center, founded in Winnipeg in 1993, was very active until recently, but it closed in 2017. Together with Rita Flamand, the center published *Michif Conversational Lessons for Beginners* in 2002.[17]

Michif courses are currently offered in some schools and university institutions, as of 2020. Verna DeMontigny teaches Michif at the University of Brandon in Manitoba and in elementary schools. Norman Fleury teaches Michif at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Curriculum Studies. Heather Souter teaches Michif at the University of Manitoba since 2019.

Norman Fleury was also chair of the Manitoba Metis Federation Michif Languages Program, who contributed several resources. He edited *La lawng: Michif peekishkwewin: The Canadian Michif language dictionary* (Fleury & Barkwell 2000), a primer with a pronunciation guide, conversational phrases, and examples of prayers and invocation, then *La Pchit Sandrieuz an Michif*—a version of Cinderella in Michif (Fleury & Bakker 2007)—, and several children books and other translations. Bakker and Fleury developed an audio Michif course together with Heather Souter and Torkil Oesterbye, first released in 2004.

Probably one of the most effective initiatives for the preservation and the revitalization of Michif was conducted in Camperville (Manitoba) from the years 2004 to 2010. Elders Grace Zoldy[18] and Rita Flamand[19] have hosted several students in Mentor-Apprentice language learning programs, coordinated and funded by Heather Souter.[20] The Mentor-Apprentice Program (MAP) was first developed in California by

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[16] http://www.louisrielinstitute.com/michif-language-resources.php (21 May, 2020).

[17] Other Michif lessons are available on the website http://www.learnmichif.com/ (21 May, 2020).

[18] The story of Grace Zoldy from Camperville on the *Winnipeg Free Press*: http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/la-lang-di-michif-ta-pashipiikan-103776389.html (21 May, 2020).

[19] Rita Flamand (in collaboration with Robert Papen) devised a spelling system for Michif, paying close attention to Michif phonological features (referred to as Flamand-Papen spelling). Flamand, for instance, introduced the double-vowel to represent Michif contrastive long vowels.

[20] In 2003, the Endangered Language Fund funded the first program in Camperville. The National Aboriginal Health Organization—Métis Centre also gave sponsorship to the pilot project conducted by Tricia Logan in 2007.

Leanne Hinton (Hinton 2002).[21] It consists of a one-on-one language immersion program, where a "mentor" (a fluent speaker of a language) is paired with one (or more) "apprentice(s)" (learner). The mentor and the apprentice spend a certain amount of hours (usually 300) per year together, doing everyday activities and using the language at all times. Immersion is a special method of teaching and learning language as well as culture. It tends to reproduce the environment in which language is passed on from one generation to another in a natural setting, and it is an effective way to create new speakers and improve the fluency of semi-fluent speakers (Hale 2001: 227–236). The Camperville programs permitted new Michif speakers to develop their language knowledge (Souter 2004). Some of them became language teachers in turn. In 2018 and in 2019, the community-based Prairies to Woodlands Indigenous Language Revitalization Circle in Camperville, was awarded funding from Heritage Canada's Aboriginal Language Initiative (now the "Indigenous Languages Component—Indigenous Languages and Cultures Program") to run a MAP for six teams for Michif and other Metis languages. In all, these community-based efforts have produced some second language speakers, who learned or re-learned Michif after infancy, and a few individuals have reached fluency (*pace* Golla 2007: 62).

Within this vast panorama including community and academic work on Michif, there are nonetheless many urgent issues that call for more research, especially due to the critical level of endangerment of the language. For instance, there are multiple areas of Michif grammar that need more description. At the community level, there is the need to foster language competences among children and young adults through effective teaching programs. Therefore, my work aims at contributing some theoretical insights, descriptive work, and pedagogical resources in collaboration with the Metis community. In specific, my analysis of Michif morphological verb structure and derivational processes will contribute to an area of Michif grammar which lacks description. My fieldwork activities are conducted within modules of MAPs, that aim at involving researchers, learners and fluent speakers together in language-related work. In the summer 2017, for instance, I organized in Brandon a MAP together with Dr. Nicole Rosen, the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Manitoba, Verna DeMontigny, Harvey Pelletier, Kay Pyle and Jacqueline Pelland (Mazzoli 2019: 110–111).

4. Challenges and opportunities

In this section I discuss some of the challenges and opportunities of collecting linguistic data and conducting elicitation work on Michif, as an endangered Indigenous language with an elder population.

[21] Together with Nancy Richardson, Mary Bates Abbott, and others, after a suggestion from Julian Lang, a Karuk speaker.

4.1 Is Working with Endangered and Polysynthetic Languages Different from Working with Standard Average European Languages?

One of the aspect of my work on Michif is to understand how speakers parse and represent complex verb stems. Tests on morphological representation and parsability have rarely been done with speakers of a polysynthetic (thus very complex) and non-written language, such as Michif. In fact, most research in the field has focused on major languages with a solid written tradition, which is confirmed in the fact that most tests are submitted on screen, using written stimuli. Relying on tests submitted to literate language consultants on languages with an existing written tradition risks to perpetrate Western biases towards how languages work. Rice, Libben, and Derwing (2002) conducted two experiments on morphological parsing with speakers of Dene, an oral, polysynthetic, and endangered language, and have openly challenged the idea that the information we have collected on Standard Average European languages may be extended to non-written, lesser known, morphologically complex languages such as the Indigenous languages of North America. Also, there has been scarce attention to developing experimental techniques of morpheme recognition that will allow for "valid comparisons among literate and non-literate populations, techniques that facilitate the testing of populations outside of the traditional university laboratory environment" (Libben & Jarema 2002: 9–10).

In the Michif case, as in the experiments described in Rice, Libben, and Derwing (2002: 483), the most immediate procedural difficulties include: (a) working with a group of consultants who are not literate in their language and are unaccustomed to the kind of meta-linguistic analyses that linguists tend to reify; (b) devising effective tasks and elicitation sessions directed to older speakers; and (c) using techniques, theories and methods appropriate for polysynthetic languages, specifically Michif.

Especially when working with language consultants on the morphological structure of their language, it makes a great difference whether the consultants are literate *in that language*. In a large body of literature on several languages, metalinguistic awareness of the morphemic structure of words, and the speakers' ability to manipulate that structure has been correlated with reading skills and vocabulary development in both children and adults (Carlisle 2000: 186; McBride-Chang et al. 2008, among others). It follows that morphological awareness changes considerably in speakers who become accustomed to reading and writing in their languages, with respect to speakers who have mainly, or only, oral mastery of those languages. Michif speakers may not be trained to read and write in Michif, although they are sometimes literate in English and/or French. Also, they are mostly elderly people who may have experienced some attrition and loss of Michif, as they became more dominant in English over the course of their life.

The elicitation work and tests that I conducted include discussions of related word pairs or small word sets, judgments of interpretability/acceptability of complex mixed verb stems (French-Cree), morpheme addition and subtraction, filling in distribution charts, commenting on silent videos such as animations to elicit coinages, and building paradigms and lexical networks around a single bound root or stem. The need to develop methods to work with non-literate consultants goes beyond the pragmatic necessity of producing picture or audio stimuli instead of written slides for experimental

purposes (Rice, Libben & Derwing 2002: 483), and ultimately addresses the fundamental issue of the primary oral nature of human language. Although writing and literacy are an important part of language learning and contemporary life, language remains essentially an oral object; as such it is used in ordinary everyday face-to-face conversation, and it is transmitted and acquired in natural contexts. Moreover, the vast majority of the world languages lack written traditions entirely.

Furthermore, morphological theory and the theory of lexical processing have developed without a systematic and equal comparison among the typologically diverse languages of the world (Hankamer 1989; Evans & Levinson 2009). Libben and Jarema (2004: 2) suggest that "the effects of morphological diversity across languages may have been obscured by the fact that most mental lexicon research has concentrated on lexical processing in English." Indeed, according to the authors (ibid.: 3) the term *morphology* has a typological validity, and refers to "the semantic and syntactic substructure of language strings that have relatively invariable surface manifestations in language and can *potentially* be stored in the mind." In this view, morphologically complex words find themselves at the crossroads between those structures that can only be memorized (which are mono-morphemic words), and those that can only be computed (which are more like sentences). Thus, complex words present an ideal testing ground for the evaluation of hypotheses concerning the extent to which morphological factors shape the representation of words in the mind. Assessing the way speakers of Michif represent and parse complex verbs will help to evaluate the extent to which morphological computation is involved in lexical processing of languages that do not have a written tradition (Rice, Libben & Derwing 2002: 474).

4.2 What Research Methods Enhance The Collaboration Between Researchers and Community Members?

Communities who speak an endangered language are vulnerable partners in language-related research. Most research in linguistics, including on Indigenous languages throughout the world, is conducted according to a model of documentation and description that is linguist-led and linguist-focused. This type of research is conducted *by* linguists, *for* linguists, and the language-speaking community's participation consists of being *the source of fluent speakers* with whom the linguist could work. The linguists would establish the research agenda and priorities, and report primarily to their scholarly community. Some foundational manuals in field methods (e.g., Samarin 1967) and recent textbooks (e.g., Vaux & Cooper 1999) are expressions of this perspective (cf. the discussion in Ladefoged 1992; Dorian 1993). Linguist-led research is not inherently unethical in its methodologies, as long as it occurs in an environment where the researchers and the speakers are in a somehow balanced relationship of power. However, this is not the case for endangered language research in the Canadian contexts, where domination of Indigenous people "took the form of compulsory education, economic adjustment programs, social and political control by federal agents, and much more" (Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] 1996). The RCAP goes on saying "these policies, combined with missionary efforts to

civilize and convert Indigenous people, tore wide holes in aboriginal cultures, autonomy, and feelings of self-worth" (ibid.).

Many scholars have described how specific practices in linguistic research help to reflect more closely the speakers' needs, which also implies taking fully into account issues of power, and accepting that linguistic research cannot be neutral with respect to the political and social issues permeating the communities involved and the world more generally (Cameron et al. 1992; Rice 2006; Gaudry 2011). Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) gives an overview of speaker-centered approaches presenting three models, in a scale of growing compliance to the speakers' necessities: (1) advocacy research, or research *on* a language, made *by* linguists and *for* members of the speaking community; (2) empowering research, or research *on*, *for*, and *with* members of the speaking community; and (3) Community-Based Language Research (CBLR), defined as engaged and collaborative research between linguists and language communities, "which allows for production of knowledge on a language that is constructed *for*, *with*, and *by* community members" (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009: 15). While the involved communities gain power and agency in research practices, the perspective on what to expect concerning research results is overturned: "in community-based research it is often the case that the process itself is a result" (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009: 43). The training of youth and community members, as well as their participation and promotion of the research activities, is indistinguishable from the communication of results because it is a result in itself (ibid.), as it is the knowledge transfer and mutual knowledge mobilization coming out of training and reciprocal active listening. It is vital that Indigenous peoples have direct input into developing the research practices and projects related to them. To act otherwise is to repeat the pattern of decisions being made for Indigenous people by those who presume to know what is best for them (Battiste & Henderson 2000: 132).

Linguists concentrate on *language*, in the conscious illusion that it is an identifiable/concrete object. Our expertise is related to the functioning of language structure, and we tend to feel self-assured in delimiting what we feel compelled to know, so that we often manipulate language data disconnected from their cultural context. This attitude is the typical way that Westerners conceive of knowledge, expertise, and disciplines. I see myself permeated by this perspective, and I acknowledge that there are contradictions in my approach, for example in recognizing the fictive nature of "language" as a discrete object of research and, at the same time, perpetrating the traditional categorization of the Michif languages in distinct varieties, identified by an ISO code. I do not expect to be able to carry out research outside of these contradictions, but rather to explore them and possibly reduce their harming potential by spelling them out. Many researchers who concentrate on "language", especially during fieldwork, experience different perspectives. For example, the prominence of language as a distinct entity may not be reflected in the priorities of the communities we work with. Other cultural or economic issues may be more urgent than, or indistinguishable from, the language issue. In the case of the Michif language, as well as other Indigenous and rural communities in Europe and around the world, the connection between the way of speaking and the subsistence lifestyle has always been very strong. The connections to

the land, not only intended as a homeland, but as a source of life, death and spirituality, has historically sustained Michif and other Indigenous languages in Canada (Patrick 2007): the language survived while the trapping and hunting lifestyles were productive, and declined with the dispersal of the Metis people and their conversion to urban/modern/western lifestyles. Today, the Metis win battles in court, which result in the recognition of their land rights (cf. the Powley case's sentence in 2003; Mazzoli 2019: 104–108), but their long-lasting status as landless has impacted their identities, languages, and social status, so that these issues are a great source of concern for the population.

As linguists, we feel the pressing need to find good, reliable speakers. In linguist-led work it is ideal to work with people who have immediate access to their language knowledge, can come up with self-assured and quick intuitions about which structures are allowed, and provide precious information on how they perceive a certain word or way of speaking. These collaborators generally have some common characteristics: (1) they acquired the language during their infancy, through their primary socialization with their family, and/or peers and close relatives; (2) they are not experiencing attrition, and the language the linguist is interested in is (one of) their current dominant language(s); (3) they show attachment to the language as a symbol of their culture, or personal bond, so they feel a sense of pride and agency in connection with their language, and enjoy showing mastery of its complexities and nuances; and (4) they are possibly literate in their language. All field linguists have had experiences with speakers' varying levels or types of competency as language consultants. In situations of language shift, especially when the heritage language is in immediate danger, the community hosts a typology of speakers that goes from the old traditional speakers, who were raised in what today is the heritage language, the younger modern speakers, raised bilinguals, and the semi-speakers, members of the community who have partial or only passive knowledge of the heritage language (Grinevald 2007; Grinevald & Bert 2011). In both European dialectology and the field of language documentation, linguists have generally tended to find and address the traditional speakers, who are seen as holders of the authentic culture and language knowledge (Bucholtz 2003: 399–400). However, especially in situations of language endangerment, speakers who do not comply with the expectations of mainstream ideologies on language competence are as vital as the more "native" speakers (cf. Doerr 2009 for a critical view of the concept of the "native speaker"). Given that it is unusual, it is also difficult to involve semi-speakers in research activities focused on *language*, since their supposedly "inadequate" language competence would make the community of scholars suspicious about their contribution. The linguist ends up in a *cul-de-sac*, studying communities that have been relegated to the borders of the structure of power, while screening the individuals according to how authentic their involvement with their culture is, in turn marginalizing those who fail the language knowledge test (Bucholtz 2003: 407).

Lately, the field of language documentation and description has developed a set of methodologies that can be of use in collaboration between the researcher and the community, in that linguists use their expertise while taking into account the community's perspective and addressing the community's needs. The organization of

Mentor-Apprentice programs has been an appropriate strategy to address the needs of the Metis community, interested in developing the language knowledge of young adults.

5. Conclusions

This paper discusses some of the challenges and opportunities of doing linguistic work in Michif-speaking communities. By critically analyzing the census data available for Canada and the USA, I have shown that Michif is more endangered than previously indicated in the literature. With about 100–150 speakers, mixed Michif is thus nearly extinct, and research projects on the language should take this critical situation into account in setting up their research goals and methodologies. This updated figure should inform appropriate strategies for language-related work in Metis communities. In Michif-speaking communities, several community-led initiatives of documentation, description, and revitalization are in place. The need for new young adult speakers is urgent in the community, and several Mentor-Apprentice programs in the last decades have produced some second language speakers.

In this paper, I also discuss issues related to the methodology of data collection and elicitation strategies, when working with a polysynthetic, oral and under-described language like Michif. For instance, although morphological knowledge and representation is considered to be a valid cross-linguistic concept, it is also known that the ability to manipulate morphological structure is related to literacy skills. It follows that morphological awareness changes considerably in speakers who are accustomed to reading and writing in their languages, with respect to speakers who have mainly oral mastery of the same languages. There is an urgent need for developing specific elicitation techniques able to survey language competence for speakers of endangered language, who may be elder and have experienced attrition, or have limited or no written competence in their language.

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