THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE CHANGE AND DEATH ON OBVIATION IN MICHIF

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Michif is a dialect or language growing out of the contact between Europeans and Native Americans, primarily French and Cree. It is an unusual if not unique linguistic product, with its entire noun phrase, except for a few Cree nouns, coming from French, and its verb phrase and overall syntax coming from Cree, albeit with considerable French influence. Spoken by residents and dependents of the Turtle Mountain Reservation (who are primarily Métis) in north-central North Dakota, as well as in parts of Canada, it is a language undergoing not only coalescence and change, but also death due to increasing English monolingualism of Michif children.

Research in Turtle Mountain Michif has been done primarily by John Crawford (1976, 1978) and graduate students working with him. Michif was first introduced to the Algonquian conference in 1976 by Richard Rhodes in his paper “French Cree: a Case of Borrowing” (Rhodes 1977). The purpose of the present paper is to explore the effect of language change and death on one characteristic feature of Algonquian languages, obviation, as exhibited in the speech of the residents of Turtle Mountain. Obviation is difficult to discover in Michif because, while it has preserved most of the distinctions of Plains Cree in its verb paradigms, its noun phrase is French. It could be expected that with the loss of most of the Cree nouns the cross-referencing system, including obviative inflection, would fail to transfer over to the French nouns, making it difficult to elicit obviative subject forms in the verb paradigm. With a lack of obviative inflection on nouns, one might suppose that the corresponding forms could have been lost in verbs. However, obviative inflection does occasionally occur, especially on the few existing Cree nouns, making the question of what factors are affecting that occurrence one worthy of exploration.

More significant than the inherent structure of the language in making obviative forms hard to discover are the sociolinguistic factors surrounding the current use of Michif on the reservation. English has become the main vehicle of communication and, because of this situation, the linguist often finds it difficult to get an accurate picture of
Michif structure. Since Michif is used mainly within individual family groups, at times it seems like each family speaks a different dialect. English is the acceptable mode of communication outside the family, making it difficult to obtain data. Thus the linguist may have to rely on translations of isolated, unrelated sentences. Since English has nothing like the proximate/obviative distinction, it is difficult to elicit it in such translations. The novice must proceed with caution: there is no guarantee that because she has been unable to elicit a form that it does not occur. This is true in any language learning situation, but even more so in a situation as complex as this one.

Whether a person uses obviative forms may be affected by many factors. The degree to which speakers are able to use the language to express themselves and interact with other people could be expected to influence the degree to which they use features like obviation that often serve a discourse level function. The same could be said for the degree to which speakers actually use the language, which in this particular sociolinguistic situation is often less than they are capable of. Some speakers do not think of Michif as a language, but as bits and pieces of other languages, preferring not to use it on a regular basis.

The degree of fluency and current use of the language may be expected to correlate with the degree to which morphological leveling of several types has occurred. Some speakers preserve the full range of person affixes and are most likely also to preserve obviative forms. Others exhibit a leveling of person prefixes and tense markers and are more likely to neutralize the proximate/obviative distinction. Some speakers use Cree possessive markers on the few remaining Cree nouns including the expected obviative endings as in (1) below:

(1) li garsō o-mušum-a kiː-pakamahw-eːw
    the boy his-grandfather-obv past-hit-3
    ‘the boy hit his grandfather’

Others use the French possessive markers as in (2) below:

(2) li garsō su mušum kiː-pakamahw-eːw
    the boy his grandfather past-hit-3
    ‘the boy hit his grandfather’

In this study of obviation in Michif a questionnaire was used which took these factors into consideration. This questionnaire sought to establish which sociolinguistic variables might affect whether or not a particular speaker uses obviative forms. It was anticipated that family, age, geographical location, languages spoken in the home when growing
up and presently, the types of situations in which Michif is currently used, and perception of Michif as a language in its own right or as only bits and pieces of other languages would be factors that could possibly affect the use of obviative forms. This questionnaire was not intended to be a statistical tool, but a means of identifying some of the trends in language use on the reservation. Because of the small size of the population that actually used Michif on a regular basis, it was deemed impractical to seek out a statistically sound sample.

The questionnaire also served to elicit language data. The design of this elicitation tool is crucial. Obviative forms do not occur in isolation but as a result of two third persons being closely related syntactically. Ideally, linguistic data should take the form of natural texts, elicited over a period of time, from a cross-section of the population. However, such long-term study is not always feasible, making it necessary to design very carefully the elicitation technique used.

The part of the questionnaire reproduced in Appendix I asks for the Michif translation of twelve English sentences. These were asked in pairs, the first sentence intended to establish which third person is proximate and which is obviative, the second reversing their initial relationship (semantic roles).

The first pair was thought to be the pair most likely to produce an obviative marker on the noun. There are three reasons for this: 1) ‘grandmother’ is possessed by a third person, an environment that makes obviation obligatory in other Algonquian languages; 2) ‘grandmother’ is the goal of a verb with a third person actor, an environment that makes obviation obligatory in most Algonquian languages; and 3) ‘grandmother’ is one of the few remaining Cree nouns in Michif and thus more likely to exhibit Cree morphology. It was anticipated that the first sentence would establish ‘grandmother’ as obviative and that when it became the actor in the second sentence it would remain obviative, causing the verb to be marked for an obviative subject. In order to double-check the results of this, another pair of sentences with an identical syntactic environment (2a,b) was used.

The next four sentences repeat this except that the possessed noun is French. It was thought that these forms would be less likely to demonstrate obviation as French nouns usually do not exhibit Cree noun morphology. The last four sentences eliminate one further motivation,
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possession. This would be even less likely to demonstrate obviation in an Angonquian language.

The data collected in this study are presented in Weaver (1982) along with a complete discussion of the questionnaire and its results. I would, however, like to discuss the way various speakers translated these sentences and how some sociolinguistic factors may have affected them.

The twelve speakers interviewed can be placed in three groups. The manner in which each group translated the questions was fairly consistent, with only minor stylistic differences within each group. Examples representative of each of these groups are given in Appendix II.

Group A included 8 of the 12 speakers interviewed. They ranged in age from 42 to 66 and were unrelated except for a half-sister and brother. They were born on various parts of the reservation and were influenced by a variety of languages spoken in the home. All of them, except one, marked third person Cree nouns in the object position as being obviative and used the inverse form when that obviative noun became subject. For example:

(3)(a) li ġarsô u:-mušum-a ki:-pakamahw-e:w
    the boy his-grandfather-obv past-hit-3
    'the boy hit his grandfather'
(b) u:-mušum-a ki:-pakamahw-ik-e:w
    his-grandfather-obv past-hit-inverse-3
    'his grandfather hit him'

More significantly, while only two of them ever marked a French noun as obviative, and then only once, all of them used the inverse form when the French noun became the subject in the second sentence of each pair.

(4)(a) la fi sa sôr ki:-wa:pam-e:w
    the girl her sister past-see-3
    'the girl saw her sister'
(b) sa sôr ki:-wa:pam-ik-e:w
    her sister past-see-inverse-3
    'her sister saw her'

The inverse marker is required in Algonquian when a lower ranking person in the person hierarchy of 2nd > 1st > 3rd prox. > 3rd obv. serves as subject while a higher ranking person serves as object. The use of the inverse marker in sentences with French nouns would seem to indicate that the concept of another third person is, at least for these speakers, not dependent on a noun being morphologically obviative. It is obviative by virtue of its relationship to the other participant in the
first sentence and thus requires the inverse marker when functioning as subject.

Group B consists of only two speakers, ages 63 and 26, from different parts of the reservation. They retain Cree possessive markers and obviative markers on the Cree nouns but do not spontaneously use the inverse marker in the second sentence of each pair. The 63 year old did, however, use inverse forms when prompted by his wife. He finally ceased translating the sentences at all and let his wife, whose answers mostly corresponded with those in Group A, finish. For these two speakers, then, there are vestiges of obviation left in their speech, but no concept of proximate and obviative forms being at different levels in the person hierarchy. Possibly they view the obviative ending as being the second half of a split morpheme marking third person possession.

Finally, in Group C, the three speakers, ages 26, 40, and 46, do not mark obviation without prompting. In their speech, Cree nouns have been completely incorporated into the French noun phrase and they consistently use direct forms in all sentences involving two third persons.

The two factors, besides age, which seem to be most crucial in affecting retention of the proximate/obviative distinction are the degree to which the language is currently used by the subjects and their attitude towards it. These are probably aspects of the same phenomenon. Speakers who perceive Michif as being less than a language, or who see themselves as unable to speak any language well, did not exhibit a semantic concept of obviation.

A good example of the effect of attitude on speech is the 63 year old from Group B. He grew up speaking the language, his mother spoke only Michif, his wife had to become more fluent in order to live with his people, and yet he almost completely blanks out when asked to speak. Why is this? It is impossible to say what all the factors are that led to his saying, "I speak a little French, a little Cree, a little Chippewa, a little English, but I don't speak any language well." When I said, "But that means you speak Michif," he said, "Michif isn't a language, it's just bits and pieces of other languages." However, his wife, who claims

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1 One speaker, the youngest, did use some inverse forms when prompted by her older sister.
to have learned the language from him, is very fluent, used obviative forms on nouns, and occasionally used an obviative subject form on a verb.

On the other hand, those who are the most conservative (Group A) are aggressively interested in the language. Three of them have been language teachers in the field methods course at the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session, for several years. One is also a co-author of the Michif/English dictionary, which is in preparation. Another of this group is a teacher's aide at the Ojibwa School, an alternative school that is trying to instill a pride in the children of their heritage as Native Americans. She speaks the language whenever she can, especially to children, and wants to help people learn to speak it. These speakers have incorporated French nouns into the Cree person hierarchy even though the noun phrase is in every other way French (with the exception of the few Cree nouns). The two factors that seem to have led to the complete loss of the proximate/obviative distinction in the speech of the other Michif interviewed are sociolinguistic ones: a failure to use the language because of a low self-esteem linguistically, or failure to completely learn the language as a child.

The loss of most Cree nouns and the replacement of the Cree noun phrase with a French one has not, in and of itself, led to a loss of the proximate/obviative distinction. Conservative speakers still retain this distinction as seen in the responses of Group A. However, the sociolinguistic factors surrounding the replacement of Michif by English on the reservation may be leading to such a loss in new generations of Michif speakers.

There is a necessity for thorough sociolinguistic research on current language use at Turtle Mountain and its relationship to attitudes, language background, age, etc. The present study, while not a statistical one, demonstrates that there is such a connection and lays the groundwork for further exploration of the effect of sociolinguistic factors on the speech of the Michif at the Turtle Mountain Reservation.

APPENDIX I

1 (a) The girl saw her grandmother.  
(b) Her grandmother saw her.

2 (a) The boy hit his grandfather.  
(b) His grandfather hit him.

3 (a) The girl saw her sister.
(b) Her sister saw her.

4 (a) The boy hit his brother.
(b) His brother hit him.

5 (a) The girl saw the dog.
(b) The dog saw her.

6 (a) The boy hit the girl.
(b) The girl hit him.

APPENDIX II

Group A

1 (a) la fi uhkuma ki:wa:pame:w (la fi su uhkum ki:wa:pame:w)
    (b) ukuma ki:wa:pamiku: (su uhkum ki:wa:pamiku:)
2 (a) li garsō u:mušuma ki:pakamahwe:w (li garsō ki:pakamahwe:w su mušum)
    (b) u:mušuma ki:pakamahuku: (su mušum ki:pakamahuku:)
3 (a) la fi sa sör ki:wa:pame:w
    (b) sa sör ki:wapamiku:
4 (a) li garsō su frer ki:pakamahwe:w
    (b) su frer ki:pakamahuku:
5 (a) la fi li šič ki:wa:pame:w (la fi ki:wa:pame:w li šičwa)
    (b) li šič ki:wa:pamiku:
6 (a) li garsō la fi ki:pakamahwe:w (li garsō ki:pakamahwe:w la fiya)
    (b) la fi ki:pakamahuku:

Group B

1 (a) la fi ohkuma ki:wa:pame:w
    (b) ohkuma(a) ki:wa:pame:w
2 (a) li garsō umušum(a) ki:pakamahwe:w
    (b) umušum(a) ki:pakamahwe:w
3 (a) la fi sa sör ki:wa:pame:w
    (b) sa sör ki:wa:pame:w (sa sör ki:wa:pamiku:)
4 (a) li garsō su frer ki:pakamahwe:w
    (b) su frer ki:pakamahwe:w (su frer ki:pakamahuku:)
5 (a) la fi li šič ki:wa:pame:w
    (b) li šič ki:wa:pame:w
6 (a) li garsō la fi ki:pakamahwe:w
    (b) la fi ki:pakamahwe:w

The forms in parentheses in Group A are alternative translations given by various speakers. Note especially the presence of obviative markers on French nouns in 5a and 6a.

The forms in parentheses in Group B were given by the wife of one of the subjects. He never used the inverse marker on his own.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to John Crawford, the director of my master’s thesis at the University of North Dakota, for his insights and encouragement. This paper grew out of the research that was part of that thesis. I am also indebted to Desmond Derbyshire, who read this paper in its several stages, for his comments.

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The forms in parentheses in Group C were given by the older sister of one of the subjects. The subject herself only used these forms in the presence of her sister and reverted to the direct forms after her sister left the room.