The use and distribution of Michif complementizers in oral stories: An example of storywork in Linguistics

This presentation will explore some findings of the early stages of a long-term effort to learn, explore and study the intricacies of Michif morphosyntax, semantics and pragmatics through storywork, i.e. the study of narratives anchored in Indigenous methodologies (Archibald 2008; Archibald et al. 2022). More specifically, it delves into the use and distribution of complementizers in the (mixed) Michif conjunct order in oral stories shared by speakers from the Ste. Madeleine community in Manitoba, Canada.

The Michif (Métis) are a post-contact Indigenous people whose traditional homeland extends across the Medicine Line, from Rainy Lake in the East to the Rocky Mountains in the West; and from the Missouri River in the South to the northern Canadian treeline in the North. Born from generations of intermarriages between (typically) French men and Plains Indigenous women, Michif families came to speak language variations which reflected the intense contact between their two parent cultures. The term Michif often refers to a language which incorporates French-source noun phrases and Plains Cree-source verb phrases, spoken by many Michif families across the homeland.

Similarly to other Algonquian verbal structures, the Michif verb system is divided into three main orders (Bakker 1997; Gillon and Rosen 2018), namely the imperative order, the independent order (typically used in main clauses and closed-ended questions), and the conjunct order. However, unlike its parent language Plains Cree, the Michif conjunct order only occasionally occurs in main clauses (Bakker 1997; Rosen 2007; Gillon and Rosen 2018), surfacing mostly in open-ended questions, relative clauses and subordinate clauses.

In Bakker (1997) and Mazzoli (2021), complementizers occupy the first slot in the conjunct verb template, and a few authors (Rosen 2007; Gillon and Rosen 2018; Bakker and Papen 2020) have provided general interpretations for their particular use in Michif (see table below). Through a qualitative study of oral narratives recorded in 2017 and 2018, these interpretations can be developed further to link the occurrence of these complementizers to aspectual and modal contexts:

Table 1: Previous and proposed interpretations of Michif complementizers

	Conjunct markers	Previous interpretations	Morphosyntactic/ pragmatic context in oral stories
chi/ shi	/tʃɪ/~/ʃɪ/	- Purpose (PURP) (Rosen 2007) - Future subordinator (Bakker and Papen 2020)	Event modality : - Deontic - Dynamic - Purposive - General possibility
aen	/ɛ̃/	- Complementizer (COMP) (Rosen 2007) - General subordinator (Bakker and Papen 2020)	Propositional modality : - Epistemic - Evidentiality Imperfective aspect: - Habitual - Progressive - Non-progressive
kaa	/ka:/	- Relativizer (REL) (Rosen 2007; Gillon and Rosen 2018; Bakker and Papen 2020)	Relativizer Perfective aspect

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A detailed understanding of these complementizers is a key component of verb structure and serialization, and is necessary for achieving fluency in the language. In my experience working with community members to develop and deliver classes and materials for the language, one of the most challenging aspects of its grammar and sentence structure for students has been the distribution of use of complementizers and the conjunct order as a whole. As such, we hope that this growing body of work can contribute to the development of more detailed resources on this particular aspect of the language and many more to come, as well as promote research through storytelling and oral stories as a form of collaborative work.

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