

# Phonetics of the Synchronic Michif Vowel System

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## Introduction

- Language of the Red River Métis, first created by descendants of Algonquian and French intermarriage, probably in/by 1830s (Bakker 1997).
- Classified as ‘**mixed language**’; may not be traced back to a single language family (Thomason 2001).

- DP elements come primarily from French.
- VP elements come primarily from Cree.

Mitoni l<sup>a</sup>posyer-i<sup>w</sup>an ‘It’s really dusty’  
 Ni-ka-lipam<sup>kin</sup>-i<sup>w</sup>in ‘I’ll turn into a pumpkin.’  
 Ni-lidinii-ihkan ‘I’m making dinner.’

## Research Question

- Is Michif divided, or *stratified* based on source language?
  - Do Cree-origin lexical items preserve their Cree phonology?
  - Do French-origin lexical items preserve their French phonology?
  - And what is the status of English in Michif?

## Methodology

- Use phonetic evidence to compare Michif vowels in the French-origin items vs those in the Cree-origin items.
- Measure vowel F1, F2 and employ statistical analysis to see whether vowels of different sources are of significantly different or not.

## Participants

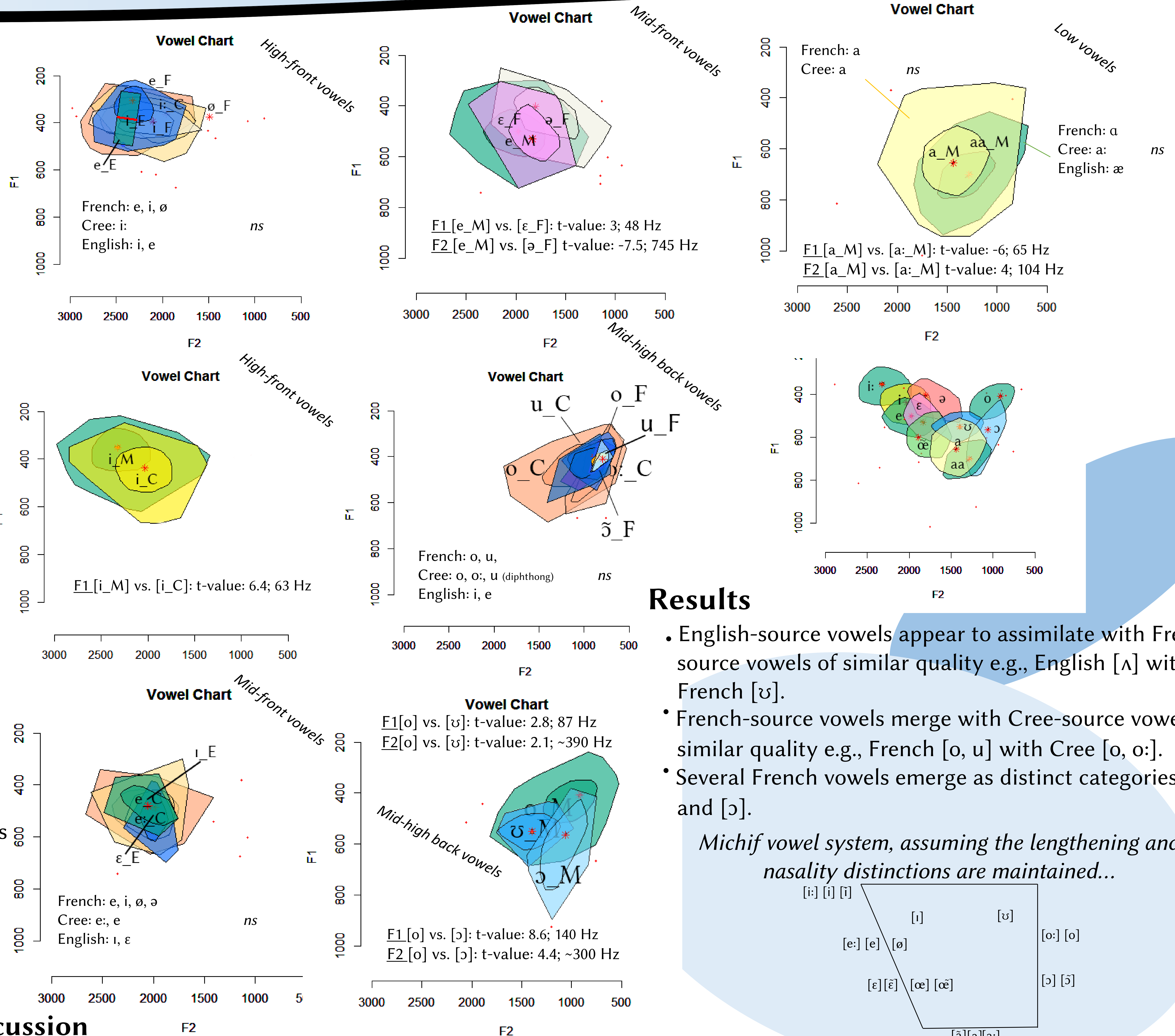
- 5 speakers (2M, 3F) – Southwest Manitoba – 60+

## Task

- Retellings of the Pear Film (Chafe, 1980)

## Analysis

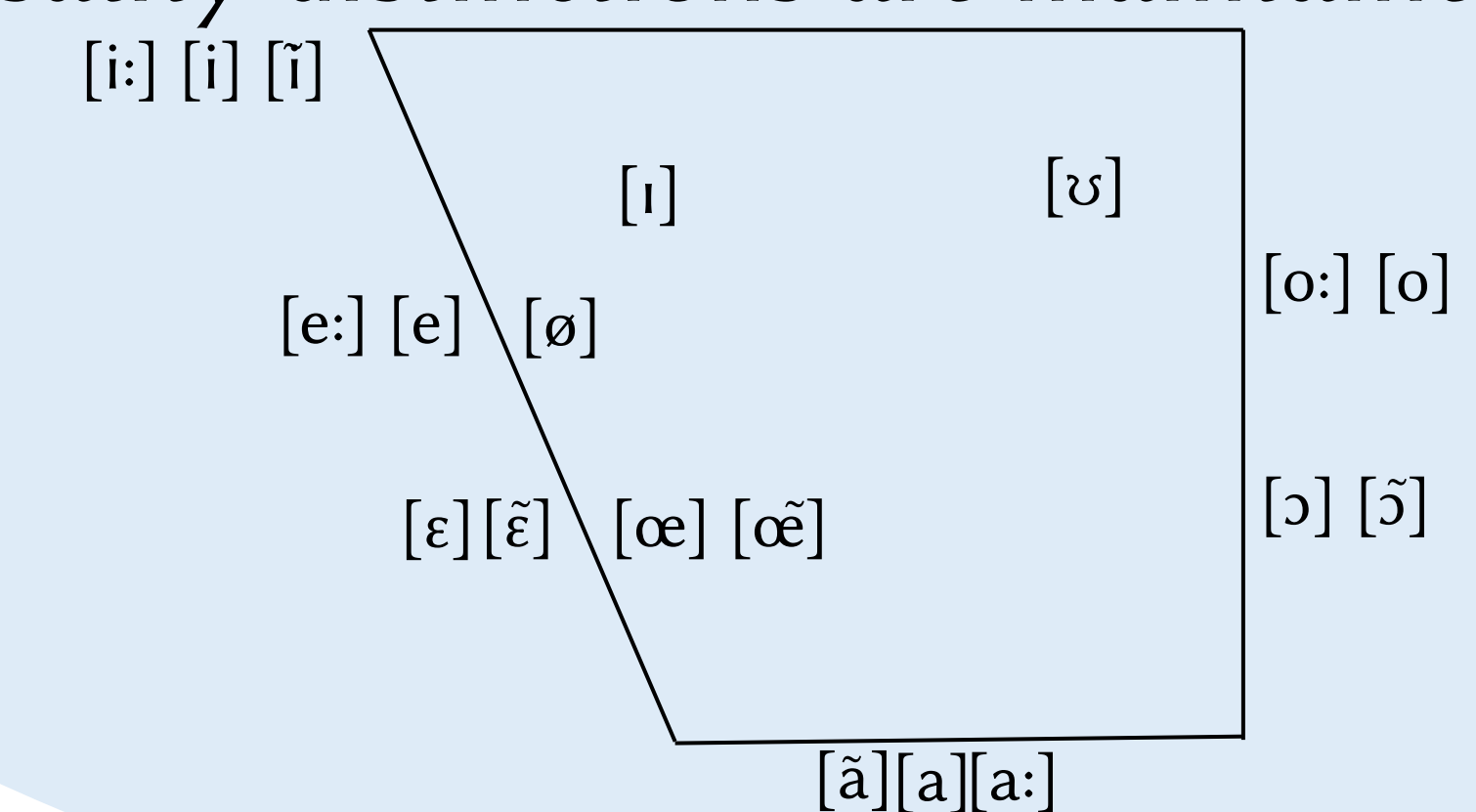
- 1,785 vowel tokens analysed (F1 & F2)
- Mixed effects models in R – F1/F2 DV
  - Fixed – gender, surrounding segment
  - Random – speaker, word



## Results

- English-source vowels appear to assimilate with French-source vowels of similar quality e.g., English [ʌ] with French [ʊ].
- French-source vowels merge with Cree-source vowels of similar quality e.g., French [o, u] with Cree [o, o:].
- Several French vowels emerge as distinct categories e.g., [ʊ] and [ɔ].

*Michif vowel system, assuming the lengthening and nasality distinctions are maintained...*



## Discussion

- The Michif vowel system is complex and cannot accurately be described as ‘stratified’ based on language of origin.
- Like other MLs, Michif is heavily influenced by the Algonquian (Plains Cree) phonology and appears to conform to its patterns whenever possible.
- Reasons for deviating from the Cree phonology may include high functional load placed on the Cree vowel system to accommodate the French vocabulary.

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