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## AN OVERVIEW OF MÉTCHIF ADJECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

Métchif is well known to have its vocabulary and syntax split between French and Plains Cree. At first approximation, the verbs are from Cree and the noun phrase is from French, including the adjectives. This paper presents a detailed account of adjectives and adjective phrases in Métchif.

### Résumé

Le vocabulaire et la syntaxe du mitchif, on le sait, sont répartis entre le français et le cri des plaines. En gros on peut dire que les verbes sont issus du cri des plaines et le syntagme nominal, y compris les adjectifs, du français. Cet article offre une analyse détaillée des adjectifs et des syntagmes adjectivaux en mitchif.

Métchif is well known to have a vocabulary (and syntax) split between French and Plains Cree (Rhodes 1976, Bakker 1997, among others). At first approximation, the verbs are Cree and the nouns are French. More accurately the noun phrase is French, although Cree deictics are used. Other than the nouns and articles, the other French components of the noun phrase are the adjectives. There is only a little in the literature on Métchif adjectives. There is a brief section in Rhodes (1977) preliminary grammar sketch. A similarly brief section is given in Bakker (1997). A slightly fuller discussion can be found in Bakker and Papen (1996). The purpose of this paper is to give an expanded discussion of the points raised in those works.

The basic noun phrase construction in Métchif is summarized in (1).

### (1) Noun phrase structure<sup>1</sup>

NP = determiner - quantifier - article - pre-nominal modifier(s) - N - post-nominal modifier(s) - relative clause

Examples showing forms in the various slots are given in (2).<sup>2</sup>

(2)	determiner	quantifier	article	pre-nominal modifier(s)	N	post-nominal modifier(s)	relative clause
	<i>awa</i> this.AN.SG		<i>le</i> the.M.SG		<i>châr</i> car		'this car'
		<i>sept</i> seven	<i>les</i> the.PL		<i>chaise</i> chair		'seven chairs'
			<i>un</i> a.M.SG		<i>bras</i> arm	<i>câsé</i> broken	'a broken arm'
			<i>l'</i> the.M.SG=		<i>homme</i> man		<i>kâ-wîwit</i> REL-he.marries 'the bridegroom'
	<i>trouas</i> three		<i>les</i> the.PL	<i>p'chit</i> small	<i>zoie</i> goose		'three goslings'
			<i>un</i> a.M.SG	<i>p'chit</i> small	<i>t'oiseau</i> bird	<i>jaune</i> yellow	<i>kâ-nakamot</i> WHO-he.sings 'a canary'

Nouns, whether of French or Cree origin bear the grammatical gender of both French (masculine or feminine) and Cree (animate or inanimate). All four combinations are possible. In general the animacy of a Métchif noun is the same as that of the Cree noun of corresponding meaning.<sup>3</sup> Nouns of Cree origin are all masculine unless they refer to notionally feminine animates.

(3) (a) nouns of French origin

- Une roche awa.* 'This is a rock.' (fem.-an.) PC *asiniy* (an.)  
*Un ouagon awa.* 'This is a wagon.' (masc.-an.) PC *otâpân* (an.)  
*Une maison ôma.* 'This is a house.' (fem.-inan.) PC *wâskahikan* (inan.)  
*Un fîsi' ôma.* 'This is a gun.' (masc.-inan.) PC *pâskisikan* (inan.)

(b) *Un tahkwaminân awa.* 'This is a chokecherry.' (masc.-an.) MF *la graine* (fem.)

- Un panachân awa.* 'This is a nestling.' (masc.-an.) SF *oisillon* (masc.)  
*Un pakân ôma.* 'This is a nut.' (masc.-inan.) SF *noix* (fem.)  
*Un mêtawâkan ôma.* 'This is a toy.' (masc.-inan.) SF *jouet* (masc.)

As in Standard French there are adjectives that have morphology to show that they agree with the nouns they modify in (French) gender. The list is given in (4).

(4)		masculine	feminine
	'pretty'	<i>beau</i>	<i>belle</i>
	'blond'	<i>blond</i>	<i>blonde</i>
	'good'	<i>bon</i>	<i>bonne</i>

'short'	<i>court</i>	<i>courte</i>
'foolish'	<i>fou</i>	<i>folle</i>
'fat'	<i>gras</i>	<i>grasse</i>
'big'	<i>gros</i>	<i>grosse</i>
'damned'	<i>maudjit</i>	<i>maudjite</i>
'first'	<i>promier</i>	<i>promière</i>
'little'	<i>p'tchit</i>	<i>p'tchite</i>
'old'	<i>vieux</i>	<i>vieille</i>
'evil'	<i>vilain</i>	<i>vilaine</i>

Some examples are given in (5).

(5)	<i>le beau printemps</i>	'the beautiful springtime' <i>m</i>
	<i>une belle robe</i>	'a nice dress' <i>f</i>
	<i>un p'tchit poisson</i>	'a little fish' <i>m</i>
	<i>une p'tchite bande</i>	'a small group' <i>f</i>
	<i>un gros lit</i>	'a big bed' <i>m</i>
	<i>une grosse breme</i>	'a dense fog' <i>f</i>

However most Métchif adjectives have no agreement forms even if their Standard French cognates do.

(6)		Métchif	general Canadian
			m.                      f.
	'low'	<i>bas</i>	<i>bas</i> <i>basse</i>
	'white'	<i>blanc</i>	<i>blanc</i> <i>blanche</i>
	'hot'	<i>chaud</i>	<i>chaud</i> <i>chaude</i>
	'clean'	<i>nette</i>	<i>net</i> <i>nette</i>

A few Métchif adjectives have variants that are leftovers from lost agreement. These are true variants in the speech of many speakers, although some speakers have settled on one form or the other.

(7)		Métchif	general Canadian
			m.                      f.
	'dry'	<i>seque/sèche/chèche</i>	<i>sec</i> <i>sèche</i>
	'soft, tame'	<i>doux/douce</i>	<i>doux</i> <i>douce</i>

Examples are given in (8).

(8)	<i>le bon bouas chèche</i>	'some nice dry wood'
	<i>l'eau douce ~ l'eau doux</i>	'soft water'

As first observed by Bakker and Papen (1996), the adjectives that retain their historical agreement forms within noun phrases are all in the class of adjectives that must occur before the noun.

As is indicated in the structural summary in (1), adjectives can appear in

two different places in the noun phrase. The difference between pre-nominal and post-nominal is entirely a property of each individual adjective. It is unclear whether there are any adjectives that can appear in both positions.<sup>4</sup>

Most modifiers are post-nominal.

- (9) *un chat **savage*** 'raccoon' (lit. 'wild cat')  
*le blandinde **jaune*** 'sweet corn' (< *blé d'Inde*)

That includes borrowed modifiers borrowed from English.

- (10) *un truck **pickup*** 'pickup truck'  
*un vieux **smart*** 'a wise old man'

The list of pre-nominal modifiers is short. The most common ones are given in (11). Notice that the liaison forms don't always have the etymological consonant, and that the adjectives with nasal final vowels in the masculine form do not denasalize in liaison contexts. This is why we treat the liaison consonant as a prefix (cf. Morin 2003 for Standard French).

- (11) (a) adjectives with agreement and liaison forms

masculine	liaison	feminine
le <b>beau</b> printemps 'the beautiful springtime'	un <b>belle</b> l'homme 'a handsome man'	une <b>belle</b> journée 'a beautiful day'
un <b>bon</b> tchoeur 'a good heart'	un <b>bon</b> n'homme 'a real man'	la <b>bonne</b> santé 'good health'
un <b>gros</b> trou 'a cave'	une <b>gros</b> n'étoile 'a planet (lit. 'big star')	une <b>grosse</b> çaise 'an armchair'
un <b>p'tchit</b> laque 'a pond'	un <b>p'tchit</b> t'oiseau 'a small bird'	une <b>p'tchite</b> ville 'a small town'
son <b>promier</b> 'oyage 'its maiden voyage'	—	la <b>promière</b> yerre 'the first world war'
le <b>vieux</b> portrait 'the old picture'	le <b>vieux</b> l'eau 'the old water'	une <b>vieille</b> fille 'a spinster'
le <b>vilain</b> bout 'the bitter end'	un <b>vilain</b> n'histoire 'a dirty story'	une <b>vilaine</b> tempête de tonneur 'a terrible thunder- storm'
—	—	la <b>maudjite</b> femme

- (b) pre-nominal adjectives with no agreement forms

masculine	feminine
un n'aut'e nombre 'another number'	l'aut'e s'maine 'next week'
un pauvre blanc 'a poor whiteman'	la pauvre besoin 'rotgut'

un grand 'oyage 'a tour'	une grand natte 'a rug, big mat'
un vrai mirac'e 'a real miracle'	une vrai méchante 'a real bitch'
au chaque bord 'on each side'	---
un jenne garçon 'a young boy'	une jenne dinde (SF jeune) 'a young turkey'

Among the non-agreeing adjectives, only *grand* has liaison forms. In one frozen expression, given in (12a), the consonant is etymological. In all other cases the liaison consonant is *n*, even where there are plurals. It should be noted that some speakers have the plural liaison prefix *z* as an option, as in (12c).

- (12) (a) *grand t'école* 'high school'  
 (b) *un grand n'areiller* 'a big pillow, a bolster'  
*un grand n'éclaire* 'a lightning bolt'  
*le grand n'arloge* 'the grandfather clock'  
*les grand n'aidjuille* 'the big needles' (cf. *les z'aidjuille*)  
 (c) *les grand z'enfant* 'the grown children'

With agreeing adjectives, the liaison consonants are only rarely non-etymological, as shown in (13).<sup>5</sup>

- (13) (a) *un p'tsit n'assiette d'or* 'a small gold dish'  
 (b) *un p'tsit t'animal* 'a little animal'  
*un p'tchit t'ange* 'a cherub, little angel'  
*mon p'tsit t'argent* 'my pin money'  
*le p'tsit t'enfant* 'the little child'  
*le p'tchit t'oiseau* 'the bird'<sup>6</sup>  
 (c) *les p'tsit z'enfant* 'the little children'  
*les p'tchit z'oiseau* 'the birds'  
*les p'tsit z'agnion* 'the leeks'  
*les p'tsit z'aidjuille* 'the little needles'  
 (d) *les bon z'enfant* 'the good children'  
*les bon z'ami* '(the) good friends'

Métchif adjectives can also be used predicatively.

- (14) *Il est riche.* 'He's rich.'  
*Il est vide la boîte de poivre.* 'The pepperbox is empty.'  
*Il est cru la viande.* 'The meat is raw.'

However, the kinds of meanings expressed in by predicative adjectives frequently show up instead as Cree verbs.

- (15) *Li zâbre mishkitiw.* 'The tree is big.'  
*Nki-âhkoshin.* 'I got sick.'  
*La boîte kishikwan.* 'The box is heavy.' (PC *kosikwan*)

In many cases there are fully synonymous alternatives, one using a Cree verb the other using a French adjective, as shown in (16).

(16)	Cree verb	French predicative adjective	
	<i>La boîte de savon shīkwāw.</i>	<i>La boîte de savon il est vide.</i>	'The soap box is empty.'
	<i>La robe shāpopayiw.</i>	<i>La robe il est mouillé.</i>	'The dress is wet.'
	<i>Le vieux kīshkwēw.</i>	<i>Le vieux il est fou.</i>	'The old man is crazy.'
	<i>Nipiw l'homme.<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Il est mort l'homme.</i>	'The man is dead.'
	<i>Ton capot wīnan.</i>	<i>Ton capot il est sale.</i>	'Your coat is dirty.'

<sup>1</sup> There is an alternate form *nipow* from Ojibwe.

Occasionally there are subtle semantic differences between the Cree verb and the corresponding French predicate adjective. Sometimes the French version bears the marked semantics; sometimes the Cree version does.

(17)	Cree Verb	French predicative adjective
	<b><i>Ntāhkosin.</i></b>	<b><i>J'est malade.</i></b>
	'I'm sick'	'I'm under the weather.'
	<b><i>Kawikīhkāw.</i></b>	<b><i>Il est vieux.</i></b>
	'He's really old.'	'He's old.'

A number of adjectives that show no agreement in noun phrases, nonetheless have agreement forms when used predicatively, as in (18).

(18)	<i>Le vieux il est fou.</i>	'The old man is crazy.'
	<i>Le vieille il est folle.</i>	'The old woman is crazy.'

Some examples of post-nominal adjectives that have agreement forms when they are used predicatively are given in (19).

(19)	masculine	feminine	gloss
	<i>fou</i>	<i>fol</i>	'foolish, crazy'
	<i>gras</i>	<i>grasse</i>	'fat'
	<i>blond</i>	<i>blonde</i>	'blond'

Adjectives can be freely used as nouns, especially if they refer to humans or animals. Some examples are given in (20). If the adjective in question has a predicative agreement form, then the nouns it forms take the gender of the referent. In a few cases there are idiomatic formations, as in (21).

- (20) *un riche* 'a rich man'      *une riche* 'a rich woman'  
*un p'tchit* 'a boy baby'      *une p'tchite* 'a girl baby'  
*un gros* 'a fat man'      *un gros* 'a fat woman'  
*un vieux* 'an old man'      *une vieille* 'an old woman'
- (21) *un blond* 'a sorrel (horse)<sup>8</sup>      *sa blonde* 'his girlfriend/mistress'<sup>9</sup>  
*le gras* 'fat'

In (22) some examples of adjectives used as nouns are given in full sentence context.

- (22) *Le tremble c'est le premier les feuille ê-ayât dans le printemps.*  
 'The aspen is the first to sprout in the spring.'  
*C'est comme un fou ê-itôtahk.*  
 'He acts dumb.'  
*No kishkêyistamiyw sa femme une blonde ê-yâwât.*  
 'His wife doesn't know he has a mistress.'

Métchif color terms are adjectives, but they have a distinctive syntax, in that they can be compounded, yielding a very rich set of terms. The basic terms are given in (23).

- (23) *rouge* 'red'  
*jaune* 'yellow'  
*vert* 'green'  
*bleu* 'blue'  
*violet* 'purple'  
*chacoualat* 'brown'  
*brun* 'brown'  
*noire* 'black'  
*blanc* 'white'  
*gris* 'gray'

The two terms for 'brown' are different, in that *brun* is the preferred term for the brown hair or fur color. A sampling of some of the compounded terms is given in (24).

- (24) *blanc jaune* 'off-white'  
*bleu vert* 'aqua'  
*bleu bleme* 'azure'  
*brun rouge* 'wine-colored, maroon'  
*chacoualat jaune* 'tawny'  
*crème blanc* 'platinum'  
*jaune brun* 'color of old gold'  
*jaune noire* 'dark yellow'  
*jaune vert* 'pea green'  
*noire violette* '(dark) purple'  
*rouge chacoualat* 'auburn, reddish brown'  
*vert jaune* 'olive green'



*vialette rouge* 'cherry-red'

There can even be doubly compounded forms as in (25).

(25) *bleu vialette noire* 'royal bleu'

Finally color adjectives can be reduplicated to indicate intensity, as in (26).

(26) *noire noire* 'pitch black'  
*rouge rouge* 'scarlet'

Other adjectives can be reduplicated, as well, with the same semantics.

(27) *p'tchit p'tchit* 'tiny' < *p'tchit* 'small' (*p'tchite p'tchite* f.)  
*vieux vieux* 'ancient' < *vieux* 'old' (*vieille vieille* f.)

Métchif derives adjectives from both noun and verb roots. Some have agreement forms in predicative positions.

(28) denominal

- (a) N-*eux* m., -*euse* f.  
*narveux* 'nervous' < *nerf* 'nerve', *narveuse*  
*plumeux* 'feathery' < *plume* 'feather'  
*joyeux* 'joyful' < *joie* 'joy'  
*courageux* 'courageous' < *courage* 'courage'  
*amoureux* 'loving' < *amoure* 'love'  
*morveux* 'snotty' < *morve* 'snot'
- (b) N-*é* (common gender)  
*cârré* 'square' < *cârre* 'square'  
*bârré* 'striped' < *bârre* 'stripe'  
*fleuré* 'flowered' < *fleur* 'flower'
- (c) N-*u* (common gender)<sup>10</sup>  
*pointchu* 'pointed' < *point* 'point'  
*poilu* 'hairy' < *poile* 'hair'

Deverbal adjectives are participles in French. It's somewhat difficult to classify these forms, since many of the etymological past participle forms would be homophonous with infinitives and many speakers lack the French verbs.

(29) deverbal

- (a) V-*é*/N-*i*/V-*u* (historically past participles)  
*agité* 'upset' < ?*agiter* 'to upset'  
*profité* 'profited' < ?*profiter* 'to profit'  
*béni* 'blessed' < *béni* 'to bless'  
*fini* 'finished' < ?*fini* 'to finish'

- vu* 'seen' < *'oir* 'to see'  
 (b) V-ant ppl.  
*restant* 'remaining' < *?rester* 'to remain'

There are a few examples of anarthrous noun phrases serving as modifiers.<sup>11</sup>

- (30) *un chevreux tcheue noire* 'black tail deer'  
*un pistolet six coup* 'six shooter'  
*une machine battage* 'harvester'

Metchif adjectival phrases are relatively simple. The basic structure is given in (31).

- (31) AP = adv - adj - complement

The one complexity is that sometimes the complements licensed by adjectives can be extraposed. All AP's are either predicative, as in the most complex of adjectival phrases is the comparative. There are two synthetic comparatives given in (32).

- (32) *meilleur* 'better'  
*pire* 'worse'

Normally, comparatives are analytic, and as suggested by the glosses comparatives can be given a superlative reading in the scope of a definite article or a possessive, as in (33b).

- (33) (a) *plus gros* 'larger/largest'  
*plus court* 'shorter/shortest'  
*plus haut* 'higher/highest'  
*plus cheap* 'cheaper/cheapest'  
*plus bon* 'better' (alternant for *meilleur*)  
 (b) *le plus meilleur* 'the best m'  
*la plus jali* 'the prettiest f'

There is also a Cree alternative for the comparative, *nawat*.

- (34) *nawat bon* 'better' (alternant for *meilleur*)  
*nawat large* 'wider'  
*messe nawat* 'thinner' (SF *mince*) = *plus messe*

However, *nawat* is external to the adjective phrase. In fact, if the adjective phrase is functioning as a noun modifier, the *nawat* can either follow or precede the NP, as in (35).

- (35) *un gros cake nawat* 'a bigger cake'  
*nawat les bon gage* 'better wages'

Comparatives license a basis of comparison as their complement. There are two



*Kischi* also has a postpositional usage with the sense 'specifically'.

(41) *Ntawéyistam êkwânima kischi*. 'She wants **that particular one**.'  
(*êkwânima* 'that one')

*Kischi* also belongs to a small class of forms cognate with Plains Cree pre-nouns that can modify noun phrases with adjectival meanings and specific (although not necessarily definite) readings.<sup>12</sup>

(42) *Kischi grand choge ê-shistâchik kêkway êkwa*. 'It's a **great thing** the way the make stuff now.'

<i>Mishi la job anima</i>	'That's a <b>big job</b> .'
<i>napaki le poisson</i>	'that <b>flat fish</b> '

The adjective *plein* licenses a complement. The construction has two variants. In one the complement is a *de* + N phrase as exemplified in (43). In the other the complement is a definite NP as in (44).

(43)	<i>plein de lente</i>	'full of lice'
	<i>plein de huile</i>	'oily'
	<i>plein de maladji</i>	'disease-ridden'
	<i>plein de trou</i>	'riddled with holes'
	<i>plein de sang</i>	'bloody'

(44)	<i>plein le sable</i>	'sandy, full of sand'
	<i>plein la joie</i>	'joyful'
	<i>plein le tache</i>	'polka-dotted'
	<i>plein le foin</i>	'filled with hay'

There is also a measure construction with *plein* as exemplified in (45).

(45)	<i>pleine bouche</i>	'mouthful' (MF <i>bouche</i> is Sunday French <sup>13</sup> )
	<i>pleine yeule</i>	'mouthful' (SF <i>gueule</i> '(animal) mouth', MF 'mouth')
	<i>pleine main</i>	'handful'
	<i>pleine verre</i>	'glassful'

The measure construction goes in the quantifier slot of the NP, as shown in (46).

(46) *une plein n'assiette les pataque* 'a plateful of potatoes'

Métchif negates adjectives with *pas*. It appears as if the negative also goes in the adverbial slot of the adjective phrase, as the examples in (47) suggest.

(47)	<i>pas dompté</i>	'wild, untamed'
	<i>pas trostable</i>	'untrustworthy, dishonest'
	<i>pas bien bon</i>	'mediocre'



same concepts using Cree morphology. Métchif adjectival syntax shows more integration of Cree and French than any other portion of Métchif grammar.

### Notes

1. This version of the noun phrase differs slightly from that in Bakker 1997, mainly in that I believe that preposed relative clauses and postposed demonstratives are related but distinct constructions.
2. The orthography used here is a more developed form of the orthography proposed Rhodes (1986). In quick approximation one spells Cree using Plains Cree orthography except that the sibilant is spelled *sh* and the affricate is spelled *ch*. Many speakers have *s* as an allophone of *h* after a front vowel. If the source of a particular example pronounces *s*, then spell it. (Dictionary practice is different.) The French is spelled with one eye toward standard French spellings, but all palatalization is spelled out and all sounded final consonants are followed by *e* or another consonant, except for final *r* in monosyllables.

The basic rationale for this approach to orthography is that the variety of Métchif represented here has two distinct phonologies, so it is only appropriate to represent them with distinct orthographies. There are a fair number of complexities, but basically the orthography is simplified from standard French and respects differences between words that have acrolectal pronunciation options and those that do not (Rhodes, 2009a). English borrowings are spelled as in English unless they are thoroughly Gallicized, in which case they are spelled as if they were French.

One important point needs to be made. Papen (2005) charges that I developed this approach to Métchif orthography for scholars. Nothing could be further from the truth. When I was doing fieldwork among speakers from Belcourt, I discovered, quite by accident, that my consultants could read this type of orthography without training. At the same time they were having serious difficulties using the Crawford orthography (Laverdure and Allard, 1983). This includes Patline Laverdure, one of the authors of the dictionary. My calculation was that if they needed help writing in any case, one should use an orthography that can be read by native speakers easily.

3. Animacy in Algonquian languages is only partly determined by semantics. No notional animate is grammatically animate, but notional inanimates can be grammatically animate. This includes rocks, tobacco, pipes (for smoking), certain plants, certain body parts, among other things.
4. The one example in the data base is *le principal manger de Métchif* 'the main Michif food' next to the usual order *le ch'min de fer principal* 'the mainline [railroad]'.  
 5. It should be noted that some nouns have restructured to include the liaison consonant. *nouque* (SF (mo)n oncle) *leu nouque*, *zoie* (SF < oie) *un zoie*. Some nouns vary by speaker or even for a single speaker *oiseau* ~ *toiseau*

~ *zoiseau, un zoiseau, un n'oiseau bleu ~ un toiseau bleu.*)

6. The Plains Cree word for 'bird' is diminutive in form but not in sense. Ojibwe, which is also a substrate for Métchif (Bakker, 1997, Rhodes, 2009b) has a fundamental distinction between big birds (*binesiwag*), mostly raptors, and small birds (*bineshiwag*), thrush-size on down. But both forms are build on historical diminutives.
7. There is an alternate form *nipow* from Ojibwe.
8. Presumably sorrel a light-reddish color counts as the lightest color for a horse.
9. This is a Canadian French usage.
10. The forms in *-u* are distinguished from the forms in *-eux* Métchif in two ways. The *-u* palatalizes a preceding *t* or *d*; the *-eux* does not, and by the fact that they lack feminine variants.
11. The term *anarthrous* is from Greek grammar. It means a noun phrase without an article.
12. The structure of Algonquian languages includes a class of constructions that prefix modifiers to verbs and nouns. They are called pre-verbs and pre-nouns. The constructions include a suffixal *-i* on the pre-word.
13. The notion of Sunday French is discussed in Rhodes 2009a. The term comes from the fact that the Métis community heard standard French in church every Sunday.
14. The Métchif word for nothing is *arien*, rather than *rien*.

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