Lemoine's French-Algonquin Dictionary

Laszlo Szabo
University of New Brunswick

Seventy years ago, in 1906, Georges Lemoine presented the introduction to his Dictionnaire français-algonquin (Lemoine 1906) in Québec, at an Amerindianists' Congress.

He treats only the Algonquin language, and does not mention the name of the Algonquian language family, although he states Algonquin to be a "sister-language" of Montagnais, Tête-de-Boule of St-Maurice, Cree, Ojibwa and other "dialects" of Canada. He means the other members of the Algonquian language family.

In his introduction he says where the Algonquin language is spoken (or at least, where it was spoken when he wrote the dictionary): it was spoken at the Lac de Deux Montagnes, in Maniwaki and other places at the Gatineau river, at the lakes Barrière, Victoria, Temiscaming and Abbitibi, at Grass Lake, Golden Lake, and in Mattawa. The dialectal differences cannot be very large. He states that the language is spoken "d'une manière passablement uniforme".

His transcription is very simple and not overphoneticised. It is not very far from a modern phonemic transcription, even though he speaks about "sounds" and "letters". But he uses only 17 letters.

Lemoine distinguishes exactly the same four vowels as Bloomfield reconstructed for Proto-Algonquian, namely:

1) high-front i,
2) low-front e,
3) high-back o,
4) low-back a.

Lemoine marks the vowel length in his dictionary. (Cuq, too, marks it in his Algonquin grammar (Cuq 1891).) Lemoine calls them "long and short syllables", not "long and short vowels", but the examples make it sure that he means vowels. For instance, the singular forms of the present indicative of the verb ni-..., ki-..., pizindam 'I listen, you listen, he listens', contain a short a in the last syllable; but in the second person plural the a is long: ki-pizindâm 'you (more than one) listen'.

I have tried to compare some of his words containing a long vowel with Malecite words containing a long vowel in the same syllable. Both vowels are long in Algonquin nikan, the same in Malecite nhkâni 'in front, before'. The same is true about the short vowels. In many words they are there in both languages. The e is always short in Algonquin keko, and Malecite kew 'something'.

Lemoine's symbols to mark the consonants seem to be good, too, giving a solid point to help the reader to pronounce them. However, the c for a postalveolar fricative (for Σ) is rather unusual... Instead of v it would be better to write w. There is no labiodental fricative (v) in Algonquin, as is seen in the treatment given French loanwords like Xavier>sapie. The author knows this and says it should be pronounced like w. He uses three letters...
to mark the bilabial semivowel in different positions, namely: o, w and y.

Among the consonants he distinguishes voiced and voiceless stops, b, d, g and p, t, k. Similarly we find voiced and voiceless pairs among his fricatives, i.e. z, s and j (= ʓ), c (= ʓ). He says m and n are always voiced. There is no l and no r in the Algonquin language. Besides the above mentioned symbols he uses one more letter, namely h.

He is writing a French-Algonquin, and not an Algonquin-French dictionary. This is why in many cases he concentrates more on French than on Algonquin. For instance, he presents all French prepositions as separate entries, although there is nothing like that in Algonquin. In such cases the title of his entry must follow the requirements of French rather than the spirit of Algonquin.

A French adjective is usually a verb in Algonquin. He presents e.g. blond, blonde under b, and not under e, like être blond.

A great merit of this dictionary is its grammatical clearness. Lemoine's grammatical rules enable the person who studies the language to make the grammatical forms, not only to recognize or to guess them. For instance, he indicates not only that the ending of the obviative is n, but specifies also the connecting vowel. The obviative ending is a single -n only after a vowel. After g, k, z it is -on, and after any other consonant it is -an. The "surobviative" ending is -ni, -oni, -ini, following the same rule of the end-vowel or end-consonant. The vocative plural ending would be in Algonquin, generally speaking -tok, but it is really -tok only after a vowel, like ockinawe 'young man', voc. plur.: ockinawetok. After g, k, z the ending is -otok, e.g. amik 'seal', amikotok. After any other consonant it is -itok, e.g. nidjanis 'child', nidjanisitok. The possessive marker is m, -om, -im, depending on the end of the word. The same applies to the Locative ending -ng, -ong, -ing, e.g. nipi 'water', niping 'in the water', akik 'kettle', akikong 'in the kettle'; asin 'rock', asining 'on the rock'.

In the verb inflection Lemoine distinguishes nine modes and seven tenses. He calls the modes: indicative, conditional, imperative, subjunctive, participle, dubitative, investigative, eventual, and gerund. His tenses are: present, imperfect, "passé eloiigné", "passé indéfini", pluperfect, future and past future. Perhaps we should explain what he means by "passé eloiigné". It is something that was there for some time, and is not there any more. For instance, the imperfect is used to express 'he loved': sakidj igeban. The form of the "passé eloiigné" would be, adding -go- before the past marker -ban: sakidjigegeban, and it means 'he loved some time ago (and he does not love any more)'.

The author distinguishes three conjugations of the animate intransitive verbs, according to the third person singular of the present indicative. It can end in a vowel, in m, or in n, e.g. nese 'he breathes', pizindam 'he listens', tagocin 'he arrives'.

The transitive inanimate verbs have two conjugations, depending
on the end of the third person indicative, namely -on or -an, e.g. o sakiton 'he likes it', o pizidan 'he listens to it'.

He makes the classification of the transitive animate verbs according to the end of the second person singular of the present imperative, which might end in -ah, -eh, -ih, ci, -j, -m, -n or -v, e.g. sakih 'love him', aci 'put him' nagaj 'leave him alone', tilbenim 'govern him', webin 'throw him back', pakitev 'hit him'.

Impersonal verbs or verbs with inanimate subject represent three additional classes of verbs, depending whether they end in a vowel, -n, or -t, e.g. pikocka 'it is broken', kimíwan 'it is raining', kiwemakat 'it turns back'.

He presents the intransitive verbs in two different ways:

1) If the first and the third person singular of the indicative present are different from each other, he presents both, e.g. ijinikas, -azo 'I am called, he is called'.

2) But if these have the same form in Algonquin, he presents only one form, e.g. nese 'I breathe' or 'he breathes'.

Another example of the way he presents an intransitive verb which he calls "absolute verbs", can be seen in the entry for "écouter". Under this entry he presents about fifteen verbs. All of them belong to the same semantic group 'listen', but there are differences in their meanings. Before presenting the Algonquin form for each individual verb, the author gives the French translation again, now more precisely, e.g. --avec admiration. More than half of those fifteen verbs are animate, about five inanimate. (He calls the catagories "g.a.", that is "genre animé", and "s.i.", "sujet inanimé".

In the entry for 'dormir', there are more than twenty verbs. Many of them are presented in only one form, which means that the first and the third person of the present indicative have the same form, e.g. bien - , minõngwām ; - la bouche ouverte tāwanõngwām.

In the entries for the transitive verbs he presents three forms if necessary, e.g. nici 'kill him', nisa 'I kill him', nisan 'he kills him'. In other entries only two forms appear, and one of them is always the imperative. In still others only one form like sakih 'like him' appears. The second person singular of the present imperative seems to be the key form for the transitive animate verbs.

In summary, Lemoine's Dictionaire français-algonquin is an admirable work, which has not only the merit of presenting much material in a relatively neglected Algonquian language, but also the merit of being far ahead of its time, presenting the vocabulary of this language on an advanced level of knowledge of its phonetics and morphology.