Métchif – A Second Look

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Nine years ago I reported to this conference concerning the language of the Métis of North Dakota, known locally as “Métchif” and sometimes called “French Cree” (Rhodes 1977). At that time I argued that this language was Cree with heavy French borrowing. Since then continuing research on Métchif has brought to light a number of facts that warrant further discussion of matters relating to Métchif. These include both linguistic and sociolinguistic matters. The linguistic questions include: what kind of language is Métchif, and what is the contribution to Métchif from its source languages? The sociolinguistic questions include: how is the term “Métchif” used as a language name and what other names are there for this language? what other languages does Métchif coexist with? and what is the distribution and vitality of Métchif?

Let us open the discussion with the sociolinguistic questions and a comment about the name “Métchif”. This name, spelled “Michif” in North Dakota, is used by Métis in the same way other Algonquians use group names to name languages. In Rhodes (1982) I showed that Algonquians, or at least Great Lakes area Algonquians, tend to use their tribal name to name their language regardless of the linguistic affiliation of that language. The same is true of the Métis. Recent evidence (John Nichols, personal communication; Paul Chartrand, personal communication) has come to light that Métis who speak only Métis French but not Cree or French Cree call that language “Métchif”. But the Métis of North Dakota and southern Manitoba call their French Cree “Métchif”. The importance of this in political and educational matters is not to be overlooked. Notwithstanding, I
will continue to use the term "Métchif" to refer to French Cree.

As for the linguistic milieux of Métchif, it appears that Métchif arose in communities where both a rural variety of French and Plains Cree were spoken. The mixed structure of the language, a point I will return to below, strongly supports the position that this language arose in a thoroughly bilingual context. In such multilingual communities the different languages serve different functions and as a result have different statuses with respect to one another (Douaud 1985). To the best of our current knowledge, in all Métis communities where both French and Plains Cree are spoken, Métchif is also present. It serves as an insider’s language, hard for outsiders to get to. Douaud seems to have missed the linguistic significance of his sources’ references to “le cri et le français ensemble” (1985:69). On the basis of his fairly careful analysis of the way French and English are used among the Métis of Lac La Biche, Alberta, he mistakenly extrapolates that French and Cree interact in the same way and therefore the mixing of French and Cree is governed by social rules rather than linguistic ones. This is simply wrong. Where Métchif exists, it is as uniform as any Algonquian language, even though it is dismissed to outsiders as "cri cassé" or "cri mêlé". Our attestations stretch from Belcourt, North Dakota to Buffalo Narrows, Alberta, and the language is remarkably uniform.

The final sociolinguistic question comes from Crawford’s work on Métchif, where he presents evidence that Métchif is a dying language (Crawford 1983). While this is clearly true in southern Manitoba and North Dakota, it is not so clear that it is true elsewhere. Here again the problem is that Métchif is an insider’s language. Therefore in communities in which both French and Cree are still functioning, the existence of Métchif is hidden to outsiders. Short of taking a Métchif speaker into such communities it will be very difficult to assess the state of Métchif in its natural environment. I take the position that it is precisely because of the loss of Cree in North Dakota that Métchif appeared to the outside world there.

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1It is unfortunate that Douaud called his basically quite sound study An Ethnolinguistic Profile of the Canadian Métis in that it is based on a sample of only 18 speakers from a single community.

2It must, of course, be remembered that Algonquian languages show far more variability than we are used to seeing (Goddard 1982).
Now let me turn to some more properly linguistic questions. The basic questions are: what kind of language is Metchif, and what is the contribution to Metchif from its source languages?

It has been variously asserted that Metchif is a creole (Hancock 1977:379), a dialect of Cree with heavy borrowing (Rhodes 1977), and a mixed language (Thomason 1984). It has been established that Metchif is not a creole (Rhodes 1977; Thomason 1984; Douaud 1985), but the question remains as to whether it is a dialect of Cree or a mixed language. At the time I wrote the grammatical sketch (Rhodes 1977), I had not considered this latter possibility, which is the position I now take. I will devote the rest this paper to a discussion of the contribution of French and Cree to Metchif.

A detailed look at the facts of Metchif grammar support the position that although the French component of Metchif is both pervasive in scope and extensive in depth, the most basic character of Metchif is Cree into which French material has been incorporated. This is true at syntactic, morphological, and phonological levels.

The morphological and syntactic outlines of Metchif are fairly well understood (Rhodes 1977; Weaver 1982; Lovell 1984). In these aspects the two source languages mix little. The French stems take French morphology and Cree stems Cree morphology. At syntactic levels, the noun phrases, which consist primarily of French lexical material, have French syntax, the rest of the clause has Cree. But when there is mixing, it is Cree intruding on French and not the other way around. For example, French nouns may take obviative marking and in some cases even Cree possessive marking. Such a situation reflects French moving into a Cree substrate. It was on this basis that I made my original assertion in Rhodes (1977) that Metchif is a dialect of Cree.

However, until recently the phonological structure of the French in Metchif was poorly understood and no easy conclusions could be drawn from it. But due to recent work, there is now enough known about the phonology of Metchif to make a arguments to the effect both that Metchif is a mixed language and that Cree is the substrate. I will concentrate on making the former argument. The position im-

3Some French stems are incorporated into Cree verbs, but in the fashion that is normal for the incorporation of borrowings as stems, e.g., \textit{diabiwiw} 'he's a devil' in the pattern N + \textit{iwi}. 
plicit in *The Michif Dictionary* (Laverdure and Allard 1983) and in the work of Crawford and his students, is that Métchif has a unified phonological system encompassing both the Cree and French components. In Rhodes (1977) I took the position that Métchif is a language with coexistent phonemic systems. There is now enough evidence to argue for this latter position in detail. Since the phonology of Plains Cree is fairly well understood and was accurately represented in Rhodes (1977), I will pay most of my attention here to sketching the phonology of Métchif French.

It was previously thought that the French of Métchif corresponded rather straightforwardly to standard French. This is not the case. The Métchif French vowel system is laid out in (1):

(1)

(a) In stressed syllables

\[
\begin{array}{lll}
i & \ddot{u} & u \\
\varepsilon & (\ddot{o}) & \ddot{o}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
a & \ddot{e}
\end{array}
\]

(b) In unstressed syllables

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
i & u \\
\varepsilon & a
\end{array}
\]

Some Métchif speakers marginally retain the expected four height contrast in vowels. In citation they produce forms cognate to Standard French forms with higher mid vowels over a range extending from high mid vowels to high vowels. Thus they may pronounce *de l'eau* 'some water' anywhere from [dilu] to [dilo] and likewise *deux* 'two' from [dû] to [dô] and *l'été* 'summer' from [liti] to [lîte]. The contrast is present because forms with standard French cognates with high vowels do not show the variation. The vowel in forms like *rue* 'street' contrasts with the vowel in *deux* only in that the former can be pronounced only as [rä] while the latter can be pronounced as either [dû] or [dô]. The lower variants, however, are not attested other than in citation. It should also be noted that the phonetic norms of Métchif round vowels are quite low. There is, however, one remaining contrast of a high vowel with a mid vowel in Métchif: */ö/* contrasts with */ü/* but only before */r*; cf. *pur* /pür/ 'pure' and *beurre* /bör/ 'butter'.
The correspondences of the Metchif vowels with other forms of French can most easily be seen by reference to the standard orthography. The biggest difference between Standard French and Metchif French vowels is that of the four vowel heights represented in the standard orthography, Metchif has merged the two top heights while Standard French is merging the two mid heights. The Metchif merger corresponds to the raising of mid vowels noted in Rhodes (1977) and incipiently for Métis French in Douaud (1985:38–40). This is sketched in (2).

(2) Metchif Orthography  Standard

(a) Front vowels

/i/  /i/
é  /e/
/ɛ/  è, ai
/a/  /a/

(b) Back vowels

/ɔ/  /o/
/œ/  /a/, (/ɔ/)

(c) Front round vowels

/u/  /ü/
/eu  /ö/
/a/  œu

A more detailed summary of correspondences between standard French orthography and Metchif French vowels is outlined in (3).

(3) (a) In stressed syllables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orthography</th>
<th>Metchif</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i, y, ie/ — #</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>lit, cygne, vie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>é, er/ — #</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>blé, premier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ai, è, èe, e/ — C(C, #)</td>
<td>ɛ</td>
<td>e(ɛ)</td>
<td>lait, pêche, après, messe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e/ — rC</td>
<td>a/ɛ</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>reserve, verte</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the biggest differences between Metchif French and more
standard varieties of Canadian French is the reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables. Since stress is assigned to final syllables, this is the same as saying that vowels are reduced in prefinal syllables. These reduced vowels require some further examination. First, the phonetic ranges of Mêchif reduced vowel phonemes is very large with a lot of overlapping. This is represented schematically in (4).

\[(4) \ \text{Phonetic ranges of reduced vowels}\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{i} \\
\text{I} \\
\varepsilon \\
\text{a}
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
\text{u} \\
\text{ } \\
\text{ } \\
\text{ }
\end{array}
\]

Secondly, there is a previously unreported phenomenon in Mêchif French phonology. While there is no contrast of rounding in front vowels in non-final syllables, such vowels are sometimes rounded or unrounded by a process of regressive harmony as exemplified in (5).

\[(5) \ \text{Vowel harmony}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orthography</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Mêchif</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pouilleux</td>
<td>[pujö]</td>
<td>[pujü]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mesure</td>
<td>[mezür]</td>
<td>[mizür]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chevreuil</td>
<td>[šavrö]</td>
<td>[šuvrü]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fusil</td>
<td>[füzij]</td>
<td>[fizi]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musique</td>
<td>[müzik]</td>
<td>[müüzük]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also possible that a vowel harmony principle accounts for the irregular correspondences of unstressed orthographic au and ō (phonetic [o]) with Mêchif [a] in words like sauvage [savaž] and l’hôpital [lápital], where one would have expected *[sovaž] and *[lópital] respectively.

The proof that there are two phonological systems is shown by the fact that there are different distributions of vowel allophones. Two examples should suffice.

At first approximation the non-low vowels of Mêchif French have higher and tenser allophones word finally and before r and sibilants,
and lower laxer allophones in syllables closed by other consonants. This is more or less in accord with general Canadian French.

In Cree there is a contrast between /u:/ [u] and /u/ [u]. Of interest here is that Cree words like those in (6a) have only phonetic [u] in positions in which Metchif French words like those in (6b) have (or may have) phonetic [u]:

(6) (a) Cree

anos [anu$] ‘today’
minos [minu$] ‘cat’
namo [namu] ‘no, not’
wápamiso [wapamis$u] ‘look at yourself’

(b) French

bouche [bu$] ~ [bu$] ‘mouth’
rouge [ru$] ‘red’
mou [mu] ‘soft’
chou [su] ‘cabbage’

Similarly the allophones of Cree /a/ are strikingly different from the allophones of French /a/. In closed final syllables Cree /a/ normally appears strongly fronted, i.e., as [æ] or [ɛ], particularly before nasals. It does not merge with /e/ however, because /e/ retains length in these environments which /a/ never has. In Laverdure and Allard the morpheme /-yan/ ‘second person singular, conjunct’ is always mistranscribed as -yen, and TI verbs in /-am/ are written randomly as ending in either -am or -em. Elsewhere Cree /a/ is variously realized as [a] or as [æ]. On the other hand the French /a/ varies freely between [a] and [æ]. This is reflected by varying transcriptions in the dictionary, e.g. fam and faem for femme, gazh and gaezh for gages, etc. These facts are summarized in (7):

(7) (a) Cree /a/

(i) / - C#

apiyan [opiyan] ‘that you (sg) sit’
kiskeyihtam [kiške:ičten] ~

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4Laverdure and Allard (1985) list this form with a long vowel, but in the data available to me, including citations from Patline Laverdure, I have only [u].

5In the environment before /$/, stressed /u/ may be pronounced either [u] or [u]. Laverdure and Allard, however list only the [u] pronunciation.
As a final brief argument on the topic of the mixed character of the phonological system, I point out that there are a significant number of English forms borrowed into Metchif. Some of these are nativized to varying degrees, as shown in (8), but the nativization is towards French, not towards Cree, strongly suggesting that French is both compartmentalized and is the foreign element.

(8) Gallicized English forms:

store \([\text{st}o\text{r}]\) ~[\text{stor}]  
wagon \([\text{wag}\tilde{\text{o}}] \sim[\text{wag}\text{in}]\)  
cowboy \([\text{kawb}\tilde{\text{oy}}]\) (not *\([k^{\text{b}}\text{awb}\tilde{\text{oy}}]\))  
job \([\text{d}z\text{ab}] \sim[\text{d}z\text{ob}]\)  
bus \([\text{bas}] \sim[\text{bas}]\)

In conclusion, I hope that the phonological facts presented here will constitute convincing evidence that Metchif is indeed a mixed language.
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