Reanalyzing Michif “Determiners”
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Introduction  Michif, a mixed language born derived from Plains Cree and Laurentian French, offers a unique insight into the effects of language contact. These effects are potentially even more interesting given the typological differences between French (Romance) and Cree (Algonquian). Michif has been characterized as having French DPs and Cree VPs, each with their own grammatical system stemming from their source language (Bakker 1997), though the situation is more complicated than that. While the “determiners,” possessives, numerals and most quantifiers are derived from French, the demonstratives and some quantifiers are derived from Cree. In this paper we argue that though what looks like a determiner system in Michif is historically French, the system does not display properties typical of French determiners, and that the determiners appear to have been reanalyzed as Class prefixes, contra Rosen (2003).

Data  We have four pieces of evidence that the Michif “determiners” have been reanalyzed as (i) lower in the tree and (ii) prefixal. First, unlike French determiners, which must precede numerals (1a), Michif “determiners” must follow them (1b)
(1) a. les trois pommes b. trwaa lii pom
   D.pl three apples            three “D”.pl apple
   ‘the three apples’            ‘(the) three apples’
Second, when nouns are incorporated in verbs, they incorporate the “determiners”.
(2) a. ni-li-galet-ihkaa-n b. la-tortsheu-ikhka-ishi-w
   1-“D”-bannock-MAKE-NON3      “D”-turtle-MAKE-REFL-3
   ‘I’m making bannock.’         ‘He’s acting like a turtle.’
Third, only a very small, finite number of (French-derived) adjectives can intervene between the “determiners” and N (3a). Any other elements may not intervene (3b).
(3) a. li pehit animaal b. * lii trwaa animaal
   “D” small animal             “D”.pl three animal
   ‘the small animal’            ‘(the) three animals’
Finally, Cree-derived “adjective-like” elements are prefixed to the “D”-N complex.
(4) napaki-li-pwesun
   flat-“D”-fish
   ‘flatfish’ (Bakker 1997: 107)
This is only expected if the “D” is itself prefixed to the N.

Analysis  We argue that these D-like elements occupy a much lower position: Class (as gender markers). They also affix to the noun (or to the A-N complex). Assuming a structure as in Harbour (2007), the Michif DP would be as in (5).
(5) [DP [D [NumP [Num [DivP [Div [ClassP [Class {li-/la-} [nP ]]]]]]]]]

Implications  If these French-source “determiners” are in fact affixes in Michif, a French syntactic item has been reanalyzed into the Algonquian nominal morphology. This may lend support to arguments that Michif is typologically an Algonquian language, with heavy borrowing from French, rather than a mixed language with two intertwined grammars, as argued in Bakker (1997).
References