This paper compares the back vowel space in Michif, a French-Cree contact language spoken in the Canadian Prairies, with that of its principal lexifying languages, Plains Cree and Manitoba French. Plains Cree has two back vowels in its inventory, /o:/ and /o/, distinguished primarily by length (Wolfart 1996, Muehlbauer 2009), while French has three phonological vowels distinguished by a height contrast /u/, /o/ and /ɔ/. Vowel inventories of Michif have not been consistent in terms of back vowels (compare for example Rhodes 1986, Bakker 1996, Rosen 2007). This paper gives phonetic evidence to show that there are only two vowels in Michif: that the diachronically French /u/ and /o/ have merged into a single vowel. We further compare the back vowels of Michif, Plains Cree, Manitoba French and Métis French by plotting the F1 and F2 of each language and comparing the resulting vowel spaces. Our results support an analysis of Michif as a primarily Algonquian language, given that its vowels space resembles Plains Cree much more than Manitoba French. Furthermore, we show that Métis French back vowels even look more like the Algonquian system than other Canadian French dialects.

References
Smithsonian Institution: Washington D.C.