

MALISEET, A CANADIAN INDIAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: Maliseet is an Algonquian Indian language, spoken in Canada and the USA. After a phonetic introduction, the morphology, particularly the very complex verb inflection will be discussed: the animate intransitive, inanimate intransitive, transitive animate and transitive inanimate verbs. There are inclusive and exclusive forms, obviation, special forms if first person acts on second person or the other way around, etc. The transitive animate verb inflection is the most difficult part of the grammar. Then sentences are presented. They are numbered for the sake of grammatical explanation.

Keywords: Maliseet verbs, gender and transitivity.

The Maliseet Indians live in the province of New Brunswick, Canada; and there are some speakers of it in Maine, USA. I have worked on this language for many years, and noted down a huge story collection, 12 volumes (about 500 pages each volume). I transcribed the stories phonetically on the basis of oral communication, and added the English translations. I am publishing parts of this large collection in co-operation with the Maliseet people.

There are only five vowels in this language: a, i, o, e and ə. The first four can be short or long: a, ā, i, ī, o, ō, e, ē. The vowel ə is always short in Maliseet. There is no difference between o or u. And there is no phonemic difference between a more open and a more closed e sound. I mark the long vowels with a horizontal line on top. Besides the vowel length, I mark the stress, using "accent aigu" for the main stress and "accent grave" for the secondary stress. Stress and vowel length are independent from each other. There are stressed or unstressed short vowels, as well as stressed and unstressed long vowels; I quote a few examples from the story: Short unstressed a: íya 'this', skítap 'man' (line 1). Long unstressed ā: āliyat 'going around' (line 1). Long stressed ā: kētāma 'no' (line 8).

We could discuss the other vowels and the consonants in the same way. But I am not doing this because we need more time for morphology. The noun can be animate or inanimate. This distinction of "gender" is very important because the endings are quite different, depending on this. The use of the other words in the sentence (particularly the verb) is quite different,

depending on gender. The animate nouns do not always indicate a human being or an animal. For instance, an apple is animate, but a nut is inanimate.

Adverbs belong to the category of “particles”. I am quoting examples: póniw ‘in the winter’ (line 79); təkè ‘now’ (line 118).

There are many more grammatical questions in connection with nouns, pronouns and particles, but we have to go ahead and speak about the verb, which is the most important and most difficult part of the Maliseet sentence. In Algonquian Linguistics we distinguish at least four major types of the verb: animate intransitive (AI), inanimate intransitive (II), transitive animate (TA) and transitive inanimate (TI). The sequence of the words is important in these terms. In the first two the gender of the subject can be animate or inanimate. In the last two, the object is animate or inanimate. The forms depend on several possible combinations of the subject and the object. These combinations of the number and the gender of the subject and the object allow a high number of different forms. In first person plural we have to distinguish between “inclusive” and “exclusive” forms, depending on the fact whether the person or persons present are excluded or included. And there is “obviation” in the Algonquian languages, including Maliseet. Obviation means that an animate third person is acting on another animate third person (or persons). In the transitive animate verb inflection there are different forms depending on the fact whether first or second person acts on third person or the other way around. We call this distinction “direct” or “inverse” forms. There are special forms for the situation when first person acts on second person (just like the Hungarian l forms of the verb), and there are forms for the opposite of this: second person acting on first person.

The relative form means ‘then (something happened)’. I quote a relative form of an animate intransitive verb from line 75: tətłtəkwsin ‘It (i.e. a squirrel) made noise’.

The transitive animate verb inflection is extremely complex because of a high number of possible combinations of the subject and the object. Here we have to distinguish between so called direct and inverse forms. Direct forms: ‘I see him’, ‘you see him’, etc. Inverse forms: ‘he sees me’, ‘he sees you’, etc. This distinction exists most commonly in the independent indicative and in the conjunct forms. Obviation makes the number of possible forms still higher. I quote an example: this is a simple transitive animate third person singular, independent indicative, direct form with obviation, in line 4 in our story: tiyal-yákw ‘he said to it (or: to him)’. Here is an inverse form of a transitive animate verb, third person singular, conjunct: éliwiyot ‘(this) is his name’ (line 15). A transitive animate negative independent indicative, first person singular, direct form is in line 41: ma-mátnāwi ‘I do not fight him’. We meet a transitive animate simple conjunct third person singular direct form in line 57: tāma nāmiyāt ‘if you see him anywhere’. I quote an example with a transitive inanimate verb, independent indicative, third person singular: nīl-kāhk-əlo sesmitahatəmən ‘I myself wonder about it’ (117).

The use of the conjunct verbs is very common in the stories. It has not only grammatical, but stylistic function as well. I quote a sentence from lines 132-133, in which there are three verbs, all of them in some kind of a conjunct form: kisi-nástəkwēnat / ēci-yakw wēlinəkwsit / él(ə)miyat apikcilo ‘After he stroked it / it was so nice, going away, the skunk’. The first conjunct in this sentence, kisi-nástəkwēnat ‘after he stroked it’, is a transitive animate verb with

a past marker preverb. The verb wəlinākwsit 'it was so nice' is animate intransitive conjunct. There is one more animate intransitive conjunct in this sentence: əlmiyat 'going away'. (The ending is different from the previous one, because this belongs to a different conjugation.)

Finally allow me to make such a statement: Maliseet is an extremely difficult language. I speak an unusually high number of languages. During my long teaching career I taught German, Russian, Japanese and Hungarian; and I conducted research on several Fenno-Ugrian languages. I am a fluent speaker of Maliseet. I think my life time experience makes it possible for me to declare such a statement: Maliseet is more difficult, more complex than any of those languages I ever had to work with, in teaching or research.

A few words about the contents of the stories: Mythology, stories of Glooscap and Meekkomowess, history the way the old people remember it, old Indian life, hunting, handicrafts, housekeeping, medicines, domestic and wild animals, witches, spirits, ghosts, superstition - these are the main issues in the stories of the Malecite Indians. There are also fairy tales of European origin, reshaped and adjusted, told in their Malecite versions, as well as nice children's stories. There are beautiful old songs, presented by old Indians in the Malecite language, religious hymns, Indian war songs, and songs for different occasions, for instance, weddings. The storytellers gave many details of old Indian life. They described the making of snowshoes, moccasins, canoes, paddles, tanning hides by soaking them in oil, the way they built their own church, and even old Malecite games. Some of their old habits are connected with their ancient beliefs: dancing the trade dance, or using the sweatlodge.

THE MAN STROKED THE ANIMALS

- 1 yòt-ēhta pīhce / āliyat iya / skītap
Right here, / long ago, / (he was) going around, this here, / a man,
- 4 nākā móhs / nākā iyil mīkhwiyl / 'tiyal-yákw /
and a moose, / and this squirrel. / He said to it (i.e. to an animal): /
- 8 -āhá / nil-kāhkēlo kētāma /
-Yes! / (Somebody does, but) I myself, no (i.e. I do not fight him). /
- 15 nōhsēhs éliwiyot /
Noossez is his name. /
- 41 -ən-tāma / ma-mátnāwi / má-nit nil n tēli-pēciyāwēn /
-No! / I do not fight him. / I did not come here, into this /
- 57 mawshowin / tāma nēmiyāt? /
with a human person / if you see him anywhere? /
- 75 'tēlihtākwsin / étlihtākwsit wēt mīhkò /
it made noise. / (While) it was making a noise, this squirrel, /

- 79 -tānəp-lo pōniw k-təlawhsin? /
 -How would you live in the winter? /
- 117 -ī / tán-pal tēke k-təhlōhkan? / nīl-kāhkəlo sesmitahatəmən /
 -Oh, / what would you do now? / I myself wonder about it, /
- 118 -'tiyal - tán-pal-lo tēkə k-təhlōhkan / apsəkīlən /
 -he said to it. - What would you do now, / when you are small? /
- 132 kisi-nástəkwēnat / əci-yakw wəlinəkwsit / él(ə)miyat
 After he stroked it / it was so nice, / going away,
- 133 ápikcīlio /
 the skunk. /

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