

# **Negotiating Métis culture in Michif: Disrupting Indigenous language shift**

**Judy Iseke**

*Lakehead University, Canada*

## **Abstract**

Language contact, shift, and multilingualism are social processes inherent within power relationships under colonization and globalization that have shifted the values of languages and impacted cultures based upon political power. To explore understandings of language, colonization and globalization in regard to Indigenous peoples, the article considers the case of language negotiations amongst the Métis - Indigenous peoples of Canada and Northern United States who speak Michif. Michif is a contact language created in the 1800's under the forces of colonization but which is increasingly affected by the dominance of the English language under continuing colonization and globalization. This article shares discussions with Métis Elders who focus attention on 1) The Meaning of Nehiyewak Language in Métis Communities, 2) Negotiating Identities through Language in Métis Contexts, and 3) Importance of Sharing Stories in Indigenous Languages and Relationships to Land. Discussion follows of lifestyles, racial categories and repression of identities, languages and relationships to self and culture, relationships to English, and language revitalization. Conclusions suggest some of the many forms that Michif language retention and revitalization might take as options for the future.

**Keywords:** *Michif language; Métis peoples; Indigenous language shift; language revitalization; colonization*

## **Introduction**

Language is a practice that is always being negotiated amongst its speakers. Many forces impact this negotiation including multilingualism, language contact and shift, as well as power relationships inherent in broader social and political contexts like those under colonization and globalization. Michif, the Indigenous language of Métis peoples in Canada and northern United States, is a contact language developed in the 1800's under colonization but is increasingly affected by the English language, particularly under globalization. Through discussions with Métis Elders who are speakers and teachers of the language, this paper explores language shift - the complex set of internal and external influences on language and change.

This article introduces the author to situate the work, from my positionality as a Métis scholar, and then provides a very brief discussion of the Métis in the history of Canada, followed by discussion of Michif language. It next turns to literature on language shift from Indigenous perspectives, followed by an introduction to the research with the Elders and an introduction to the Elders reported in this article. The discussions with Elders focus our attention on 1) The Meaning of Nehiyewak Language in Métis Communities, 2) Negotiating Identities through Language in Métis Contexts, and 3) Importance of Sharing Stories in Indigenous Languages and Relationships to Land. Discussion follows of lifestyles, racial categories and repression of identities, languages and relationships to self and culture, relationships to English, and language revitalization. In conclusion, I suggest that language and education were major instruments of colonization and continue to be important under globalization, although other factors contribute significantly to linguistic shift. Some of the many forms that Michif language retention and revitalization might take are emphasized as options for the future.

### *Introducing the author*

I am a Métis woman, researcher, and scholar from St. Albert, Alberta, Canada, that was once a strong Métis community that spoke Michif, though this has changed over the years through transformation into a mixed urban center. I am a descendant of the Métis families that founded this community. My grandmother's first language was Michif, although the family referred to it as Cree, and due to many pressures, particularly from public school, my grandmother did not teach Michif to her children and grandchildren (Iseke-Barnes, 2004). My academic work has sought to reestablish that connection to my community and language through my extensive work with Métis Elders to explore storytelling traditions. I work with Métis Elders who speak Michif to record stories, histories, pedagogies and Indigenous knowledge in order to develop resources to aid in generating interest in the Michif language and to provide supports to Métis peoples who wish to learn the Michif language and about Métis culture.

## **Métis in the history of Canada**

The control mechanism that legislates identities in order to systematically but arbitrarily control who is and is not ‘an Indian’ in Canada is called the Indian Act (Iseke-Barnes, 2008; Lawrence, 2000, 2004; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Section 35 of Canada’s constitution of 1982 recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada – the First Nations, the Inuit, and the Métis – grouping together hundreds of distinct peoples into 3 groups. Anderson (2000) explains that distinctions between Métis and First Nations, both historically and today, are not, nor have they ever been, so clear. But Anderson remains clear that there are a definitive Métis people.

The Indigenous peoples of this land are considered the first peoples to have lived in the territories that eventually became Canada. One of these groups, that spreads across a vast territory from Quebec to Alberta, are known as the Cree - or in their own languages some refer to themselves as Nehiyawak. The Métis National Council (MNC) – a national governance body for Métis peoples – describes the Métis as descendants of First Nations peoples of the prairies and European fur traders, often of Cree women and French men (MNC website <http://www.Métisnation.ca> under the heading The Métis Nation – paragraph 1). The unique Indigenous Nation called the Métis people emerged “with their own unique culture, traditions, language (Michif), way of life, collective consciousness and nationhood” (MNC website under the heading The Métis Nation – paragraph 1).

In 2002 the Métis National Council defined Métis as “a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation” (MNC website <http://www.Métisnation.ca>). The historic 2003 Supreme Court of Canada Powley Case confirmed this Métis identity. Being Métis in Canada is inherently a political reality. But this definition is not without controversy. Brown (2008) suggests that scholars have rejected definitions of Métis based on race and blood quantum. Instead they consider family, community, language, economic factors and identity opinions (Brown, 2008; Makokis, 2008). Belcourt (2006), a Métis from Alberta, suggests that claiming a Métis identity means having your identity questioned and misunderstood, often being treated in a demeaning manner, and having Aboriginal status and rights to exist as a people challenged.

The Métis continue to exist and assert their collective identity as an Indigenous nation with a unique history and connection to a Métis homeland and an Indigenous language. But the political controversy over Métis identity continues. On Jan. 8, 2013 a 12-year court case concluded with the judgment that “Métis are ‘Indians’ within the meaning of s. 91(24)” of the Constitution Act, 1867 (MNC website, Press release, Jan. 8, 2013). In this press release the Métis National Council suggests that Canada denied the claim vigorously indicating it was based on definitional difficulties but the court rejected Canada’s assertion that ‘difficulty’ was not sufficient reason to deny the claims of Métis. The press release further indicates that:

As the court noted Canada's own documents admit that Métis are more exposed to discrimination and other social disabilities and that "in the absence of Federal initiative in this field they are the most disadvantaged of all Canadian citizens."

It is not clear what the implications of the court's decision might be. However, it is sure to create ripples and have implications at least within political arenas. Being Métis is inherently a political reality.

The histories of the Métis are further complicated by the vast geographic region in which Métis lived, worked, travelled, and oversaw. The historic Métis homelands include the 3 prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta), parts of Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, and northern United States (MNC website under heading The Métis Nation). Métis "patterns of land settlement and relocation in the United States and Canada ... [document] kinship ties [that] bound these communities together as borders and government policies worked to sever or at least strain them" (Iseke-Barnes, 2009, p. 84).

## **Michif language**

Indigenous languages in Canada are under threat of disappearing with only 4% of all Métis able to speak an Aboriginal language and only 18% of all Aboriginal children able to speak at least one Aboriginal language (Statistics Canada 2006 census data). Younger generations are left to define themselves using Canada's official languages of English or French in which the words can imprison (Vizenor, 1978; Blaeser, 1996) and create a sense of powerlessness, often being at times unable to speak these languages well enough to express deep thoughts and emotions but unable to speak Indigenous languages well enough to express them either (Maria Campbell in Iseke-Barnes, 2003, p. 220).

Many linguists particularly focus on a version of Michif spoken in Western Canada that combines Cree and French, with additional borrowing from English and other First Nations languages including Ojibwe and Assiniboiné (Rhodes, 1977; Bakker, 1997). There are multiple variations of Michif spoken across this vast homeland – some with more emphasis on the original Indigenous language (in many cases Cree), some focused more on French. Bakker (2004), a linguist, reports, "there are ... two languages called Cree... the language spoken by First Nations in many Canadian provinces... [and] the mixed Cree-French Michif language [spoken by the Métis peoples of many provinces in Canada]... also called 'Cree' by its speakers" (p. 6). Michif is unusual in that "the bulk of the verbs are derived from Plains Cree, while the bulk of the nouns and elements of the Noun phrase such as determiners, numerals, adjectives, and possessive pronouns are derived from French" (Rosen, 2008, 613).

Gingell (2010) further describes that Cree speakers use many variations of the language and its variants that are formed in relation to English. Campbell (1995), a prominent Métis scholar and Elder, uses the expression 'village English' to describe the language, "dialect and rhythm of my village and my father's generation" (p. 2). Bakker (2004) reports that Métis

English is the expression used by Métis to describe the language of the Métis. However, Gingell uses the expressions Creeglisch and Michiflish to refer to Cree and Michif languages as they are mixed with English languages.

To those who believe that Michif is just a variety of either French or Cree, Bakker indicates that:

People who also speak French do not always use a form that is closer to standard French than those who do not know this language. Similarly, those who also know a Native language do not conform more to the Cree norm. In short, knowledge of Cree and French influences the amount of French and Cree use in Michif to a certain extent, especially in the number of lexical items, but it does not influence the quality or the nature of the Cree or French elements. This shows again that Michif must be seen as a separate language, independent of both source languages. (Bakker, 1997, p. 160)

Linguists are intensely interested in mixed languages such as Michif that combine elements from both languages in a unique mixture that draws from speakers of the language who may well have been fluent in both languages (Bakker & Mous, 1994; Matras & Bakker, 2003). Michif is a contact language – a language generated when two language groups come into contact with each other. Michif is the mixed-language developed by the Métis that draws on historic Indigenous language of Cree/Nehiyawak and French. Michif is a unique language expressing Métis understandings of the world in which they live in both the colonial and the Indigenous languages and was created in the homes and lives of Métis peoples. The complexities of both parent languages are often reflected in mixed languages such as Michif (Bakker, 1997).

There is a common perception in Métis community that the Michif language first developed amongst the children of French fathers and Nehiyow mothers and that their fluency in both the languages of their parents enabled them to speak to both parents. As adults they taught their children both languages simultaneously and a mixed language emerged. This perception is not universally accepted as it creates the impression that Michif is a children's language, which is clearly not the case. Michif was an important language of Western Canada for 100 years or more throughout the nineteenth century.

A mixed-language like Michif can be distinguished from a Pidgin – a language developed when two language groups come together but neither are speakers of both languages - a communication system developed for trade or other contact activities but the people do not develop a full knowledge of each other's languages (Mous, 2003; Thomason, 1997). A mixed language also differs from a Creole language, which generally has one clear parent language and diverse language inputs from multiple languages that cannot necessarily be traced to a particular source language (Sebba, 1997; Thomason & Terrence, 1988). In the case of Michif, although it contains elements of a colonial language – French – it was not imposed as a colonial language upon Indigenous peoples but rather was developed by Indigenous peoples and so was not resisted by the Métis peoples.

Michif became the lingua franca of the Michif communities, being used for commerce, trade, community communications, and in everyday life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Métis relationship to Michif is like the relationship to other Indigenous languages by its speakers – “embedded in a political discourse centered on land and the role that land plays in Aboriginal cultures, including their spiritual values and languages” (Patrick, 2007, p. 51). Connections to land and trapping and hunting lifestyles aided in sustaining Michif language historically, as is the case in other Indigenous communities (Wyman, 2009; Morrow & Hensel, 1992). As outlined by the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education, a global statement organized by the World Indigenous Peoples’ Conference on Education (WIPCE) in 1999, “Indigenous peoples have strong feelings and thoughts about landforms, the very basis of their cultural identity. Land gives life to language and culture” (in Benally & Viri, 2005, p. 86). Land is a vital part of Indigenous lifeways and the Métis continue to struggle over land due to past and present government policies. While Métis win battles in the courts to recognize their land rights, their realities as mostly landless have impacted their identities and languages.

Ethnologue (2009) is a reference work that catalogues, it claims, “all of the world’s 6,909 known living languages”. Ethnologue estimates that there are only 600 Michif speakers of all variations scattered across Canada, with some speakers residing in the northern United States. In Alberta, it is estimated that there are fewer than 50 Michif speakers by the Métis Nation of Alberta study (personal communication). Michif is considered highly endangered. Métis peoples in Canada continue the work to sustain their languages (LearnMichif.com).

## **Language shift**

Language is a practice that is always being negotiated within culture, history, and location amongst the speakers of the language. Language is tied to identity within local and global contexts, past and present (Pennycook, 2010, p. 14). Language shift is a complex process to understand multiple influences and pressures that are both internal and external to the community (Fishman, 1991, 2001). Internal and external to communities are language ideologies that Wyman (2009) defines as “seemingly commonsense assumptions about languages relating to communities’ sociohistorical circumstances— [which] lay the groundwork for the shift before it is apparent (Dorian, 1998; Gal, 1979; Kulick, 1992)” (p. 337). These language ideologies, Wyman suggests, “proliferate quickly when individuals try to maintain or document an endangered language or make sense of language endangerment (Hill, 2006), naturalizing ongoing processes of shift” (p. 337). These can be “language ideologies of contempt” that function to separate the oppressed from those who oppress (Dorian, 1998). These ideologies can include “complicating factors as symbolic domination, social inequality, conflicting language ideologies, local discourse norms, and linguistic convergence within individual linguistic repertoires in favor of what they expect: deficiency and inevitable failure” (Kroskrity, 2011, p. 163)

Historically language shift towards English and other colonial languages in Indigenous communities was not a ‘natural’ process but rather was a shift towards the decline of Indigenous languages, propelled by colonial schooling designed to ‘civilize’ Indigenous children and turn them into citizens conforming to ‘white’ standards (Benall & Viri, 2005; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; McCarty, Romero-Little, & Zepeda, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Other important conditions that impact language shift are:

Schools, satellite dishes and television, CDs, and visitors from distant lands have all left their mark in terms of material culture, ideas, language, governance, religion, and other lifestyle manifestations. These have all created permanent changes. (Benally & Viri, 2005, p. 87)

Language shift or vitality and retention are influenced by many factors including lifestyles, such as urban or rural, by local education programs, numbers of existing speakers and teachers, and opportunities to engage in language and culture within local contexts (McCarty, Romero-Little, & Zepeda, 2006, p. 662).

It is also important to recognize that, while populations primarily respond to local economic, political, and linguistic systems, these systems are not isolated from global economic, political, and linguistic trends and impacts. So, for example, a study of Quichua family language polity examines how cash brought into local communities from emigration for employment has created family separation and changing understandings and practices of parenting, childhood, and family obligations and shifts in values and behaviors that “significantly impact Indigenous language maintenance and revitalization” (King & Haboud, 2011, p. 150). Another example outlines the shifting economic realities created by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the displacement of workers in El Paso such that a radical restructuring of society occurred at the hands of globalization and economic destabilization (Ullman, 2005). These are not separate factors.

The significance of global impacts on local cultures and the linguistic imperatives required to engage in those economic and political realities for Indigenous peoples globally and locally have created language shifts towards colonial languages like English. In order to answer the question of the roles of languages in the world, it involves recognition of accounts of the world in “tiered, hierarchical relations” while simultaneously recognizing world relations in “laterally-related ‘local’ speech communities and such an account must be capable of discussing how language is articulated (and articulates) timespace scales” (Collins, 2011, p. 132). Further the role of the state and state policies - ever shifting and in current times, decentralizing practices - continues to shape political subjectivities through state power that affects language shifts (Collins, 2011). Language standardization is one such state effect while, another is demarcating and regulating land and territorial borders, impacting where languages can be spoken or revitalized. For example, Nicholas (2011) outlines Hopi site-specific ceremonial usage of language that is impacted by control of lands. Collins further discusses processes that identify

individuals into collectives, which works to create “a process of differentiating and ranking that works against hybridities and promotes one language = one people fundamentalism” (p. 133). In contrast to this fundamentalism, Métis peoples introduced colonial languages into their Indigenous language, combined to create Michif, which is not a hybrid but a language that is considered Indigenous by its users and by linguists that study it. By examining discussions of historical language contact and shift for the Métis under colonization and more recently under globalization we can consider resistance to language shift that is often framed in terms of language linkages to identity and as carriers of culture or worldview (Fishman, 1991, 2001; Hinton, 2002; Hornberger, 1996; May, 1999).

In Canada, Métis Elders tell stories of the past and create hope through their ongoing work of nurturing understandings of cultural traditions, spiritual healing practices, and language education (Iseke, 2011; 2010; Iseke & Moore, 2011; Iseke-Barnes, 2009). Their work in Indigenous communities supports the ongoing education of community members. Their narratives about Indigenous language pose challenges to educators and community to consider language revitalization.

## **Research with Métis Elders in Canada**

My larger research program involves working with 7 Elders from various communities in Canada. A sub-study worked with 3 Métis grandfathers and 1 Métis grandmother who share their understandings of storytelling and focus on “Métis storylines, histories, cultural contexts, and pedagogies” (Iseke, 2010, p. 83). Their roles as Elders are based on their knowledge and the way they use their knowledge for the collective good (Iseke, 2010). The term Elder describes a person who is the cultural knowledge keeper in communities (Iseke, 2010).

This research program involves Métis Elders as collaborators in order to better understand the sharing of stories and histories through Métis pedagogies. The intentions of the research were: (1) to respond to the need for Indigenous interpretations and representations of culture, history, pedagogy, and curriculum; (2) to provide increased research opportunities and publicize the work of Indigenous Elders; and (3) to generate better understandings of the relationships between Métis peoples’ knowledges and mainstream education and research practices.

In this research program, Elders were contacted based on their previous involvement with a previous research program. They were contacted by telephone and told of the storytelling research focus and they consented to come to Thunder Bay in Northern Ontario to be with other Elders and to be video and audio recorded. Elders were welcomed to the territory by a local Elder through ceremony, given tobacco and cloth to ask them to participate through appropriate cultural protocols. This acknowledged that truth would be spoken in the research process and the researcher’s responsibility to the integrity of the stories told and to respect and honor the Elders throughout the research process. It was also a commitment to continue to work with the Elders in representing their stories in media productions and written forms.

I provided the Elders a set of research questions to help them think about stories and discussions which were important for them to share. They were free to respond in whatever way they saw fit. A talking circle format was used to encourage discussion and to ensure opportunities for the full participation of each Elder. Elders were audio and video recorded while sitting in circle over a nine-day period. At the conclusion of our time together, a feast and ceremony was held. Ceremony was also conducted in the space where the video productions and research work would continue.

All Elder discussions were transcribed and sorted into topics. Follow up interviews of two days duration were recorded in Elders' homes or in Thunder Bay and then transcribed and sorted. Film scripts, articles, and chapters were written based on the transcripts. I continued to dialogue with the Elders via e-mail and telephone as well as at community events and gatherings. This helped to continue an ongoing dialogue about the stories that had been shared. I have been in contact with the Elders and shared a version of the paper, as well as seeking out feedback from the Elders.

## **Introducing the Elders**

Tom McCallum was born and raised in Ile à la Crosse, Saskatchewan and is fluent in Nêhiawuk and Michif. Tom has a passion for the language and promotes its use as he explains the way the language has shaped his way of seeing the world. Tom grew up on the land and has a close relationship with it and in working with medicines. Tom uses traditional teachings to work with inmates, youth, men's healing circles, and in cross-cultural workshops. Tom shares stories in this text and has reviewed this text prior to its submission to make any changes he saw fit. We have edited Tom's stories in the interest of space.

George "Lonewalker" McDermott was Métis from northern Alberta and lived in Lumby, British Columbia until his passing in 2009. He travelled throughout Canada and the United States in order to share his knowledge of traditional medicines. George learned about life on the land, picking medicines, and healing practices from his grandparents and Elders in Métis and Cree communities in northern Alberta. George shared his knowledge of plant medicines and healing, as well as his knowledge of the land, in healing the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects of people.

Albert Desjarlais was born and raised on the Elizabeth Métis Settlement in northern Alberta and later moved to High Prairie, Alberta. Grandfather Albert learned traditional Indigenous spiritual and healing practices from his grandfather who lived these traditions in the 1800s. Albert has the honour of being the sixth generation of healers to receive the teachings passed down in this family. Albert has been married to grandmother Alma for over 40 years.

Alma Desjarlais was born in Frog Lake, Alberta, a First Nations community in Northeastern Alberta. Grandmother Alma's parents were Cree. She was stripped of her First Nations status by the Indian act, upon marrying her husband Albert, a Métis, and so she became Métis. Her son indicated that her children are not being allowed by Indian Affairs to return to

First Nations status. Her grandmother and family were healers and helped her to become a healer herself. Alma is fluent in Cree and has become a pipe carrier<sup>1</sup>, works with healing medicines, and is part of the healing lodge that she and her husband Albert have on their land. She also oversees a cultural camp for young people to help them learn Cree traditions.

## **The meaning of Nehiyewak language in Métis communities**

All four Michif and Cree-speaking Elders spoke about language and its importance in community. Their stories and explanations take us into an understanding of the importance of language within this political-linguistic context. Tom McCallum shared a story about Indigenous language and its importance in retaining culture and expressing understandings from his Nehiyaw perspective:

This language that we speak is the language that we grew up with. Most people call it Cree but there is no such thing as a Cree. Cree is a French word, and that's what those French people called us ... Now, Cree is a plural. Christineaux is the singular and if you translate it, it means Christ-like because of the habits the people had of ... sharing. ... but the English speaking people could not say ... [it], so they said Cree, and that's how we came to be Cree.

Smith (1987) describes the writing of David Thompson (from 1916) who was the noted explorer and cartographer of the Canadian and American northwest. In Thompson's description the uneducated French Canadians called the people "Krees" which he said came from the name of one group of people referred to as "Keethisteno" but that was mispronounced "Kristeno" and then by contraction Krees. Tom McCallum goes on to disrupt this naming of Cree when he further describes the importance of naming one's own people in one's own language:

In our own language we are Nehiyawak. And that word Nehiyaw, comes from two root words: The Ne comes from the Newo which means four, and the last part iyaw, comes from the word Miyaw, which means body. So we're the four body people, or the four directions people. That's how we see ourselves. That's our connection to the universe. ... That's the difference when we speak our language and when we speak English. The language is dynamic, the language that we speak, Nehiyawewin.... It's got an instant connection, so your worldview is changed right away, everything is changed when you think in Cree and you start speaking that. It's a whole different perspective that you have of life as opposed to English, which is a noun-based language and it objectifies things.

Both Cree and Michif peoples, when they speak their languages, use the expression Nehiyawak to refer to themselves, echoing Anderson's earlier contention that the distinction between these

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<sup>1</sup> Pipe Carriers are spiritual people in communities that use a sacred pipe to pray and ask for assistance and to seek a greater connection with the Creator. One needs to develop a level of spiritual awareness before being gifted a pipe.

groups is not always really clear. Both groups use the expression Nehiyawak or the four directions people that is a reference to the medicine wheel worldview in which the four directions – east, south, west, north – are integrated into a way of life, and the four states of being (mind, body, spirit, emotions) are connected to these directions and to our understanding of finding balance in the world (Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane, 1984; McCabe, 2008; Hart, 2002). The name Nehiyawak connects us to the medicine wheel and to our identity as a people.

George McDermott explains the necessity of Indigenous language:

how can you tell ... in any other language but the language it was born? You can't do it. There is no English words. ... You can touch on the surface of it, but not the deep feeling and the way it was given to us. ... If you were going to say it in English and translate it into the Indian language, how many translators would you need?

George McDermott further explains that,

When I get into a gathering like this [gathering of Elders who all speak Cree but were speaking English because it was for a non-Cree-speaking researcher], I try to think in English and thinking it out in Cree. So it's a ... strain. ... We can make it into a real huge something ... or just simplify it and say “hm, as long as we understand each other”.

## **Negotiating identities through language in Métis contexts**

Tom describes the ability to understand each other and the lack of conflict between First Nations and Métis peoples:

whether you were Chipewyan or whether you were Cree or whether you were Métis, ... there was no such thing as hey you're not this and you're not that or you're not good enough or this and that. There was not a lot of that because they were still tied very, very close to the land and that kind of lifestyle ... A Cree person trapping is the same as a Métis person trapping ... There was not a lot of difference in terms of one not accepting the other. There was not that when I grew up.

Tom further explains about rivalries today:

Now today there is a lot of controversy. What is a Métis? Who is a Métis? There's so much. When we were growing up we never had that problem. Everybody knew who everybody was. ... The only difference is the Indian Act separated us in terms of the administration. But we trap. The treaty guy trapping would be the same as a Métis guy trapping.... There's no difference in lifestyle. The one difference I really noticed when I was a child, was those [Cree] people from Canoe Lake man could they ever speak Cree. They had a word for everything - to

describe everything. It was wonderful to be able to hear them talk. It was like singing. It was so beautiful to hear that.

Tom further explains about Nehiyawak, Cree, and English:

You see before the Europeans came here, we were Nehiyawak. After the Europeans came here we were no longer Nehiyawak, we turned out to be Cree. Now who's more powerful the Europeans or the Creator? The Creator gave us a way and a language, but these others that came gave us a different name, and today we use that name. So in our minds we have that belief and that's what gets us into trouble, is our minds. Because of the way we speak is the way we think. ... But when you speak English you're thinking in an English perspective. I know that's the language that we all use .... A lot of us don't know any other language. We know the English language, that's all. And that's not a feeling language. It's not a verb-based language, a feeling language, like the Aboriginal language...

Do we need to tell it [our perspective and stories] in Indigenous language? Yes we do. Absolutely we have to. But the first step of course is to share it in English so we have a direction, because that's what we understand. The hope is that eventually we will venture into the direction of the west of the medicine wheel, the period of great mysteries. The great darkness, we call it. The darkness, which is where we are walking right now. We're walking in a period of darkness of our language and our culture, because we don't know it now.

Again Tom refers to the medicine wheel and our location and identity connecting within it. Language is a key to this understanding. Tom here refers to the western door of the medicine wheel and the very difficult situation of severe language loss and alienation from our culture felt by younger generations. It also is in reference to the dominance of colonial languages, which serve to oppress Indigenous languages.

Alma Desjarlais discussed the importance of sharing and teaching in the language:

The stories should be ... told in our language and then translated. ... I always tell my kids, they don't sound as good in English when I tell them something.

Albert Desjarlais explains about language,

What I go by is more or less what the Creator has given to us. I have to go that way because that's how I grew up. ... but there again it's hard when somebody else is teaching our kids, grandchildren, ...

There again I think it's up to the people. If they can learn one language, why can't they learn the first language the Creator has given to his people, the first people? I don't think it would be that hard. Some people learn many languages. I know

four or five different languages and can speak and I believe that's a good way to be. ... I call this [English a] borrowed language, white man's language. And that's all that it is to me, because I never learned it.... It's not the same, they're trying to tell a story in English than in the Cree language.

Albert emphasizes that in his own life and in days past many people were speakers of multiple languages. Monolingualism is a current phenomenon (de Jong, 2011). He recognizes the inherent human capacity for language - indeed for multiple languages - and challenges each of us to become more multilingual as to better be able to communicate with one another.

In discussing the earlier quotes, Tom explains the distinction between naming oneself - Nehiyawak - and being named in someone else's words - Cree. Smith (1999), in a section called "They Came, They Saw, They Named, They Claimed" (p. 80), describes the colonial project of naming the lands as "the spoils of discovery" (p. 81). Europeans used their languages to classify, describe, and claim the Indigenous world (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 7). As Tom explains, we have come to accept the colonial namings and have naturalized English to the extent that our minds are impacted by these belief systems. The Indian Act, another colonial process, created distinctions between close relatives like those in Tom's community and the nearby reserve community, naming and claiming some as 'Indian' and some as not. From within this system of defining and controlling identities, the Métis have come to define themselves in the new colonial agenda of controlling who is and is not Métis.

## **Importance of sharing stories in Indigenous languages**

Each of the Elders asserts that the stories of Indigenous peoples need to be shared in Indigenous languages by Indigenous peoples and from our own points of view (Hill, 2002). This enables the intertwining of identity, history, culture, and worldview (Grandbois & Sanders, 2009). In encouraging Indigenous storytelling practices to be shared, one needs to consider the context of the story, and how, by whom, and when a story is told such that the integrity of the story is sustained (Eder, 2007). Tom suggests that everything changes when one thinks in the language. Within Nehiyawak, the storyteller and their audience are not separate from the stories but the stories reflect the people and are situated within the context of community and a knowledge system and medicine wheel perspective which is sustained in storytelling (McLeod, 2000). Nehiyawak is a feeling language rather than a noun-based European language.

Each Elder spoke of the importance of sharing stories in the Indigenous language. The stories encourage understanding that life is sacred and we are part of a whole, which can be contrasted with Western thought that separates secular and sacred knowledge (Eder, 2007). Knowing the stories in the language enables a strong foundation in Nehiyaw culture (Makokis, 2008). Given that many Indigenous children, and their parents too, do not speak the language but see English as their usual means of communication, it is important to encourage Indigenous language use (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007; Crawford, 1995; Littlebear, 2003; McCarty &

Zepeda, 1995). Tom, George, Alma and Albert recognize this as a reflection of where we are and that we need to go back to the language and culture.

A Cree informant for studies conducted by Kouritzin (1999) described his connection to the Cree language that is centered in “The soul or the spirit, the Cree spirit, is sustained by the earth which is sustained by the language of the earth” (p. 213). This medicine wheel perspective, particularly focusing on spirituality and the connection to land/earth, is reflected by Daniels-Fiss (2008) who explains,

The Cree word for “land” is *okawimawaskiy*, comprising *okawimaw* (mother) and *askiy* (land, country, earth, or world); and *okawimawaskiy* provided everything people needed for their health and well-being, and the people thanked Mother-earth daily through prayer, rituals, and ceremonies using the language *kise manitow* [Creator] gave to them. Their language, *nehiyawewin*, became known to the newcomers as Cree. Although the language is seen as a gift to the people from *kise manitow*, its lexicon comes from *okawimawaskiy*. Just as the land is sacred in the Cree culture, so too is the language. These two, the land and the language, work in unison, creating an ever-deepening relation between the speaker and the environment. (p. 238)

Previously I described the vast territory over which the Métis lived and travelled and the connections amongst them forming a historic society based on kinship relations, shared economic and lifestyle choices and that their mobility “was the glue that kept the people connected throughout this vast territory” (Teillet, 2008, p. 38). Today Métis are still mobile, demonstrating connections to large harvest areas and connections to extensive historic Métis trade routes (Teillet, 2008, p. 38). Further, Métis equate conceptions of home and community with conceptions of landscape; as an example, Canadian census data questions of ‘residence’ that equate it with ‘your address’ or ‘your house’, and questions about ‘community’ that equate it with ‘town/city/village’ are reductive constructs that Métis do not easily adhere to (Teillet, 2008, p. 39).

This is why, when “the Government of Canada attempted to extinguish [land title] through the issuance of “scrip” and land grants in the late 19th and 20th centuries” (MNC website under heading Citizenship) they were unsuccessful in extinguishing the understanding of a people as Métis. It is embodied in the language, in the culture, and in an ongoing relationship to landscape. It is a strong and continuing bond for Métis peoples in Canada.

## **Discussing Michif – language negotiations of the Métis**

There are negotiations of identity, understandings, language, culture, community, and self within these language engagements of the Métis, ever evolving in a changing political landscape but emerging as a strong Indigenous nation founded on the strengths of our Nehiyaw and European ancestors. This is not some kind of hybridity – a notion in which identities are separate and fixed

– Indigenous and European – but rather a drawing upon the strengths of both Nations in the production of an emergent and ever evolving National identity – the Métis peoples of Canada. This identity, negotiated within the strengths of two parent languages (and other Indigenous language influences), is difficult for mainstream scholars, linguists, and everyday citizens to navigate and accept. But it is the everyday reality of these Elders and the communities from which they come. It is the negotiation of identities that has worked for many years and continues to work for these Elders, despite the fixing of identities and creation of boundaries inherent in the political processes at work in Canada.

### *Lifestyles*

Métis traditionally were hunters and trappers and these Elders, in other places, discuss these historical practices (Iseke, 2009, 2011). These lifestyles kept them close to the land and communities of Michif speakers. But modern lifestyles including jobs for wages have created the conditions of a rapidly changing society, moving to urban lifestyles and moving away from the linguistic communities and thus linguistic conditions outlined by these Elders. The importance of continuing community contact in order to keep languages alive and in use is outlined by the Elders but in current decline. The global impacts on local cultures and the linguistic imperatives required to engage in the current global economic and political realities have been part of the linguistic shift under both colonization and subsequent globalization.

### *Racial categorization and repression of identities*

In Canada, colonization created racial categories through the Indian Act: First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Whites. These arbitrary racial categories are tied to white supremacy, control of the land and resources, and a means of segregating people to deny access to equal opportunities. Métis are particularly impacted by these ideologies of control because, by very definition, Métis disrupt this symbolic domination and separation of peoples into neat categories.

As Tom McCallum outlines, in Michif we have our own names for ourselves that connect us to our culture and our knowledge system or worldview within the medicine wheel teachings. We do not need to rely on racialized schema from a government official under the 1860 Indian Act or the continued racializations within it to know who we are. When the categorizations change, as they have for the Métis peoples through court cases, we know who we are and that we continue to be a people. Our languages and cultures tell us who we are. This is why resisting language erasure is so important in resisting the continuance of neocolonial globalization.

### *Relationships to English*

Canada was colonized by the French and later by the British and the role of English for Indigenous peoples is a complicated one historically and today. English amongst the Métis in

Canada has been resisted as a colonial language and yet it has also become the dominant language of Métis people.

In this study, Tom referred to the western door of the medicine wheel and “walking in a period of darkness in our language and our culture”. Part of this darkness is brought by the dominance of the English language and the demise of the Indigenous languages.

The ongoing colonial condition includes English as the language of instruction in schools, as the dominant language of media, and as the requirement of international trade and economic opportunity in Canada. There may be some who suggest that somehow English could be taken up into Indigenous language practice while still allowing for Indigenous ways of knowing to be “carried” in the language. The case of Michif explores in detail an example of the production of a new language that is not the colonial language but rather developed by a people fluent in both the colonial language and the Indigenous language. Michif, despite its French roots, draws upon the strength of the Indigenous languages and retains its relationship to Indigenous people. But the relationship to English is different.

While Métis are now fluent in English they have not created a new contact language with English in the same way as they did with French. Instead, English is replacing Michif. Elders have documented that when languages are not on an equal footing and the people are not fluent in both languages, that language dominance often occurs to the demise of the oppressed languages. Forces of globalization and internationalization draw upon English and make it dominant to all other languages (Macedo, Dendrinos, and Gounari, 2003). This political reality necessitates a view of English as a linguistic and cultural bomb (Ngugi, 1986).

Globalization can be characterized in economic, political, cultural, and linguistic terms but there is tremendous interest in connections between globalization and language, and language change, tip, shifts and retention under globalization (Blommaert, Leppanen, Pahta, and Raisanen, 2012; Coupland, 2010; Edwards, 2011; Fairclough, 2007) and also in the challenges to languages posed by language contact (Fishman, 2000; Wyman, 2009). Globalization in some characterizations is seen as an extension of colonization, which is the impetus for the spread of English across the world and across cultures (Cowen, 2001; Mufwene, 2001; 2002; 2011; Mignolo, 2000; Osterhammel & Peterson, 2005).

### *Language revitalization*

So how are communities and educators responding to colonization, globalization and ongoing language shift? In Canada, Indigenous Elders and community educators are working to sustain Indigenous languages against the oppressive pressures of economics, globalization, media, and the spread of English that all threaten their languages (Blair, Rice, Wood & Janvier, 2002; Daniels-Fiss, 2008; Kirkness, 2002; Makokis, 2008; Maracle, 2002; McIvor, 2006; Richards & Maracle, 2002; Schreyer, 2008; Smith & Peck, 2004). Colonization and globalization have created a valuing of English above Michif and other Indigenous languages and recognizing this

power and value imbalance is important but the questions remains, what to do about it. How do we revitalize Michif?

Hope remains in the words of the Elders that Michif language can be revitalized and when one searches for Michif language revitalization on the Internet there are a number of resources and options to learn (catalogued on [my website](#) under ‘Michif Language’). Websites created by community and organizations provide opportunities to learn (<http://www.learnmichif.com/>; <http://www.metisresourcecentre.mb.ca/>) by providing language learning lessons, pronunciation guides, activities and language samples. YouTube also provides language-learning videos, contributing to the body of resources for language revitalization. These range from short vocabulary videos to longer recorded conversations. There are two channels in particular, [Learnmichif](#) and [Michifspeaker](#), that provide a selection of recorded interviews, conversations and lessons in Michif. When reviewing resources on the Internet one has to be pay attention to the variation of the language as many of these speakers are speaking a version of the language spoken in Manitoba, while the Elders in this research speak a variation from Alberta and Saskatchewan that has some differences.

These Michif language revitalization efforts are part of a larger Indigenous language revitalization focus within a broad body of literature. McIvor (2009) documents Strategies for Indigenous Language Revitalization and Maintenance while Hermes, Bang, and Marin (2012) examine Ojibway language revitalization and “explore questions of design as they pertain to the evolution of a community-based design process for language revitalization” (p. 381). Hermes and King (2013) also explore multimedia technology and family language learning. The literature on revitalization is vast if one considers broader connections to Indigenous languages globally (McCarty, 2009) including in Hawaii (Wilson, Kawai’ae’a, & Rawlins, 2008) and New Zealand (see <http://www.kohanga.ac.nz/>), whose efforts have impacted the Indigenous Language revitalization efforts in Canada through sharing of knowledge at international Indigenous conferences (World Indigenous Peoples’ Conference on Education, 1999).

## Conclusions

Language contact, shift, and multilingualism are social processes inherent within power relationships and have been profoundly impacted under colonization (Mufwene, 2011; Trudell, 2011). Indigenous peoples and languages have been profoundly impacted by colonization and globalization. For the Métis, they were valued and contributing members, with significant knowledge, during the fur trade era when they developed a language they used for trade and commerce. For a period of time in St. Albert, my home community, the dominant language was Michif, given that most inhabitants were Métis. As new French migrants moved into the region they had to learn Michif to participate in economic and communal matters. In other regions, they needed to learn Cree. But changes in trade and commerce brought on by the increase in settlement in the region brought significant changes to economic life. Métis continued to be contributing citizens but British colonization and its ongoing realities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to

dominate. The process of linguistic shift towards English during the colonial era continues under globalization. Education in English-only schools also brought about shift. Other factors brought about by colonial ideologies brought about societal change that created a linguistic shift for Métis. As with other Indigenous communities, the global movement towards English language dominance continues to pressure Métis peoples and suppress Michif so that much of the younger generation no longer speaks this language. In this sense, globalization is not a distinct process from colonial realities but an extension of these realities for Métis peoples.

The challenge is to recover from Indigenous language suppression brought about by these systems of oppression that are ongoing in the lives of Indigenous peoples. The marginalization of Indigenous languages has come to mean the suppression of culture. Elders and community are concerned about this process and are working to counteract it but the process is continuing. By speaking the Indigenous language one is instantly connected to the language, community, culture and worldview of Indigenous peoples but when speaking English one enters into a noun-based language that objectifies things and is disconnected from the Indigenous worldview and the people. Indigenous languages are God-given gifts that connect a speaker to the land, the stories of one's people, and to a worldview inherent in the culture.

Indigenous knowledge and languages are found in story and narrative forms, in cultural resources and healing practices, cultural and pedagogic practices, social movements, organization of families and communities, cultural products like music, art, stories, poetry, media, fashion, etc. (Dei, 2011) and in media (Hermes & King 2009). Michif language revitalization will continue to support communities and individuals in meeting the challenges of life and in regenerating speakers of Michif language in younger generations if some of these many forms are drawn upon as community strengths, and are encouraged in younger generations.

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