A study investigated the existence of a definite article in Montagnais, an Algonquian language spoken by about 6,000 Canada natives. The language has not yet been totally described, and teachers, who must create their own instructional materials for Montagnais language instruction, are unsure as to whether to teach their own usage or what they are told by linguists. No description of a definite article system has ever been included in the language's grammar. However, analysis of Montagnais now suggests that it does have such a form, and that it differs enough from French not to have been borrowed from it. Comparison of frequency of usage of the definite article and demonstratives in this and other languages support this hypothesis. Others argue that because the definite article is much more frequent in the speech and writing of younger people, it is just emerging. This perspective is supported by an analysis of pupils' retelling, in writing, of an elder's story but not by frequency data from the spontaneous speech of elderly Montagnais monolinguals. It is concluded that the explicit grammar reflects more the incomplete construct of linguists than the real usage of the language. (MSE)
INTRODUCTION

Montagnais is an Algonquian language affiliated to Eastern Cree. It is spoken on the North Shore of Saint-Lawrence River in Quebec by some 6,000 speakers spread on 10 reserves or so. The data I will expose to analysis come from Betsiamites, a community of 1,200 speakers, 100% of which declare to have Montagnais as their mother tongue and home first language of use. 85% of them declare to be French-Montagnais bilingual. Actually, except the preschool children and a few very old persons every one is bilingual.

When they enter school, children are taught mainly in French. Montagnais as a language course exist since 1972 however. In the early 80s, and over a period of four years only, an experimental program offered entire education in the mother tongue to children from grade 1 to grade 4 inclusively. During that period started an intensive era of course material production.

Problematic

The problem though remains that Montagnais has not yet been totally described, so teachers must rely on incomplete grammars to create their own teaching material. It should be mentioned that these teachers, who have a B.Ed. were introduced to the existing grammatical description of their language in a very schematical way. More over, they do not read English and hence do not have access to most of the scientific literature on their language. Hence the question is, when they teach Montagnais L1, what do they teach, their own use of the language or what they have been told by linguists about their language?

One example of that problem is the case of the Montagnais definite article. From Bloomfield on and untill very recently no research had

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been done about the existence of such a category in the Cree languages. And consequently no description of a definite article system was ever included in the grammatical descriptions of these languages. When asked about the existence of a definite article in Cree or in Montagnais, linguists and native teachers were unanimous: there was no definite article in these languages. 

First in collaboration with Monica Axelsson at Stockholm's University in 1987, then by myself in Quebec in 1990-1991 I made research on the subject. This brought evidence that Montagnais was a definite article language. I presented my results at the 23rd Algonquian Conference held in London 1991. The set of semantico-functional rules as they appear in table 1 show that Montagnais definite article system differs enough from the French one not to have been borrowed from that language:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) if an entity has a referential definite status in the relevant universe of discourse</th>
<th>then it obeys the construction (DEF ART + NP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whether or not the NP is a common noun a proper noun including place names a possessed noun</td>
<td>provided that it is not a title/vocative partitive/mass noun noun complementizer [and ev. direct object]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2) if an entity has a referential indefinite status in the relevant universe of discourse | then it obeys the construction Ø + NP |

Table 1. Semantico-functional rules for the use of definite articles in Montagnais.

Beside this set of rules what convinced Algonquianists most about the existence of a definite article in Montagnais was the comparative frequencies among languages as they appear in table 2:
Table 2. Frequencies in the use of definite articles and demonstratives among languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>DEF ART</th>
<th>DEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>2.27 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>39.8 %</td>
<td>3.30 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>40.2 %</td>
<td>6.87 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>49.5 %</td>
<td>3.77 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>55.0 %</td>
<td>7.07 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montagnais</td>
<td>55 % DEF + NP</td>
<td>2.9 % NP + DEM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DET + NP indicates that this construction should correspond to the definite article in the language, while the reverse construction of NP + DET should correspond to the demonstrative marker. The 55 % reflects the average frequency found in the overall Montagnais data, mentionless of age, sex, dialect, style, type of discourse, etc. totalizing 11,100 words and 45 speakers.

On these basis Algonquianists accepted the idea of a definite article in Montagnais, but, as it was the first description of it and as the language is presently going through a catastrophic period of linguistic change, most of them emitted the hypothesis that the definite article was in mere emergence. Actually one frequent comment from the linguistic consultant and among native language teachers, technolinguists and translators is that the use of the noun determiners, i.e. definite articles, is not obligatory and that it is much more frequent in the Youngsters' discourse than in the Elders'. It is seen as sheer redundancy due to overemphasizing practices.

When I wrote the abstract for the present paper I had not yet calculated the frequencies shown on the last line of table 2 and I was therefore under the impression that the above mentioned hypothesis had good chances to be correct.

In order to measure this hypothetical increase in the frequency of the use of the DEF from generation to generation I made the following experimentation. I asked the Montagnais teacher for grade 7 to read a tale to her students (3 groups = 58 children) and to ask them to write it down later on as a homework.
Data

The tale chosen by the teacher to be read in class was an edited version of a transcription of a tale told by an Elder (72 in 1983). I don't know what the term edited hides but it is expected to be a slight simplification of the sentence structure and erasing of what the teacher considered as oral discourse redundancy. Consciously or not, by chance or not, the teacher choose a text that shows, after "editing" afrequency of DEF lower than any other text I have ever seen i.e. only 32% of the NPs occur with a DEF compared to an average of 55% for the overall Montagnais data (as shown in table 2).

Comparing the frequencies between the teacher's version and the children's versions the results were as shown in table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher's tale</th>
<th>Students' versions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32% of NPs have a DEF</td>
<td>54% of NPs have a DEF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Compared frequencies for DEF/NPs in teacher's and students' texts.

This effectively reinforced the hypothesis that the DEF was in progression from one generation to another.

Then I went to Betsiamites to discuss the case with my informant, who is 46 years old, native speaker of course, has lived all her life on the reserve, beside short stays in town during her part time B.Ed. studies. She is now the person in charge for the amerindianisation program and belongs to the Education Service in the Band Council. After a short briefing on the question of the definite article which she new nothing about (I didn't tell her about the emergence hypothesis but I showed her table 1 and 2) she said that she perceived what I meant and that in fact teens and children used a lot more DEF than Elders. She said that according to her intuition she would say that Elders used DEF only to give a little more contour to some parts of their discourse, to make it "nicer" while teens and children would use it everywhere. Asked if she would qualify the Youngsters' use as incorrect she answered: «No, maybe a bit exagerated but surely not incorrect.»
ANALYSIS

I- Teacher's version of the tale

Then we looked at the teacher's version of the tale and she felt that even that piece of discourse showed a quite high frequency of DEF for an Elders' discourse. She said most of these DEF were not obligatory. I asked her to mark all the ones she considered redundant. Among 60 NPs, 19 had a DEF. She crossed off 14 of them, leaving the text with a frequency of only 8.3% of DEF/NPs which would be the frequency of a language with a very high rate of DEM but not of a DEF-language (see table 2).

Then she mentioned that there could also be much more DEF than there were in reality, were it a teens' discourse. So I asked her to indicate all the slots where a DEF could be used. Over the 19 that already existed she indicated 28 other possible slots for a DEF to appear. If all these slots would be filled then the frequency of DEF/NPs would reach 78% These frequencies appear in table 4.

II. Children's text

I then asked the informant to read the children's texts (for one class = 20 students) and to classify them as good or bad. I specified that she should not take the orthography into account, but she should consider only the clarity and the grammaticality. The results were as follows:
1) The average frequency in the text classified as of good students (which corresponds to the average overall frequency shown in table 2) was 56% DEF/NP

Highest frequency: 75% DEF/NP
Lowest frequency: 41% DEF/NP

2) The average frequency in the text classified as of bad students was 43% DEF/NP

Highest frequency: 67% DEF/NP
Lowest frequency: 12% DEF/NP

NOTE: The informant commented this 12% DEF/NP text by saying "Very difficult to read".

The interpretation of those frequencies is that students whose average frequency is higher are considered better speakers (writers) than students whose average frequency is lower. It is not sure if there is a link between the low frequency of DEF and the opacity of those texts. Yet, it is likely that there is a link since one function of Montagnais DEF is anaphoric recall of participants. A text not making correct or even sufficient use of these markers necessarily ends up with being unclear. Example (1) illustrates a sample of a good student text:

(1) Excerpt of a typical child's discourse
(Chantal Tshernisk 13 years old, 63% DET/NPs)

Tshi-Shan ka natuapamat kamatshishit. Ekue itat ne Tshi-Shan Johnny goes to meet devil Then he-says the Johnny

ma tshipaiuin shunialu iteu ne Tshi-Shan. Eshe ekue itakuat Oh! I want money says the Johnny Yes then he is told-by-him

ne kamatshishilit. Nituassimat tshika tshiuetaut. Ekuan miam iteu the devil My children will bring-it That's very good says

ne Tshi-Shan nelu kamatshishilit. Ek ne Tshi-Shan mishta peshikashteu the Johnny the devil Then the Johnny a lot he beats them
nelu kamatshishissat. Ek nitshen kamatshishisssat ekue uitamuatau utauia. the little devils then the little devils then they return to their father.

«Johnny goes to meet the devil. Then Johnny says to him: "Oh! I want money!" he says Johnny. "OK" he is then told by the devil. "My children will bring it [to your place]." "That's very good" says Johnny to the devil. Then Johnny beats the little devils a lot. Then the little devils return to their father.»

III. Older speakers frequencies

The next logical stage after that was to go back to older speakers's spontaneous discourse and to check if their frequency was so much lower than the one in the children's discourse or even in the teacher's adapted version. I took oral data from 1980 (Drapeau-Betsiamites corpus) and looked at three speakers who were in 1980 respectively 60, 79 and 97 which gives an average age of 78.6 year. These speakers were held to be Montagnais monolinguals and indeed their discourse was 100% Montagnais monolingual.

The frequency of DEF/NP in the older speakers' discourse (shown in table 6) was respectively:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>DEF/NP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st speaker</td>
<td>60 years old</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd speaker</td>
<td>79 years old</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd speaker</td>
<td>97 years old</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with an average of 53.4% DEF/NP

Table 6. Elders' frequency in the use of DEF.

This frequency corresponds exactly to the good students' average frequency and to the overall frequency. Example (2) illustrates a sample of an Elder's spontaneous discourse:

(2) Excerpt of a typical spontaneous Elder's discourse
(Speaker 82-12-16-18 72 years old, 63 % DET/NPs)
CONCLUSION

1) Even though the use of DEF is claimed to be almost unexistant in the Elders' discourse (8%) and very frequent in the Youngsters' discourse (78%), the data show that the average frequencies are absolutely the same in both groups.

2) As the native teachers and the native language consultants were never told by the linguists that there was a DEF in the Montagnais language (they were probably told on the contrary that there was NO DEF in Montagnais) they are puzzled by the idea of its existence. They think of it either as of a new phenomena or as of a mere stylistic device.

3) The explicit grammar the educated natives (teachers) have in their mind reflects more the incomplete construct of the linguists than the real usage of the language (even in its most classical manifestation, I mean by this the language of very old monolingual speakers).

And this shows once again that the strongest argument is always the best...