

TOWARDS A DIALECTOLOGY OF
CREE-MONTAGNAIS-NASKAPI

by

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ABSTRACT

This study describes linguistic variations among the dialects of the Cree language at the levels of phonology, morphology and lexicon. The dialects which undergo velar palatalization (k>c) within Quebec-Labrador are described in detail. The language spoken in these nineteen communities has been referred to as Cree, Montagnais, Naskapi or Montagnais-Naskapi by various scholars. Only the dialects where velar palatalization does not take place are unambiguously regarded as Cree. The relationship between the palatalized and non-palatalized dialects is examined and the dialects spoken between Alberta and Labrador are found to form a continuum. Within the continuum sub-groups are established but the existence of a significant break between non-palatalized (so-called Cree) and palatalized (so-called Montagnais-Naskapi) dialects is challenged.

At the level of phonology it is demonstrated that the majority of sound shifts occur in both palatalized and non-palatalized dialects. Usually, however, these shifts are

generalized to more phonological segments, and over a larger geographic area, in the palatalized dialects. Processes of short vowel assimilation, loss, neutralization and rounding are much more widespread. As well, the processes of velar palatalization, short vowel syncope and subsequent de-palatalized account for the majority of the differences between palatalized and non-palatalized dialects. These processes are linguistic innovations which originate in the Quebec dialects, which have been longest in contact with European populations.

The differences in inflectional morphology and non-palatalized dialects than within either group. The distribution of lexical items, however, divides the palatalized dialects into two major groups, which correlate with areas of English and French influence. Speakers in the west of Quebec, where English is dominant, share vocabulary with the non-palatalized dialects in the rest of Canada. The linguistic groupings are displayed by the use of isoglosses on maps. These linguistic patterns are then correlated with non-linguistic ones of geographical, social and cultural variation.