

A SURVEY OF RESEARCH ON MONTAGNAIS AND NASKAPI (INNU-AIMUN) IN LABRADOR¹

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ABSTRACT

The last two decades have seen increased interest in the study of the language of the Innu of Labrador. Researchers from Memorial University of Newfoundland have been prominent in producing descriptions of grammar, lexicon and linguistic variation in the community of Sheshatshit. Anthropologists have been active in the collection of texts and toponyms. This article gives an overview of work to date in these areas.

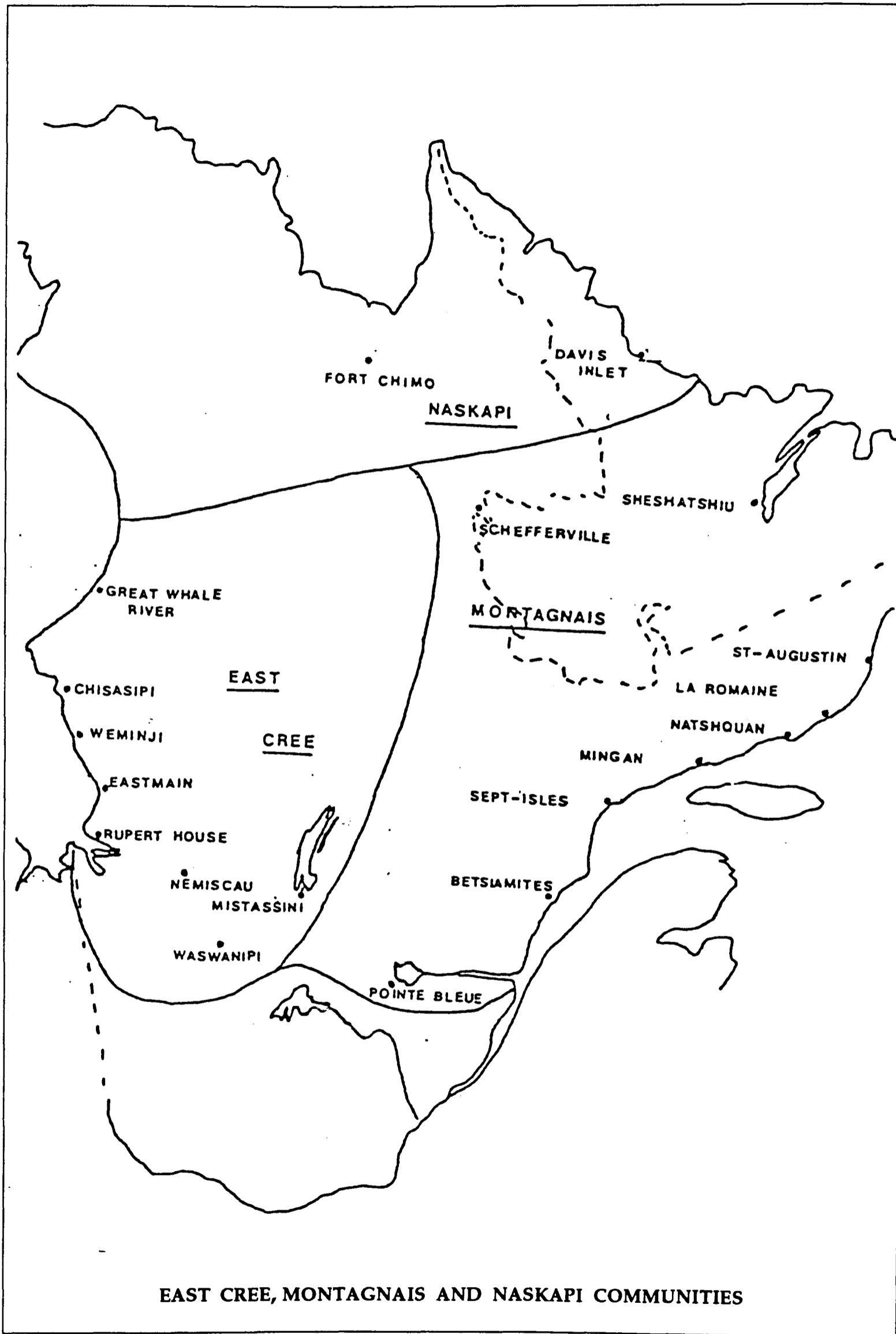
1. INTRODUCTION

The language spoken by the Innu of Labrador, known to linguists as Montagnais / Naskapi, represents two dialects of the Cree-Montagnais-Naskapi language complex of the Algonquian language family. The Montagnais sub-group is spoken by about 10,000 people in eight communities in Québec and one in Labrador (see Map). In Sheshatshit, (formerly known as North West River) there are about 2,000 speakers. To the north, Naskapi is spoken by about 500 people in Davis Inlet, also known as Utshimassits. Speakers refer to both dialects as Innu-aimun, qualifying this term as necessary. Innu-aimun is still the first language of virtually all residents of the two Labrador communities, with English as the second language. In Québec, where French is the second language, a significant number of Innu, particularly in the western communities, now use French as a first language. In Labrador most speakers under the age of forty are now bilingual to some extent in Innu-aimun and English, since English is the language of schooling. The extent to which this language will join or resist the widespread decline of Aboriginal languages as first languages remains to be documented.

A considerable amount of work has been done on all dialects of Montagnais and Naskapi but only those spoken in Labrador will be reviewed here². The Montagnais dialect of Sheshatshit has been the subject of on-going study by members of the Linguistics Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The Naskapi dialect of Davis Inlet has been primarily studied by Alan Ford of l'Université de Montréal.

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² The newsletter *Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics* publishes a running bibliography of works on all Algonquian languages, including those under discussion.



Prior to the 1970s there existed very little in the way of grammars and dictionaries for the Native languages of Newfoundland and Labrador – Micmac, Innu-aimun (Montagnais-Naskapi) and Inuktitut (Eskimo). And, it seemed, there was no pressing need for such resource documents. A few grammars and dictionaries collected and written by missionaries (often in French) in the last century were to be found only in libraries and were, for all practical purposes, unavailable to native speakers of these languages.

The early 1970s saw the beginning of a movement toward reinstating aboriginal languages in the curriculum of schools attended by Native children. This movement was part of a nationwide effort on the part of Native people to ensure that their children would maintain, or in some cases recover, Native values, culture and language. Today, this effort has resulted in the provision of 'Native as Language of Instruction' programs and increasingly, the takeover by Native groups of their own school boards. The resulting need for modern linguistic resource documents is being met by joint initiatives of linguists and Native people.

2. GRAMMATICAL DESCRIPTIONS

Grammars of Montagnais are scarce. Until recently the only published account of grammar was a sketch of the Betsiamites dialect accompanying a French-Montagnais lexicon (Lemoine 1901). As was common at that time, the author, an Oblate priest, followed the Latin model for both terminology and grammatical categorization.

The first modern grammatical sketch of Montagnais was compiled only a decade ago by Sandra Clarke of Memorial University and focuses on the dialect of Sheshatshit, then called North West River (Clarke 1982). This reference grammar gives information on pronunciation, inflection of nouns and pronouns, and the enormous number of verbal paradigms. It is also unique among grammars of Cree / Montagnais / Naskapi dialects in that it provides information on aspects of syntax, through an outline of sentence types. The extensive system of verbal inflection was also the subject of a Master's thesis (1984), as well as an article (1986), by Anne-Marie Baraby. The verbal paradigms used in Sheshatshit were compared with those of six other Cree / Montagnais dialects in MacKenzie and Clarke (1981). A brief general description of grammatical points, along with dialect variation and pedagogical considerations, is given in MacKenzie (1982b).

The dialect of Naskapi spoken at Davis Inlet is recognizably different than that spoken by the Montagnais of Sheshatshit in that it shares many features with the neighbouring Cree dialects of eastern James Bay. Alan Ford, in his short sketch *The Basics of Utshimashits Mushuau innu*, presents aspects of the inflectional system in a format intended for language learners (Ford [not dated]).

3. LEXICONS

The need for an Innu-aimun / English lexicon for use in the school at Sheshatshit, Labrador arose when Innu-aimun was introduced as a subject of instruction. The first modern lexicon, published in 1978, was unsuitable for use in Labrador since items were written in the Sept-Iles dialect, with French translations; the Innu of Labrador use English as a second language. A first lexicon of about 1100 words was compiled by Sandra Clarke in conjunction with the language learning material described below (Clarke 1982, 1986b). A larger lexicon of approximately 7,000 items is being prepared by Marguerite MacKenzie. This project, which was initiated by the St. John's Native Friendship Centre, includes computerization of the

Montagnais words, English and French translations, grammatical information and key words for producing an English-Montagnais version. The data was being collected and entered and a preliminary version produced when the orthography of the language was changed (see section 5. below). The whole lexicon is currently being revised to reflect the recently proposed standard orthography (Drapeau and Mailhot 1989) and will then undergo a final checking.

All nouns in the computer file have been provided with codes which indicate all grouping by topic (animals, birds, household items, proper names, etc.). The category of particles (which includes what in English would be classed as adverbs, prepositions, demonstratives, and numerals, to name a few) also are coded according to semantic criteria such as space, time, manner and quantity. Lists of these nouns and particles, as well as verbs, are provided to the Innu teachers involved in curriculum development. The current elementary Innu language program focuses on vocabulary development as well as reading and writing skills. Since virtually all Innu curriculum materials must be produced from scratch within the school, the lexicon and vocabulary lists produced from it are extremely useful and time-saving devices.

4. VARIATION

The dialects of Montagnais (as well as Cree and Naskapi) show an enormous amount of variation, not only at the level of phonology, but also in morphology and lexicon. Variation at the inter-community level was documented for the nineteen Cree / Montagnais / Naskapi dialects of Québec-Labrador by Marguerite MacKenzie (1982a). This study established four main dialect groupings of Cree / Montagnais / Naskapi within Québec-Labrador: Attikamek Cree in south-western Québec, East Cree in north-western Québec, Montagnais in south-eastern Québec and Labrador and finally, Naskapi in northern Québec and Labrador. The variety of Innu-aimun spoken at Sheshatshit is a sub-dialect of the larger Montagnais grouping, spoken in eight Québec / Labrador communities. This Montagnais group of dialects can be further subdivided into western, central and Lower North Shore (of the St. Lawrence River) sub-dialects.

At Davis Inlet a variety of the Naskapi sub-group is spoken. The only other speakers of the Naskapi dialect now reside in Québec, north of Schefferville. Montagnais and Naskapi, while sharing pronunciations, grammatical structures and vocabulary, nevertheless differ significantly enough in these same areas to be easily distinguished from each other.

In addition, it was found that even within a single community there can be a great deal of variation. Linguists who had worked with Labrador Montagnais speakers had reported that within Sheshatshit there seemed to exist an unusually high degree of intra-community variability. In 1981, the Sheshatshit Sociolinguistic Variability Project was undertaken with the financial support of the Institute of Social and Economic Research of Memorial University, to study the extent and social correlates of this variation. The members of this team research project included two linguists with a strong background of research into Cree / Montagnais / Naskapi as well as language variation (Sandra Clarke and Marguerite MacKenzie), as well as an ethno-linguist with an excellent speaking command of Montagnais and previous experience working in the community (José Mailhot), and an anthropologist with extensive research experience in the area (Adrian Tanner).

The main questions this study was designed to answer were as follows:

- would patterns of linguistic variation prove to correlate with the known territorial sub-groupings within the community?

- was variability highest for older speakers, with younger people converging toward a more homogeneous dialect?
- if a more homogeneous dialect were emerging, which of the three main Montagnais sub-dialects would it reflect most closely?
- were women, as many other studies indicate (cf. Labov 1990), leaders in innovating linguistic change?
- was it possible that linguistic patterns of variation and change would provide evidence of a prestige hierarchy in this otherwise overtly unstratified village?

From a population of about 700, tape-recordings were made of a sample of 87 speakers using both formal and informal style. This sample was stratified by age, sex and territorial affiliation (this last category refers to whether the individual oriented to the central or Lower North Shore Montagnais or to the Naskapi dialect areas). Information was also gathered on the life history and social background of the individuals. The tapes were transcribed and translated and the phonetic variants of 18 variables subjected to statistical analysis. The results of this research, in general, gave a positive answer to each of the above questions. First of all, a high degree of variation was confirmed by the data. Among older speakers, linguistic patterns clearly correlated with territorial affiliation. Speakers in the youngest age group were more homogeneous in their speech, which tended to reflect the central, more prestigious dialect of Montagnais. There did seem to be evidence for a covert prestige hierarchy in this small, seemingly unstratified community. Young people from non-prestige groups (i.e., Naskapi or Lower North Shore) demonstrated linguistic insecurity through use of hypercorrection in their speech. Results also showed that sex was less significant than age, although females did lead overall in the use of innovations. The analysis indicated also that the rate of change within the community was not as rapid as might have been expected, perhaps due to the high degree of dialect mixing. The above research results from this project are reported on in Clarke (1983, 1986a, 1987, 1988); Clarke and MacKenzie (1982, 1984); MacKenzie and Clarke (1983, 1985); Mailhot, MacKenzie and Clarke (1984).

5. AN ORTHOGRAPHIC STANDARD

The immense amount of variation which exists at the phonological and even morphological level has created serious problems for those who work with the written language. The Roman orthography originally devised by Jesuit scholars in the 17th and 18th centuries is still followed in principle. This very conservative orthographic system was based on what seems to have been a form of the language with little vowel deletion or lengthening, today a source of major phonological variation. Montagnais people were literate in their language by the late 1700s, as extant letters show, and the tradition of passing on literacy skills on an individual basis within a family unit was common. Any orthographic variation was not an impediment to understanding as fluency of reading as we understand it nowadays was not an objective. Instead, the common method of deciphering a written communication was (and to a large extent, still is) to read it twice, once to decode the phonology and once again for meaning.

However, the introduction of Montagnais as a language of instruction in the schools has brought with it an expectation and a need for an increased level of fluency in reading and writing. This, in turn, is seen to require a standardized system of spelling. Early attempts to implement standardization met with substantial resistance from speakers in all communities. People equated the written form of the language with the spoken form and often felt that

writing a standardized form entailed a change in pronunciation. Nevertheless, children in Montagnais language classes were being exposed to teachers who spelled the same words differently from each other and, in some cases, to a single teacher who would spell differently from one day to the next. The need for standardization for both pedagogical and economic reasons thus became a serious issue.

The Montagnais-French lexicon produced by Mailhot and Lescop (1977) was intended to provide an example of the systematic recording of lexical items. It was well received, not so much because of the orthographic standardization, but because it was the first substantial representation of the language to be available to speakers themselves. Useful as it was, it could not address the problems of orthographic variation in the writing of inflectional and derivational forms. A major effort by linguists Lynn Drapeau and José Mailhot has resulted in their *Guide Pratique d'orthographe montagnais*, a set of spelling rules for over eighty points of variation in Montagnais. During the course of workshops held over a three-year period, the linguists and Montagnais speakers, primarily teachers, came to agreement on just how most phonological and grammatical differences between the communities should be represented. The resulting orthography is highly abstract and, in fact, strongly resembles the writing system in use several centuries previously. Although there is not full agreement in all communities, a substantial number of organizations, including the Institut Éducatif et Culturel du Conseil Attikamek-Montagnais, a major source of funding, have committed themselves to the use of the standard orthography.

Unfortunately the Montagnais of Labrador were not initially invited to participate in the orthography workshops, held in the Québec communities. A further obstacle to their adopting the spelling rules lies in the fact that the body of the report is written in French. In order to make the orthography available to speakers in Labrador, the report was translated into English by Marguerite MacKenzie. A next step is the organization of workshops for the community whereby people will become familiar with the new rules. Again, it will be necessary to overcome the perception that this orthography is valid and necessary only for some other group, as well as the fear that the language (in this case the local dialect) must undergo change. Spelling reform is a long process, but one that is well underway in most communities. It may well be that the Montagnais will have been able to achieve it within a span of thirty years.

6. LANGUAGE LEARNING MATERIALS

There is a small but constant interest on the part of non-Innu in learning to speak Innu-aimun. To this end Sandra Clarke has published *An Introduction to Sheshatshit (Labrador) Montagnais for Speakers of English*. This introduction presents a large number of basic inflectional and sentence patterns by giving both grammatical explanation and exercises. A set of video-tapes of an introductory course in the structure of Montagnais is also lodged at Memorial University. Although entitled *Learning to Speak Indian with José Mailhot*, and accompanied by a set of her (uncorrected) handouts, these are difficult to use since the course was not planned or set up to be video-taped. In his work *The Basics of Utshimashits Mushuau innu*, Alan Ford sets out to provide similar details for the neighbouring, but quite different, dialect of Davis Inlet. MacKenzie (1982b) is also useful as an initial introduction to these dialects.

7. TEXTS

An extensive collection of tapes, transcriptions and translations of Montagnais texts is housed at the Department of Linguistics, Memorial University. The first collection took place in the summer of 1967 under the auspices of the LABORATOIRE DE RECHERCHES AMÉRINDIENNES, an independent research group in Montréal. The aim of the project was to collect myths in several Innu communities. The work was begun in Sheshatshit, where about one hundred myths were recorded from a number of elders. These were later transcribed and translated into English or French by Matiu Rich, the son of one of the story-tellers. A selection of the myths has been edited and published in English by Peter Desbarats (1969). They have also been the subject of analysis by structural anthropologists (cf. Lefebvre 1971, Savard 1971). As yet they have not been subject to linguistic analysis.

A second body of texts resulted from the work of the *Sheshatshiu Sociolinguistic Variability Project*, referred to above. These conversational texts, often with the life history of an individual as the topic, have been transcribed phonetically and phonemically, and a number have received grammatical annotation.

8. PLACE NAMES

Another type of lexicographic work currently underway is the collection of Innu toponyms. This work began in the mid-seventies as an integral part of research into land use and occupancy among the Innu of Labrador. This research is intended to support the Land Claim submitted to the Federal government by the Innu Nation. The existence of Native place names often provides important evidence of the occupancy of particular areas of land by a Native group. The Innu of Sheshatshit and Davis Inlet have traditionally hunted and trapped over a large portion of the eastern Labrador peninsula, well into the present-day province of Québec. The knowledge of these traditional names is still fresh in memory, although people travel on the land somewhat less widely today.

Adrian Tanner of the Department of Anthropology at Memorial University began the collection of place names in 1975 (Tanner 1977). This work has been continued by other researchers, primarily Peter Armitage, a former student of Tanner's, and José Mailhot. Mailhot has been responsible for the verification of the orthography and accurate translation of about 1,000 toponyms to date (Mailhot 1986, Armitage 1990) and will continue the work during the coming year.

The vocabulary for geographic forms in Montagnais is extensive, productive and highly descriptive. In the past, the Innu, without benefit of maps, were able to travel over vast areas of Québec-Labrador, depending only on detailed descriptions of travel routes encoded in this vocabulary and handed on from one hunter to another. The linguistic analysis of toponyms and geographic descriptors is thus of great interest to those who work in the field of ethnosemantics. It has even provided clues to meaning of the more abstract morphological elements of the language (Mailhot 1975; Denny and Mailhot 1976).

9. CONCLUSION

Although the Montagnais / Naskapi dialects in Labrador have been the focus of a considerable amount of study to date, as always, much remains to be done. The system for creating new words is poorly understood, as are syntactic and discourse processes. There now

exists a substantial body of textual material for the Sheshatshit dialect which can, in future, be utilized for research in these areas. In addition, the differences between the two dialects, in phonology, grammar and lexicon, have not as yet received systematic attention. It is to be hoped that young scholars will find the study of these and other Amerindian languages to be of interest.

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