

French Revitalization in Louisiana: Media with a Purpose

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Abstract

Since it was established as a colonial territory in 1682, Louisiana has had a unique history and culture influenced by various waves of imperialism, slavery and immigration. Therefore, it has always existed as a center of diversity, with various cultures and people intermingling there for centuries. Perhaps one of its most distinct and interesting features as an American state has been its Latin influence, namely within the manifold French and French-based dialects that have persisted within the region. However, due to governmental and social repression, the French language in Louisiana is declining in numbers of native speakers, making it an endangered, minority language in the region. The state of Louisiana French is at a critical point; many native speakers of the language have deceased or forgotten it. However, the francophone movement emerges this year with reinvigorated enthusiasm, growth and media presence. According to contacts involved in this movement, interest around learning French has increased significantly. However, as interest increases, so does the need for resources. As is supported in the research of linguist, David Crystal, a language must go beyond the classroom and be utilised in both the public and private sectors. Accessible media about Louisiana French such as books, dissertations, films, music and language classes, should therefore become more available in the near future if revitalization is to be done. In March, the Department of Languages and Literatures, along with the Mass Communications department, produced a documentary film which will be donated to the budding Louisiana French language media channel, Tél  -Louisiane, to use in their developing corpus of educational media.

1. Louisiana Until Antebellum- A Multinational History

Colonization of Louisiana began near the end of the 17th century under the reign of Louis XIV when a French-Canadian explorer, Robert Cavelier de la Salle, made a journey down the Mississippi river from Illinois to modern day New Orleans. It was during this expedition that La Salle baptized these lands “La Louysiane”, in honor of the king, and declared the territory as property of France¹. After this declaration, the region’s expansion was financed by large companies, such as la Compagnie des Indes.²

In 1759, England took control of Quebec and expelled an estimated 3,000 French-speaking acadians from the region. Most of those expelled settled in Louisiana, as it still belonged to France at the time. In 1762, Spain purchased Louisiana, however acadian immigration continued, along with that of the Spanish colonists and around 20,000 slaves.³

Napoleon Bonaparte bought Louisiana back from Spain in 1800 as part of a secret plan to develop the French Empire in the United States⁴. However, after quickly realizing the difficulty of defending such a vast amount of land from the British Empire, he sold the land to the United States in 1803⁵. Shortly after this, many ex- French colonists fleeing from the Haitian revolution, as well as individuals escaping political crisis in the collapsing French Empire, settled in Louisiana, helping to establish New Orleans as the second largest port city in the US.

Up until the early 20th century, French was a common language between the groups of people who lived in southern Louisiana, such as those of French, Acadian, Spanish, Cuban, Mexican, African and Native American descent. “Creole” was the catch-all term for someone native to the region, with very little regard to race or ethnic origin, despite

the current, more popular racial divisions between “cajun” (white descendents of the Acadians) and “creole” (non-white, French speaking) identities⁶. As many identified more with Latin-derived culture and customs, they tended to reject the anglo-american doctrine of race, which had its own set of rules and practices during the time. Therefore, a large number of communities in the region were multiracial and multicultural⁷. This led to the development of a rich and unique band of French-based dialects, some with various roots in African and Native American languages that thrived throughout the 19th century. In fact, to attend to the needs of the French-speaking public, Louisiana state government declared “législature sera, elle aussi, à prédominance française” [legislature will also be predominantly in French]⁸.



Figure 1. A map of Louisiana’s first borders, indicated in opaque red⁹.

2. From Reconstruction To Today- A Linguistic Profile

Whereas before the Civil war, the majority of anglophones lived in the north of Louisiana, the end of the war brought in new English-speaking communities who settled in Acadiana¹⁰.



Figure 2. A map of Louisiana’s regions. Acadiana, the historically French-speaking part of the state, is indicated in red¹¹.

In the early 20th century, the American government standardized English as the primary language for all public education. Resulting from this law, students were banned from speaking French in public schools; any student caught speaking a language other than English was punished and/or humiliated in front of their peers¹².

After WWI, during the Jim Crow Era, communities began to racialize and divide themselves more heavily due to the imposition of the anglo-american identity¹³. As the English language grew dominant in the region, French became less of a daily reality and, in quick time, became stigmatized as the language of the poor and uneducated¹⁴. Because

of this, many native speakers decided not to teach French to their children, thus leading to its gradual weakening in numbers- over the past 50 years, the language's popularity has declined from 1 million native speakers in 1968 to 115,000 in 2010, according to the most recent U.S. Census data¹⁵.

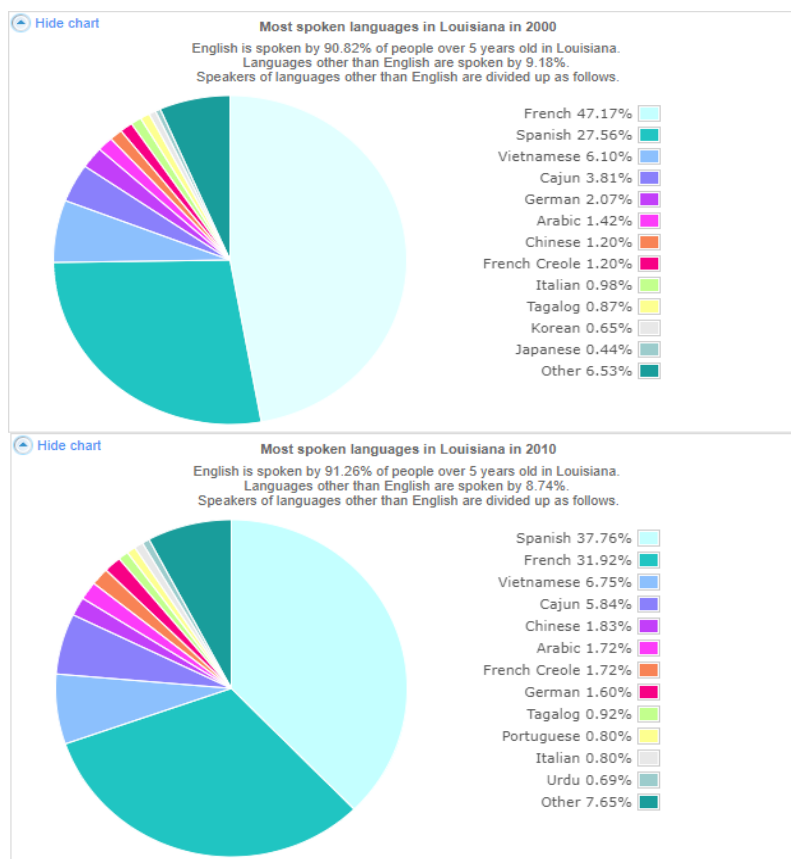


Figure 3. Comparison between percentages of non-English languages spoken in Louisiana in 2000 (top) and 2010 (bottom)¹⁶.

Acadiana, the most French-speaking region, contains 22 parishes (32.5% of the state's population). And while many self-identified Cajuns of the region still speak French (about 8% of the population), it is estimated that 91% percent of Louisianians speak English as their maternal language¹⁷.

Despite this linguistic data, a movement to save Louisiana French has been underway since the 1960s, starting with the 1968 establishment of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). Since then, work has been done primarily via education, specifically through French immersion primary schools headed by CODOFIL¹⁸. However, recent months have shown a renewed fervor in the movement, as many are beginning to take a stronger, more organized interest in protecting French. With Louisiana's recent entrance into the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), some are calling this period revolutionary.

3. Language Revitalization

According to UNESCO's Atlas of Endangered languages, 567 languages are considered to be "critically endangered", with thousands more falling under the category of "endangered"¹⁹. Another notable fact is that most of these languages are on the North American continent²⁰. So far, efforts to save these languages have been diverse in methodology, as there is no concrete answer on how language revitalization to be done. This is true in many social sciences, as human behavior, learning patterns and culture are various and ever-shifting. Models for this process are range from those focusing mainly on childhood education to those who focus on media and other forms societal integration. That being said, there is still value in revitalizing languages²¹.

3.1. The Importance Of Language

While language is commonly thought of as a mere tool for communication, it also contains the function of preserving human history. According to linguist, David Crystal, languages also express ethnic identity, contribute to the totality of human knowledge, are “interesting” in themselves and contribute to diversity²². Written literature, being relatively new in the history of humanity, does not contain every bit of human knowledge; many stories, songs and poems can only be recited in their original languages. It is ultimately the uniqueness of a culture which is preserved in its language. For example, there is no way to say “goodbye” in the Cherokee language as there is in English. Instead, one would say “I will see you again”²³. As well as this, language preserves knowledge in particular ways and structures; there are specific pieces of knowledge (especially concerning nature) that are contained within a spoken language²⁴.

In one study, scientists studying the Bari indigenous language of Venezuela, which has lost 45 percent of its plant names, found that “the loss of Bari traditional knowledge corresponded with diminishing use of forest resources and a shift from the traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle, along with the shift to speaking Spanish”²⁵. This demonstrates the innate relationship language has to human behavior, not only providing us insight into particular cases, but also insight into psychology and perhaps even neurology²⁶.

3.2. Language Revitalization In Louisiana

For Louisianians, the concept of language revitalization is nothing new. As mentioned before, CODOFIL has headed most of the concerns with the francophone movement in Louisiana, especially in the educational realm of immersion, wherein all or most subjects are taught in French. This has many reported benefits, including higher test scores²⁷, increased general awareness of student heritage as well as fulfilling an economic demand²⁸.

GRADE 1			
INTERVAL TESTING	DISTRICT AVERAGE	SCHOOL AVERAGE	IMMERSION AVERAGE
READING	69%	74%	73%
MATHEMATICS	79%	82%	84%

GRADE 2			
INTERVAL TESTING	DISTRICT AVERAGE	SCHOOL AVERAGE	IMMERSION AVERAGE
READING	65%	71%	76%
WRITING	66%	71%	78%
MATHEMATICS	74%	77%	83%

GRADE 3			
INTERVAL TESTING	DISTRICT AVERAGE	SCHOOL AVERAGE	IMMERSION AVERAGE
READING	64%	67%	74%
WRITING	65%	69%	70%
MATHEMATICS	71%	75%	80%

GRADE 4			
INTERVAL TEST	DISTRICT AVERAGE	SCHOOL AVERAGE	IMMERSION AVERAGE
READING	69%	75%	80%
WRITING	67%	70%	74%
MATHEMATICS	68%	69%	79%

GRADE 5			
INTERVAL TEST	DISTRICT AVERAGE	SCHOOL AVERAGE	IMMERSION AVERAGE
READING	69%	74%	75%
WRITING	73%	77%	79%
MATHEMATICS	70%	71%	84%

Figure 4. Table of test scores in Jefferson Parish comparing school and district scores to those of immersion programs²⁹.

In 2018, the group “Parti Louisianais”, headed by francophone activists in Louisiana, was formed. According to their Facebook page:

“Nous ne sommes pas un parti politique. Nous sommes un rassemblement des individus de toutes secteurs (comme objectif) qui a pour but de collaborer ouvertement, soit en ligne ou en personne. On accueille tous qui veulent prendre le relais et veulent s’attaquer aux défis concernant, entre autres, la visibilité bilingue, l’engagement civique et un référendum éducatif qui comprend le français pour toutes et tous les élèves de l’état de la Louisiane.³⁰” [We are not a political party, We are an assembly of individuals from all sectors who wish to openly collaborate, either online or in person. We welcome all who wish to take charge and confront the challenges concerning, among others, bilingual visibility, civic engagement and an education referendum which includes French for all students in Louisiana].

According to Joseph Dunn, a member of Parti Louisianais, Louisiana French requires a “professional, social, economic and political development³¹”

Brian Clary, co-founder of Parti Louisianais and one of the primary contacts in this research, has been active in this movement for under a year, and yet has already helped to create a list of over 245 French-speaking businesses in Acadiana, hoping to encourage and pressure local enterprise to start the transition into a bilingual society³². As well as this, the organization has encouraged use of the term “Francoresponsable” (French-responsible), a word created in Quebec in 2009³³.

In October of 2018, Louisiana was added into the International Francophone Organization (L’Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie), thus helping them win recognition and access to funding in their efforts³⁴. Shortly after this, the media company startup, Télé-Louisiane, was formed by Clary along with Will McGrew, a New Orleans native³⁵.

4. Collaboration With UNCA

The author began research on this subject in 2017, making contact with many of the activists in the newly reinvigorated movement, such as Brian Clary, Joseph Pons (founder of the french-language podcast, Charrer-Veiller), Joseph Dunn, Dr. Christophe Landry (Ph.D. in historical philosophy) and Youtuber, Katelyn Deculus.

In wishing to aid in the linguistic revitalization of Acadiana, Crystal’s theories on language revitalization were revisited. In his work, *Language Death* (2002), Crystal shares six factors he believes lead to successful linguistic revitalization. These include³⁶:

1. Prestige of the language in its community
2. Wealth of the community
3. Legitimate political power
4. Strong presence in the school system
5. Preservation of written language
6. Capacity to utilise technology

As the research and current events show, all of these factors hold true for Louisiana’s efforts. French has a re-found level of “prestige”, combined with newfound funds stemming from the state’s recognition as part of the francophone world, political power gained through organizing (such as Parti Louisianais) and the numerous examples of the written language online and in print.

Indeed one of the greatest allies of this movement is technology, which, as Crystal points out, decreases separation between people in isolated geographic areas, helping to engage people who may not have any other way to connect outside of their own homelands³⁷. In addition to this is the easy access to information offered by the internet. While Crystal does acknowledge that this area needs work, his point is not lost. Any group wishing to revitalize a language should make use of this tool and help to improve it.

In the interest of contributing to the budding French media economy, the author visited Louisiana to film a documentary exploring the current francophone movement. The film, which is being donated to Télé-Louisiane for distribution, is completely bilingual, featuring scenes in English and French as well as subtitles in both languages.

4.1. Personal Observations And Process

French permeates society in south Louisiana, as even non-French speakers utilize French words or expressions in their vernacular. The author, during the course of filming observed monolingual English speakers use words such as the French “mais” in the place of the English conjunction “but”, or the word “tante” instead of “aunt”. In one specific instance, a non-French speaking, self-identified Cajun contact used the phrase “pas pour moi” to say “not for me³⁸”.

This sort of intermingling between languages is inherently present in the culture, as even many of the street signs, businesses and even municipal buildings are in French (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Restaurants in Arnaudville with signage in French (Left and Middle). Police cars in Arnaudville are also bilingual; “Nous croyons en Dieu” [We believe in God] (Right).

For the documentary itself, the author attended various cultural events such as a traditional countryside “Courir de Mardi Gras” (Mardi Gras run) in Mamou, “Cajun Jam” in Lafayette and a French book club in New Orleans called “Les Causeries du Lundi”. In total, there were 10 interviews, which were conducted with subjects of multiple ages, backgrounds and places within the Louisiana French revitalization movement.

Intercut with B-Roll of bayous, city streets and daily life, interviews with the subjects focused on desires, hopes and goals for the future of French in Louisiana as well as the importance of language outside of a simple tool for communication. The documentary also explores the idea of film as a medium- how audiovisual media is being used for the propagation of Louisiana French. Currently in post-production, the film is intended to be incorporated by Télé-Louisiane into a portfolio which the company will then use to request funding from larger media conglomerates.

The film is set to premiere at the 2019 UNCA Undergraduate Research Symposium. It is the author’s researched and personal view that a project such as this can help show solidarity from UNCA, helping to encourage the revitalization efforts in Louisiana as well as raise awareness of the issue in places outside of Acadiana. Another, shorter film is also being created purely on the subject Mardi Gras, which will be donated to UNCA’s departments of (1) Modern Languages and (2) Mass Communications to be used in the future for pedagogical purposes.

5. Acknowledgements

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