

## Paul Chartrand Interview by Spenser Thibault, November 20, 2021

I'll tell you what I know about it. It's based pretty well on my experience. Except that some things I can say are based on things I've read. For example, I read a report by the American Surgeon General who wrote a report in 1879, a report of the Smithsonian Institution. He'd gone through Canada, Valery Havard was his name. I dunno if you know that one, but anyway, I read that, and from that, if I rely on what he says, I can see the continuity in the usage of the words that he used. I wanted to mention that as an example of what I meant when I said "mostly based on my experience." I wasn't alive in 1879 but I can assume that if that's true, then. But, other than that, I can just use my own experience, because I grew up in St. Laurent in Manitoba, and I spoke that the way the people speak there, even though there, different families speak ... a little bit different, sometimes. It's about three miles long, and, when you're there and you really know everything, you'll know that some people ... say these words this way, and these people over here, they say these words that way. So, there's none of that uniformity that outside scholars write about. When they come in for a few weeks and write about it, you know, people are creatures who like to simplify things so they can understand it. So, whatever you read about language, you can assume it's a very simplified version of reality. That applies for a lot of things, not only for language I think! It's a human tendency.

But by and large, our language is an old—I call it archaic French. It's the fur trade era French, because people who brought it here, were the Moniyaws, the white people. You know, Moniyaws, of course, is an Anishinaabe word, but it means "Montreal." The people from Montreal. Now it's in Cree. It's used as a word for white people. But, for Americans, you call them the Bostonais, you see, from Boston. So, one of my direct ancestors is Bostonais Pangman. He's very well known in western Canadian history, particularly Manitoba history. He's regarded as one of the four chiefs of the Metis in 1812, around that time when Selkirk first brought some settlers to the Red River area. So that's my direct ancestor.

Anyway, in St. Laurent it looks like we're one of the few places where we're backward, I guess. We still speak the old way, where everybody else has moved along, but that's been changing too over the last several decades. I lived there growing up, until my early twenties, except for one year I was in a residential school, and then I was away for a long time, but, I came back as an adult, in my ... sixties, seventies? And I lived there for about another eleven years, recently. So, I've lived there for over three decades, over a very long period of time: over fifty years. So that's the stretch of my experience with the people, the culture, the language, and I'm related to all the old families there pretty well.

I can bore you for hours with the local history, which I won't, but on the language, I call it archaic French, it's derived from that French. I know that Father Guy Lavallée who died a few years ago, there's an example of—we don't say "eh/é" like La-val-eh, you know, in French, however we say "La-val-ee" have no "é" kind of sound, we go "ee." So, that's one of the distinguishing features, when French folk say "lavaleh" we say "lavalee." But anyway, he did interviews, with the people there, most if not all of them are my relatives, and then he sent a copy of the recordings to Robert Papen. I don't know if you've heard of him, he's a linguist in Quebec. He's from Saskatchewan originally.

But I remember Robert called it a "living linguistic museum," you know because, we use a lot of French words that are not used anywhere else. For example, **[speaks Michif]** is an old French word. It means your coat, or an item of clothing, anyway. So we still say **[speaks Michif]**, usually for your winter gear, but, it means your clothes, generally, but you can use it more particularly as well. That's getting to complexities, but I just gave you a word as an example. But I checked with linguists, "Where does that

come from?" 'Cause I've asked Robert, mostly, "Where does this word come from, is that a French word?" There are words in our language that nobody knows their origin. And again, for example, nobody knows where that comes from [**speaks Michif**], there's another one. We can use some of these words. I've asked linguists, I've had French speakers, Cree speakers, and Ojibwe speakers, and nobody has any idea what the word comes from. So, our language has words of unknown origin. We even have songs, there's a song that has no words ... no intelligible words, and I know it's not only St. Laurent because I know somebody whose nickname is from one of these "non-words" in the song. His nickname is one of those words, and he told me the Elders gave him that nickname, and he had no idea, he's dead now, but he had no idea what the word meant, eh? But, it's just his nickname, so that's pretty strong evidence to me that that nonsense song was known not just in St. Laurent, but farther out, amongst Metis people, Metis communities.

The language is unique, absolutely unique. I've spoken to—the way we speak, with some French speakers, their native language is French, and they didn't have a clue what I was talking about. And, some others, they can understand me without a problem. Linguists tell me that people who are accustomed to hearing different varieties of spoken French will be better able to understand it, but people who are just used to one version, then they'll have a hard time. I've tried it with people sometimes, it's a bit difficult because [**speaks Michif**] but, anyway, that's a bit about our language. It's based on French, so one of its linguistic elements, is that most of the words by far are French. A lot of them are words that are no longer used. I'm not gonna say anywhere else, but, generally not in use, around us, or in Canada. But we find some words are—my brother told me, he was in France, and some of the words we use, they're still used in some places over there. So we've got a collection, because if they're brought here three-hundred years ago, those words have persisted in some regions in France, perhaps, you see, but they're not used in Quebec, for example. It's a big mixture of expressions and words, all over the place. It's certainly a field that's ripe for inquiry, for study. I've always said it would be fascinating to engage in a study with linguists and speakers, and just delve into all these mysteries. Try to get somebody who can sing, because I can't sing!

But the other thing is that, still on the language, its structure is influenced by Algonquian languages. Algonquian includes quite a number of languages, including Cree and Ojibwe, as well as Algonquin, as opposed to the big family of languages. Some of the structure of the sentences reflect the Algonquian syntax, more than the French syntax. You see that complicates things. That's kind of throwing a curve at someone who's not used to it. He's saying that upside-down or backwards, for example. One example that I saw somebody else write about was in French you would have the expression les chevaux de ton père. Your father's horses. You see, in French the horses come before the father, your father's horses. But anyway, the way we would say it, the old way, what I'm gonna tell you is generalized, the old way. Because there are varieties of expression, it's not every family that will use every expression the way I express it. It's impossible to get a sort of a general picture, there's no such thing! It's all particularized. But, [**speaks Michif**], you see, instead of les chevaux de ton père, you'd say [**speaks Michif**]. It turns things around a little bit.

That's a bit of a start. So you see a lot of things like that. So, say, [**speaks Michif**], which means "the thing of yours." In French you would say ... say you were playing golf, your ball, there was your ball, here was my ball, how would you say that in French... c'est ta balle. [Spenser says: la balle à toi], in old Michif we say, [**speaks Michif**]. They're all French words, but they're twisted around, so if you're not used to the language you don't know what the heck the speaker's talking about. So there's all these kinds of

complexities that I'm trying to illustrate, and then there are words that nobody knows their origin. It's been a really interesting experience for me to go to places, some American Indian communities, Métis communities, and hear people say, "Oh, I thought only at home we said that!" and here they say it. So that's why it's a big mystery out there, so who else speaks like this? There's been no studies! It's really bad because it's a foundational language of western Canada, and that's maybe why I might have said nobody seems to put too much weight on it, to do a study on it, and so on. They spend a lot of time studying other things. It's fine, but, for me, I'd say "Man, it would be really nice if people spent some time delving into the mysteries of this language."