

# Translation of French Residential School Documents

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University  
of Regina

# About me

- ▶ French as first language
- ▶ Grew up in Québec, in a Catholic family
- ▶ Studied at University of Ottawa, and Université Paris Cité
- ▶ Married into a family from the area around Meadow Lake, SK
- ▶ Taught at University of Alberta, Camrose, with help from Maskwacis
- ▶ At U of R since 2016
- ▶ Studied and researched political institutions and political ideas
- ▶ Research on the history and politics of French-speaking communities in the Prairies
- ▶ Poet, translator
- ▶ Research on colonialism & relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples
- ▶ Book project on « reconciliation »

What documents  
are we talking about?

# Why are so many documents in French?

- ▶ 60% of Indian Residential Schools were administered by the Catholic Church
- ▶ Most of these schools were administered by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a religious order then mostly present in France and in Québec
- ▶ The Oblates rarely taught - they brought orders of nuns focused on teaching and on missionary work
- ▶ They taught in English and worked alongside Indian agents and the Federal government
- ▶ They spoke French together, and with other members of the Catholic Church (Bishops, Archbishops, etc.)
- ▶ Their administrative and private documents were kept in French

# What documents are we talking about?

## ▶ Official documents

- ▶ Codex Historicus: notebook indicating who visits, and what the main events are
- ▶ Lists of staff

## ▶ Formal letters

- ▶ Requests for funding, expansion, students
- ▶ Updates on school administrative matters, quarrels
- ▶ Impressions about co-workers, about events, about policies
- ▶ Instructions to subordinates

## ▶ Journals (less often)

- ▶ Personal documents showing daily life in the schools
- ▶ Not really meant to be private

# What we can expect to find

- ▶ There is rarely solid information about the children in the Oblates' records
  - ▶ Except where important events take place
  - ▶ There is possibly more information in documents from the Sisters
  - ▶ Transfers, deaths
  - ▶ Moments when diseases strike
- ▶ Hints, stories to cross-reference
- ▶ Lists or mentions of visitors
- ▶ Mentions of visits to doctors
- ▶ Attempts to deal with problems (runaways, certain cases of abuse, transfers)
- ▶ How the school functioned (not the policies, not the experiences of survivors)
- ▶ Lots of bureaucratic information: this was a bureaucracy

# Principles

Beyond the TRC and the OSI's Interim Report

# My two primary ethical concerns

TRC: some lawyers overcharged

Ground-penetrating radar: in some cases companies have bought the equipment without being properly trained

- ▶ Sometimes there is bad faith and bad intent; sometimes there are good intentions but lack of preparation, knowledge, or sensitivity

Independent assessment / IRD Adjudication led to retraumatization

- ▶ Many survivors have never talked about their experiences - now these may show up in archival documents



# What to be careful of with translations

- ▶ Translation is not regulated: translators can charge whatever they want
- ▶ Prices are generally between \$0,15 and \$0,19 per word
- ▶ Handwritten documents do take longer to translate
  - ▶ They will be more expensive
  - ▶ It may be necessary to have them transcribed first
- ▶ Anyone can say they are a translator - but it is not necessary to have professional translators to work on these documents
- ▶ The language is older French, but easy to understand for those who grew up with it in rural areas
- ▶ Some words have to be looked at in context (eg. battre = threshing... but also to beat)

# A few principles translators ought to follow

- ▶ The data belongs to First Nations / Survivors
  - ▶ Have a confidentiality agreement that includes data management
  - ▶ Be careful to maintain your relationship with the institution that gave you the documents
  - ▶ Keep track of the documents and keep your own copies
  - ▶ Ensure nothing is published
- ▶ The goals are those of the community
  - ▶ Have someone who speaks French sit with you to identify what documents ought to be translated first
  - ▶ Explain your goals clearly to the translators
  - ▶ Discuss what responsibility and obligations mean to you
- ▶ Less of a contract, more of a collaboration
  - ▶ This is a different model from their usual work
  - ▶ Have a contact person for questions

# A few principles

- ▶ Translators ought to meet the person who oversees the project
  - ▶ They usually work away from clients, with little contact - this can be different
  - ▶ Meeting makes the work more real, less abstract
  - ▶ A debrief might be helpful
- ▶ Translators can be asked to flag certain topics as they translate
- ▶ Translators ought to have some training to prepare them
  - ▶ Non-Indigenous people don't have a good sense of the history of the schools or of religion
  - ▶ This is work that can be difficult emotionally: what is described itself, and what it shatters in people's own view of themselves, their community, their country
  - ▶ 4 Seasons of Reconciliation
  - ▶ Training about the schools to learn the vocabulary
  - ▶ Access to TRC report & other documents

Ongoing work

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of green, ranging from light lime to dark forest green. These shapes are primarily located on the right side of the slide, creating a modern, layered effect. The rest of the slide is a plain white background.

# What we are putting in place

- ▶ In-depth collaboration with Cowessess First Nation (SK) - Marieval IRS research team
  - ▶ A documentation fund (not quite an archive - no originals)
  - ▶ Community consultations on what to do with the information
  - ▶ Develop community goals - not just the bad story (but that too, of course)
  - ▶ Currently: six students, plus myself
- ▶ Collaboration for translations only with Office of the Treaty Commissioner (SK) and University of Saskatchewan for five schools
  - ▶ Currently: three researchers (incl. myself), five students, one employee of the OTC
- ▶ Timely collaborations with Société historique de la Saskatchewan, with Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology (U of Alberta), and with the OSI
- ▶ Documents to support translators: Glossary; List of keywords; Information on the school / on residential schools in general.

# One way to work with translators

Translators can:

- ▶ Begin with the larger file (usually electronic, made of of various documents, such as letters and reports)
- ▶ Summarize each document that is part of a larger file
- ▶ Indicate whether children are mentioned
- ▶ Include names and pre-defined keywords
- ▶ Indicate whether a full transcription and/or translation is suggested
- ▶ Translate the document
- ▶ Sit down with the community / IRS research team contact and go over it with them

# What I am working on

- ▶ Creating a translation group
- ▶ Basic training for translators regarding Residential Schools and the documents
- ▶ List of resources for translators
- ▶ A more formal document once we have done more work and know better how to do things (all thanks to Barb Lavalée and her team!)
- ▶ Develop capacity to identify the documents to translate
- ▶ Resources for First Nations communities about the context of the schools
- ▶ The story of another Melançon that illustrates the connection of French-speaking / Francophone communities with the religious orders and the schools

Happy to talk with you

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