

## ***Quel français?: Observations of Language Ideologies and Louisiana at LSU's table française***

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### **1. Introduction**

In Louisiana, there are several French conversation hours, known as a *tables françaises*, are found predominately in the region known as Acadiana. This region is comprised of 22 parishes in Southwest Louisiana and is where Cajun French is spoken.<sup>1</sup> These conversation hours were started as part of the revitalization efforts for Cajun French (CF) as an opportunity for Cajuns of all ages to come together and speak CF as a means for preservation of the language. There is another tradition of *table française* that is found in the university setting – an opportunity for students of French to practice their language skills outside of the classroom. The *table française* of Louisiana State University's Department of French Studies belongs to this second tradition. It should also be noted that Standard French (SF) is the variety spoken at these *tables françaises* because that is the variety taught at every level.

During the Fall 2014 semester, in addition to the varying levels of fluency of the anglophone Americans and the non-American francophones, there were two participants in the *table française* who were speakers of CF and involved in the university's CF program.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this presence of these two CF speakers, *la table française* provided a microcosm of the various ideologies about French currently at work and discussed in both Louisiana and the *Francophonie* at large. The ideologies that were present were either about the language itself or about the speakers of CF. The three main ideologies that the researcher noted throughout the course of the semester were: the

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<sup>1</sup> The website for the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana also lists that are in a few in both Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

<sup>2</sup> One, who only visited once, was a native speaker of CF and an instructor of CF for the Department of French Studies. The other was Johnny, a Cajun who learned how to speak CF in early adulthood.

inferiority of the North American varieties of French, the ideologies surrounding claiming Cajun identity, and the idea of mutual unintelligibility between CF and SF. Each of these three ideologies were simultaneously accepted, maintained, or rejected by the various participants of *la table française*. The differences in how these ideologies were handled by different participants help to provide a better understanding of the current discourse on French in Louisiana.

## 2. Ideologies About Language

There are two different emphasis concerning ideologies about language – one on the concept of language and the other on the speakers of a language. This section presents the definitions for both concepts, as both types of ideologies of languages were present in the observations of LSU's *table française*. There is what Silverstein (1979) defines as linguistic ideologies: “any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (193). Then there is what Gal and Irvine (2000) define as language ideologies: “the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map these understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them” (35).

## 3. Standard French

French is a pluricentric language with numerous varieties found in many countries around the world. There are also a few standard varieties, such as Standard Canadian French or Standard Belgian French. However, most francophone nations use SF as their standard. When this paper refers to SF, it refers to the rulings suggested by the *Académie française*. These rulings are reflexive of the most formal register of written and spoken French in Metropolitan France<sup>3</sup> and is the variety used for non-native learners of French. Some notable publications that detail SF are the dictionary officially published by the *Académie française*, the grammar *Le Bon Usage* first published by Maurice Grevisse and officially endorsed by the *Académie française*.

## 4. French in Louisiana

Louisiana was claimed as a French colony in 1682 and today there are two varieties of French spoken in Louisiana: CF and Louisiana Creole (LC). The main distinction between the two is in their origins – slavery for LC and the forced expulsion of the Acadians from Canada by the British for CF. With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, Louisiana became part of the United States, an anglophone nation. However, for some time after this, French remained a strong presence in the region and was considered one of two “official” languages. However, in 1921, Louisiana's new State Constitution declared English as the sole official language of the state. This resulted in many anglophones looking down on those that spoke French and if a francophone spoke it in school, they were punished. (Natsis 1999: 325-26).

Efforts to preserve French in Louisiana began in the late 1960s. In 1968 the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) was founded to help re-establish the French presence in Louisiana and to insure its instruction (Dubois et al. 1995:127-28). It was decided that SF should be the variety taught “based on the criterion of mutual

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<sup>3</sup> Metropolitan France refers specifically to the part of France in Europe and does not include the overseas departments or territories.

comprehension within the international Francophone community, and instructors were brought in to teach French” (Dubois et al. 1995:128). These instructors were brought in as a result of lack of funding and lack of native CF instructors. Furthermore, James Domengeaux<sup>4</sup>, the first president of CODOFIL, was against the idea of teaching CF in the classroom, as he considered it an oral language without grammar, and this was a factor in his decision to choose SF as the language of instruction (Ancelet & LaFleur 2005:416). This decision to use SF over CF has been a source of contention for Cajun language activists, who felt betrayed by CODOFIL (and there are some who still feel this way today). As stated above, textbooks feature exclusively SF, with brief mentions to other varieties of French. There was an attempt, however, to create a CF textbook (as well as a CF orthography) by Faulk in 1977 (Barnett 2010). The textbook, however, was not very successful as there were issues perceived with the orthography he created. Ancelet and LaFleur (2005) provide an example from his textbook, where Faulk turned the SF phrase “*Il est en train de réparer sa voiture*” [He is repairing his car] into the CF phrase and orthography: “*Eel a ahpra ahronja son shahr*”. Ancelet and LaFleur stated that SF orthography could be used to capture the CF equivalent of this phrase and proposed: “*Il est après arranger son char*” (Ancelet & LaFleur 2005:417).

Since the 1990s, CODOFIL has begun to offer immersion programs in a few elementary schools where 60% of classroom instruction needs to be conducted in French (Tournquist 2000:94). While SF is still the variety that dominates the classrooms, there is a session on incorporating varieties of Louisiana French in the classroom given during the three-day training session instructors of French attend before the start of the academic year (Barnett 2010:33-34). However, despite these efforts at revitalization and the Cajun Renaissance<sup>5</sup>, French in Louisiana is still declining. In 1968, the same year that CODOFIL was founded, it was estimated that there were a million speakers of French in Louisiana. The most recent United States census data estimates that there are anywhere from 150,000 to 200,000 French speakers.

## 5. Observations

### 5.1 *The Inferiority of the North American Varieties of French*

The ideology of the inferiority of the North American varieties of French manifested in two different ways at *la table française*. As mentioned above, there were some that believed that CF should not be the variety taught in Louisiana because it was simply an oral language. Instead, SF should be the variety taught in Louisiana because it had the prestige necessary to participate in the international Francophone community. When I interviewed Johnny, the CF speaker who frequented *la table française*, it was clear that he contested this ideology. He said: “People will always put down Cajun French, but it’s French” (J. Matherne, personal communication, October 28, 2014). With this simple “but it’s French”, it appears that Johnny does view CF as being equal to SF. This contestation of the ideology of inferiority continued throughout the rest of the interview, with him stating that the major difference between the two varieties is simply a manner of vocabulary and that these differences are there because of their respective cultural contexts.

<sup>4</sup> He is, however, also credited with saying “School destroyed French, school should restore it”.

<sup>5</sup> The movement by Cajun activists who organized numerous socio-cultural events.

This ideology of inferiority mentioned above was a result of CF not being seen as prestigious as SF and has been the dominant ideology concerning CF in Louisiana. In France, however, another ideology of inferiority, that of *le bon usage* [good use], influences all perceptions of all non-standard varieties<sup>6</sup>. For the French, the North American varieties are inferior because they deviate vastly from the standard. The North American varieties have been separate from France for centuries as a result of war or trade agreements. As such, these varieties have not undergone the same changes or been subject to the reforms of the *Académie française*<sup>7</sup> to the French language that have happened since the Revolution of 1789. This is highly notable in differences of vocabulary and phonology between SF and the North American varieties. Therefore, it was not surprising when Quebec French was a topic one day and a native speaker from France explained to the group that it, and CF, sounded “très rigolo, très fun” [very funny] to French speakers from France. The native French speaker continued on, switching to English to further clarify to the American participants, that both varieties sounded funny because it was a “very old accent, like Middle Ages”. This concept of *le bon usage* has been a long-standing ideology in France<sup>8</sup>, thus the French speaker has been influenced by this ideology their entire life. Therefore, it is not surprising that varieties of French in North America are described in terms that show it deviates from the standard, and that is why they are just so “funny” to the French. It also appears to be so internalized that they have no problem sharing the ideology with the American audience, as they switched to English so that all those presents could understand how different the varieties are in contrast to the standard.

## 5.2 Claiming Cajun Identity

In their 1997 study, Dubois and Melançon asked their survey participants what criteria was necessary for someone to be “Cajun”. In order of most important to least: having Cajun ancestry, parents or grandparents who spoke CF, to speak some French (regardless of competence or variety), speaking CF in particular, living in Louisiana, living in a Cajun region, and for CF to be the native language of the person. They also noted what the participants considered the most important criteria for claiming to be Cajun was related to their linguistic repertoire<sup>9</sup> – with fluent CF speakers indicating that all of the various “speaking French” responses, and particularly speaking CF, as the most important criteria; semi-speakers or passive speakers indicated that the “speaking French” responses were somewhat important and non-francophones found them to be the least important (Dubois & Melançon 1997:83).

As their study mentioned, Cajun ancestry seemed to be the most important for those of Cajun heritage. Johnny stated that he was interested in learning French, and most particularly CF, because of his Cajun heritage. There were two students, one male and one

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<sup>6</sup> Eve, as Kircher (2012) notes, this may only exist as an ideal and does not correspond to any actual spoken variety (346). However, many do associate Parisian French with SF (even if Parisian French does deviate from SF as well).

<sup>7</sup> The *Académie française* is France’s official language planning institution whose mission is to establish the rules of the French language.

<sup>8</sup> Kircher (2012) states that Vaugelas defined *le bon usage* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was associated with the elite of Paris and “was conceived in stark contrast to many other ‘bad usages’ – that is, any social and regional deviations from the norm” (345).

<sup>9</sup> Which, while not always true, does also correspond to different age groups as a lot of the older generations could speak CF while younger ones were most often semi-speakers or passive bilinguals.

female, enrolled in FREN 1001 (first semester of the first year of French) who said that they were in French because they had Cajun heritage. There were also a few students in FREN 1002 (the second semester of the first year) that were taking French because of their heritage. The variety of which French to learn also reflected the findings of Dubois and Melançon (1997). Of all these participants, Johnny was the only one who was taking one of the CF classes offered by the department. He was also the only participant who had grown up listening to family members speaking French and could speak CF, all the others who claimed Cajun heritage mentioned their heritage and their desire to learn French, despite no one else in their family speaking the language. Therefore, this could be a factor in why he was taking CF classes, while the most of the others opted to take SF classes<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, it does seem that for a minority, CF is the French that should be taken for being of Cajun descent, whereas for others any variety of French will be satisfactory for being Cajun.

However, what I found most interesting was how much emphasis Johnny placed on having the Cajun accent when speaking French. He knew SF, as that was the variety he first acquired and only later acquiring the vocabulary unique to CF. Since he self-identified as Cajun, he would purposely use CF pronunciation and CF vocabulary, such as use of the apical trill [r] instead of the voiced or voiceless uvular fricative ([ʁ] or [χ] SF donates as the acceptable rhotics in French. In terms of vocabulary, he would use *asteur* in place of *maintenant* and *chevrettes* instead of *crevettes*, to list a few. While this certainly was how he chose to present himself as Cajun, it would seem that he believes that others of Cajun origin should attempt to do the same, even if they were learning the SF variety<sup>11</sup>. In our interview, he mentioned how there was a person at *la table française* who had a “Cajun name, but speaks like a Parisian” (J. Matherne, personal communication, October 28, 2014).

### 5.3 Mutual Unintelligibility between Cajun and Standard French

The ideology of mutual unintelligibility stems from two things: the suppression of speaking French by the anglophones and how Cajuns internalized this. The English-speakers have told CF speakers that their French is not the same as the standard and that if it's not the same, then it could not be understandable to a speaker of SF. The idea that CF was simply an oral language and was not good enough for international interaction was a prevalent idea during the decades when the state started its language revitalization efforts. Many Cajuns had stopped speaking French because of the policies of the anglophones in Louisiana. The fact that this ideology persists post-World War II is quite intriguing. As Kube (1994) notes, Cajun soldiers in WW2 had their ability to speak French questioned by anglophones in the Army and many believed (but not all) that they would not be able to act as translators between the American and French forces (345). But the contrary proved to be true – these Cajuns, despite 300 years of separation from France, were able to act as translators. The only thing that they had needed to do was learn some of the vocabulary used in France (Kube 1994:346-348). Despite the Cajun soldiers bringing back these stories back to Louisiana, the idea that CF speakers are not able to

<sup>10</sup> One student mentioned that they had tried to take the beginning semester of CF but had not passed the class, thus they switched to a beginning SF class. This does indicate, however, that for this student learning French because they are Cajun is important to them.

<sup>11</sup> He had no issues with learning SF, as that was the variety he learned first. But he does feel that those who are Cajun should make an effort to learn to speak CF as it is not any less prestigious than any other variety of French.

communicate with SF still persists to this day, though perhaps not as influential as it had been. This is one of the reasons that SF has been adopted as the variety taught in schools and why it continues to bring in foreign francophones – it wants Louisianans to be able to participate in the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*.

When I interviewed Johnny, I asked him if he had grown up speaking French, since he is Cajun – he answered no. He also stated that he did not put any effort into learning French in high school, where it was mandatory, because “it wasn’t relevant” (J. Matherne, personal communication, October 28, 2014) – at the time, he felt that the standard was nothing like the French spoken in Louisiana. This mutual unintelligibility ideology was only broken, for him, once he joined the Army and learned French to be a translator. Upon returning home, he realized he was able to communicate with his CF speaking grandmother – it was simply a matter of vocabulary that caused the difference between the two varieties. In the interview, he also stated that some of the CF speakers he had talked to about learning CF had told him “if you learn to speak like they do over there [in France], it will be easy to learn how to speak over here”. It is clear that some Cajuns believe that there is not a difference between the two varieties. Johnny knows both varieties of French, but prefers CF because of his heritage. This preference led to him using CF at *la table française* – that, and the knowledge that speakers of SF can understand most of what he is saying (as there are vocabulary differences, it is possible that speakers would not understand some words, but context could help them figure out what he was saying). This preference to speak CF at *la table française* never caused comprehension issues. Thus, this ideology of mutual unintelligibility that has been perpetuated by the preference for SF over CF is damaging for the fate of CF.

## 6. Conclusion

These observations of LSU’s *table française* during the Fall 2014 academic semester provide some insight to how ideologies about French in Louisiana currently influence a wide variety of groups and speakers. These ideologies, or ones very similar, have shaped decisions about the variety of instruction in Louisiana and thoughts about Cajuns. It does seem, however, that these ideologies are not as influential as they had been in the past. Johnny, the regular participant who spoke CF, contested both the ideologies of inferiority and mutual unintelligibility in both the conversation hour and an interview. It was also clear, however, that the French participant and some of the non-francophone Americans were influenced by the ideology of *le bon usage* as they found CF to be antiquated in comparison to SF. Lastly, the ideas about Cajun identity follow the division noted by Dubois and Leacock (1997) – that those older and more familiar with CF (such as Johnny) view CF as the variety that a Cajun should speak, while the younger participants just saw speaking French, in general, as part of being Cajun since they all claimed to be taking the SF classes because they were Cajun. It was also interesting to observe that these younger students were interested in learning French, as many researchers have indicated that Cajun is shifting from a linguistic community to a cultural one. However, what these observations could mean for the Cajun community is unclear and would need further research to see if it had any significance or was simply the personal motivations of a few individuals.

This paper just presents the observations from one of many French conversations hours that occur in the state of Louisiana, and one that takes place in an academic setting, just over the course of a few months. Further research that looks at other groups, and over a longer period of time, would be beneficial to see how ideologies about French in

Louisiana have and are influencing people. It would also be interesting to interview those of Cajun heritage from a variety of age groups to see the progression and changes that these ideologies have had over time. Lastly, it may also be beneficial to interview non-francophone Americans and the European (and African) francophones to see the ideologies that they hold towards Cajuns and CF.

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