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Indigenizing the Structural Syllabus: The Challenge of Revitalizing Mi'gmaq in Listuguj

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Abstract: Mi'gmaq, an Algonkian language of northeastern North America, is one of nearly 50 surviving Indigenous languages in Canada that are usually not considered to be viable into the next century. Only Inuktitut, Cree, and Ojibwe presently have enough younger speakers to provide a critical mass for long-term survival. In one Mi'gmaq community, however, a new way of passing on the language to adults who do not already speak it is rekindling new hope for the language. Building on a kernel provided by Arapaho scholar and Indigenous language revival activist Stephen Greymorning, teachers in Listuguj have created a structural syllabus that expands on the basic categories found in Mi'gmaq grammar rather than borrowing from methods devised to teach English or French as a second language. Learners have responded enthusiastically. This article reports on a participatory action research project involving Listuguj teachers and researchers from McGill University who are documenting this approach as it evolves.

Keywords: Indigenous language, Micmac, Mi'gmaq, language revitalization, structural syllabus

Résumé : Le Mi'gmaq, langue algonquienne du nord-est de l'Amérique du Nord, compte parmi la cinquantaine de langues autochtones qui ont survécu au Canada et qui sont habituellement considérées comme n'étant pas viables jusqu'au prochain siècle. Seuls l'inuktitut, le cri et l'ojibwé comptent actuellement assez de locuteurs jeunes pour qu'il y ait une masse critique suffisante pour la survie à long terme. Dans une communauté Mi'gmaq, toutefois, un nouveau moyen de transmettre la langue à des adultes qui ne le parlent pas encore allume un nouvel espoir pour cette langue. À partir d'un noyau fourni par Steven Greymorning, spécialiste arapaho et militant de la revitalisation des langues autochtones, les enseignantes et enseignants de Listuguj ont créé un programme structurel qui se développe à partir des catégories fondamentales de la grammaire mi'gmaque plutôt que d'emprunter à des méthodes élaborées pour enseigner l'anglais ou le français langues secondes. Les apprenants ont répondu avec enthousiasme. Cet article rend compte d'un projet de recherche-action auquel ont participé des enseignants de

Listuguj et des chercheurs de l'Université McGill qui étudient cette méthode au fur et à mesure qu'elle évolue.

Mots clés : langue autochtone, Micmac, Mi'gmaq, revitalisation d'une langue, programme structurel

In recent decades, Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation, like many other Indigenous communities across Canada, has seen an alarming decline in the number of fluent speakers of its language. Statistics on the number of endangered languages worldwide vary widely (Abley, 2003; Nettle & Romaine, 2000), as such statistics rely on differing interpretations of what constitutes a 'language' (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). However, all agree that Indigenous languages are more likely to be endangered than others. The situation in Canada is no exception: of about 50 Indigenous languages still spoken, only three (Cree, Ojibwe, and Inuktitut) are *not* considered endangered. Canadian census data gathered in 1996 and again in 2001 show a 5% drop both in the proportion of Aboriginal¹ people 'able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language' (from 29% to 24%) and in the proportion 'whose mother tongue is Aboriginal' (from 26% to 21%; Norris, 2007, p. 19).

Mi'gmaq, an Algonkian language of Eastern North America,² is considered a 'viable small' language (Norris, 2007) and is far from moribund, but it is already gone from many Mi'gmaq communities and is fast disappearing from many others. It was feared not long ago that Listuguj was one of these; very recently, however, we have begun to see the beginning of what we hope will be a turnaround.

The story we will tell here has three parts. First, we outline the sequence of events that led to a massive language shift from Mi'gmaq to English in Listuguj from the 1960s on, summarizing three subsequent decades of unsuccessful efforts to revitalize the language through the school system. Second, we briefly chronicle a shift in attitude that has taken place in Listuguj over the past two years, leading to new hope for the future of Mi'gmaq as a living language of the community. Third, we walk the reader through some key features of the structural syllabus that has been devised by Listuguj teachers for adult learners. The description is based on classroom observations conducted by Sarkar between August 2007 and September 2008, mostly of classes given by Metallic.

The main message we want to convey corresponds to the three parts of the story: (1) Indigenous language revitalization is a huge challenge, but (2) hope *is* possible, as in this case, when (3) development of the teaching approach comes from within, and is truly Indigenous. Hence our title, 'Indigenizing the Structural Syllabus.'

We begin with a few remarks about conducting research in Indigenous communities and about the pedagogical and research project described here.

Research and Indigenous communities

We started working together when Sarkar, a McGill University applied linguist and second language (L2) researcher specializing in minority language issues, was invited to participate in the project in early 2006 by the Listuguj Education Directorate (LED). The overarching research question preoccupying LED administrators was, 'Why has this approach to teaching Mi'gmaq to adults – in development for only a few months at the start of the project – engendered such enthusiasm and shown such promising initial results among adult learners, when in the past, other attempts to pass on the language to this population have been so markedly unsuccessful?' The focus throughout has been on ways to extend the early successes with beginning-level learners over a longer learning span, so that eventually the number of competent speakers in this community will reach a critical mass and the language will start to be used on a daily basis outside the classroom by several generations, not just by older community members, as is now the case.³

In recent years, much has been written on Indigenous research ethics issues by researchers, some of whom are themselves members of Indigenous communities (e.g., Letendre & Caine, 2004; Martin, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2004). Our main goal here is to present the language teaching work that has been going on in Listuguj. We will therefore not devote much space to issues of research ethics, except to note here that when Sarkar went into the community, starting in mid-2007, to observe and participate in Mi'gmaq classes, a fairly intensive process of consultation was launched that respected local ethical protocols for engaging in research with the community (AFNQL, 2005; Mi'kmaw College Institute, 1999). All members of classes in which Sarkar was present, most of which were taught by Metallic, knew who Sarkar was and where she came from; permission for her to be present and to take notes was given by all present. Sarkar, though not herself Indigenous, is non-white and has been taken to be First Nations by most First Nations people she has met. This may have helped to make her observation and participation seem less intrusive to all concerned.

Sarkar's involvement in this project has deliberately been restricted to an observing and documenting role. It had been the experience of

Listuguj band members in the past that the presence of a university researcher could have negative consequences for their own sense of agency around language research decisions. Over the 2007/2008 school year, Sarkar took longhand observation notes in Mi'gmaq adult classes for two- or three-day periods in August and October 2007 and in February and June 2008, then during a more extended three-week period in September 2008, as well as taking notes during extensive informal discussions with the language teachers. These notes represent approximately 100 hours of observation and/or interaction. At this early stage of the project, we decided that recording classes or conversations would not be culturally appropriate.

It is important to note that all curriculum development has been undertaken by instructors from Listuguj who are first language (L1) speakers of Mi'gmaq, including Metallic, for whom curriculum development is a full-time job. Some existing reference grammars and dictionaries of Mi'gmaq were not found by the instructors to be helpful as teaching aids (e.g., E.N. Metallic, Cyr, & Sévigny, 2005) and are therefore not cited in the following section, although teachers do occasionally refer to some others (DeBlois, 1996; Rand, 1888/1994) when they have questions about vocabulary. In any case, to the best of our knowledge there is no existing pedagogical grammar of Mi'gmaq that we can use. The structural knowledge of Mi'gmaq reflected in this article comes entirely from the intuitive understanding of native speakers.

As members of a team undertaking a research project, we feel we are finding out what we are doing as we go along. It took over a year of Sarkar's going regularly to Listuguj and sitting in on classes taught by Metallic and a couple of other teachers for the research process to start to feel focused and natural. On the one hand, trust has to be built up slowly, over time, between the university and the First Nations participants; on the other hand, Mi'gmaq language teaching at Listuguj is constantly evolving as the teachers respond to learners' needs and develop new ways of presenting and practising the language. As is generally recognized in the literature on research with Indigenous communities (Battiste, Bell & Findlay, 2002; Pihama, Cram & Walker, 2002; Steinhauer, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Weber-Pillwax, 1999), it was apparent that a pre-planned research process would not work. In our case, such a process would not have enabled us to keep up with shifts in course planning, pedagogical techniques, and student/teacher availability. During Sarkar's September 2008 visit to Listuguj (her fifth in 13 months), we worked with Listuguj teacher Janice Vicaire on the first draft of a curriculum document describing the teaching approach. The director of education

thought such a document would be useful to the community as it entered into negotiations with the provincial Ministry of Education around funding issues for the teaching of Mi'gmaq. The process of putting the document together was a rich learning experience for us. We had to draw on both Metallic's actual teaching experience and ideas for new classroom techniques and Sarkar's academic writing skills and training in L2 pedagogy and curriculum theory. We drew extensively on that curricular work-in-progress as we put together this paper (M.A. Metallic, Vicaire, & Sarkar, 2008).

A tale of community language shift after European settlement

For geographical reasons, first contact with Europeans came earlier for the Mi'gmaq people than for many other Indigenous peoples of North America. The Mi'gmaq people, along with the Maliseet, have traditionally lived across large parts of what is now Atlantic Canada (as well as the eastern United States), in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and the Gaspé region of Quebec; both *Gaspé* and *Quebec* are, in fact, Mi'gmaq words. There are also Mi'gmaq in Newfoundland. Listuguj is located on the north shore of the Restigouche River⁴ in Quebec, connected by a bridge to Campbellton, NB, where many Listuguj residents are employed or go to school.

The Mi'gmaq population is concentrated in Nova Scotia, where there are correspondingly more communities that still have a relatively high number of fluent speakers (TFALC, 2005). There are also a few Mi'gmaq still living in the northeastern New England states. The names and locations of the traditional Mi'gmaq 'Seven Districts' are mapped in the Appendix.

Mi'gmaq was alive and healthy in Listuguj, as in other Mi'gmaq communities, well into the twentieth century. From before the arrival of the first European settlers in North America to about 50 years ago, children learned Mi'gmaq in their homes and communities as their first, and often their only, language. The language was transmitted orally⁵ and was developed to a high level of proficiency by experienced speakers and story-tellers, often community elders. Advanced fluency in speaking and story-telling was recognized as complex and difficult to achieve.

From the sixteenth century on, settlement by Acadian French and then by English colonists forced Mi'gmaq to coexist with European-descended Canadians at such close quarters that they may

well have been among the most intermarried and assimilated of Canadian First Nations groups. Missionary activity followed settlement by farmers and fishermen. The English-speaking Baptist missionary Silas Tertius Rand (1810–1889) wrote a *Dictionary of the language of the Micmac Indians who reside in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton and Newfoundland*, first published in 1857, that is still in active daily use by teachers in Listuguj (1888/1994); Father Pacifique (1863–1943), a French monk, produced a written system for Mi'gmaq, published in 1939, that is also still in use.

Attrition of Mi'gmaq as a community language

In the 1920s, the school for Mi'gmaq children in Listuguj, intended mainly to train local people to be domestic servants or labourers for the surrounding white settler community, still used the Mi'gmaq language. A shift in the Canadian authorities' attitude towards 'Indian education' then resulted in two things: first, the establishment of 'residential schools' in some areas of Mi'gmaq territory, of which the most notorious is probably Shubenacadie (Knockwood, 2001); and, second, a decades-long process of 'integration' of Listuguj children into the surrounding provincial schools. Both of these developments were detrimental to the survival of Mi'gmaq as a home and community language. In residential schools for Mi'gmaq, as elsewhere in Canada (Grant, 1996; Milloy, 1999), children were not allowed to 'talk Indian' and, in fact, were often physically punished for doing so. This practice led children to develop psychological blocks against 'remembering' their first language. For all intents and purposes, such children became monolingual anglophones, even if little or no English had been spoken in their homes.

In provincial schools, the language of instruction was either English or French, since local white settler children were in the same classes as Listuguj children. Less brutally than, but just as effectively as, the residential schools, these public schools succeeded in creating a generation of Mi'gmaq in Listuguj who did not know their ancestral language. Often their parents encouraged them to use only English, the supposed language of success. In this way, the three-generation cycle detailed by Nettle and Romaine (2000) for the Celtic languages of Europe operated just as detrimentally: a generation of monolingual Mi'gmaq grandparents was followed by a more or less bilingual generation of parents who, in their turn, raised a generation of children educated in local English schools who then became monolingual anglophones themselves. As a result, very few Listuguj community members who

started school after 1970 – the year an off-reserve school began receiving Listuguj pupils (J. Vicaire, personal communication, September 2008) – were raised in Mi'gmaq-speaking homes. This is the 'missing generation' who are now the parents of Listuguj's current youth generation. In addition, intermarriage has become more prevalent in the community over the past 50 years; there are many ethnically mixed families in which the default language is the majority language because the English- or French-speaking partner speaks no Mi'gmaq (J. Vicaire, personal communication, September 2008). Under these circumstances, continued community maintenance of Mi'gmaq has faced overwhelming odds.

The alarming prognosis for Mi'gmaq as a community language led, in the 1970s, to the gradual introduction of Mi'gmaq language teaching for Listuguj children in the local schools they attended, along with a call for Native control of Native education, as in many other First Nations. Mi'gmaq classes were at first offered only in Grades 7 through 9 but are now a part of many Listuguj children's school experience from kindergarten on,⁶ especially if they attend the band school, Alaqsit'w Gitpu School. Space does not permit a detailed history of the period from 1970 to the present; most relevant for our discussion here is the inarguable fact that three decades of efforts to revive Mi'gmaq as a community language by introducing it into the regular school curriculum have failed to produce fluent speakers who will pass the language on to the next generation. Although many young people from Listuguj may have learned Mi'gmaq songs, stories, counting, and so forth for several years in classes in which Mi'gmaq was taught as a subject – not through immersion pedagogy – they typically do not feel confident in speaking Mi'gmaq outside the classroom. Some of the younger adult learners in the classes described here are among these recent graduates; they often mention to Listuguj Mi'gmaq teachers, including Metallic, that they stopped trying to practise their classroom-acquired bits of Mi'gmaq because when they used these carefully memorized sentences in natural contexts with older speakers, they were made fun of for sounding wrong or childlike.

This unfortunate outcome, which often led to near-total psychological blocks against speaking, was at least partially the result of the kind of L2 pedagogy implemented in Mi'gmaq curricula from the 1970s onward. At the time, learners faced two obstacles: first, state-of-the-art L2 pedagogy was audiolingual, which subsequent research has shown was not particularly effective in producing speakers able to cope with real-world language demands outside a small repertoire of memorized dialogues (Lightbown & Spada, 2006); and, second, the methods used

to teach Mi'gmaq were imported wholesale from core French curricula of the time, which were based on the grammar of French (G. Metallic, personal communication, September 2008). The resulting model sentences were European in structure (i.e., subject–verb–object) and sounded ludicrous to fluent L1 speakers of Mi'gmaq.

Revitalizing Mi'gmaq in Listuguj: Course structure

Until recently, Indigenous language revival has not been considered a Listuguj priority. Many other problems seemed more pressing (J. Wilmot, personal communication, September 2008), and the current young adult generation had humiliating memories of their abortive attempts to speak 'school' Mi'gmaq in public. Since early 2006, however, Listuguj teachers have been developing an innovative approach to teaching the Mi'gmaq language to adults who did not acquire it as children and who have not succeeded in learning it later. The instructors are themselves surprised and pleased at the overwhelmingly positive response they have received, both within the community and from other communities that have asked to participate and to be kept abreast of course offerings and new pedagogical developments. Many people who have attended these classes report that they have made rapid progress in basic comprehension and speaking, after trying and failing in classes that used other approaches.

Part of the reason for this unprecedented success may be that there is no pressure on learners to read and write Mi'gmaq at an early stage. Different Mi'gmaq scripts have proliferated over the years, to an extent that complicates the learner's task considerably. In addition to the still-used Pacifique script referred to above, a modified version, the Pacifique-Millea, is also in use, and at least two other less widely known scripts for writing Mi'gmaq were devised in the 1990s. Furthermore, most Nova Scotia Mi'gmaq (or 'Mi'kmaq') use another script, the Smith-Francis, and there is still another script devised and used in Listuguj for local purposes.⁷ Thus, becoming literate in Mi'gmaq is a formidable task for someone who is not already familiar with the spoken language. None of the orthographies listed overlaps with the sound–symbol correspondences familiar to English or French speakers, including, of course, many Mi'gmaq. Partly for this reason, the language teaching approach described here downplays the written word. When writing is used, the in-house, locally

developed Listuguj system is preferred (see Cyr & Sévigny, 2003, for details of this and all other scripts enumerated here).

The teaching method is innovative in that it is based on a carefully selected sequence of key images, through which the learner is gradually introduced to Mi'gmaq vocabulary and grammar in a way that respects the internal structure of the language itself, rather than using a teaching sequence derived from the structure of English, French, or any other European language. The instructors (Metallic and one other) who originally came up with this idea did so after attending a Certificate in Native Language Immersion Teaching workshop given by Stephen Greymorning in Fredericton, NB, in November 2005 (see Greymorning, 1997, 1999). At this workshop, the image-based kernel of the method was explained and a few sample pictures were demonstrated (see next section). Work at Listuguj was at first based on Greymorning's suggested teaching sequence (devised by him to teach his own Indigenous language, Arapaho) but was quickly expanded beyond the small set of images he suggested. Metallic and her main teaching partner and curriculum developer, Janice Vicaire, both fluent L1 speakers of Mi'gmaq who between them have raised eight Mi'gmaq-speaking children, now adults,⁸ do not in fact have formal teacher training. Far from constituting a handicap, however, this can be seen as an advantage in this sociocultural context where these particular individuals are concerned: received notions about what classroom teaching 'should' be like might be more likely to hamper creativity in the classroom.

Small beginner and intermediate classes are now being conducted using the teaching method reported here. The cooperation of the band council, a major local employer, was sought and obtained by the LED, making it possible for employees to take classes during working hours without loss of pay. Some learners have progressed to an advanced level. In total, approximately 100 people attended classes between February 2006 and July 2008; in September 2008, 47 people signed up for four different adult classes – a considerable increase over previous enrolment figures, which had averaged under rather than over 10 students per class.

Classes are one hour long and are held two or three times a week, before, during and after the working day, over a semester of 13 to 15 weeks; band council events such as elections, funerals, spells of bad weather, and other unusual and somewhat unpredictable events may occasionally result in classes being cancelled for a week. The result is a course of about 40 hours for any individual learner. Semesters start in September, when the regular school term starts; in January; and again for a summer session from June through August. Learners can

choose among four or five possible class meeting times per day from Mondays through Thursdays.

Curriculum is not 'set,' in the sense that, when dealing with these adult learners, the instructors follow the image-based, Mi'gmaq-grammar-centred pedagogy they have devised but construct vocabulary sets and topics for conversation practice around the learners' wishes, which are discussed in the first week or two of classes. Within a relatively fixed structure, the content of learning is responsive to the learners' expressed needs in their roles as adult community members,⁹ ranging in age from 18 through retirement age, who have specific responsibilities as workers and/or family members. For example, some learners have an official role as band councillors that requires them to understand and participate in formal greeting/introduction ceremonies with other Mi'gmaq groups; these ceremonies involve complex, ritualized language use that they must nonetheless be able to manipulate in the manner of fluent speakers. Others may have responsibilities involving frequent visits to community elders – often, though not always, their own family members (typically, people born before 1939) – in a caregiving capacity; they need to know the appropriate forms of respect and to understand traditional cultural aspects of these elders' lifestyles, as well as being able to master the daily language of food preparation and household management.

There is no sequence of courses, in the sense more familiar to Western-style curriculum developers or school administrators; from early 2006 on, Metallic and her colleagues have constructed the courses around the learners they had, building in a great deal of flexibility and spontaneity. While most classes take in beginners or near-beginners (some of whom have done one 40-hour course and want to do another for review), in recent semesters it has been possible to set up one more advanced class per term for learners with good comprehension (either from earlier courses using this approach or from other exposure – for example, as spouses or family members of fluent speakers). These courses start at the beginning and progress far more rapidly past repetition and drill-based classes to natural conversation on topics chosen by the learners. Advanced explicit discussion of grammar (for the most part eschewing technical metalinguistic terms) is always part of these conversations, which enables the instructors to introduce the traditional cultural concepts that are built into the way the language works (Abley, 2003; Richards & Kanatawakhon/Maracle, 2002). Testimony from 2006 through 2008 exists in the form of video-recorded discussions with both beginning and more advanced learners about the success of this method for learners whom other methods had failed.

In the classroom

The central core of this approach is rooted in a visually based structural approach to L2 teaching.

Structure-based approaches to L2 teaching have been out of favour in Anglo-American educational systems for well over two decades where the teaching of European languages is concerned. L2 teachers trained to teach English as a second language (ESL) in North America and parts of Europe from the mid-1970s through the late 1990s were exhorted to use only “CLT” the communicative approach to language teaching (Lightbown, 2000). In many cases, explicit grammar was completely excluded from the language classroom. As the Canadian French immersion research literature, spanning three decades, makes clear (Allen, Swain, Harley, & Cummins, 1990; Bouffard & Sarkar, 2008; Swain, 1980, 2000), this emphasis tended to produce graduates who had fluent comprehension of both spoken and written language but whose speech contained many grammatical inaccuracies and whose written skills were far below the standard for an educated native speaker.

CLT can in many respects be seen as an overreaction to the previous decades or centuries of L2 instruction based *only* on a rigorous and systematic knowledge of grammar, without much practice in real communication. Such instruction resulted in learners who could often read at a high level and construct grammatically correct pre-rehearsed sentences in speech or writing but were at a disadvantage in real-life communication contexts because they had never had any practice in using or listening to natural, unrehearsed speech. This more structured way of teaching an L2, which often involved a great deal of grammar instruction and translation, is still the norm in many parts of the world, and it still has the same results in those places (Nunan, 2003). In the past decade, however, the pendulum has swung to a middle position. In many Canadian universities, L2 teacher training now advocates the use of CLT along with a balanced use of structural principles (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Lyster & Mori, 2008). Introducing explicit grammatical concepts into the L2 syllabus is no longer frowned upon.

In the approach used for teaching adults in Listuguj, from the beginning the decision was made to base the teaching in the grammatical structure of Mi'gmaq. The approach is in accordance with theories of L2 learning and teaching that advocate starting from the perspective of the target language grammar and, as much as possible, eschewing translation. The approach is *emic*; that is, it takes the perspective of a native speaker of Mi'gmaq and works outward. European-derived

grammatical categories are not used as a base, although some of the terms used to refer to these categories ('animate,' 'inanimate') may overlap with familiar terms.

Like many other Indigenous languages, but unlike Western European languages, Mi'gmaq is agglutinative. In an agglutinative language, a single word comprising many morphemes may do the work that in a typical Indo-European language is done by a whole sentence. Agglutinative languages rely on morphology (prefixes and suffixes that usually must be added in a particular order) rather than on syntax (word order). English is a language with very little morphology that relies heavily on syntax: if you change the word order of an English sentence, you change the meaning. In Mi'gmaq, on the other hand, word order is very flexible, because grammatical and lexical meanings are conveyed through suffixes and prefixes.

Learners are discouraged from relying on translation to and from English as they acquire the basics of Mi'gmaq. Instructors do resort to English frequently in the beginning stages, but they move away from it in the last few weeks of instruction. Although some of the terms learners may already know are useful in the classroom (e.g., noun, verb, animate, inanimate; past, present, future tense), many of them have slightly different meanings and cover different domains in Mi'gmaq. The approach described here is structural, but it is also communicative, in that from the first class the learners are 'bathed' in spoken Mi'gmaq. Visual context, mime, and gestures are used as the teachers ask questions, give instructions, and encourage interaction among learners and teachers. From the first class, learners are encouraged to think in Mi'gmaq. There is no pressure on learners to speak, but in the safe environment of the classroom they quickly lose their shyness about speaking¹⁰ and begin to produce short, well-formed utterances in Mi'gmaq, typically describing themselves and their families – an important part of traditional greeting and introduction rituals in this and other Indigenous cultures (Battiste et al., 2002).

A foundation of nouns: The two-category system

The teaching method is grounded in the presentation of a carefully chosen sequence of images. In the first class, learners are introduced to the noun-classification scheme on which the entire teaching approach is based. All Mi'gmaq nouns fall into one of two categories, which Listuguj instructors, following earlier linguistic analyses of Mi'gmaq (E.N. Metallic et al., 2005; Rand, 1888/1994), call 'animate' and 'inanimate.' Each category includes many nouns that might seem to an

English speaker to 'belong' to the other category.¹¹ The images in the first set of 10 or so nouns in each category used to lay down the basis for noun classification are chosen for their obvious animacy or inanimacy for the English speaker. The animate nouns in this starting set are the basic human nouns *gisigu*, *gisigui'sgw*,¹² *ji'nm*, *e'pit*, *ji'nmji'j*, *e'pite's*, *lpa'tuj*, *e'pite'ji'j*, *mijua'ji'j* (old man, old woman, man, woman, young man, young woman, boy, girl, baby). The images representing these nouns are always lined up in this order of presentation on the board; immediately underneath each is the corresponding plural image. No written form is shown during the early stages. These singular and plural animate nouns make up Row 1 and Row 2 of the visual array, and they are presented and practised in the first class. Rows 3 and 4 consist of an equal number of inanimate nouns, which may vary a little more but typically include: *mutputi*, *pata'uti*, *lgusuaqan*, *ga'qan*, *'mpo'qon*, *msaqtaqt*, *awti*, *msigu*, *wasoqonmaqan* (chair, table, ladder, door, bed, floor, road, grass, candle). At this stage, nothing is written for the learners; they are expected to listen and repeat.

This starter set of nouns, arranged in a visually striking array of four rows, is the basis on which all later language learning builds. From the second or third class, learners are made familiar with the notion that many nouns in each category will not seem to them to belong. Thus, the 'animate' row will quickly expand to include *tap'tan*, *mg'sn*, *lamqwan* (potato, shoe, undershirt); many other food, clothing, and container nouns are animate. This row will also expand to include many kinds of animals, which – more logically than potatoes and shoes to the English speaker – are also animate. At the same time, the 'inanimate' row expands to include *wasueg*, *wa'w* (flower, egg), which might seem not to 'belong,' as well as many more nouns.

The images in their invariable rows are always present in the classroom and are referred to constantly. For a long time during the initial stages, they are placed in the same location on the wall or blackboard, creating a familiar and reassuring visual environment for the learners. (In fact, we have observed that sometimes, in stimulus-response fashion, just glancing at a certain spot on the wall is enough to trigger a learner's memory of a word or phrase a year after the course, long after the images have been taken down.)

Simultaneously with the extension of each of the four rows horizontally, learners practise the plural forms. This is where the usefulness of keeping animate and inanimate separated out becomes clear. All animate plurals end in a velar consonant, although the preceding vowel may vary: thus, *gisigu'g*, *gisigui'sgwaq*; *ji'nmug*, *e'pijiig* (old men, old women; men, women – contrast the singular forms *gisigu*,

gisigui'sgw, ji'nm, e'pit, as given above). All inanimate plurals end in a sonorant, either /l/ or /n/.¹³ The teacher explains explicitly, in the learners' L1, English, that if they want to know the Mi'gmaq for any noun and whether it is animate or inanimate, the best way to get this information from a fluent speaker is to ask for the *plural*, as the ending will tell them the noun class. From the first or second class, learners practise a structure that is useful for asking for a word in Mi'gmaq: *Taltluen* — *Lnuigtug?* ('How do you say — in Mi'gmaq?')¹⁴

Building on the foundation: Verbs and transitivity

Although this teaching approach starts with the more accessible categorization of nouns, real fluency in Mi'gmaq, as in other languages, grows out of an ability to use verbs. Learning verbs in Mi'gmaq is difficult, however, because transitive and intransitive verbs inflect very differently. In addition, Mi'gmaq verbs necessarily inflect for several categories that may seem numerous and unwieldy to the L2 learner – minimally, animacy, number (singular, *dual*, and plural¹⁵), and tense. A large number of prefixes exists and must be mastered if one is to be able to nuance verbs in terms of aspect, place and manner of motion, and many other categories not easily labelled in English (E. Metallic et al., 2005); for example, prefixing with *metu-* means 'have difficulty doing [verb].' As one would expect from the fact that Mi'gmaq is agglutinative, fluent and accurate use of the verb system requires mastery of multiple and overlapping affixation (prefixes, infixes, and suffixes) that must be added to the stem in the right order.

In this teaching approach, therefore, the learner is introduced to the verbal system very gradually. Teachers start with two intransitive verbs in third-person singular present animate form: *gaqamit* ['s/he stands'] and *pemgopit* ['s/he sits'].¹⁶ These are taught using the images for 'animate' already presented. They then expand to other intransitive verbs, until the learner has a base of about 24 (including, for example, 'laugh,' 'cry,' 'run,' and 'walk'). The first transitive verb to be introduced is *nemi'g* ['I see']. It is introduced, with the help of images, in a separate lesson.

We conclude this section by very briefly indicating a couple of other areas of Mi'gmaq grammar that are covered in the basic course. The order in which these topics are presented and practised is more variable than the introduction to nouns and verbs sketched above, depending to a large extent on the learners' needs.

The general locative suffix -igtug

Very early in the learning sequence, learners are introduced to the suffix *-igtug* and told that it means ‘in the vicinity of.’ This morpheme can be added to any inanimate noun to create the possibility of talking about a location. In combination with the basic set of animate and inanimate nouns and the third-person present-tense singular forms of ‘stand’ and ‘sit,’ the learner now has everything needed to create simple sentences of the type ‘The old man is standing on the road/floor,’ ‘The baby is sitting on the chair/grass/table,’ and so forth. Together with the verb for ‘see,’ these can then be combined to enable the learner to progress to sentences of the type ‘I see the old man standing on the road.’ At this point, the learner must acquire the suffixes that denote transitive objects.

Counting

When counting in Mi’gmaq, a bare cardinal number can never be put in front of a noun; there is obligatorily a counting suffix or ‘counter’ on the number. Many different counters exist, denoting different kinds of nouns. One counter indicates that the following noun is animate:



tapusijig e' pijig ['two+animate-counter women+pl']¹⁷

(Photo by Janice Vicaire)

Another counter denotes that the following noun is inanimate:



tapuɟl muputi'l ['two+inanimate-counter chair+pl]
(Photo by Mela Sarkar)

So far the system follows what beginning learners already know, so at first they are exposed only to these two counters and helped to practise counting the nouns they already know (learning the numbers in the process). However, mastery of more than two dozen other counters helps make one an idiomatic speaker: counters are used to indicate something about the shape of the kind of noun that follows (long and thin; round; cylindrical; flat) or the fact that it denotes a set or is about money, time, or any one of a number of other implicit noun classes not indicated otherwise than through such counting suffixes.

Longer utterances: When a sentence paints a picture

In this discussion we do not touch on the details of more complex structural features of the language, such as pronominalization, possession, question and negative formation, aspect, place and manner of motion, past and future tense, or multi-clausal structures of intentionality (e.g., 'I am going to location *x* in order to do *y*'), but the basic 40-hour course does include these at a basic level. Armed with this array of structures and lots of 'communicative drill' in using them, the learners we have taught and observed start to be able to use Mi'gmaq the way fluent

speakers must, in a fluid and nuanced way that does not sequence subjects, verbs, and objects but, rather, takes an observer's point of view in describing a 'big picture' in which many things are happening.

Because Mi'gmaq functions through 'big words' made of many morphemes that must be put together correctly, we believe that it reflects a different mindset from English, or any other European language. Thinking in Mi'gmaq means not starting with the speaker as centre but, rather, starting with a picture that one then 'zooms in' on. The memorable images used in the teaching approach described here therefore fit well with the way Mi'gmaq operates as a language. Learners are brought back to the images and helped to put in more detail – more morphemes – again and again, until they are forming the long agglutinated word-sentences they need to earn them the respect of fluent speakers they may talk to. The teachers encourage learners to bring in their own images, often full of family, friends, and interesting actions. By the end of the course, learners' descriptions of the initial picture set are much more developed, and the walls of the classroom are crowded with picture sequences covering different areas of vocabulary building. Learners are able to talk about the past and the future of the scenes in the pictures and are ready to build on their initial foundation in real situations outside the classroom.

A work in progress

The structural syllabus used in Listuguj, as outlined above, is undergoing constant development and expansion. Teachers and learners together work out what they feel will be the most useful focus for an individual's learning, based on that person's needs. The close-knit nature of this small rural community and its kinship networks means that the instructors almost always have a personal connection to the people they teach. The classroom is built around mutual negotiation of course content and constant coming to consensus on what is most important or what should come next – a traditional Indigenous cultural practice somewhat in contrast to many Western-style classrooms.

However, the basic principles remain the same: always work outward from the structure of Mi'gmaq, without reference to other grammars; always ground the learner in images (as we have seen, instructors use translation at need to render more abstract concepts not easily understood through images alone), with lots of 'communicative drill' and repetition. The teachers and other fluent L1 speakers (who do not, as a rule, have academic training in linguistics or L2 pedagogy) are the best judges of what will work here. The goal is for 'graduates' of these classes, mostly

second language speakers, to become fluent enough to be able, with training, to move into the teaching role themselves. We hope that if they start to pass on the language, a momentum will build up. When the movement is spearheaded by L2 speakers, the gradual and inevitable erosion of a 'monolingual' L1 base of elders, now rapidly passing, will no longer be such an issue (Norris, 2007; Richards & Kanatawakhon/Maracle, 2002). Use of technologically based ways to reach out to younger, computer-savvy learners, such as the 'Mi'kmaq/Mi'gmaq/Micmac/Mi'gmaw Language' Facebook group started by Metallic in 2008,¹⁸ may be a way to create a virtual community with the potential to engage learners across many Mi'gmaq communities and age groups (also see Noori, 2009, for creative suggestions on how to engage young children with Indigenous language learning in homes and communities).

This is an optimistic scenario. We do not deny that there are many reasons for pessimism where Indigenous language revitalization is concerned. Whatever the long-term outcome may be for the Listuguj project reported here and others like it, we feel that the needs of Indigenous communities are better served by working in hope. As one well-known Indigenous educator has pointed out, 'Indian people must determine the future of Indian education and that future must be rooted in a transformational revitalization of our own expressions of education' (Cajete, 1994).

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Notes

- 1 In this article we use the term 'Indigenous'; for our purposes, 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' are interchangeable.

- 2 For the convenience of readers we use the usual 'white settler' designations for place names in this text, such as 'North America,' 'Canada,' and 'Quebec.' Readers should be aware, however, that many First Nations people prefer to eschew such designations (e.g., King, 1993), as they consider that the present political boundaries are not relevant to them and were not determined in an ethical manner.
- 3 Another approach to reaching such a goal is documented in Richards and Kanatawakhon/Maracle (2002); ours differs in that it requires neither immersion learning (a heavy time commitment for working adults) nor prior language study, making classes accessible to a wider range of community members.
- 4 'Restigouche' is an early French mispronunciation of 'Listuguj.' The band itself was previously known under this spelling; the name has now officially been changed back.
- 5 Writing was introduced to North American Indigenous peoples only after the Europeans arrived, starting in the early sixteenth century. The first writing systems for Indigenous languages were devised by missionaries as part of their efforts to propagate Christianity.
- 6 In the community's school, Alaqsite'w Gitpu School, kindergarten is the only Mi'gmaq immersion year. There is also a regular (English) kindergarten class.
- 7 This script has the advantage of not requiring any diacritical marks except the apostrophe (to mark, e.g., long vowels and internal voicing). The others, devised during the era of manual typewriters, use diacritics that were not too awkward for manual typists but, in the age of personal computing, are clumsy in the extreme (J. Vicaire and J. Wilmot, personal communication, September 2008).
- 8 Notably, they did this after 1963, when this was not usual for Listuguj families and therefore required some determination.
- 9 A few learners come from outside the community; most have a family connection with Mi'gmaq through marriage.
- 10 We have encountered exceptions in the case of residential school survivors who cannot overcome early instilled inhibitions against 'talking Indian' because of the beatings they received as children for speaking their language, even though they may still have advanced comprehension. The legacy of the residential schools will be with Indigenous communities for many years to come.
- 11 A less well known French reference on the grammar of Mi'gmaq, based on early missionary work (Maillard, 1860–1864/1964), uses 'noble' and 'ignoble' rather than in/animacy, explaining that 'noble' nouns have life, or 'spirit.' All sacred objects are 'animate' in Mi'gmaq. This distinction, rooted in traditional Mi'gmaq spirituality, has not been the focus of more recent linguistic analysis.

- 12 English has no exact counterpart to *gisigu*, *gisigui'sgw*, which denote respect as well as seniority. These terms can no more be left out of a list of human nouns in Mi'gmaq than 'boy' or 'girl' can in English.
- 13 The liquid sonorant /l/ and the nasal sonorant /n/ are in diachronic allophonic variation: /l/ is more typical of older forms, and /n/ more typical of newer forms. Thus the word for 'person' is pronounced and written *Lnu* by older speakers but is now more commonly taught as *Nnu*. Mi'gmaq has no liquid sonorant /r/. In loanwords from European languages, /r/ assimilates to /l/; *Mali* is the Mi'gmaq form of Mary.
- 14 See note 13. *Lnuigtug* more correctly means 'in the people's [language]' and is often translated by teachers as 'in Indian.' Although the original meaning of *Lnu* or *Nnu* is 'person,' this root is now usually used to mean an Indigenous person, no matter where the person comes from (compare *Inuit*, *Inuk*, originally 'the people, a person,' but now used specifically to refer to Canada's northernmost people). One can say *Mi'gmawei'igtug*, 'in Mi'gmaq,' but this is more cumbersome. It is also a relatively recent coinage, dating from the 1980s, and thus less familiar to older speakers.
- 15 Thus, even the beginning learner must be able to remember and use one present-tense ending (*-jig* or *-ig*) for the verb 'stand' or 'sit' when two people are doing it, and another ending (*-ultijig*) when three or more people are.
- 16 The third person is gender-neutral in Mi'gmaq.
- 17 Sarkar on left, Metallic on right. *Wela'lieg* (we [inclusive] thank [transitive, plural] you [three or more]).
- 18 Available at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=5151022563>.

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Appendix

Map of the 'Seven Districts' of Mi'gmaq territory in Canada
(Map by John Vicaire and Martin Benoit)

