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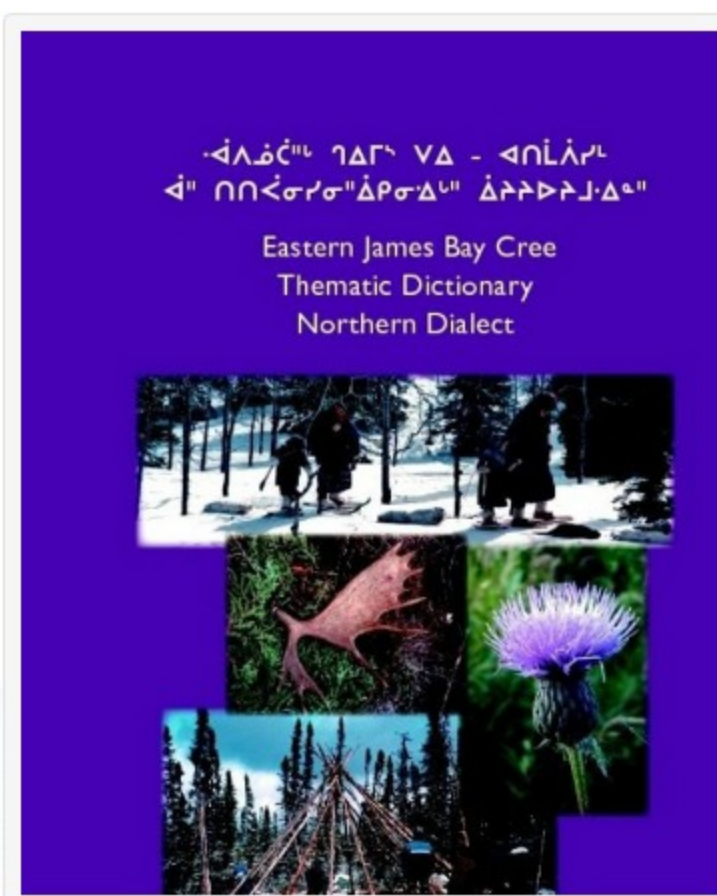
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Developing Thematic Dictionaries of Eastern James Bay Cree

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Dr. Marie-Odile Junker, a Killam Research Fellow, is the project director responsible for publishing a new dictionary of Eastern James Bay Cree. In this post she writes about the need for the dictionary and some of the unique challenges she faced and discoveries she made in producing it.

Aboriginal languages under threat

Canada's Aboriginal languages are, for the most part, in danger of disappearing. Eastern James Bay Cree is no exception, despite being taught in schools and spoken by approximately 13,000 people. In fact, due to the pervasiveness of Canada's two main languages, Eastern James Bay Cree is undergoing a transformation akin to the loss of biodiversity. That's why there's an urgent need to document the Eastern James Bay Cree language and produce resources for its survival.

Bilingual dictionaries consisting of thematic groupings of word families are popular in schools and appreciated by the general public, but they often simply adapt existing material into English or French without taking into account the cultural viewpoints or internal structures inherent in the original native language. This often leads to poor-quality translations.

For example, here are some of the specific challenges and questions faced by the authors in developing thematic dictionaries of the two dialects of Eastern James Bay Cree into English and French:

- How to group the words of a language that mostly consists of verbs rather than nouns?
- How to organize and classify the lexicon of a language that generally lacks adjectives but is extremely rich in classifier words which indicate substances or the types of instruments used for performing actions?
- Can the language's morphology reveal the language's conceptual categories?
- Are there lexical fields that comprehensively correlate with traditional culture?
- What word associations are normally used by Cree Elders, who are naturally more familiar with traditional Cree culture?

The dictionary team

Thanks to a two-year Killam Research Fellowship from the Canada Council for the Arts, I had the privilege of working closely with several extraordinary people. I would like to pay tribute to my two co-editors and East Cree speakers: Linda Visitor and Mimie Neacappo. Linda boasts more experience due to her work for the Cree School Board's Cree language programs in Quebec, while Mimie, our "young" team member, is a student at Carleton University as well as my research assistant.

Like many Aboriginal people, Linda suffers from diabetes and was informed 12 years ago that her days were numbered. Even though she undergoes dialysis three times a week, her amazing energy in promoting Cree language and culture has been a constant source of inspiration for the entire team. In fact, she spent a complete sabbatical year in the woods during the 1990s to take most of the photographs that illustrate the dictionary's various versions, while her profound knowledge of Cree language and traditional life made her an outstanding interlocutor for our consultations with Cree elders. Indeed, the Cree elders' insights are very much reflected in the dictionary's thematic categories.

A very precise language

One of the project's most interesting discoveries was the lexical richness of Eastern James Bay Cree in describing visual contrasts. Rather than referring to objects as if they possessed permanent properties (e.g., colour), Cree speakers traditionally situate objects in space and time by articulating what is taking place at a given moment in the interlocutors' field of vision.

We also discovered that what linguists call "instrumental transitive finals" actually represent the basis for conceptualization in the Cree language. For example, the 1,729 verbs in our database, which end in -nam/-neu or -nim/-nâu, indicate an action performed by hand, but this meaning is not at all obvious in the translation/definition originally proposed in French. Thus, whereas the proposed French translation of the verb ᓵᓵᓵᓵ mushtenam / ᓵᓵᓵᓵ mushtânim was "covet, be attracted by something," all the people we consulted felt that an action of the hand was implicitly understood in the use of this verb. Since verb-finals in Eastern James Bay Cree imply an instrument (instrumental final verbs), we created a category of action verbs with transitive verbs (i.e., verbs that take an object complement) and then subdivided this category according to the instrument involved – the hand, arm or action of pulling; the foot or entire body; heat; the blade; or the tool or impact – all of which specifically correspond to the instrumental finals found in the Eastern James Bay Cree verbs concerned.

The dictionary

All versions of the Eastern James Bay Cree Thematic Dictionary contain more than 140 themes and sub-themes covering many aspects of traditional and modern Cree life. Each theme contains Cree words associated with their definitions in English or French. Special attention was given to the relationship between Cree people and the land, traditional ecological knowledge, and Cree culture in general with photographs and drawings illustrating each theme.

This thematic dictionary tells a story – the story of a people and a culture as incarnated in a language. The words you find will help you discover not only how the Eastern James Bay Cree have fashioned their existence in the world but also how any measure of linguistic diversity can shed light on humanity's cognitive potential.

Respective print and electronic versions of the Eastern James Bay Cree thematic dictionaries for the Northern and Southern dialects are available in both English and French.

Order the [print version](#).

Consult the [online dictionary](#).

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