
LINGUISTIC FACTORS IN ALGONQUIAN LANGUAGES

Influencing the Learning of French or English



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Context

For most children having an Indigenous language as their mother tongue, schooling in Canada will take place in the second language (French or English). As with any second-language learning, many language-specific factors may influence this learning. Since this second language is the language of instruction at school, the child must first learn that language in order to be able to acquire knowledge of the other subjects taught in this language.

An Algonquian language, namely Innu, will be used to present the possible challenges in the learning of French, or English, and of reading and writing. In addition, adaptations and activities will be suggested to facilitate the learning outcomes for children.

Sounds of languages (phonetics and phonology)

Words in languages are composed of units commonly called “sounds” (phonemes). These phonemes are consonants, vowels and semi-consonants. They are themselves composed of features that allow them to be described and differentiated—the “nasal” feature, for example, refers to the passage of air through the nose of the “m-n-gn” consonants. Each language has a determined set of phonemes which uses a limited range of features. This determined set varies from one language to another (and from one dialect to another). Thus, the French “u”, as in “rue” (street), does not exist in English and an anglophone may confuse the “u” with a sound he knows, the “oo”; he may not hear or express the difference between “roue” (wheel) and “rue”.

The meaning of words (semantics)

Each word has one or more meanings. The meaning of a word in one language may include several words in another language. Thus, in French, one says “aimer”, whereas in English there is a distinction between “to like” and “to love”. In Innu, the word “tetapuakan” includes the words “chair”, “bench”, but also several other sorts of seats. While the Innu term is used for almost everything you can sit on (including the log around the campfire), the words in French and English are not interchangeable.

Overlaps and divisions of language words can be explored in class using illustrations and Venn diagrams.

In addition to enriching students’ vocabulary, such classification activities will develop their lexical awareness.

The grammar (morphosyntax)

In Algonquian languages, the verb is the central element of the sentence (Drapeau, 2014). Indeed, the majority of words are verbs (including colours and days of the week). Algonquian languages are polysynthetic, which means that it is possible to construct words (including verbs) so complex that their translation would correspond to an entire sentence. Adjectives are presented as affixes, that is to say, words that must necessarily be attached to the words they describe (in English, the “in” in “indecision” is an affix example) In Algonquian language, since adjectives “stick” to the words they describe, it is not surprising to find a hundred words to name the snow. It is possible, in addition to the existing lexicon, to create words at will!

While the privileged word order in French and English is subject-verb-object, this order is not necessarily the same in Algonquian languages since the object-verb form is just as frequent—especially when telling the time.

While the grammatical genre is important in French (both for people

and objects) and in English (for people), it does not exist in Algonquian languages. However, the animate/inanimate distinction is central to it, going as far as to influence the conjugations used according to whether the subject is animated or not. The modes, the verb tenses of Algonquian languages and their uses do not correspond in a linear fashion to those found in French and English—for example, there is no verb tense in French or in English intended to relate one’s dreams.

The absence of grammatical gender in Algonquian languages has a direct impact on the learning of French or English, especially for the acquisition of personal pronouns. Indeed, the distinction “he-she” can be difficult for the learners. On the one hand, because it does not exist

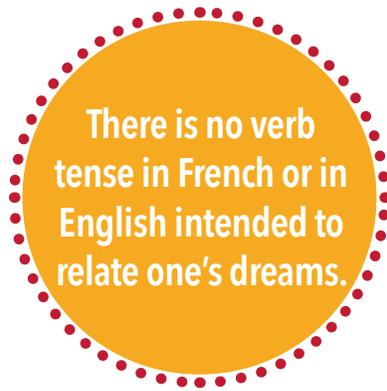
in Algonquian languages and, on the other hand, because adults who speak French or English around them, and who have the same mother tongue, do not necessarily make the distinction in their model.

The student will also learn that, although there are two “we” (inclusive, “all of us”, and the exclusive we, “us only”) in Algonquian languages, there is only one in French or English, to which must be added some words if one wants to be more precise.

Finally, in a narrative in Algonquian language, the order of introduction of characters, and their roles in relation to others, will determine the pronoun used to refer to them. In “My father’s brother ate the cake”, the brother and my father will each have their pronouns (3rd and 4th person) that will clearly refer to one or the other. Since both pronouns clarify the relationship of dependence (here, between the dog and the father), the repetition

of the antecedent is not required to clarify who it is during narration. Since these two pronouns are translated as “he” into French or English, it will be necessary to explicitly teach the student whose mother tongue is Algonquian that the antecedent of pronouns must be repeated in a speech or narrative.





A child whose mother tongue is an Algonquian language will therefore implicitly learn that voicing is not a distinctive feature. He could therefore have difficulty understanding that this contrast is important in French and in English. He might not hear or articulate this contrast properly.

Conclusion

We provided a brief overview of some of the linguistic difficulties that an Algonquian language speaker may encounter in learning English or French. Other factors, such as the cultural rules of social interaction or the quality and quantity of language models, influence the acquisition of mother tongue and second language. In order to support students in their schooling, a reflection on language is required from preschool. Language awareness activities and explicit teaching can help children (and adults!) not only to become aware of the differences and similarities of languages, but also to develop their metalinguistic skills in order to overcome difficulties. ■

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