MICHIF LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION WITHIN A POST-SECONDARY CONTEXT

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The language of the Métis, Michif, is on the verge of extinction largely due to colonial injustices which forced many Western Métis to hide their identities and language. This paper will discuss one ongoing effort to revitalize the language in a Métis teacher education program and the implications the initiative has for other post-secondary educational programs and institutions who seek to contribute positively to Indigenous language reclamation in Canada.

CONTEXT

Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI) of Native Studies and Applied Research is the educational arm of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan. Its mission is to "promote the renewal and development of Métis culture through research; materials development, collection, and distribution; and the design, development, and delivery of Métis-specific educational programs and services" (GDI 2018). The flagship program of GDI is the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) whose mandate is to work with Saskatchewan universities to ensure adequate representation of Métis teachers and culture in elementary schools across the province. The SUNTEP program is administered in three large urban centers and is operated as a semi-autonomous program in which students take classes that enhance, promote and share Métis epistemology while fulfilling all credit requirements necessary to obtain a bachelor of education degree in the province of Saskatchewan. Over the course of its 38 year history, the SUNTEP program has graduated over 1,200 graduates (Howe 2017) who have contributed greatly to the preservation and understanding of Métis/Michif culture in schools across Western Canada.

A LANGUAGE DILEMMA

In order to graduate, SUNTEP students must enrol in an Indigenous language class at some point during their four year program. Until recently, students opted to take Cree, Saulteaux or Nakoda as these were the languages that were most often offered and/or had accredited and available instructors to teach. While it can be argued that learning any language is beneficial, the choices did not allow for students to learn their own language, Michif. Michif, the language of the Western Métis has been spoken amongst Métis peoples for over 200 years (Bakker 1997). It is unusual amongst languages in that

it defies classification. It belongs to two language families simultaneously (Indo-European and Algonquian). It draws lexical and grammatical features from both Cree and French in equal parts yet in its complexity it defies language contact phenomena. Michif's equal representation of two very different source languages "may very well make it unique among languages of the world" (Bakker 1997, 25).

Until recently, Michif as a language course was unavailable at the post-secondary level. The increasing level of language loss amongst Michif speakers (Statistics Canada 2016) and the corresponding lack of availability of Michif courses prompted the SUNTEP program to develop a language class that would allow Métis learners to fulfill a language requirement by learning their own traditional language through a university credited course.

CREATING A MODEL

Very few models of institutionalized learning of Michif exist. As an oral language, it was largely passed from generation to generation through the use of storytelling, visiting and land-based teaching models. As a result, the development of a teaching model for a Michif class was influenced heavily by Métis knowledge keepers and the language revitalization work of Dr. Joshua Fishman. Dr. Fishman (1991) proposed a process for language revitalization based on his work with threatened languages (Holm 2015; Lee 2015). The process involves reconstructing the language, mobilizing fluent older speakers, restoring intergenerational transmission through meaningful interactions and teaching the language in school. Fishman also emphasized the need for language revitalization to be conducted within a localized context. He states, "specific languages are related to specific cultures and to their attendant cultural identities at the level of doing, at the level of knowing and at the level of being" (2001, 3).

Much of the reconstructive work regarding Michif had been conducted in the 90's by Dutch linguist Peter Bakker (1997). The act of mobilizing older speakers presented challenges to the course developers. The course was to be taught within the confines of an academic institution; however older speakers sometimes had difficulty navigating and accessing a university campus. It was also essential to the development team that if possible, requests for assistance were made in the speaker's native tongue and demonstrated a sense of reciprocity (Kovach 2009). The team was fortunate enough to have a colleague on staff who is not only a Michif speaker, but who had kinship ties to a group of speakers in a traditional Métis community within the appropriate dialectic region. The team worked with this colleague who helped to develop trust and a working relationship with a small group of Michif speakers. In this way she acted as a cultural broker who could communicate the goals of the initiative to the Michif speakers in their own language and assure them of intent, which ultimately is to prevent further language loss.

The transmission and interactive aspects of Fishman's model were enacted simultaneously. The course was developed into thematic and interactive modules which allow students to gain practical knowledge of the Michif language and then to put that knowledge into practice through both classroom and community based interactions with Métis/Michif elders. The course has five modules which each run three weeks in length. The first week of each module is used to learn the vocabulary and pronunciation of words and phrases applicable to the respective module. The following two weeks are used for practice and interacting with Michif speakers. For example, in the module titled "Pa-keewekaytahk" (Let's Visit), students were given instruction by a Michif speaker in how to express common Michif greetings and phrases which one might use during an initial introduction. Once the Michif speaker was confident in student's pronunciation and memorization of the phrases, the students and instructors travelled to a senior citizens' home for Métis Elders where they were able to practice their introductions in a comfortable and intimate setting during an activity dubbed "Speedating with Elders." In the module entitled "Li Teyr" (The Land) students are provided vocabulary that describes weather, animals, plants and water features. They are given a week to practice this vocabulary and to construct questions and short conversations in the language. They then are taken onto the land by a Michif speaker who describes traditional Métis interactions with medicines, animals and geographic features. Students are encouraged to respond to the speaker or to ask questions in Michif.

INITIAL RESULTS

Although the course has been offered only twice thus far, the SUNTEP program is seeing some promising results. Students have increased knowledge of the Michif language and the cultural protocols inherent in working with Métis knowledge keepers and speakers of the language. They demonstrate a confidence in speaking the language which can be observed as they practice the language amongst themselves and in the community. The act of learning their traditional language has created opportunities for conversations in their own families regarding the traumatic history of language loss. Students express that their efforts have often spread to members of their own family who now also demonstrate a willingness to reclaim Michif for themselves. Additionally, the program now has a small but important group of Michif speakers who trust the intent of the course and who are willing to regularly visit the classroom or to engage with students in Michif outside of the classroom. Although the program is far from being able to produce fluent speakers of Michif, the past two years have allowed for a building of cultural and language capacity which

will provide a solid foundation for advancing the process of Michif reclamation.

NEXT STEPS

The development of a Michif course has allowed the SUNTEP program to build a small community of Michif speakers, to reconcile modern language acquisition practices with traditional Métis pedagogies of land and language, and to engage in the production of Michif language curricular resources for post-secondary students. What the course does not allow for currently is the ability to learn the language in an immersive context. It is with this in mind that plans are now in place to evolve the course into a three week intensive and immersive experience outside of the academic institution. In the spring of 2019, the course will be taught entirely on a small piece of land that is significant to Métis people in Southern Saskatchewan. Métis knowledge keepers and Michif speakers will be housed in trailers and students will set up a camp in close proximity. The course will retain its module-based format, however all activities will be done on the land and with the assistance of the cultural carriers. Métis Elders and youth participants will engage in the preparation of the campsite and communal meals, the maintenance of the land and buildings of the site, the learning of traditional Michif songs and stories and the practicing of basic conversations all in the Michif language.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE PLANNING AND PARTNERHSIPS IN POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

The University of Regina's Faculty of Education is closely associated with various educational partners in the province of Saskatchewan and beyond, including SUNTEP Regina.

The intent of these partnerships is the enhancement of the formal, non-formal and informal educational experiences for diverse learners and citizens. Given the effects of ongoing colonial structures for Métis, Inuit and First Nations peoples in Canada, and in light of our ongoing partnerships, the Faculty of Education is committed to indigenization efforts that include careful consideration of spaces, practices, and curricula, like the Michif language initiative highlighted in this article.

The planning of this program reveals possibilities for greater institutional inclusion of Indigenous languages in higher education. Conducting this work in ethical and thoughtful ways that honour the epistemologies, pedagogies and semi-autonomous/autonomous nature of Indigenous teacher education programs is key. Institutions of higher learning can help to support, sustain and learn from Indigenous language reclamation efforts. In working towards this goal, universities will need to collaborate and partner in meaningful ways with Indigenous communities to ensure adequate resourcing.

CONCLUSION

According to Statistics Canada (2016), less than 1,200 people remain in Canada who can conduct a conversation in Michif. There is a strong sense of urgency in Métis communities to revive and reclaim this language, which from a linguistic standpoint represents a tangible example of the reconciling of two vastly differing worldviews. Grass-roots Métis organizations, Métis education programs, and Michif Elders who have taken the lead can be supported by post-secondary institutions through advocacy, resourcing and through the acknowledgement that Métis systems of being, knowing and speaking have inherent value which they can learn from as they pursue goals of indigenization and reconciliation.

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