Michif Language Background Paper
Hungry Half Breed Song
(for Wannie Fisher)

There’s worms in the porridge
There’s ants in the jam
The bannock’s all dried up
There’s no lard in the pan
There’s a mouse nest in the teapot
And bugs in the spam
There’s flies in the buttermilk
But I don’t give a damn

- Joe Welsh

Li Michif: a people and a language

The word Michif denotes a people and a language. Spoken primarily in western Canada and parts of the northern United States, Michif is a unique indigenous language consisting of a mixture of Cree verbs and French nouns — though it is completely neither. Those who speak it refer to themselves, in their own language, as Michif people. In English, the word Métis has become more common.

Michif is just one of the indigenous languages spoken by Métis, among others such as Cree (or Métis/Michif Cree), Saulteaux, Dene. A unique dialect, Métis French (or Michif French) is also spoken by some Métis. These are still the mother tongues of many, and aside from being languages shared by a diverse population of Métis people, these languages share another less fortunate distinction: they are all severely endangered.

Many of the old people speak of the importance of language to culture. Some say that you see the world through a different set of eyes in your own language. Some say that it is your culture; language is God-given. Some say that language defines who you are and the way you think; thus, if you are speaking another’s language, you are less than yourself. Whether extreme, diplomatic or in between, many of the views seem to converge at the same point: your language is important for complex reasons, but letting it die is simply a travesty.

Scholars, indigenous and otherwise, study and affirm the intimate relationship of indigenous languages to their speakers’ oral history, traditional knowledge and healing practices, cultural values and norms, political and legal customs — in short, the way a people live in and interpret the world around them. If language shapes identity, then it follows that the health of a culture is directly related to the overall health and wellness of an individual, a community, a people.
Is it a coincidence that Métis (as well as Inuit and First Nations) suffer from poorer health than other Canadians? Or is language loss symbolic of something much deeper affecting the health of Canada’s indigenous population?

Métis children and youth have very low rates of indigenous language use. Those who do speak their languages have few opportunities to express themselves outside the home. Some school districts offer language classes but this is not at all common, particularly in urban areas, where the largest proportion of the Métis population, some 68 per cent, lives. Where programs do exist, they may be complicated when, for example, an oral language, like Michif, is taught in a classroom setting, using teaching tools and methodologies more appropriate for written languages, say English or French, or using textbook-style learning (phonetic translations of Michif words to English or verb conjugation flashcards) rather than practically learning to speak the language as it is spoken (or, as the case may be, hardly ever spoken) where the learner lives. Of course, it’s easy to be critical, and any instruction is better than none. But, all the while, language use continues to drop at a record pace: Métis children, according to Statistics Canada, have the distinction of being less likely than Inuit and First Nations to speak an indigenous language.

Immediate action is required to record, revitalize, transmit, and celebrate Métis languages before it’s too late. This is especially true for Michif, one of the most endangered indigenous languages in Canada.

The purpose of this short paper is to discuss the significance of saving and speaking Michif and other indigenous languages and, hopefully, to provoke discussion and action on the subject. It is, admittedly, not very good. There is a lot that is missing, but hopefully some of what needs to be said is here. An assumption from the start is that culture and identity are intertwined with the health and well being of individuals and communities. As the medium through which culture is transmitted, language is one of many determinants of health. Unlike Canadians with origins in other parts of the world, Métis people are unable to hop on a plane to other lands where their languages are spoken. Indigenous languages come from here and, tragically, are also laid to rest here. If they are no longer on the tongues of those who speak them, or in the hearts of those whose cultural heritage is bundled up in the stories told, the songs sung, in those languages, then we’ve lost something unique to this part of the world, unique to us.

Who are Métis people? An all too brief non-oral history

Otipemisiwak. Brois Brulés. Apeetogosan. Gens du libre. Half-breeds. Outsiders have referred to Métis as many things since the genesis of Métis people in what is now northwest Canada and the northern United States. Whether flattering or pejorative, indigenous peoples, such as the Cree and Ojibway, and European settlers alike have had terms to identify Métis as a recognizable and distinct group of people.
While there are many hypotheses as to how and when Métis crystallized as a people, this paper is not concerned with answering that question and is certainly not concerned with defining what is and who are Métis. Some history, however, is important to provide context to the discussion.

The short version of the story goes something like this: Métis evolved from unions between indigenous women and western European men. Their descendants, over time, absorbed influences from both cultures, intermarried, lived together, formed new communities in what is now western Canada and the northern US. These communities flourished and became social, cultural, economic and political centres. That Métis have made significant contributions, since before confederation, to the formation and development of Canada is a matter of historical record.

There has been some confusion as to a clear definition of Métis. Some of this can be explained by semantics. The word ‘métis,’ French in origin, is often translated literally to mean ‘mixed ancestry.’ Mixed heritage, or mixed race, populations are common throughout the world and have been evident in the Americas since Columbus sailed the ocean blue. However, more than simply having mixed indigenous and European ancestry — or, in the crude politics of blood quantum, more than simply being ‘mixed blood’ — defines those who identify as capital-‘M’ Métis. What distinguishes the Métis is that from these mixed origins grew an identifiable group of indigenous people, with unique cultural and economic traditions and a sense of collective identity, distinguishable from other indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Métis were formally recognized in the Constitution Act, 1982, as one of three Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Métis communities have been formally recorded from about the mid-eighteenth century. Sometimes called ‘children of the fur trade,’ Métis were essential to the early development of the northwest, working such occupations as trappers, guides, freighters, interpreters, farmers, and, of course, legendary buffalo hunters. With multilingual language skills, strong families and communities, and an intimate knowledge of the land, Métis were an indispensable economic and political force during that period of Canadian history.

By the 1870s, Métis were the majority of inhabitants of the Red River settlement, around present-day Winnipeg. This was the crossroads of Métis economic and social life, where a pronounced Métis political consciousness and governance system had emerged. By this time, Métis had been recognizable as a distinct people for well over a century, exemplified not only in economic and social institutions but cultural and linguistic traditions as well — the unique Michif language is a prominent symbol of the uniqueness of Métis culture. This heritage is still arguably very much a part of what defines the core of Métis identity today, while distinct cultural markers throughout Métis history have continued to build on a collective sense of unity and to preserve Métis culture and identity.

Despite having significant historical presence, and influence, on present-day Canada, there are many gaps in the written history on Métis, many of whom come from oral
cultures — and, as such, perhaps a written account is not entirely adequate. In any event, non-Métis have written the vast majority of the books and studies on Métis history. And, for the most part, such texts tend to focus on two specific periods of western Canadian history: Métis resistances to the Canadian government over land and self-determination in 1870 and 1885. The former saw Métis negotiate the creation of the province of Manitoba. In the latter, the most well known Métis historical figure, Louis Riel, was hanged, and military leader Gabriel Dumont was forced to flee to the US.

What followed these resistances is less represented in documented history. Political, economic and social factors in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries forced the dispersal of many Métis from their traditional lands — and to the economic margins of Canadian society. Well into the 1950s, a number of Métis in the Saskatchewan lived on the Road Allowance, parcels of Crown land made available for Métis use but not ownership. Throughout this time, up to today, many Métis have continually lived together in distinctly Métis communities, many of which predate confederation and are still predominantly Métis. Others were transplanted to urban areas when Métis were, once again, being pushed from their lands for economic and social reasons. Despite being vulnerable to discrimination, poverty, poor health and whatever other social ills round out the grocery list of afflictions facing ‘marginalized’ peoples, many Métis continue to retain distinct identities, indigenous languages, land-based cultures and a wholly Métis worldview. Today, when urban migration has filled the phone books in cities like Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon and Edmonton with Métis surnames, there is a young and growing population that continues to identify as Métis.

The language(s) of the Métis

Michif

The origins of the Michif language are as complex as those of the Métis. Historically, Métis were multilingual, speaking a combination of French, English and indigenous languages, such as Cree and Saulteaux. At some point in Métis history, a new language — Michif — emerged out of a mixture of Cree verbs and French nouns. While consisting of elements of both, Michif is in fact a unique language. At one time, Michif may have been heard from the Great Lakes, across the plains up to Great Slave Lake and into the northern United States. Though now endangered, there are still pockets of Michif speakers throughout this geographic area, mainly in the Prairies, North Dakota and Montana.

The unique character of Michif has confounded linguists, some of whom deny its existence because it does not fit into any of the usual categories of language classification. Derived from Amerindian and European languages, Michif does not belong to any single language family and “looks completely different from other mixed languages of the world.” Michif is not simply a dialect of Cree or French, or a mixed dialect that switches back and forth between the two languages. While it does incorporate elements of both Cree and French, Michif is completely neither: it is a language of its own, with all the order, chaos, complexity and beauty of any other.
Métis have long bore the brunt of cultural and political imperialism. A story that dates to 1850 reveals how a Catholic priest, showing a Scottish immigrant around Red River, described the settlement’s Métis as “the one-and-a-half men”: “half Indian, half white and half devil.” Canada’s first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, was candid about his views on Métis self-determination in the northwest: “These impulsive half breeds have spoiled by their émeute and must be kept down by a strong hand until they are swamped by the influx of settlers.” In 1985, John C. Crawford wrote, “Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Michif is its tendency to be ignored.” With such a long history of discrimination toward Métis in Canada, characterizing Métis people and culture as inferior (if a people at all, if a culture at all), it is not surprising that Michif has its detractors, those who deny its existence or downplay its importance.

Dutch linguist Peter Bakker travelled to Saskatchewan and Manitoba in the mid-eighties and created the most comprehensive academic study of Michif to date. His book, *A Language of Our Own: The Genesis of Michif, the Mixed Cree-French Language of the Canadian Métis*, tries to dispel many of the misinformed, and sometimes outlandish, theories of Michif origins. For example, there was a “Laziness hypothesis” floating around: “The Frenchmen were lazy and let the Indian women (their wives) do all the work. Hence the verbs, expressing action, are in the Indian language and the nouns are in French.” Ha ha.

Bakker conducted his study primarily in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where the vast majority of remaining Michif speakers can be found. It reveals what many had been saying all along, that Michif is made up of roughly equal number of French and Cree words. But his linguistic analysis finds that Michif, far from being ‘Cree slang’ or a ‘bastard French,’ preserves “virtually all the complexities of both source languages.” Michif is not Cree sprinkled with French or French that has adopted some Cree. It is a language, and it is a language like none other. On the one hand, it may be described as similar to Algonquin languages in that it is verb-based and, like Cree, has a system of animate and inanimate genders. On the other, the sound system from French is intact and bears many similarities to the romance language.

Contact between speakers of different languages sometimes creates mixed languages, also known as *pidgen* languages. These often result when two cultures come together and do not speak each other’s language but need to communicate for practical purposes such as trade. On the face of it, this may sound like a reasonable explanation for Michif, since Métis are so often associated with the North American fur trade. The characteristics of Michif, however, are much more complex than normally present in *pidgen* languages. Such languages tend to be simplistic and favour one dominant language, whereas Michif uses elements of both languages almost equally. And there is apparently no record of outsiders speaking Michif. It is a language Métis used, and continue to use, to communicate with other Métis.

Languages, of course, borrow words from other languages, especially the one in which this little paper is written. Michif does not display the characteristics of simple word
borrowing from one language to another, nor is it a mix and match of Cree and French. And while at one time Michif speakers were generally multilingual, it also doesn’t share characteristics in common with bilingual speakers who mix the languages they speak — think franglais or spanglish. It appears more complex than that.

Most often when one language borrows from another, the borrowed words conform to the dominant language. English speakers who use words from other languages — say, soufflé or salsa — do not change the structure of their sentences when doing so. No one says, ‘I made un soufflé for dinner last night,’ or ‘I’ll have la salsa with chips.’ The French or Spanish word is alone lodged into the English sentence, which accommodates the foreign expression as it would one of its own. The structure of the first language stays in tact. In Michif, the French words use French syntax and the Cree use Cree:

The French and Cree elements are about evenly distributed. English words intrude into Michif because that is the language most often used by speakers of Michif. Verbs, personal pronouns, and demonstratives are always in Cree; nouns, numerals, and articles are always French. Michif verbs have the same complexity as the Cree verbs. Michif nouns are used and categorized as in French. Word order mostly follows Cree, that is, almost completely free, but order in noun phrases is like that in French. The agreement system of Michif combines the agreement systems of French (masculine or feminine) and Cree animate and inanimate as if they were Cree. French nouns are classified as animate or inanimate as if they were Cree nouns and showed the appropriate gender agreement in the verb. Michif adjectives in French are used as are French adjectives, Cree adjectives in the Cree way. Other categories associated with noun phrases, such as propositions, are often French. Adverbs can be Cree of French. A very few words have French stems and Cree affixes. Cree and French lost very little of their complexity in Michif. Michif has two phonological, one for the Cree part and one for the French part, each with its own rules. The Cree part is almost identical with Plains Cree, and the French part is almost identical with the Métis French dialect, which is a derivative of eastern Canadian French dialects.

So Michif does not merely borrow, or haphazardly mash together, elements from Cree and French so much as weave them together into something similar but remarkably different, a Métis language. Interestingly, Bakker’s study finds that, today, “virtually no Michif speakers are able to speak and understand Cree, and only a minority speak or understand French.” And though the language crosses provincial lines and an international border, there is “little variation among Michif dialects spoken in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and North Dakota, that is, no more than in other comparable languages.”

Other Métis languages
As noted prior, Métis speak other indigenous languages, some of which, like Plains Cree, have been studied extensively, others less so. Little is known about Métis variations in these languages, some of which borrow words from other languages and exhibit characteristics unique to Métis speakers. The late Dr. Anne Anderson authored a dictionary, “Métis Cree Dictionary,” in 1975 describing one such example. The dictionary primarily consists of the “y” dialect of Cree spoken by Métis in part of Alberta. “The written Cree used in this dictionary,” she explains in the forward, “has been influenced by my Métis culture and reflects my upbringing.” As well, some Métis communities speak dialects of Cree that borrow heavily from other languages, such as the French, but are still classifiable as Cree or as mixed languages. Though similar, these languages may be unrelated to Michif.

There is also a dialect of French spoken in some Métis communities and referred to as Michif French or simply Michif by its speakers. In his article “The Michif French Language: Historical Development and Métis Group Identity and Solidarity at St. Laurent, Manitoba,” Guy A. Lavallee describes his community’s language as “similar to modern-day French dialects, such as the many French Creoles, including Cajun, the provincial usages in France and Canadian French itself.”

The kids aren’t talking their languages

As a young man mainstreaming in the city of “Sass-a-toon” among the white settlers, I was suspicious of my own tongue, continued to watch ever so carefully my Michif accent. Desperate to talk exactly of the Mother Country Aryans, I would practice for hours each evening locked in my tiny dark room. Yet I longed so much to go to the pub and drink beer and meet my buddies at the National. But that would only drag me deeper and deeper into my ghetto dialect. I resolved not to fit the stereotype of the typical Métis Halfbreed.

- Howard Adams

A language dies when those who speak it are not able to pass it on to their children and grandchildren. It can’t be made any plainer than that. For this reason, Michif and other languages spoken by Métis are suffering a similar fate as the majority of indigenous languages in Canada: they are threatened by extinction. The situation for Métis is urgent. Studies indicate that the younger generations of Métis are losing their languages at a faster rate than those of other indigenous groups.

European colonization and settlement planted English and French in Canada. When these became the dominant languages, the loss of indigenous languages followed. This is not unique to Canada. On a global level, there are estimates kicking around that as many as 90% of the world’s 6,000 languages could disappear by the end of the century. Of the 50 classified indigenous languages in Canada, just three are considered healthy enough at present to survive: Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibway. The countdown has begun.
In its report, “Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial findings: Well-being of the non-reserve Aboriginal population,” Statistic Canada presents some grim information:

Of the three main Aboriginal groups, the Métis were the least likely to know an Aboriginal language. As was the case with the North American Indian population, Aboriginal language use by the Métis declined between 1996 and 2001.

According to the census, 5% of Métis of all ages were able to converse in an Aboriginal language in 2001, down from 8% five years earlier. Similarly, only 2% of Métis of all ages used an Aboriginal language at home in 2001 compared to 3% in 1996. The same was true for mother tongue with a decline from 6% to 4%. The 2001 APS showed that 16% of Métis were able to speak or understand an Aboriginal language. Of people in this group, 34% were able to speak very well, or relatively well.

Language use by Métis children was also the lower than for Inuit and First Nations children. Just twelve per cent could speak or understand an indigenous language.

Of the respondents who self-identified as Métis in the Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001, just over 2200 people, aged 15 and over, reported being able to speak or understand Michif. The vast majority lived in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Anecdotally, one would suspect that the majority of these speakers are estimated to be elderly. Information sources on the number of Michif speakers in the northern US are not readily available.

In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples didn’t offer much more hope to Michif people, and the commissioners’ warning is worth repeating here:

We consider the possibility that Michif as a distinct language may not be revived for daily discourse in a dispersed Métis cultural community. This prospect makes it all the more vital that the distinctive perspectives and experience embodied in the Michif language be recorded, understood and communicated in new environments so that Métis culture can continue to enrich the understanding of Métis people and all Canadians.

Keep in mind, that was ten years ago, and a lot can happen in ten years.

A majority of Métis, according to Statistics Canada, have stated that learning, relearning or keeping an Aboriginal language is very important. Similarly, 80 per cent of respondents to a public opinion poll commissioned by the Métis Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization indicated that a revival of Métis culture and traditions would improve Métis health. That so many young indigenous peoples do not speak their languages is significant and “did not occur by accident or natural evolution.” The natural process of passing on these languages from generation to generation was disrupted by colonization and governments’ assimilation policies — the residential school system, in which some Métis were involved, is the most blatant example, but
certainly is not the only one. Such policies as Adopt Indian and Métis, AIM, in the 1960s, and the so-called Sixties Scoop, in which children were forcibly removed and adopted to non-indigenous families had a devastating effect on Métis communities.

English is everywhere, its pervasiveness, in effect, undermining the vitality of indigenous languages. There likely isn’t a square inch of the continent that is untouched by North American popular culture and its “antipathy towards the use of any language other than the dominant language.” For children, there are few opportunities to speak indigenous languages on a day-to-day basis or learn them in school. Shame and disinterest prevents some adults from speaking their language or passing it on. I mean, if everyone speaks English, why bother?

Federal and provincial governments offer some support for revitalizing indigenous languages through the Aboriginal Languages Initiative. The $20 million fund was created in 1998 and administered until 2003, under the auspices of Canadian Heritage, by the Métis National Council, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Assembly of First Nations. In 2002, the then Liberal government announced $175 million, spread over 11 years, towards the creation of an aboriginal languages and cultural centre. A task force was formed to make recommendations on its development. The Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures released a report in 2005. No further announcements have been made in respect to the future of the initiative.

In any case, money alone won’t encourage kids to speak their languages. The predominance of English and French in the country’s social, economic and political institutions is a huge barrier to countering the language shift. You can’t ask where to find the toothpaste at Wal Mart in Michif. Rogers won’t explain your cable bill in Cree. Good luck applying for EI in Saulteaux.

Some communities have countered language loss by developing their own education programs and instuting revitalization strategies. A good example is the Michif language program at the Rossignol School in Isle-a-la Crosse, a Métis community in northwest Saskatchewan, where language instruction is part of a Métis cultural component of the Kindergarten to grade 5 curriculums. Unfortunately such programs are far from the norm, particularly in urban areas, where the majority of Métis live.

Language is culture, culture is language

Culture and identity for many Métis is not tied to an indigenous language. Even those who do not speak an indigenous language are still unmistakably Métis. Many Métis families and communities have survived language loss and maintained their distinctness. For them, language is not the only element of Métis identity. The ways in which peoples have maintained and transmitted their cultures and worldviews change with time. There always have been Métis who speak English. And it can’t be said that Métis do not have distinctive ways of speaking that language, whether or not their antecedents may have spoken an indigenous language. But indigenous languages are important to many Métis,
those who speak them and those who are relearning — and let’s not forget to mention there are many too young to make the decision for themselves.

Language is inseparable from culture. “It’s the heartbeat of a culture,” Michif elder and language instructor, Rita Flamand, says when asked why her language is important, adding, simply, that our “language contains who we are.”59 Such are the reasons the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples gave for the importance of rejuvenating indigenous languages. “Most people find it impossible to separate language and identity. Language is perceived as the quintessence of a culture. It expresses a unique way of apprehending reality, capturing a world view specific to the culture to which it is linked.”60

A language is not only on the lips of speakers but also deep in their hearts, minds, bodies, souls. There is an emotional and spiritual relationship with the language, one that connects a people to their past. Simon Robinson of the First Peoples’ Cultural Foundation points out that an indigenous language is the legacy of countless generations, each building on the contributions of the last, amounting to the collective knowledge of a people. “Language developed over this long period of time, has become an intimate interactive reflection of the landscape where it was born and developed, containing precious knowledge and wisdom.”61

Losing Michif or any other Métis language may be comparable to a country burning its libraries and universities, as these languages embody the cultural and intellectual heritage of Métis communities. In her article “Maintaining Aboriginal Identity, Language, and Culture in Modern Society,” Marie Battiste argues that for aboriginal peoples language does indeed carry that much weight. “Aboriginal languages are the basic media for the transmission and survival of Aboriginal consciousness, cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. They provide distinctive perspectives on and understandings of the world.”62

“When you speak your own language, you have a different road than you have when you speak English,” says Métis elder Tom McCallum. “When you speak English, everything that you think about, you think in English, put everything into an English perspective. It’s not who you really are. If you’re not who you are, it affects your self-esteem, it affects your mental, your spiritual, your physical and emotional [well being]. It effects every aspect of you as a human being, so if you’re not who you really are, how can you ever be proud of who you are? And if you’re not who you are, you’re something other then what the Creator had put here.”63

Such a personal and illusory thing as spirituality — religion — is not easily addressed here, but neither should it go unmentioned. For many there is a spiritual element in the language that is intimately tied to culture and identity.

“The Creator put us here with culture, customs, traditions and ceremonies,” says McCallum. “Every nation in the world has been given that. They’ve been given a language, a geographical area in which to live, traditions, rituals, ceremonies … If you
follow [those teachings] you’ll be very, very healthy because you will be in harmony with everything else because the creator did not make anything disharmonious. He created everything to harmonize, and if we go back to what they say in the old traditions, actually if we go back to who we are, which is who the creator put us here as, that is health.”

Indigenous languages are different from European languages. They are verb-based, for example, rather than noun based. What this means is that they “are process- or action-oriented. They are generally aimed at describing ‘happenings’ rather than objects.”

It’s a difference way of thinking, a different way of seeing the world. It’s been described as “a moving landscape,” that is, more than simply a concept but a state of being, a different kind of connectedness to other living things, to nature, than in English. As Leroy Little Bear says in his article “Jagged Worldviews Colliding”:

“The languages of Aboriginal peoples allow transcendence of boundaries.
… There is no animate/inanimate dichotomy. Everything is more or less animate. Consequently, Aboriginal languages allow for talking to trees and rocks, an allowance not accorded in English. If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations.”

**If our stories disappear, will our people disappear?**

Indigenous peoples in Canada, including Métis, are primarily from oral cultures. Michif is not a written language, though a couple of writing systems are being promoted, most notably those by Rita Flamand and Norman Fleury. The oral tradition, stories, carries the culture forward. It is art, literature. It has a particular pedagogy, a way of teaching. Each Métis person is, in some way, a storyteller. There is not a family or community get together that does not involve storytelling of some kind. In this way, family and community history is taught. Lessons are learned. Fun is had. Identity is formed, reinforced, celebrated, passed on.

The storyteller has the tools of a novelist: setting, character, plot, back story, digression, details. “A good storyteller,” says Métis elder Elmer Ghostkeeper, “will entwine these elements to convey and transfer the teaching and lesson to the listener. What listeners take away are emotions and feelings and that is what they will remember. Very few words are remembered and but feelings are felt and can be evoked just by thinking about them.”

Words are not the only tools of the storyteller. There is emotion, body language, diction, context. “The oral tradition is an element of our culture, and how we practice culture,” says Michif elder Bruce Flamont. “There are recognized storytellers … your creation stories, your spiritual stories are told to you by these storytellers, through the stories that they choose and how they tell those stories. You would get the oral tradition from your
uncles or whoever. … Storytellers weren’t just entertainers, they were educators, they would have been our philosophers, I guess, in today’s concept.”

“So now the uncles and the grandfathers and moms and dads who understand it try to carry it on, on a daily basis, communicate, and so it’s a continuum, and it’s oral. So that’s why I say you have to have been there, you have to have listened to these people, you had to know the [storyteller]. He’s got you shook up, laughing, and that just sticks with you. You can never, ever forget that, as opposed to trying to memorize it, to recite it … it’s really the same education as a university, but they’re doing it orally, but you’re getting taught similar things … and you look at it from a totally different world.”

Such a way of learning comes from where you live, the people you live with; it makes you a part of something. Stories connect you to tradition and community, in the same way that songs and ceremonies do. You get this from your family. Kinship ties are uniquely important to Métis, as they are for other indigenous peoples; this is where the teachings are acquired, in the home, say, around a kitchen table, not from strangers in a non-descript building down the road. “Oral teachings are necessarily passed on in the context of a relationship — or they were before the arrival of electronic media in aboriginal communities,” writes Mohawk scholar Marlene Brant Castellano.

The teaching encompassed not only intellectual content but also the emotional quality of the relationship. It drew on the shared experience of a common environment and, in all likelihood, on a history stretching back over generations. It was essentially non-prescriptive, respecting norms of non-interference in social relations.

The oral tradition is not static. It has evolved and changed over time, surviving and negotiating the process of colonization and assimilation and incorporating new mediums, such as books, film and contemporary music. There is indeed a thriving scene in these arts, and anyone who has read any of the great indigenous novelists can attest that, yes, there has been an evolution, from orality to the written word, in indigenous arts. Indigenous expressions in contemporary art, in film and dance and theatre and visual and conceptual art, are indeed indigenous. But this paper is not about that. There is no intention to derogate those art forms, just to recognize that the value in keeping the languages alive from which they came, not to nourish the culture but because language is part of the culture. From language come the stories and the teachings, and while the modes of transmitting them may change, perhaps if the foundation is strong, the stories will remain strong, no matter how they are told.

There is a political element to languages, as well. The Canadian state has aggressively tried to eradicate indigenous languages, in effect, trying to erase those cultures and replace them with another. Stories can still be told in different languages; they can be written down in those languages, too. Are they then a different kind of story — as, say, a movie adaptation of a book? Some say a traditional story, any story or word or phrase for that matter, changes when translated from an indigenous language into English; something is lost in translation that is difficult, maybe impossible, to get back. Others say
it’s a different story altogether, thus implying it shouldn’t be confused with the original. Such a thorny argument as authenticity is not a productive one, at least for the purposes here, especially as the author is, admittedly, not fluent in his language. Though it’s a point of view that should be raised, because it is one that is heard among language speakers, perhaps not out of a sense of superiority but at least clarity. In any case, as Mohawk writer and orator, Taiaiake Alfred, points out, there is no question that indigenous languages are markers and expressions of what makes indigenous peoples culturally distinct from the European cultures transplanted here in North America:

Beyond the languages used to express cultural perspectives, beliefs, and values, we must consider the importance of stories, ceremony, and rituals in the regeneration of authentic indigenous existences. These are also basic elements of culture, and they are of course tied to language. For humans to enjoy happiness at all, they must be integrated politically, socially, spiritually and culturally; language, stories, and ceremonies are the building blocks of an integrated human being. Without the sense of self-awareness and psychological rootedness that being part of a cohesive culture gives a person, and lacking basic consistency between one’s identity and the legal and experiential reality of the world one lives in outside of the individual mind and body, human fulfillment, happiness, peace are simply not possible.\textsuperscript{75}

Talking about health, literally

Michif always like to joke. They always like to say things, you know, to get you going and to have fun. One of the mains things that kept our health up was our laughter. So if I told you something, as a Mètis person, and if you were a white person and I approached you and told you something that I thought would be funny … it would be insulting to you. So when you’re looking at the whole picture of health and of culture, that’s a very important point.

- John Boucher\textsuperscript{76}

One of the remarkable things about Michif speakers is when communicating in their language they always seem to be laughing. One Michif person describes it as “a laughing language,” its speakers convivial and good-humoured.\textsuperscript{77} On at least a practical level, laughter seems as good a determinant of health as any. There is, however, an acknowledged link between healthy languages and healthy people.\textsuperscript{78}

Language is more than words, “not only a means of communication, but a link which connects people with their past and grounds their social, emotional and spiritual vitality,”\textsuperscript{79} so says a Statistics Canada publication. The author skips the ‘physical’ aspect, but the point is clear: cultural vitality is a determinant of health and wellness. Cultural dislocation is a catalyst for the health and social inequalities confronting indigenous communities. If culture is important to health and vitality, to the way in which people
learn and adapt to the world around them, then “to disconnect or alienate people from their cultural foundations is like plucking a plant from the soil in which it is rooted.”

As everyone, Métis, Inuit and First Nations confront rapid cultural changes, but against a tide of colonization, assimilation, racism. The resulting consequences are deeply rooted: poorer physical health, in almost every measure, than the overall population and profound cultural, economic, political and social impacts out from which communities and individuals are digging their way. Métis researcher Dr. Judith Bartlett explains the impact such factors have had on cultural identity:

> It is unfortunate but understandable that ‘contact’ has resulted in a significant level of individual and inter/intra group stress. Such stress (i.e. “demands to which there are no readily available or automatic adaptive responses”) must be understood in order to create a solid basis for policy and program development. Since the earliest continuous contact with newcomer Europeans, original peoples have been erroneously identified by externally designated and often misleading names such as Indian, Eskimo and Half-breed. This has resulted in poor self-image for individuals and groups who have in some cases, in order to survive, gone underground with their identity.

The extent, and long-term effects, of such stress, has been similarly studied by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, which describes it as historic or intergenerational trauma and proposes a medical-type model to understand how historical injustices simmer under the surface and emerge in destructive patterns of behaviour. And while the proposed medical model is neither endorsed nor rejected here, that historical injustices strongly influence the contemporary lives of indigenous people is undeniable:

> The experience of historic trauma and intra-generational grief can best be described as psychological baggage being passed from parents to children along with the trauma and grief experienced in each individual’s lifetime. The hypothesis is that the residue of unresolved, historic, traumatic experiences and generation or unresolved grief is not only being passed from generation to generation, it is continuously being acted out and recreated in contemporary Aboriginal culture. Unresolved historic trauma will continue to impact individuals, families and communities until the trauma has been addressed mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

Indigenous cultures and traditions, the report concludes, is the means by which indigenous peoples can make sense of and reverse the impact of what the author’s call historical trauma. No matter the diagnosis, such a prescription is easily supported. Language, the primary mode of cultural transmission, is, naturally, part of that process. The oral tradition is, naturally, part of that process. Ceremony and ritual is, naturally, part of that process. Stories, mythology, are, naturally, part of that process.
Cree playwright Tomson Highway speaks of mythology as if it’s a matter of life and death, because of its central importance to the language and culture, thus the health (or poor health), of a people:

[M]ythology defines, mythology maps out, the collective subconscious, the collective dream world of races of people, the collective spirit of races of people, the collective spiritual nervous system, if you will, where every cord, every wire, every filament has a purpose and a function, every twitch a job in the way that collective human body, mind and soul moves and operates from one day to the next and to the next. Without this mechanism, that is to say, there would be no reason for getting up in the morning to go to work, to school, or to play. Life would have no meaning. And suicide would flourish.85

While Highway may be speaking on a metaphorical (as well as literal) level, interestingly, a study in British Columbia by Michael J. Chandler and Christopher Lalonde, “Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada’s First Nations,” finds evidence that may corroborate Highway’s assumption. The authors studied First Nations communities in British Columbia, looking to factors, such as cultural, self-determination and economic development, which explain suicide rates. Their research points toward concluding “that the communities that have taken active steps to preserve and rehabilitate their own cultures are also those communities in which youth suicide rates are dramatically lower.”86

Michif revitalization

There’s no word for good-bye. There’s no word for good-bye in Michif. We say, ka wawpamitin. It means we’ll see you again. Or, paykeewkay ahpee, come back again, come and visit again. Never good-bye, there’s no good-byes.

- Gilbert Pelletier87

It is much easier to identify the reasons for rejuvenating a language than actually giving it new life. Michif may be especially challenging as it is considered to be at an advanced stage of endangerment. On socio-linguist Joshua Fishman’s eight levels of language endangerment, Michif has been estimated to be at about level seven, meaning, in general, only the older generations are fluent, the middle aged are partially proficient, and communication with children, when it exists, is difficult.88 The way to save the language, then, is to create conditions for speakers to interact with the younger generations.

Fishman provides a useful list of key elements in restoring intergenerational transmission of languages and extending their usage:

Restoring transmission:
• Reconstruct the language
• Mobilize fluent older speakers
• Restore intergenerational transmission through family, neighbourhood and community reinforcement
• Teach the language in school

Extending usage:
• Implement immersion and strong bilingual education
• Use the language in work environments
• Offer government services in the language
• Use the language in higher education, media and government

Michif is an oral language, and while there has been recent promotion of writing systems, there are few formal education materials or trained teachers. But education is not only in schools. It is in the home, and that is where language revitalization must occur. This presents its own difficulties, as there are obvious distractions all around and few opportunities outside the home to use the language. Immersion, however, is seen by many experts as the best means to teach and revitalize a language.

Laura Burnouf, a Métis language instructor with the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP) in Saskatchewan, offers an explanation for why she believes immersion is necessary:

• It is the best and often only means to save a language from extinction
• Studies show that bilingual children are more advanced in general intellectual development
• One’s place in the world is taught and reinforced
• Learners need to be engaged in real communities
• Language is a tool of knowledge and its relevance should not be understated
• Indigenous languages have a grammatical construction that is much different than English, making translation not only unnecessary but also a liability

Burnouf notes that there are successful examples of formal immersion programs in Mohawk, Dakota and Navajo communities that start in Kindergarten and include parental involvement, which is crucial for the revitalization process to work. In these voluntary programs, evaluations indicated students did as well than monolingual students on English language ability and in some cases did better academically.

A Michif immersion program, perhaps the only one in Canada, has been implemented in Camperville, Man. Language activist Heather Souter and two community elders, Grace Zoldy and Rita Flammand, modelled the program on the Masters-Apprentice Program concept, an innovative and successful language program originating in indigenous communities in California. It is a complete immersion program where the speakers, usually elders, commit to teaching the language on a one-on-one basis in the home and in the community. It is a community-centred approach that allows speakers to effectively pass on their language to learners without classrooms, books or language experts. A book on the program, *How to Keep Your Language Alive*, succinctly describes its
methodology: “If you want to learn to speak a language and understand others who are speaking it, you must learn it through speaking and hearing it, not through reading and writing it.” The Camperville program is entirely self-funded, relying on the volunteer commitments of those involved in the program, either as teachers or learners.

Learning a language needs to be as natural as possible, and language programs and immersion settings that work for one community may not work for another. A community’s needs, in some instances, are as unique as the community itself, and there are also regional variations in the language that need to be accounted for. Fishman argues that “the loss of a dialect is as much as the loss of a language. Having the language shrink down to one dialect is itself a great loss because those dialects were different because there were also other differences … They go along with differences in customs, and those differences also get lost.”

Regional differences in Michif create challenges in developing a writing system, as pronunciation varies region to region. The most important thing is to allow people to talk how they talk and to respect local dialects. While a spelling system is not critical in order to pass on the language, there is value in developing a flexible writing system. A good system, one linguist suggests, must be consistent, usable on a typewriter, avoid accents, and use letter combinations to allow for more sounds.

That so few people, spread out over a large geographic area, speak Michif hinders rejuvenation efforts. There are few geographic clusters of speakers. There are Michif speakers in old-age homes, or living on their own in urban areas, who don’t know anyone who speaks their language. For such reasons, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People declared (yes, way back in 1996): “There is a clear need for recognition by Canadian educational institutions that Michif is an endangered Indigenous language urgently in need of preservation measures. Without that recognition, the maintenance of the existing language base and the creation of educational opportunities to expand its use, Michif will become extinct.”

Today, there are currently few Michif language courses in public schools. A Métis school system may help address this problem. Of course, building a school system from scratch is a long-term goal, even if such a proposal were to be formally supported by governments (it isn’t). Given the language’s advanced stage of endangerment, such a thing can’t be relied upon. More urgent is that individuals make the effort to learn the language of their elders. Importantly, as much of the language as possible has to be recorded so that the dialects which are dying out will not be totally lost.
Endnotes

1. *Jackrabbit Street* (Saskatoon: Thistledown, 2004).

2. The term indigenous is used here to refer to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, those referred to in the *Constitution Act*, 1982, as a way to somehow recognize that Michif communities do not abruptly stop at the 49th parallel and, too, as an acknowledgement that many old people did not get the memo that their identities had been renamed, or re-categorized or whatever, along with their political-legal relationship to the Canadian state. See Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous: Resurgences Against Contemporary Colonialism,” available online: <http://www.taiaiake.com/taiaiake/writing.htm>.

3. The author conducted interviews with Michif speakers and had access to the transcripts of others, and many of these speakers are referenced directly in the paper.


26 Many authors speak of the history of discrimination against Métis in Canada. A couple of the best are Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed* (Halifax, Goodread Biographies, 1983) and Howard Adams, *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View* (Saskatoon, Fifth House, 1989).


31 Ibid.


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., p. 9.


36 Ibid., p.118

37 Pappen and Bakker, *Michif and Other Languages of the Canadian Métis*, p. 9.


41 Otapawy! The life of a Métis leader in his own words ad in those of his contemporaries (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2005), p. 167.


59 Rita Flammond, Interview with Tricia Logan, February 3, 2005.
63 Interview with Tricia Logan, February 3, 2005.
70 Bruce Flamont, Person interview, February 3, 2005.
71 Marlene Brant Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions of Knowledge,” Indigenous Knowledge in Global Contexts: multiple readings of our world, Edited by George J. Sefa Dei, Budd L. Hall, and Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 27.
72 Ibid., p. 104-113.
73 Bruce Flamont, Personal interview, February 3, 2005.
76 Personal interview, February 5, 2005.
77 Rita Flammond, Interview with Tricia Logan, February 3, 2005.
79 Ibid., p. 28, Quoting M. Norris, “Canada’s Aboriginal Languages,” *Canadian Social Trends* 51 (Winter 1998).
80 Phil Lane, Jr., *Community Healing and Aboriginal Social Security Reform* (Lethbridge, Alberta: Four Worlds International Institute, 1998), p. 38.
84 Cynthia C. Wesley-Esquimaux and Magdalena Smolewski *Historical Trauma & Aboriginal Healing* (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundations, 2004), p. 3.
87 Gilbert Pelletier, Personal interview, April 1, 2005. The spelling of the Michif words were taken from Norman Fleury, *Canadian Michif Dictionary* (Winnipeg, Manitoba Métis Federation, 2000). Apologies to Mr. Pelletier if this is inappropriate.
88 Peter Bakker, “Michif Curriculum Development,” Aen kwa ney taa maak nutr lawng Michif (Keeping our talk Michif), Métis Provincial Council of British Columbia, Richmond, B.C., Mar 5-7, 2004 (Personal notes).
91 Ibid.
93 Laura Burnouf, “Indigenous Language Rejuvenation” (Personal notes).
95 Peter Bakker, “Michif Curriculum Development,” Aen kwa ney taa maak nutr lawng Michif (Keeping our talk Michif), Métis Provincial Council of British Columbia, Richmond, B.C., Mar 5-7, 2004 (Personal notes).
96 Ibid.
98 Ibid.