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Working Group on the Promotion of Recording and Use of Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group Geographical Names

**Research on French Origins and Influence in the Toponymic
Heritage of Western Canada***

* Prepared by Carol Léonard (Canada), University of Alberta, Canada

**RESEARCH ON FRENCH ORIGINS AND INFLUENCE IN THE TOPONYMIC
HERITAGE OF WESTERN CANADA**

**Carol Léonard, Ph.D
University of Alberta, Canada**

Abstract

This paper refers to two major studies funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada whose main purpose is to assemble into corpora all toponyms of French origin or influence assigned to sites in Western Canada.

Two major studies funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada were undertaken in 2006 and 2007. Their main purpose is to trace, unearth and assemble into corpora all toponyms of French origin or influence assigned to sites in the provinces of Manitoba and Alberta since the 17th century. The Manitoba study is based essentially on documentary evidence and differs in this from the Alberta study, which includes a large-scale field survey in addition to documentary research. These two studies will complement the one carried out in Saskatchewan over a decade ago, which identified and characterized more than 2,500 toponyms bearing the imprint of French in that province.

These corpus-building projects give rise to a set of secondary objectives related to semantic elucidation, etymology and the characterization of naming practices where interlinguistic contact occurs. The entire system serves a pedagogical purpose with a view to recording the wealth and diversity of these corpora, which show the interrelationship of languages and cultures as they blend and combine through the original creations of the peoples who form and transform them. Toponyms of French origin or influence in Western Canada are a mirror of this blending that both reflects and is part and parcel of the social processes in question.

Compiling a provincial toponymic corpus of names originating in a specific language and culture raises the challenge of not only defining the object of study, but also understanding it. Unlike territorial toponymies, which are based on clear legal boundaries, thereby simplifying inventory of place names located within the area defined by those boundaries, toponymies based on the fluid concepts of language and culture, for which there can be no normative or prescriptive definition after the fact, entail a delicate and complex selection process.

The defining criteria for “toponyms of French origin or influence,” which determined inclusion in the corpora, were the following:

- Any toponym containing one or more words belonging to the French lexicon, whether or not it is a French generic term borrowed by North American English;
- Any toponym that incontrovertibly, though not necessarily exclusively, bears the imprint of French in the written form of its specific element;
- Any anthroponym that may be associated with the French language, in one way or another, regardless of the geographic origins or even the linguistic attributes or convictions of the person who bore the name;
- Any commemorative or identity-based toponym that recalls the memory of a person who spoke French as a mother tongue or as an adopted language; and/or
- Any toponym that is a transplant of a place name in France or another part of the world where this toponym is commonly associated with the French language.

In addition to these definitional constraints, tracking down this intangible heritage presents some difficulty. Some of the obstacles can be sidestepped, while others circumvent the identification of toponyms and irredeemably compromise their interpretation and the reconstitution of their genesis. These difficulties fall into several categories:

- Mnesic (names that have disappeared from documents and from memory);
- Cognitive-cultural (limits of individual knowledge);

- Epistemological (identical anthroponyms in more than one language);
- Graphical (alterations that obscure a name's origins); and
- Motivational (semantic error).

With these difficulties established, research can continue. In addition to a careful study of countless maps, this investigation requires close attention to the travel accounts, logs, journals and correspondence of explorers, travellers and surveyors. Missionaries' letters, land deeds and requests to open a post office must be thoroughly examined, official journals and gazettes perused, old dailies, weeklies and monthlies combed, local autobiographies and monographs as well as books of remembrance for local municipalities and school districts studied page by page.

The number of place names of French origin or influence (past and present) in all the Western provinces is now estimated at 10,000. To put this in perspective, Alberta has slightly under 9,500 official place names in all.