



Languages of Métis

Foundational
Knowledge
Theme



**Rupertsland
Institute**
Métis Centre of Excellence

A publication of Rupertsland Institute



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Languages of Métis

Métis Culture & Traditions

Homeland History

Métis in Alberta

Métis Nation Governance

Introduction to Languages of Métis



Languages of Métis are unique embodiments and expressions of Métis identity and worldview. Students and teachers who cultivate an appreciation for languages used by the Métis can better understand and appreciate Métis culture.

This resource helps teachers to understand the importance of four languages traditionally spoken by the Métis. This will assist in fostering an education system that aligns with what Métis families hope their children will learn about their culture and identity.



All RCTL resources have been carefully developed by RLI's team of Métis educators.

From 2018 - 2021, RLI worked closely with Métis leaders, knowledge keepers, and community members to produce five Foundational Knowledge Themes to support educators as they grow in their understanding of authentic Métis history, stories, and perspectives.

The Foundational Knowledge Themes are a set of living documents.

RCTL will provide periodic updates to the document to ensure that Métis voices and stories are represented in the most accurate way.

Please ensure you are referring to the most current version.

*If you have something you would like considered for contribution or have feedback,
please contact education@rupertsland.org*



Rupertsland Institute (RI) is an affiliate of the Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA) and is incorporated as a not-for-profit organization under the Alberta Companies Act. The Métis Nation of Alberta assigned RLI mandates in education, training, and research.



Rupertsland Centre for Teaching and Learning (RCTL) was established in 2018 under RLI's Education mandate. The Education Team at RCTL develops Métis-centric comprehensive foundational knowledge resources, engaging lesson plans, meaningful professional development opportunities and authentic classroom learning tools that support all learners in all levels of education.

In particular, RCTL is committed to empowering educators to develop and apply foundational knowledge about Métis for the benefit of all students, as outlined in Alberta Education's [Leadership Quality Standard \(LQS\)](#) and Competency #5 of the [Teaching Quality Standard \(TQS\)](#).

All RCTL resources have been carefully crafted by RLI's team of Métis educators. RLI works closely with Métis leaders, knowledge keepers, and community members to produce resources that accurately present authentic Métis voices and stories in education. The staff at Rupertsland Institute are honoured that members of the Métis Nation in Alberta have determined RLI to be a trustworthy voice to share Métis stories in a meaningful, respectful way.

With support from many Métis and non-Métis educators, students, and others, the three leaders from Rupertsland Institute's K-12 Education Team have been primary contributors to the development of the Foundational Knowledge Themes.

Visit our website for more information, classroom resources, and more:

<http://www.rupertsland.org/teaching-learning/>

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Lisa Cruickshank

Lisa is a proud member of the Métis Nation of Alberta. Lisa has worked in the K-12 system for 20 years in various capacities such as Elementary Educator, Indigenous Education Consultant, Provincial Curriculum Development, and is currently the Director for Métis Education and Lifelong learning at Rupertsland Institute. Lisa is passionate and committed to advancing Métis education across the province and building capacity with Métis educators.



Billie-Jo Grant

Billie-Jo Grant is a strong Métis mother, educator, and leader who inspires others to have tough conversations and learn more to do better for ALL students. Her goal is to ensure that authentic Métis education is commonplace to guarantee that Métis are no longer the "forgotten people."



Kimberley Fraser-Airhart

Kimberley is a Métis woman from amiskwaciy-wâskahikan (Edmonton, AB). In Spring 2018, she began working with RLI as a primary author of the Foundational Knowledge Themes. Guided by stories and wisdom from her Métis community, Kimberley is passionate about addressing systemic injustices so that all students can see themselves in their education.



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Published in loving memory of Cecil Bellrose, a beloved father, grandfather, great-grandfather, husband, brother, and uncle in the Métis Nation. His legacy of leadership, kindness, and pride will not be forgotten.



A Letter from Alberta Métis Education Council

The publication of these themes for Métis education is the culmination of years of collaboration between the brilliant educators at Rupertsland Institute for Métis Excellence, the Alberta Métis Education Council (AMEC), and the Métis people of this province. We, the members of AMEC, are writing this letter to share with you our joy at the release of these materials. To help you understand, we need to share a little story...



It was a dream come true. In a few short years, the line item on a strategic work plan for the first-ever Associate Director, Métis Education, calling for a collective voice in Métis education had become a reality. Thanks to visionary leadership from Lorne Gladu, our CEO at Rupertsland Institute, the first advisory members were now seated around a conference table. The jagged mountain view out the Banff Centre windows was breathtaking yet the vision that was unfolding at the first meeting of the Alberta Métis Education Council was just as impressive. Over the next five years, this new council would meet regularly to carry out the urgent business of advocating for Métis education in Alberta. We met in different locations around the province, reinforcing the importance of place and honouring our diversity across the province. Our Council welcomed Ms. Betty Letendre, a well-respected *keytayak* (say: kay-tah-yahk) from the Edmonton region, who offered her thoughtful guidance on how to honour our people through spiritual and cultural traditions passed on from our ancestors. As we met in these places, feeling the traces of our ancestors and land's memory, we knew that it was now our responsibility to revitalize our history and our stories through our roles as Métis educators. With our vision of self-determination guiding us, our group emerged with a set of themes representing what we felt was important for others to know about us as Métis people living in Alberta.

This kind of intellectual sovereignty is a reflection of our ability to govern ourselves and to set out the priorities for our people. In saying so, we hearken back to one of the names for the Métis People, *otipemisiwak*, which means those who govern themselves. The work that is done in these themes begins with Métis ways of knowing, being, and doing as a foundation. Shaping resources and materials for educators, in partnership to build better understandings of the Métis in this province, is an undertaking that moves together with building healthy futures for Métis People in this province.

In looking back at how our vision of Métis education came to be, our insistence that Métis people will determine our vision of Métis education through our collective efforts and talents has remained our guiding vision. In respecting our traditional ways, we honour our ancestors; in respecting our present circumstances, we honour our resilience; and in respecting our educational efforts, we honour our future generations.

It is our tremendous honour to witness the fruition of this dream.

Alberta Métis Education Council

Preston Huppie (MEd), Council Chair: Indigenous Education/Learning Leader, Calgary Board of Education

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Letter of Support from Métis Nation of Alberta

Dear Fellow Education Partners,

It is with great pleasure that I write this letter to support Rupertsland Institute's (RLI) publication of Foundational Knowledge Themes from the Education Division. I would like to thank the RLI Education Team for its vision in putting together a publication of Foundational Knowledge Themes to advance Métis Education in Alberta. These themes encompass the elements of "UNDRIP" and moving towards fruition under articles 14 & 15 whereas: **"Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information (15)."** In addition, this work reflects the *Calls to Action* #62, where **"We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to ... create age-appropriate curriculum on [...] Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada."** Through the sharing of accurate Métis historical and contemporary stories within these themes, the Métis Nation of Alberta is supported in its institutional capacity toward self-government.

Most importantly, I see the value of informing teachers and all educators about the Métis Nation and how education is critical to reconciliation. It is our desire that Métis citizens and all people finally learn about the rightful place of the Métis Nation and its role in Canadian history. With the implementation of Métis Education in Alberta, our Métis children understand their distinct culture and history, and the key role that the Métis people have played in the development of Canada. I am very proud of Rupertsland Centre for Teaching and Learning and its role in developing comprehensive Métis authentic education lesson plans with engaging resources for all learners in Alberta. Métis history and heritage play a large role in the history of Canada, and it is important that all learners have access and benefit from Métis education.

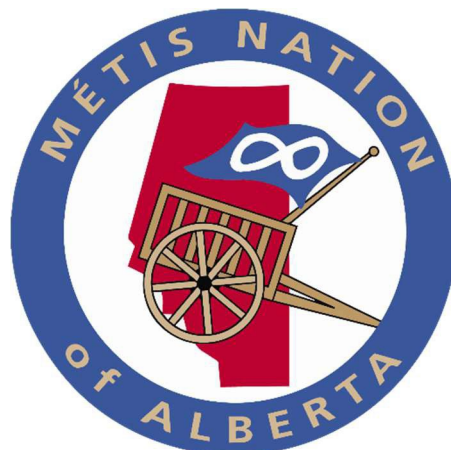
Since, acquiring the K-12 mandate in 2012, RLI has had huge success under the *MNA-GOA Framework Agreement*. RLI has also demonstrated effective and accountable governance and positive productive relationships, which are two key business plan goals of the Métis Nation of Alberta.

I am very thankful to the large group of knowledge keepers including past and current MNA Provincial Council members, and senior Métis Nation staff that have taken such a huge interest and have passionately shared their extensive knowledge to ensure that the five foundational knowledge themes are accurate.

These themes will have a positive impact on all teachers' pedagogical approaches to incorporating Métis education in their classrooms. Métis students will see themselves in their school settings and the classroom and learn the true history from the Métis perspective of historical and contemporary events. Most importantly Métis learners will identify with the strength of their Nation, and this will serve to enhance their sense of identity and will support pride in who they are and where they come from.

Sincerely,

President Audrey Poitras





Acknowledgements

The Métis Nation of Alberta is an Indigenous organization that passionately serves and cares for its people. The creation of these resources would not have been possible without the incredible support from many determined scholars, leaders, educators, and community members who are committed to seeing a strong, positive future for the Métis Nation. They are committed to ensuring that the Métis story is told accurately so that their children can live free, empowered futures as Métis Nation citizens.

The dedication and tenacious vision of the **Alberta Métis Education Council** led to the establishment of this project.

Marsee

(say: mar-see)

kininanaskomitinawaw

(say: ki-na-na-skohm-tih-nah-wow)

The Education Team at RCTL would like to thank the Rupertsland Institute Executive Team, its many supportive and encouraging colleagues, and the skilled RCTL staff that contributed through 2019, 2020, and 2021: **Jerome Chabot, Christina Hardie, Kate Gillis, Julia Callioux, Rylee Sargeant, Michelle Bowditch, Jillian Ekeberg, Kendell Semotiuk, Colette Tardif, and Sonia Houle.**

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Thank You

It has been an honor to work closely with the **Provincial Archives of Alberta, the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, Fort Vermilion Heritage Society, Lac La Biche Historical Society, the Archives of Manitoba, the Glenbow Archives, and the Musée Heritage Museum** throughout the development of this project. Partnering with them to locate and share the stories of the Métis community that are in their care has been instrumental in telling the Métis story. RLI also thanks Kel Pero and her team at KMP and Associates for their editing services.

Several leaders and community members from the **Métis Nation of Alberta** have strengthened this project in innumerable ways. RLI received support, research material, unique insights, and a variety of resources from many who work for the Métis Nation of Alberta.

Marsee nititwan

(say: mar-see nih-tih-twahn)

This resource has been developed in close partnership with experienced leaders who have served the Métis Nation throughout their entire lives. Our team is beyond grateful for the knowledge, wisdom, and resilient passion that the **Theme Review Group** has invested in this project.

President Audrey Poitras
Vice-President Daniel Cardinal
Brenda Bourque-Stratichuk
Karen Collins
Bev New
Cecil Bellrose
Marilyn Lizée
Norma Spicer



Merci

(say: mayr-see)

There have been many community members who have supported the development of this project by sharing insights, stories, photos, ideas, connections, and more with RCTL. They have shared their stories in a variety of publications, videos, and resources that have been essential in developing these Themes. The list of contributors below is in special thanks to those who shared their time and efforts to support educators in Alberta, and ultimately, Métis students.

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Daniel Cardinal; Gabriel Daniels; Lorne Gladu; Marilyn née Wells, Underschultz/Lizee; Mary Wells; and Zachary Davis. As primary academic sources for this document, the Education Team would like to extend a special thanks to Adam Gaudry, Jean Teillet, and Joe Sawchuk for their scholarship in Métis history and governance.



Who are the Métis?

Métis are a strong, Indigenous people who celebrate distinct kinship, traditions, languages, culture, politics, governance, and history. Métis are a collective of communities with a common sense of origin and destiny with kinship networks that span a historic homeland.¹ They share a common Métis nationalism that is distinct from other local identities.

Métis history begins with an ethnogenesis or emergence as a people and a Nation with a distinct ethnicity. Métis ethnicity has historical and ancestral connections to both First Nations and European relations. The unions between these two communities formed the first roots towards Métis nationhood. As communities of Métis people developed unique ways of being, doing, and knowing for themselves, they came together as a Métis Nation.

Understanding ethnogenesis as the origin of the Métis serves to counter the idea that Métis inherently means “mixed.” It is important that educators not reduce Métis identity to mixedness. Métis ethnogenesis acknowledges the beginnings of First Nations and European ancestors coming together, but also that by the mid-1700s the Métis had already developed into a distinct community with their own culture, traditions, and language.

Today Métis celebrate not just their historical roots and ethnogenesis, but also their distinct history, thriving peoplehood and vibrant culture. RCTL's Foundational Knowledge Resources invites educators to understand and celebrate Métis spirit, history, and culture, and their resilience as a people and a Nation.

Terminology to Consider...

Aboriginal

A legal term identifying the individuals and communities who were the original inhabitants to lands that became Canada.

Bois-Brule (say: bwah broo-lay)

This term is from the French language and translates literally to “burnt wood.” While originally the term had been used as a racially biased term, especially from the 18th to the 20th centuries, to refer to the diverse shades of skin color of Métis, it has been reclaimed by generations of Métis.

FNMI

An acronym often used to refer to the inclusion of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives in a dialogue or in writing. This misleading reference erases the distinctions of each Aboriginal group and so is considered offensive by many.

Half-Breed

A racially biased and derogatory term used, especially in the early 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, to refer to people of mixed heritage, often describing their Indigenous and European ancestries.



Indian

A term introduced by Euro-Canadian settlers to refer to people and communities that have ancestral connection to the lands of North, Central, and South America – especially those in North America. In Canada today, 'Indian' remains a legal term, referencing First Nations people under the *Constitution Act* and *Indian Act*.

Indigenous

A recent term describing the identity, culture, or heritage of anyone whose ancestors traditionally occupied a territory that has been colonized. There are three groups of Indigenous peoples in Canada: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. This term is better understood in Canada with the endorsement of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) in 2010.

Métis

This term has origins in the French language, translating to English as "mixed." During the ethnogenesis of the Métis Nation, the term Métis was used to describe the children of First Nations peoples and Euro-Canadian settlers. The generations who led the development of the Métis Nation reclaimed the term as a name for themselves. Today the term Métis properly refers to those who self-identify as Métis, are distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, are of historic Métis Nation Ancestry, and who are accepted by the Métis Nation.

Michif

A term used by the Métis to identify themselves as Indigenous people. The term is also the name of the distinct Indigenous language spoken by Métis.

Native

This term is used to associate someone or something with the place or circumstance of their origin. Some use it to refer to Aboriginal identity, but it does not account for distinct heritage, culture, or nationhood.

Otipemisiwak (say: oh-tih-pem-soo-wuk)

Another way of referencing Métis. The term is from the Cree language. It expresses the idea that the Métis lead, govern, care for, and own themselves. This was the name that the Cree kin of the Métis dedicated to them. Otipemisiwak is not fully understood in one English term or expression.

Pan-Indigenous

A way of referencing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit together as if they are one big group or Nation.



What is the Métis Homeland?

The Métis Nation has a generational Homeland that includes much of present-day Western Canada and northern sections of the United States. The specific areas include what is today: parts of southern Northwest Territories; parts of Ontario; Manitoba; Saskatchewan; Alberta; parts of British Columbia; parts of northern Montana; parts of North Dakota; and parts of Minnesota, USA.² Métis ancestry, history, culture, and languages are rooted in these lands.

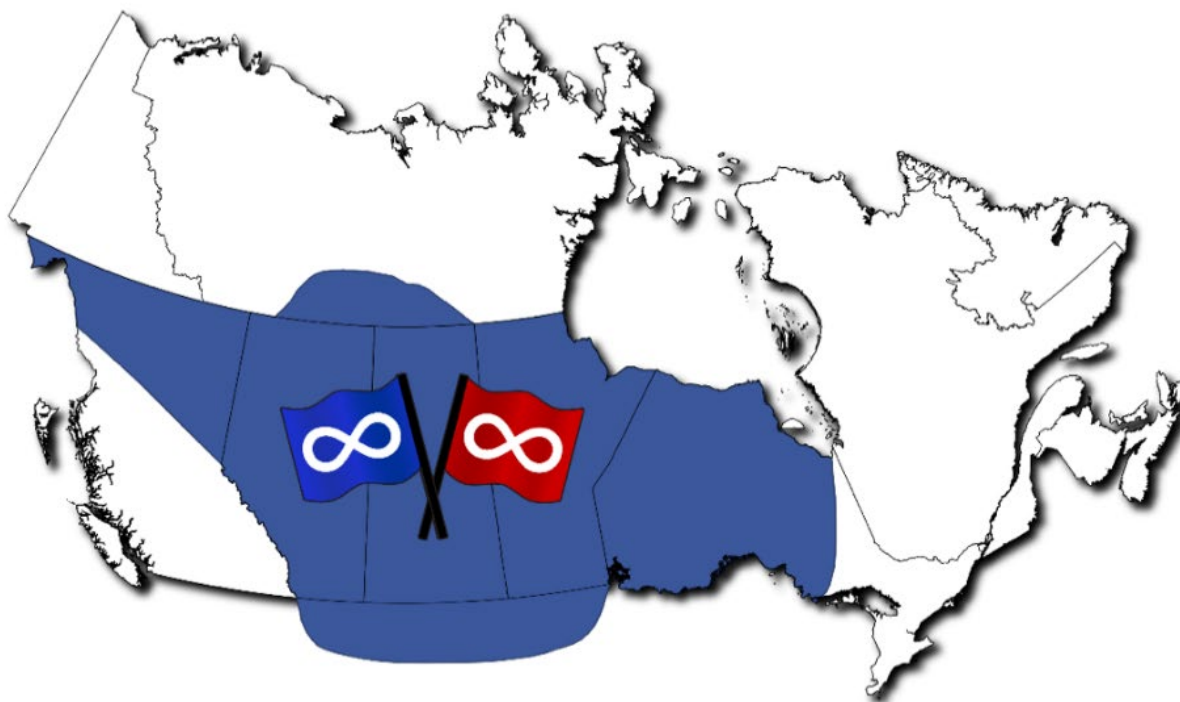


Figure 1 Métis Nation Homeland in Canada. Photo courtesy of the Métis Nation of Alberta, 2021.



Languages of Métis Vocabulary List

Term

Definition

Aboriginal

Descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. The peoples in Canada, according to Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, 1982, inclusive of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Each group is distinct and has its own history, culture, protocols, traditions, and languages. Used as a term when referring to government documents.

Adaptability

The ability to adjust to different conditions or circumstances. People who are adaptable are open and willing to try new things.

Bungee

(say: bun-gee or bun-jee)

Bungee is an endangered language that was spoken in some Métis communities in Manitoba.

Code-talkers

A name given to Indigenous soldiers who would communicate messages in their languages during the Second World War. This was an important asset because Indigenous languages are not Latin-based and enemy lines listening in could not interpret the message in their languages.

Community

A unified group of individuals; a group of people who share a living place or a common characteristic or identity.

Culture

Culture is the sum of the values, attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguish one group of people from another. Métis culture, traditions, and history guide us today in all our endeavors as a Nation of people.

Déjà vu

This French-origin phrase directly translates as “already seen.” When English speakers used the phrase, it means more than simply “already seen,” it describes the feeling that one has experienced a situation before. There is no equivalent word or term for this in English.

Demonstrative

(say: deh-mon-strah-tive)

A type of word pointing out or referring to and distinguishing it from others. For example: the; that; their

Government

The system that administers, manages, and delivers services to citizens in a community or given territory.

Homeland

The area known by individuals, communities, and nations as being home to their ancestors.



Hybrid

A “hybrid” is defined as two separate parts that remain divided even when brought together. The term hybrid is used to describe unnatural connections, and to describe non-human circumstances (such as with hybrid plants).

Identity

The individual characteristics by which a thing or person is recognized or known.

Indigenous

A term describing the identity, culture, or heritage of anyone whose ancestors traditionally occupied a territory that has been threatened by colonization. There are three groups of Indigenous peoples in Canada: Inuit, Métis, and First Nations. Each group is unique and has its own history, languages, cultural practices, political structures, and spiritual beliefs.

Kinship

A term referencing the sense of connection, relationship, and sense of responsibility to one another between family, extended family, friends, trading partners, and community members. The term often extends to natural and spiritual worlds, human and non-human, living and not living worlds.

Louis Riel

One of the Homeland Heroes of the Métis Nation, Riel was a prominent leader of the Métis through the late 19th century. He led several provisional governments in Red River, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. He also led Métis through two major resistance movements against the Government of Canada. Riel also was a founder of the province of Manitoba and was a twice-elected Canadian Member of Parliament. He was tried in Canadian courts and hanged on November 16, 1885.

Métis

Métis is enshrined in Section 35 of the 1982 Constitution Act (s.35(2)). The accepted definition of Métis as stated by the Métis National Council is: “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.”³

Michif

Michif is the distinct, Indigenous language of the Métis. In Alberta, this language draws, in varying degrees by dialect, from the French and Cree languages spoken by ancestors of Métis. It was first developed orally and was later made into a written language.

Multilingualism

The use of more than one language, either by an individual speaker or by a group of speakers.

Nationhood

National identity or independence.



Nehiyawewin

(say: neh-hee-yah-way-win)

The original name for the Cree language. This is an Indigenous language spoken by Cree, or Nehiyaw (say: neh-he-yow), people across Canada. It is a part of the Algonquian linguistic group, the largest Indigenous language group in Canada, and has ten distinct dialects.

Oral Transmission

Communication wherein language, knowledge, art, ideas, and cultural material is received, preserved, and transmitted orally from one generation to another.

Peoplehood

A sense of distinctive belonging among a group with common experiences and beliefs.

Perspective

A person's unique way of understanding and responding to the world based on his or her experience, community, beliefs, values, stories, languages, laws, ethics, and behaviors.

Settler

A person who moves to a new place with the intention to stay there. Most settlers impacting Métis communities through history are Euro-Canadians.

Syllabics

A form of script using combination of nine rotating symbols representing the oral Cree language in writing.

Touché

A French word often used in English to refer to a witty response to something someone has said or done. The word touché in French literally means "touched." The word touché is also often used to acknowledge a hit in a fencing competition.

Traditions

Long-standing customs that are an expression of values and identity.



Introduction

The languages traditionally spoken by **Métis** are unique embodiments of Métis worldviews, history, and **culture**. The unique experience of the Métis Nation is woven into the language. Across the Métis Nation, language reflects evolving diversity and **kinships**.

Four languages are traditionally spoken by Métis in Alberta: **Michif**, **nehiyawewin** (Cree; say: neh-hee-yaw-way-win),^a English, and Français (French).⁴ This book begins by exploring through a Métis lens how language is intimately connected with **identity** and **community**. It then proceeds to introduce each of the languages Métis speak in Alberta, with a focus on Michif. The book concludes with a glimpse into the work being done to preserve, protect, and revitalize the Michif language.

“Michif language is the essence of the [Métis] culture. If you learn the language, you will learn who we are as a people.”

—Dan Cardinal, Cree language instructor, personal correspondence with RCTL, May 11, 2018.

The benefits of teaching and learning languages in Albertan classrooms are manifold. Students who develop an appreciation for languages spoken by Métis are better able to understand Métis culture. Teachers who appreciate the importance of languages, and in particular, the relationship between language and identity, help to cultivate an education system that aligns with what Métis families hope their children will learn about their **peoplehood**.

The Importance of Language

Educators have the privilege of facilitating meaningful student engagement with Métis ways of knowing, being, and doing. This can be done by facilitating activities that explore Michif and other **Indigenous** languages used by the Métis. Through the mindful, informed selection of content and teaching methods, teachers can enhance their students’ understanding of the Métis worldview. Stories that are shared by teachers in their classrooms are an expression of the provincial curriculum they are empowered to deliver. The narrative behind *how* these stories are expressed—their choice of words, metaphors, reinforcing ideas, and the language they use to express these stories—determines the message about the Métis that learners internalize.

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^a The pronunciation of nehiyawewin may vary by region.



Languages Express Identity

Have you ever tried to share a story, explain a situation, or describe an emotional state and found it difficult to find just the right words to convey your meaning? Have you ever used a phrase from another language to express something that English could not fully express?

Consider the term **déjà vu** (say: day-jah voo)—an illusory feeling of having already experienced a present situation. *Déjà vu* is a French-origin phrase that translates literally as “already seen.” When English speakers use the phrase, however, it means more than simply “already seen.” It describes the whole unique phenomenon. No English word encapsulates the meaning of *déjà vu*.

déjà vu

touché

Another example is the French word **touché** (say: too-shay) when used by English speakers. The word *touché* in French literally means “touched,” and French speakers use the word *touché* to acknowledge a hit in a fencing competition. English speakers, though, say *touché* to refer to a witty response to something someone has said or done.

Similarly, languages spoken by Métis include words that are borrowed from both European and Indigenous languages. After being incorporated into the languages of Métis, these words and phrases have evolved to take unique Michif meanings, which are often distinct from what the words or phrases mean in the original European or Indigenous language. Michif, like any other language, developed to meet the evolving needs of its speakers. Incorporating words from other languages and imbuing them with Michif-specific meanings is one way that languages evolve.

Languages are reflections of a people’s heritage, community, culture, and **nationhood**. Understanding that language is an essential reflection of identity is key to understanding why Métis people value their traditional languages so highly.

For Métis people, knowing and using languages of Métis allows for a fuller expression of individual and community identity among members of the Métis Nation, and in relationship with others. Consider this story, shared by a Cree-speaking Métis, which eloquently articulates the mobilizing impact of knowing Cree.

"When I am at my place of employment or simply doing business, I think and work in English. But when I am in my community or with family and friends, I find that speaking and thinking in Cree gives me a better connection, a greater sense of well-being, and I am more compassionate with the people around me."

— Lorne Gladu, CEO of Rupertsland Institute, personal correspondence with RCTL, September 24, 2018.

Telling a story in Michif shares essential details of a community’s Métis identity because each language expresses details and ideas in unique ways. Métis culture and identity are best expressed using languages spoken by Métis.



Languages and Nationhood

From the genesis of the nation, Métis across the **Homeland** have been recognized for their ability to communicate in multiple Indigenous and European languages.⁵ Historic Métis **multilingualism** is connected to Métis relationally across the Homeland. Métis had kinship connections with other Métis,

Indigenous, and **settler** communities. These communities had a variety of languages, which Métis would know via their kinship with them. Intricately connected with that relationality is Métis employment as company middlemen and independent traders.⁶ The ability to command the languages of business partners was a historical strength of Métis among the international fur trade taking place in this land.

Historically, the Metis were the lifeblood of the west. Their ability to communicate in so many languages was incredibly useful in the many occupations of the Metis.

—Louis Riel Institute, *Speaking Michif-French: Teacher's Manual* (Manitoba: Louis Riel Institute, 2013).

The Importance of Métis Languages in World War II

The role of the Métis in facilitating the fur trade is well-known. Less well-known, however, are many of the contributions of Métis men during the Second World War. During the war, Métis and other Cree-speaking soldiers would communicate messages in the Cree language. This was an important asset because Cree was not a Latin-based language, and enemy lines listening in could not interpret the messages. This contributed to victories for Canadians and their allies. These soldiers were called **code-talkers**.

Charles “Checker” Tomkins was a Métis man, born in 1918 in Grouard, Alberta. Tomkins was one of the many Indigenous men who served in the Second World War.⁷ Frank Tomkins, his brother, shares his memory about their service as code-talkers during this war.

"First they did a little bit of training And then they were placed at different airports and then they'd send a message in Cree and of course the party on the other end would translate it back into English."

—Frank Tomkins, “Veteran Stories: Frank Tomkins, Army,” interview by The Memory Project, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/2752:frank-tomkins/>.

With any of the languages spoken by Métis, it is essential to consult trusted resources and/or collaborate with respected Métis community members, as they can help unpack the deeper meanings of Métis words that are not easily conveyed via English terminology.

In the quotation, Alma Desjarlais describes a common, and important, pedagogical approach that preserves Métis languages and lifeways. She advocates telling a story or concept first in the Indigenous language and then translating it into English. Words and phrases that are not easily translated require elaboration to help students understand the concepts in a familiar language first. It is important to communicate the knowledge encapsulated in languages of Métis to Métis people.

"[T]he 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."

—Alma Desjarlais, interviewed by Judy Iseke, “Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no.2 (2013): 103.



"How can you tell . . . [the importance of a language] in any other language but the language it was born [in]? You can't do it. There [are] no English words. . . . You can touch on the surface of it, but not the deep feeling and the way it was given to us."

—George McDermott, Alberta Métis leader, interviewed by Judy Iseke, "Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 2 (2013): 102.

Métis leaders and community members agree that it is important to tell stories in Indigenous languages. Many Métis stories encourage people to understand that life is sacred and that each person is a part of a whole; this may contrast with Western ways of knowing and being that separate secular and sacred knowledge and understandings.⁸ When Indigenous people share stories in Indigenous languages (either in full or in part) and when these stories are heard and understood, students can truly engage with an intertwining of humanity, spirit, identity, history, culture, and worldview.⁹

Encouraging Métis students to know and use stories presented in Indigenous languages is essential to fostering and celebrating a strong foundation in their Métis identity and culture.¹⁰ Students of any background who encounter Indigenous languages in Alberta schools can better understand Indigenous identities and cultures. By giving students an opportunity to learn Michif and other Indigenous languages, teachers can facilitate a deeper learning about the culture and identity of the Métis as the Métis know themselves.

Languages Traditionally Spoken by Métis

Multilingualism has long been an important attribute of Métis identity. Historically, Métis children across the Homeland learned Michif at home, often together with other languages, including nehiyawewin (Cree), English, or Français (French). Canadian schools taught European languages (and sometimes included learning other foreign languages, such as Latin).¹¹ These schools did not support students in maintaining their Indigenous languages. Today, Métis students in provincial schools learn in English and/or French, and may have the opportunity to learn other languages.





Geographical Complexities

Languages are rooted in specific geographical spaces and embedded within specific communities. The languages spoken by Métis have some things in common, but there is also significant diversity because each language has diverse regional roots.

"An older Métis man from Imperial Mills, Alberta once shared that the older generation he was around knew French, Michif, and Cree because they were moving around a lot. He shared that as the generations began to settle in different areas, their fluency traditions changed as they adopted the language of their area."

—Les Skinner, Métis community member, personal correspondence with RCTL in Edmonton, July 13, 2019.

Diversity within a language is not unusual. Consider the linguistic forms of English across Canada. An English speaker in Alberta is distinct from an English speaker in Newfoundland and Labrador. There are distinct ways of being characteristic to each geographical location, and, similarly, there are distinct ways of speaking in each location.

For the Métis, each language form has particular elements that are connected to its area of ancestry. There is also a relationship between geographic location and how Michif is spoken in Alberta. For example, some Métis families from the northern regions of Alberta self-identify as Cree speakers, whereas other Métis families elsewhere call their language “French-Cree.”

The variety of names referring to Michif is often indicative of the other languages within the community. For example, someone who speaks a dialect of Michif that is more Cree-dominant than French may identify as a Cree speaker, despite the inclusion of French-language components. Another Métis person may identify as a French-Cree speaker even though their spoken language is nearly identical to that of the person who describes their language as Cree. This example illustrates how different speakers understand their own linguistic patterns as distinct. Language is personal, dynamic, and multifaceted. Because it is so closely tied to identity, it is critical that outside categories not be imposed upon how people describe their language.

Developing an appreciation of the complexity of languages spoken by Métis is a good first step educators can take in expanding their foundational knowledge. This document is not designed to define how language works for Métis in Alberta. It is designed, rather, to empower educators with an understanding that will help them engage with the language traditions of Métis people in Alberta and better understand the diversity and importance of languages spoken by Métis students in their classrooms and at home.



Tom McCallum, a Métis community member, speaks Cree. In the quotation below, he shares how language inherently reflects identity. Consider how important it is to understand cultural meaning when learning about a language.

"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."

—Tom McCallum, interviewed by Judy Iseke, "Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2, no. 2, (2013): 101. Bolding added.

Français (French) and English

Français and English are also prominent languages traditionally spoken by Métis. Métis have ancestral kinship with people from First Nations and European Nations. The Métis who participated in the trade economy were fluent in European languages and served essential roles, such as entrepreneurs, traders, middlemen, and translators. Métis children learned English and Français in schools and churches. **Louis Riel** and many other Métis people went on to higher education, and were equipped with languages they used to challenge and interact with the Dominion of Canada's authorities and colonial leaders. English and Français remain prominent languages in Métis communities around Alberta today.

An Endangered Métis Language: Bungee

Bungee (say: bun-gee or bun-jee) is an endangered language that was spoken in some Métis communities of Manitoba. The focus of this work is specifically on the Métis in Alberta, and Bungee is not actively spoken in the Western regions.

Michif: A Unique Adaptation of Français and nehiyawewin

The Métis have a long history of adapting aspects of Métis familial cultures to suit the needs of their communities.¹⁴ Métis **adaptability** was instrumental to the formation of Métis peoplehood. The development of Michif is a concrete example of Métis adaptability. It is impossible to determine the exact date of the emergence of Michif as a language, but Métis scholars have narrowed the genesis of the language down to as early as the 1780s to 1790s.¹⁵ The spoken expression of both French nouns and Cree verbs developed into Michif, the distinct Indigenous language of the Métis. Michif is a tangible expression of the unique culture and identity of Métis people.

The creation of Michif was an "act of identity" in which a language was created for the expression of a new identity. . . . The creation of Michif was also an act of resistance. The newly emerged Métis identity and the new language symbolized a break with their parents and parent cultures.

Michif is the
"dialect and rhythm" of Métis
communities and families.

—Maria Campbell, *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2010), 2. Maria is a Métis author, filmmaker, broadcaster, playwright, and leader in Métis communities. She speaks Cree, Michif, Saulteaux, and English.

—Peter Bakker, "The Genesis of Michif," in *Contours of a People*, eds. Nicole St. Onge, Carolyn Podruchy, and Brenda MacDougall (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 2012), 179–180.



Oral, then Written

Michif was not originally a written language. It first developed orally and was later made into a written language. The first written forms of Michif date back to the early 1900s.¹⁶ The language was developed organically, without the institutional influences of education systems and **government**, which typically impose standardization in Latin languages.¹⁷ As a result of the oral, community-based development of this language, Michif is diverse and complex in its dialects and structure. Métis have a number of different names for Michif across the Homeland, including those found in the word bubble.



A Language of Contact and Coming Together

Michif is a contact language that was developed exclusively by the Métis. “Contact language” refers to a language developed through the joining of settlers and Indigenous people.¹⁸ As Cree and Ojibway women married settler men, new communities were formed, and these communities developed a unique language. Communities of Indigenous and European families integrated their languages and together formed a language that was neither Indigenous nor European but uniquely Métis.

Michif, despite its French roots, draws upon the strength of the Indigenous languages and retains its relationship to Indigenous people.

—Judy Iseke, “Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 2 (2013): 107.

Michif, though fundamentally related to both French and Cree, is its own distinct language. People who are fluent in either French or Cree (or even both) may not fully understand Michif; Michif is, in this way, independent of the two parent languages.¹⁹

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.

—Judy Iseke, “Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 2 (2013): 99.

Michif is a contact language, not a **hybrid** language. A “hybrid” is defined as two separate parts that remain divided even when brought together. The term hybrid is used to describe unnatural connections and to describe non-human circumstances (such as with hybrid plants). It would be inaccurate to call Michif a hybrid language, since it is not comprised of two languages that are easily divided. Michif is a unified language with its own distinct culture and Nation.

It is important to remember that Michif has a distinct inherent value, and it is not “less Cree” nor is it “less French” than either of its parent languages. Michif is sometimes referred to as “poor French”²⁰ or as a “children’s language”²¹ because it emerged from the



joining of two language families. Both of these terms should be avoided, since they are marginalizing and connote that Michif is somehow a “lesser” language.

As the Michif language developed, Michif speakers gave equal honour and respect to both parent cultures and languages. This allowed for the Michif language to become established as a unique, balanced blend of each culture and language.²²

Michif Speaker Demographics

In 2016, 1,210 people in Canada reported being able to conduct a conversation in Michif.²³ Of these people, 810 identified themselves as Métis.²⁴

Statistics Canada reported in 2016 that most Michif speakers resided in Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.²⁵ In 2015, some Métis living in the northern United States also reported that they spoke Michif.²⁶

After the Red River Resistance, Louis Riel found solace and safety with his kinship and family in the United States during times of unrest in Canada.

One thing to consider is that Métis people who have taken themselves and their languages to other parts of the world are not recorded in Canadian Census data.

Michif Speaker Statistics

The 2016 Canadian Census found that, of Alberta’s 114,375 self-identifying Métis, only eighty people or fewer spoke Michif. Of those eighty Michif speakers, only ten families reported speaking Michif at home.

Across Canada, 465 people reported having Michif as their mother tongue, and 85 people stated that they spoke Michif at home.

The Métis Nation of Alberta suspects that these numbers may not reflect the actual number of Michif speakers in Alberta. They are currently working to provide a more accurate, updated number of the Michif speakers across Alberta.²⁷

Only a small proportion of Métis speak Michif, and they tend to be older. These numbers reveal just how important it is to invest time and money into revitalizing Michif in Métis communities. There is an ongoing effort among Métis in Alberta to revitalize the Michif language. Michif speakers and community members gather periodically to teach the language in regional classes. Resources for teaching and learning Michif are being produced across Alberta. As part of the revitalization effort, Rupertsland Institute provides support for educators in their effort to bring Michif into classrooms in meaningful ways. It is important that educators consider how they can empower their students with opportunities to learn and engage with the Michif language, which serves not only to revitalize this Métis language but also to expand students’ understanding of the Métis communities in Alberta.

Findings of the 2016 Canada Census

	Alberta	Canada
Mother Tongue	80	465
Spoken at Home	10	85
Knowledge of Michif Language	145	1,210

Statistics Canada, “Census Profile, 2016 Census,”
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>



Looking into Michif More Closely

This section gives educators a glance into the language structure of one dialect of Michif. It is not a comprehensive source for teaching the language. Teachers can use the visuals and information provided here to expose students to one Indigenous language and connect them to the languages they are using in school. The vocabulary presented below comes from Michif language resources, including Gabriel Dumont Institute's Heritage Michif dictionary, Norman Fleury's *Michif Dictionary 2013*, and the Michif To Go smartphone app.²⁸

In Heritage Michif, most nouns derive from French.

Michif	enn, aen li, la, le	hen, deu, trwaa	aen shyaen l'ikol
French	un, une le, la	un, deux, trois	un chien l'école
English	a, an the	one, two, three	a dog the school
	Articles	Numerals	Nouns

Most verbs, personal pronouns, and **demonstrative** pronouns are rooted in Cree.

Michif	nakamoo pimohtew piikishkwayhk	niiya kiiya wiiya	ooma oohiin
Cree	nikamo pimohte pikiskwe	nîya kîya wîya	ôma ôhi
English	sing walk speak	I/me you he/she	this one these
	Verbs	Personal Pronouns	Demonstratives



Michif sentence structure is similar to French sentence structure, with a fixed order:

Number – demonstrative – article – adjective – noun – adjective

Michif	saenk aakwaanikik oohiin mishow nwaayzoo bleu					
	saenk	aakwaanikik	oohiin	mishow/groo	nwaayzoo	bleu
French	"Cinq de ces gros oiseaux bleus"					
	cinq	ces	de	gros	oiseaux	bleus
English	"Five of those big blue birds"					
	five	those	of	big	birds	blue
	Number	Demonstrative	Article	Adjective	Noun	Adjective

Vocabulary Examples

Michif	nehiyawewin (Cree)	Français	English
haen	peyak	un	one
deu	nîso	deux	two
trwaa	nisto	trois	three
lawm	napew	homme	man
shyaen	atim	chien	dog
blawn	wâpiskâw	blanc	white
nakamouw	nikamo	chanter	sing



Michif Sentence and Phrase Examples

Hello

Taanishi

How are you?

Taanishi kiiya?

I am good, not bad

Ji Bayn,
nimanaandow

You can do it!

Kaa kaashkihtan

Thank you

Maarsii

Have a good day

Enn bonn zhroornii
ayahkun

Do you understand?

Ki nishtohtayn chiin?

No

Noo,
nimooya

See you later!

Kaawaapamatin
mina

Yes

Wii

Good Morning

Boon Matayn

Good Afternoon

Boon Apray Mijii

Good Evening

Boon Swayr



Indigenous Language Legislation in Canada

Michif is a recognized Indigenous language in Canada.

In June 2019, the *Indigenous Languages Act* was ratified to revitalize, reclaim, strengthen, and maintain Indigenous languages in Canada. This legislation was developed in collaboration with the Métis National Council, the Assembly of First Nations, and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and was informed by over fifty community engagement sessions held across the country.²⁹ The *Indigenous Languages Act* is significant because, in addition to its affirmation and recognition of Indigenous language rights, it also mandates long-term, sustainable funding for Indigenous languages in Canada.

The *Indigenous Languages Act* is, in part, a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (2015)³⁰ and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).³¹

TRC- Calls to Action

&

UNDRIP

13. We call upon the federal government to acknowledge that **Aboriginal** rights include Aboriginal language rights.

14. We call upon the federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following principles:

v. Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.

vii. The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal language revitalization and preservation.

viii. The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.

14.4 Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

14.5 Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

14.6 States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.



Conclusion

Facilitating language learning opportunities allow students to develop a deeper appreciation of the importance of Indigenous languages and a better understanding of Métis culture. How languages are taught in classrooms provides important and sometimes hidden details about identity and community. By demonstrating the relevance and importance of Indigenous languages, teachers can support their students by delivering the type of education Métis parents want for their children. Making space in the classroom for languages traditionally spoken by Métis creates pathways enabling students to learn more about themselves and their culture, and encourages Métis children to learn the languages that express their being.³²

As Tom McCallum explains, “in Michif we have our own names for ourselves that connect us to our culture and our knowledge system or worldview. The Métis know themselves, and their languages are some of the best ways to express it.”³³

By speaking the Indigenous language one is instantly connected to the language, community, culture, and worldview of Indigenous Peoples . . . 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.

—Judy Iseke, “Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 2 (2013): 109.



Notes

¹ Robert K. Thomas, "Afterward," in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, edited by Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1985), 245.

² Métis Nation of Alberta, "Background," <http://www.albertamétisgov.com/background/>.

³ Métis National Council, "National Definition of Métis and Acceptance Process," http://www.metisportals.ca/cons/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/national_defn_and_acceptance_process_february_2006_document.pdf; Métis National Council, "Citizenship," <https://www2.metisnation.ca/about/citizenship/>.

⁴ Peter Bakker, *A Language of Our Own: The Genesis of Michif, the Mixed Cree-French Language of the Canadian Métis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52–53.

⁵ Peter Bakker, "The Genesis of Michif," in *Contours of a People*, eds. Nicole St. Onge, Carolyn Podruchny, and Brenda MacDougall (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma, 2012), 172.

⁶ Irene Spry provides a brief yet comprehensive review of historical records, noting Métis language use as shared by Métis themselves and by visitors to Métis communities. Irene Spry, "The Métis and Mixed-Bloods of Rupert's Land before 1870," in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, eds. Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985) 98–99.

⁷ Heather Conn, "Charles Tomkins," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/charles-tomkins>.

⁸ Judy Iseke, "Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif: Disrupting Indigenous Language Shift," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 2 (2013): 104.

⁹ Donna M. Grandbois and Gregory F. Sanders, "The Resilience of Native American Elders," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 30, no. 9 (2009): 4.

¹⁰ Iseke, "Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif," 104.

¹¹ Fort McMurray Métis Local 1935, *Mark of the Métis* (Ottawa: Library and Archives Canada, 2012), 16.

¹² Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Languages in Canada*, 2011 Census of Population, Ser. 98-314-X2011003, Ottawa, 2011, https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-314-x/98-314-x2011003_3-eng.cfm.

¹³ Statistics Canada, *Canada [Country] and Canada [Country]* (table), *Census Profile*, 2016 Census, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001 (Ottawa: Government of Canada, November 29, 2017), <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>.

¹⁴ Leah Dorion and Darren Préfontaine, "Deconstructing Métis Historiography: Giving Voice to the Métis People," in *Métis Legacy*, eds. Lawrence Barkwell, Leah Dorion, and Darren Préfontaine (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 2000), 22.

¹⁵ Bakker, "The Genesis of Michif," 180.

¹⁶ Robert Papen, "The Heritage of Métis Language in Western Canada," *Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America*, http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/article-532/The_Heritage_of_M%C3%A9tis_Language_in_Western_Canada.html.

¹⁷ Papen, "The Heritage of Métis Language in Western Canada."

¹⁸ Iseke, "Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif," 96.

¹⁹ Bakker, *A Language of Our Own*, 160.

²⁰ Jennifer Brown, "Michif," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/michif>.

²¹ Bakker, *A Language of Our Own*, 96.

²² John Crawford, "Speaking Michif in Four Communities," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 3, no. 1 (1985): 49.

²³ Statistics Canada, *Canada [Country] and Canada [Country]* (table), *Census Profile*, 2016 Census.

²⁴ Statistics Canada, *Canada [Country] and Canada [Country]* (table), *Census Profile*, 2016 Census.

²⁵ Statistics Canada, *Canada [Country] and Canada [Country]* (table), *Census Profile*, 2016 Census.



²⁶ United States Census Bureau, "Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over: 2009-2013," October 2015, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>.

²⁷ Métis Nation of Alberta, personal communication with Rupertsland Institute Education Team, August 30, 2019.

²⁸ Gabriel Dumont Institute, "Heritage Michif Dictionary," https://www.metismuseum.ca/michif_dictionary.php, Norman Fleury, *Michif Dictionary 2013* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2013).

²⁹ Canadian Heritage, "Government of Canada Introduces Historic Legislation on Indigenous Languages," February 5, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/news/2019/02/government-of-canadaintroduces-historiclegislationonindigenous-languages.html>.

³⁰ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

³¹ UN General Assembly, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly*, October 2, 2007, A/RES/61/295, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/471355a82.html>.

³² Barbara MacNeil, "Literature for Emotion Socialization in Schools," *Global Studies of Childhood* 2, no. 2 (2012): 100.

³³ Iseke, "Negotiating Métis Culture in Michif," 106.