

“Lâche pas la patate:”

French in Louisiana

by Nicholas R. Spitzer

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Middle-aged Cajuns often tell a story about being punished as children for speaking French at school. One punishment, aside from whipping, was to have students write 1000 times, “I will not speak French on the school grounds.” It was an officially sanctioned devaluation of French Louisiana’s language and culture which in turn encouraged this generation not to teach French to its own children. However, there is also evidence of resistance. People tell a joke about *un Américain* teacher instructing country children in numbers:

“All right children everyone say ‘one.’ ”

“One,” is the dutiful class response.

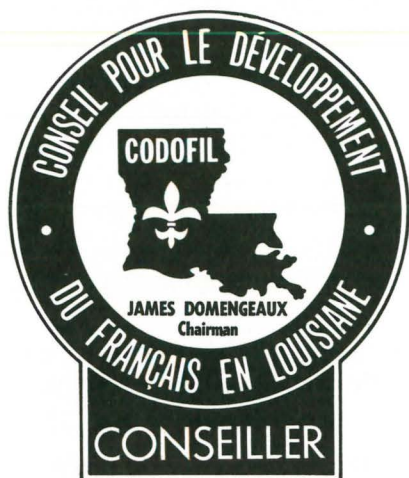
“OK children,” continues the teacher, “say ‘two’.”

The class jumps up to leave with one boy exclaiming, “*Merçi maitress, on va tu voir!*” (Thanks teacher, see you later). Interpreting “*c’est tout*” (that’s all), the class has a joke at the teacher’s expense.

Cajuns and Black Creoles of south Louisiana still use humor to criticize negative views of their culture, though increasingly in the last two decades the various dialects of Louisiana French have not

Talking Cajun French in Mamou, Louisiana.
Photo © by Phillip Gould





EST-CE QUE VOS ENFANTS APPRENNENT LE FRANÇAIS A L'ECOLE

been seen as sources of stigma to their speakers. To the contrary, Louisiana French, along with Cajun and zydeco music, Cajun/Creole food, and hundreds of festivals — from the boosteristic Rayne Frog Festival to the more traditional Prairie Laurent *courir de Mardi Gras* (Mardi Gras run) — are emblems of cultural renaissance in the region as a whole. “*Lâche pas la patate*” (Don’t let go of the potato) is one of many sayings that symbolize the new resoluteness about “holding on” to various aspects of the regional traditional culture including the French language.

Language scholars have historically divided Louisiana French into three categories: Colonial French, Cajun French, and French Creole. Colonial French was spoken by Louisiana’s initial European settlers — farmers, planters, craftsmen, mercantilists — who came directly from France or the French West Indies. This Continental French of 18th-century derivation is characterized by broader, longer vowels, archaic usages, and semantic shifts (i.e. *banquette* [foot path] and *char* [cart] now mean “sidewalk” and “automobile”). This form of Louisiana French — associated with now defunct newspapers like *Le Meschacébé* in St. John the Baptist Parish (1853-1925) and *Le Courrier de la Nouvelle Orléans* (1902-1955) as well as private Catholic school instruction — is now restricted to a few long-settled French families in New Orleans and plantation/farm areas along the Mississippi. Most of the old elite and middle class speakers of this French were absorbed into the general Anglo-American society where commerce dictated English.

Cajun French, with much sub-regional variation, is the most widely spoken type in south Louisiana today. The Cajuns, descendants of the late 18th-century Acadian refugees from what is now Nova Scotia, formed a relatively isolated rural society of *petits habitants* — small farmers, herdsman, fishermen, trappers — until the 20th century. Cajun French dialects, like the Cajuns themselves, have ancestral sources in provincial Normandy, Picardy, Brittany, and Poiteau filtered through the Maritime French of the 17th-18th centuries. As a result of the latter influence, seafaring terms like *baler* (“pull”) and *amarer* (“to moor”) are often used today rather than the standard *tirer* and *attacher*. Today, the coastal prairie landscape of south

CODOFIL signs were written in Standard French for a region where the language was primarily oral. The texts became less important than public placement of the sign in the battle for linguistic and cultural recognition.



Inez Catalon of Kaplan, Louisiana, is a singer of ballads and humorous songs in Cajun and Creole. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer

Louisiana also has many place names such as *Isle à Jean Charles* (Jean Charles Island), *Pointe d'Eglise* (Church Point) and *L'Anse Maigre* (Meager Cove). In Cajun French, open French vowels tend to be flattened and closed. The varied lexemic (word) inventory of Cajun French — shared to a large extent with Colonial French and French Creole — reflects contact in the New World with Africans (*gombo*, “okra”; *congo*, “snake”; *gris-gris*, “charm”), Native Americans (*bayou* from the Choctaw *bayuk*, “stream”; *chaoui*, “raccoon”; *maringoin*, “mosquito”), and Spanish (*banane*, “banana”; *gregue*, “drip coffee pot”; *lagniappe* from Caribbean Spanish *ñapa*, “a little extra” or “small gift”).

French Creole is referred to as such (rather than Creole French) because it originates in part from different roots than Louisiana Cajun or Colonial French. The word *créole* (pron: cray-ole) derives from the Latin-based Portuguese *crioulo* (“native to a region”). In Louisiana, Creole originally referred to colonial French and Spanish populations born in the New World. Over time Creole has come to refer to people of African, French/Spanish, and Native American descent. The French Creole language resulted from the expansion of the contact pidgin language spoken between French and African peoples in the slave/plantation sphere of West Africa and the Caribbean. Sometimes derisively called *Gombo French*, *Français Nèg'* and *Couri-Vini* (from the minimal Creole verb stems for “to go” and “to come”), Louisiana Creole shows great similarity to French Creole in Haiti, French West Africa, and even Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Louisiana Creole is largely composed of French words. However, its phonology, and particularly its grammar, mark the deepest forms of the language as different from French and more akin to other Caribbean Basin creoles (Jamaican Creole, Surinam *Taki-Taki*, and Georgia Sea Island *Gullah*).

The following features, among many, characterize Louisiana Creole: 1) absence of a “to be” verb (also noted in creole forms of Black English); 2) use of aspect markers for time such as *té* (past), *pé* (progressive), *va* (future) and *sa* (conditional); and 3) a transformed set of pronouns and possessives like *mo* (I, me, mine), *to* (you, your), *li* (he, she, it, its) and *yé* (they, them, their). Those who dismiss creole languages as simplistic are often naive about their creative syntax, relative lack of redundancy, and total appropriateness in context. A comparison is striking.

STANDARD FRENCH:

Je sais que la femme était fâchée; elle reviendra demain.

FRENCH CREOLE:

Mo connais femme-la té fâchée; li va pé vini back demain.

ENGLISH

I know the woman was angry; she will be back tomorrow.

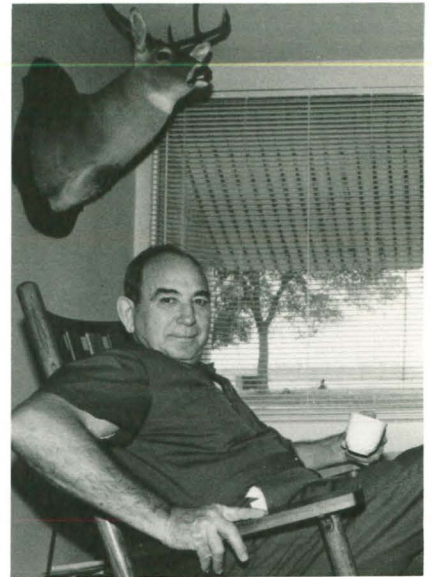
Creole is still spoken by some older Blacks in the downriver neighborhoods of New Orleans, but its primary locus for Black and some poorer White speakers is in plantation zones along Bayou Teche and the Mississippi. Speakers of French and Creole in Louisiana generally consider Creole to be a dialect of French — and the least prestigious one at that. One Creole-speaking Black man from St. Martinville, who refers to Creole as “French,” adds, “In Africa I guess they don’t speak nothing else.”

Sadly, many Creole speakers, under pressure from speakers of Cajun, Colonial French, or English, consider their language to be “broken,” “backward,” or “poorly spoken” French. In this dim light 19th-century theories of physiognomy regarding lip and tongue thickness as well as intelligence are sometimes invoked by non-Creole speakers to explain why Creole exists. Over time contact between local populations and the increased national impact of English in eroding both Cajun French and Creole have tended to level the linguistic differences between them — and a majority of the young people are now monolingual in English. As such, the larger issues of language loss and related cultural devaluation transcend the formal and historical differences between Cajun and Creole.

Increasing Americanization of French Louisiana through contact with the outside world was accentuated in the 19th century by the Civil War and post-Reconstruction economic development. French was banned as a language of instruction in Louisiana public schools in 1913 and laws, including the state constitution, were no longer printed bilingually after 1916. Accelerated erosion of French culture in the 20th century was fueled by the growth of the oil industry. This growth, along with new bridges and roads built by the Huey Long administration, brought in English-speaking outsiders in vast numbers for the first time. English also dominated the broadcast media, and American country and big band sounds began to replace Cajun folk music as the entertainment of choice on radios, records, and in dancehalls of the '30s and '40s.

Ironically, where national social trends once eroded the French language and culture in south Louisiana, they have also acted more recently to preserve them. For example, by the 1960s the national focus on ethnicity had spurred the Cajun cultural revival. Part of this was represented by the 1968 formation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) which was charged with teaching French in public schools. CODOFIL used foreign teachers to “develop” Standard French and was initially not sympathetic to Cajun speech and folk culture, much less to Creole and African influences. CODOFIL’s approach has since become more positive by utilizing more local teachers and curriculum materials and by placing what was considered a “forgettable” language into the classroom setting. However, the problems of such a formal approach to perpetuation of oral culture have never been fully surmounted.

Perhaps more influential on south Louisiana French consciousness has been the persistence and emergence of Cajun and Creole programs at selected times on regional radio and television stations. The French-speaking disc jockey, playing Cajun or Black Creole zydeco music produced by a few local and national record companies, also presents the latest news, views, and commercials: “*Si tu veut un red hot deal pour un char or juste pou’ reparer ton automatic transmission visites-toi Jimmy Faul’s Automotive ici dans gran Crowley, Louisiane!*” Folk music events such as the Cajun Music Festival, held annually since 1974, and the Zydeco Festival since 1983, as well as a revitalized French dancehall circuit have also given impetus to the culture as a whole through a primary symbol: traditional music sung in French.



Cajun motel operator, Joseph Ardoin of Eunice, Louisiana, recalls being punished for speaking French on the school grounds. Though he did not teach his six children to speak French, his youngest daughter now learns the language in school and he finds it useful in a new context: talking with tourists from France and Canada. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer

Suggested reading

- Dillard, J.L. "Languages and Linguistic Research in Louisiana." In *Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State*, ed. Nicholas R. Spitzer. Baton Rouge: Louisiana Folklife Program, 1985.
- Dorman, James. H. *The People Called Cajuns: An Introduction to an Ethnobiography*. Lafayette: The Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983.
- Johnson, Jerah. "The Louisiana French." *Contemporary French Civilization* 1(1) (1976): 19-35.
- Maguire, Robert E. "Notes on Language Use Among English and French Creole Speaking Blacks in Parks, Louisiana." *Projet louisiane, document de travail* 6. Toronto: McGill University, 1979.
- Oukada, Larbi. *Louisiana French: An Annotated Linguistic Bibliography*. Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1979.
- Read, William A. *Louisiana-French*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963.

Yet the music revival and the French media have not been able to overcome the economic and social barriers to maintaining the French language in Louisiana. Census data from the last three decades show the absolute and percentage decrease in "mother tongue" speakers to be greater than in any previous period — current estimates are generally less than 500,000 people. As such, the contexts of French use in south Louisiana today are increasingly specialized.

French remains the primary, sometimes the only, language of the older generation. It is the language of *la maison*, grandparental wisdom, folktales, and ritual. Those teenagers who can speak some French may use it to show respect to grandparents. It is also associated with rural dancehalls, trailrides, *boucheries*, games of *bourée*, and other traditional entertainments. In rural communities French is commonly heard among farmers and fishermen at local stores and community gatherings. It is less likely in formal work settings or official public places and occasions. On the other hand, one Cajun who works where English is standard says, "When I get hot (angry), or want to be forceful, I go to my French." Cajun and Creole are also often used for humorous occasions when stories and jokes just don't translate. Some young Blacks also use Creole for the "on the corner" speech of which reputations are made.

In the context of ethnic consciousness-raising, French is heard at festivals, Cajun poetry readings, and political rallies. The borders of the home region — in southeast Texas, central Louisiana, and generally east of the Mississippi — are another place where language is used to emphasize group identity. Cajun legislators sometimes find it expedient to tweak their non-French associates in Baton Rouge with public discussion of particular issues in French.

The question remains as to what extent Cajun and Creole are in the linguistic future of south Louisiana. Well known Louisianans like Governor Edwin Edwards and musician Fats Domino speak Cajun and Creole respectively. Cajun/Creole food and music are enjoying increased popularity nationally. However, speaking French in Louisiana seems less than critical in maintaining the 1980s realization of regional Cajun/Creole ethnicity — especially when French-inflected English is now used as an in-group language. Among the disturbing side-effects of the English Cajun dialect conjoined with the national popularity of the culture, is the superficial, minstrel-show-like treatment of Cajuns and Cajun English on a Public Broadcasting System televised cooking program with (non-Cajun) Justin Wilson and the appearance of advertisements in the *Washington Post* for a local "Cajun" restaurant that proclaim "... wah kin ah nami-nami un supper an' pass a good time?"

Back home in Louisiana, times are tough. The formerly flush oil industry — bringer of much linguistic, social and environmental change — is flat. With the broken promise of the good life uppermost in the public mind, Cajuns and Creoles are wondering if they can hold onto the "potato." Or will the joke be on them as they say "*c'est tout*" to French in Louisiana?