Introduction

Almost from its beginnings in the early 19th century, the Red River Settlement has been noted for its linguistic diversity. At first the major languages were French, English, Saulteaux and, perhaps more important, Cree. J.J. Hargrave, in his book Red River, states:

A man whose usual language is English, and one who speaks French alone, are enabled to render themselves mutually intelligible by means of Cree, their Indian mother tongue, though each is totally ignorant of the . . . language ordinarily used by the other. (1871:181)

Unfortunately, we can no longer do that today.

The subject of this study is the English dialect which flourished in the Red River Settlement toward the end of the 19th century. By then the area was noted for its distinctive speech, which came to be called “Bungee”.

Background

The term “Bungee” (sometimes spelled “Bungi”) here refers to the speech used by the descendants of English, Scottish, and Orkney fur traders and their Cree or Saulteaux wives. When these families retired to the Red River Settlement, they brought with them their own dialect of English with its strong Cree component.

During the late 19th century, mention of this dialect is restricted to an occasional reference in the writings of historians and interested observers living in, or passing through, the settlement. Early Winnipeg newspaper
articles also provide some comments about the characteristic speech of the area; and they reveal, in their own casual use of Cree or Saulteaux words in local news items, their readers’ knowledge and everyday use of these terms (Pentland 1985:9). More recently, within the last 40 or 50 years, a few articles have appeared which attempt to describe the fast-fading dialect.

In December, 1937, Osborne Scott did a radio presentation on the Red River dialect which was subsequently published in _The Winnipeg Tribune_ of December 27, 1937. Scott and Mulligan published an article entitled “The Red River Dialect” in _The Beaver_. In this article Bungee was described as:

... a curious dialect ... which combined some of the characteristics of both [Scotch or Orkney English and Cree] ... The Orkneyman talked English with a Scottish accent and with the lilting cadence of his Norse ancestors ...

It should be noted that, while acknowledging its sources, Scott and Mulligan referred to Bungee as the Red River dialect.

In 1968, Margaret Stobie visited several communities in central and northern Manitoba and interviewed people who were descendants of the original fur trade families. In a later publication, she said that it was the English of the Gaelic-speaking highlanders which is most in evidence “... for it has a Gaelic fall”. Stobie noted that:

... today, the rhythm of Bungi is its most distinctive [and enduring] feature ... [which] comes in part from syllable stress — both syllables of ‘canoe’ or ‘bannoch’, for instance, have equal stress. (1971:20)

Stobie also noted the pronunciation of “sawl” for ‘shawl’, “pitser” for ‘picture’, and “dzudz” for ‘judge’. This is presumably due to the lack of a phonemic distinction between [s] and [z] in Cree. A third point she mentions is the interchangeable use of the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ without regard for the sex of the person, the result of the absence of a masculine/feminine gender distinction in Cree pronouns.

Pentland (1985:10) describes Bungee as “... essentially Scottish English, especially English as spoken in the Orkney Islands”. He notes that it

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2 The script of the radio talk (CKY Radio, December 7, 1937) has been preserved in the Public Archives of Manitoba.

3 Catford (1957:109) describes the English of the Orkneys as essentially that of the Lowland Scots. He defines “Scots” as “... a range of distinctly Scottish dialects of English which are the direct continuation of that Anglian dialect of Old English which was introduced into southeastern Scotland in the seventh century ... reaching more or less its present limits of expansion by about 1700 [including the Orkney and Shetland Islands]”. This dialect had spread to the Orkney Islands with the migration of the lowlanders, the spread hastened by the reformation. Price (1984:201–203) writes, “By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Norn [Norse language previously spoken there]
has borrowed a few Cree words, and has one distinctively Cree phonological trait, the change of \([s]\) to \([s]\).

The original use of the term "Bungee" seems to have been restricted to the Saulteaux Indians living in the regions to the south and east of Lake Winnipeg. Stobie (1968:68–69), notes that, with the influx of Swampy Cree from Norway House into the area in the 1840s, the term seems to have been broadened to include all Indians in and around the settlement. By the turn of the century, the term also included the English-Cree dialect of all the old fur trade families in the Lower Red River Settlement. By the turn of the century, the term also included the English-Cree dialect of all the old fur trade families in the Lower Red River Settlement. Stobie supports these conjectures by noting that, in 1937, when Osborne Scott’s radio talk was published in *The Winnipeg Tribune* — to quote Stobie: “. . . there was a flurry of letters to the editor from people to whom that sense of the word [Bungi] had been long familiar.” Today, however, the scope of the term has been broadened even further. Stobie herself referred to her tapes of speakers outside the Red River Settlement as “Bungi” tapes.4

In this paper, I shall use the term “Bungee” to refer only to the speech of the Lower Red River Settlement.

**Status**

In view of the external history of the dialect, it would seem natural that the term “Bungee” should apply to the English spoken by all descendants of fur-trade families scattered in communities and reserves throughout the province. However, from interviews conducted in the course of this project, two points emerge. The first deals with the term “Bungee” and the second with the perceived differences in the English spoken by Indians in different areas.

The people interviewed who come from central and northern Manitoba communities do not recognize, or identify with, the term “Bungee”. On the other hand, people from the Red River Settlement know the term and claim it as part of the Red River heritage.5 An informant from the Red River area who grew up as a member of the Bungee-speaking community was sufficiently uncommon for James Wallace, who reported in 1700 that ‘all speak English, after the Scots way’, to comment that ‘some of the common People amongst themselves, speak a language they call Norns’ . . .” The Norn language has left its mark mainly in lexical items.

4 These tapes are held in the Archives at Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

5 There is some evidence that the term “Bungee” in reference to the dialect is not used by all the residents. In the remark, “I guess I talk like a Bungee”, “Bungee” clearly means “Indian”. The speaker’s sister (see below) made a similar comment When referring to the Red River dialect, they would more likely say “the old twang” or “the [location] twang”.

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told me that the Indians further north do not speak Bungee. She was not referring simply to the term because she added, "They talk different."

Linguists and Cree speakers agree that dialect diversity is a prominent feature of the linguistic situation in Western Canada. Of course, the criteria for their observations differ, and, sometimes, so do the results. The views of native speakers are coloured by a variety of cultural and social factors; but a speaker can often recognize the Cree accent of an unknown speaker and identify the community represented by that person with considerable accuracy. Likewise, speakers claim to be able to detect the differences in the English spoken in these various communities, a subject not yet studied by linguists in this province.6

There is no reason to assume that native speakers of English coming from different areas to settle at Red River all spoke the same dialect in the first place. But the local stories about the "Red River Twang" suggest that the dialect of the settlement soon acquired a very distinctive sound and a standard vocabulary that everyone used and understood. The vocabulary and speech contained a definite Cree element; but, as time went on, the speakers were increasingly more influenced by the developing urban centre in their midst and the strong linguistic impact of English. As a result, the most obvious Cree element, vocabulary, has all but disappeared from present-day speech. Some of the characteristic phonetic and syntactic features are also disappearing though these may surface from time to time, especially in casual speech.

It would appear, therefore, that a more general divergence has occurred during the last 100 years in the speech of the descendants of these original families. While the linguistic influence of Cree remained stronger in the northern communities,7 English had clearly asserted itself in the Red River Settlement by the end of the 19th century.

Therein lies the reason that Bungee has become so much a part of the Red River folk history. There is a difference in the structural relationships. At Red River it was clearly English, but it was quite distinct from the other variants of English spoken in Winnipeg, a fact commented upon by the speakers as well as by outside observers. Further north, it was merely English as opposed to Cree. This structural distinction is the reason the term has come to be so strongly associated with the Red River Settlement and its speech.

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6 A linguistic study is currently under way in Saskatchewan dealing with the variations in the English spoken by various Indian groups in that province.

7 One informant from northern Manitoba said that her great-great grandfather, a Scotsman, had insisted that his children should speak only Cree. This is just one family out of many, but it is an indication that the Cree language had an important continuing influence on the speech of succeeding generations.
What little field research has been done to date has been directed towards the more northern variety; for example, Stobie's tapes made in 1968 were almost all recorded in northern communities. It is true that some traditional Bungee features, for example the interchangeability of [s] and [z], or the variable use of third person masculine/feminine pronouns are probably more typical of the northern speakers today. This is natural because of the continuing influence of Cree in these communities. But it really has significance when you hear an [s] for [z] slip off a tongue that knows no Cree.

Frank Walters, a local raconteur, recently gave a talk entitled "A Day in the Life of a Selkirk Settler". It was a collage of several Bungee stories which contained examples of the old style of speech. Mr. Walters had moved to the region in 1906 at the age of eight and subsequently married a local woman. He obviously took a lively interest in the local dialect, recording expressions and anecdotes which he later incorporated into his "stories". But, more important, he made a comment afterwards about a small group he referred to as "the only Bungee speakers left". A well known figure in Manitoba, Mary Liz Bayer, who was Assistant Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs in the late 1960s, and has since moved to Victoria, publicly claims to be one of the last speakers of Bungee.

Pentland (1985:10) speculates that:

... today there are no more than half a dozen people who can speak [Bungee], and even they aren't native speakers but people who heard their parents or grandparents using it back in the days when Bungee was a living language. (1985:10)

If he means Bungee as it was spoken 75 or 100 years ago, I have no doubt that he is correct. But what about Bungee as it is spoken today?

In the fieldwork I have been conducting in the area of the Lower Red River Settlement, I have found that there are some speakers who still have a very decided accent and that their speech clearly reflects the features associated with Bungee. One woman in her 70s said that "Everyone around here has a little Indian in him." Both she and her sister recall their maternal grandparents speaking Cree when they didn’t want their grandchildren to understand. The same woman also commented that she hated listening to herself on tape because, she said, "I sound just like an old Indian." Since she does not speak Cree, it is unlikely that she is comparing her

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8 None of this group, in my experience, would publicly claim to speak Bungee.
10 Within the settlement, some people quite readily refer to themselves as "Native" or "Indian" (not "Métis" in my experience) while others acknowledge, often with reluctance, that they "have a little Indian in them".
English to Cree. From subsequent conversations, it is apparent that their grandparents spoke Bungee, as did the parents, and no doubt most of the grandparents, of those speakers who consider themselves Indian. So, leaving all value judgements aside, it is safe to surmise that when she says that she sounds "like an old Indian" it is, in fact, the equivalent of saying that her speech sounds like Bungee.

In addition to Cree and Bungee, their grandmother also spoke French. One of these sisters recalled their grandmother, when she forgot her house key, saying:

Chistikat, I forgot my clé.
'Oh for goodness sake, I forgot my key.'

The first word was identified as kwacistika:t, a Cree slang expression. Another example of her grandmother's comments, and one that indicates a confusion of [s] and [ʃ], is:

Spin, to learn them to [ʃu].
'[Cree exclamation], you should teach them to sew.'

Just recently, this same woman's daughter, who is in her early 40s, said:

She still [ʃu]d mocassins [pause] and sewed beadwork on them.
'She still sewed mocassins [pause] and sewed beadwork on them.'

The speaker obviously heard herself say [ʃu]d and hesitated. The gloss 'sew' ascribed to [ʃu] by the latter speaker's mother may be an oblique way of referring to the traditional Métis beadworking. Then in the second sentence, with its meaningful pause, the second half may be a definition of the first half. It has yet to be determined if this is indeed true. However, this mixing of languages is typical of the older form of Bungee.

Recorded interviews with a group of Red River speakers, supplemented by numerous informal conversations and encounters over a ten-month period, form the basis of the following preliminary observations about the speech of the area. Most of the people involved in this study are over 65 years of age, but my comments are not restricted to them.

Lexical Features

In general, there is a high frequency of old fashioned English words or words used according to their older meanings. Some of these are not remarkable in themselves except in their concentration. For example:

don - 'to put on'
mean - 'stingy'
dear - 'expensive'
rime - 'frost' (on blankets in the morning)
witty
ruction
vouched
crabbed
cheeky
lifts
‘sharp and alert’,
‘uproar’
‘promised faithfully’
‘crabby, grouchy’
‘impudent, brazen’
‘cupboard doors’

There are some other expressions which appear to continue an older English usage but have disappeared in that sense from general Canadian usage:

barm up
well posted
long headed
riddle it out
have the face
‘bloating or distending of stomach due to gas’
‘to be well read or well educated’
‘to have a good business head’
‘figure it out’
‘have the nerve’

There are a few other expressions which appear to be more local in flavour. *The old kitchen sweats* is a term for the house parties and dances that were common in the old days. Whether this expression may be related to Indian sweat baths has yet to be determined. Another expression is *cow feed* denoting a farmer’s straw hat. A *big fun* is a ‘joke’ or ‘funny story’; and the sentence “She really combed their hair” translates roughly, “She really gave them hell”.

**Phonetic Features**

The phonetic features are much more complex, and are consequently more difficult to discuss at this early stage of my work. The stress and intonation patterns, which appear to play a considerable role in the quality of the sounds produced, are still being analyzed.

One of the more obvious features is the quality of the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/. In general Canadian English, these contain a higher initial vowel [a] before unvoiced obstruents, and a lower initial vowel [ə] before voiced obstruents. For example: the noun, *[hɔɪs]*, as opposed to the verb, to *[həɪz]*. In the speech of one female Red River speaker, at least, these diphthongs are rarely realized in their lower variants regardless of phonetic environment. There appears to be considerable variability between individuals in the amount of accent, and no doubt each one varies according to the formality of the speech situations. The /ay/ diphthong has allophones ranging from [eɪ] to [ɔɪ]. For example: *[fɛɪn]* ‘fine’ but *[fæv]* ‘five’. The /aw/ diphthong ranges from [aʊ] to [ɔ] and even [u]: *[kæнт]* ‘count’, but *[ɾaʊnd]* or *[ɾund]* ‘round’. These high central diphthongs in particular are evidence of the Scottish influences in the dialect. I must stress, however, that the findings are highly tentative as a full phonetic analysis has not yet been carried out.
Though the high central diphthongs are evidently more typical of speakers over 65, younger people occasionally display some of the typical Bungee phonetic features. For instance, I heard the sentence, “Did you tell her about our [fis] — [fis]?” from a man of 35 with no detectable accent and a Polish surname. His mother grew up among Bungee speakers. She is of Swampy Cree ancestry; and though she does not speak Cree, she speaks English and Saulteaux fluently, and also some French and Ukrainian. She has traces of Bungee accent in her relaxed speech and once commented to me that it is hard to remember all the time to use the right sound for orthographic sh, although she has always remembered in my presence. Another man in his 50s, also with little or no accent, said, “I guess we were using too much [dzus].” [dzus] is juice, meaning ‘electricity’. The s for sh feature also affects the affricates so that church is realized as [tsarts] and juice [dzus]. Though this does not occur very often among these speakers, it is obviously not too far beneath the surface.

Historical evidence of this phenomenon is found in the fact that the town of Hodgson in the Interlake district near the present-day Peguis Reserve is pronounced in the Red River Settlement as if it were spelled “Hud­son”. The affricate [j] in Hodgson was no doubt realized as [dz] preceding the s in the final syllable — the z and s merging to create the modern pronunciation. The more balanced stress also seems to have changed the first vowel from [l] to [æ]. Today this pronunciation is simply learned as “Hud­son”, which appears to be in widespread use by speakers of all ages, even those who would not normally say [dzus]. In other words, it has become the social norm.

Syntactic Features

With regard to syntax, Stobie (1971) noted that, among the speakers she interviewed outside the Red River Settlement, the third person pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ were used variably, and that this inconsistency could be due to the lack of a masculine/feminine distinction in Cree.

I have recorded only three instances of this feature (involving two people) in the course of this project to date. One example is the sentence, “My daughter, he — she is always working.” One might argue that this could be a simple mistake; but I would suspect that this feature, like the s/sh feature mentioned above, is close enough to the surface to appear occasionally.

11 No doubt there are Indian people living in the settlement who have moved there more recently from native communities in the north who would have this phonetic feature in their speech. However, this study is concerned only with those long-established families who settled there in the 19th century. Only the older (over 60?) generation of Bungee speakers who refer to themselves as “Native” are likely to still speak a native language. None of those who “have a little Indian in them” do.
In 1950, Mrs. John McAllister recorded a brief tape entitled “Bungee Stories” (Provincial Archives of Manitoba C 386). This tape contains several examples of Bungee. For example, a typical greeting and response:

How do you do?
I'm well, you but.

The apparent inversion of you and but in the response suggests that, if fact, this is a word-for-word translation of a typical Swampy Cree response:

'I am well, you but.'

In another story, Alex sat down to a meal of hash and began to eat. When asked why he didn't ask a blessing he replied: “Not for these — pies and cakes, but.” According to the tape, these stories represented “The way they used to talk”. However, in 1986 one of my informants said: “She likes to eat spareribs, but.” This might be translated either ‘But she likes to eat spareribs’ or ‘She likes to eat spareribs, though.’ The use of but in Bungee is obviously different from its use in English.

This right extraposition does not occur only with but. The emphatic pronouns also occur in this position. In another Bungee story, a man goes to a farm to buy some cream. The old wife told him: “I’m not milkin’, me. But go see Mrs. McKay, she’s milkin’, her.” This is still a very common pattern among some speakers. Examples from one female informant in her 70s include:

I say, me, that’s not right.
[Annie] has been all over, her.
She’s out at Ear Falls, her.

These emphatic pronouns could be a reflection of the Cree and/or the French in her background. But the following sentences seem to illustrate a generalized use that goes far beyond the model:

I can’t wait to get home, you.
That’s my knockabout coat, you.
She’s a woman doctor, you.
I brought my medicine myself, you.
I thought I was gaining, you.

This pattern appears to be exclusive to the Red River Settlement.

The fieldwork for this project is still in its early stages. As in most studies which have a sociolinguistic component, a lot of field time is required in order to obtain the more casual speech patterns. The group of people who can be said to speak Bungee is small and diminishing, but fragments of the old speech can still be heard, even from a few of the younger speakers.  

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