

Contre Vents, contre Marées:
The Revitalization of Cajun French

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Cajuns have been losing their ancestral language, Cajun French. Although efforts to revitalize this dialect began in the 1960s, they have still had little success. This is due to the limiting nature of the revitalization programs, wherein children are taught Cajun French as a subject in school, but given no opportunity to use it outside of the classroom. Using existing methods for language revitalization that have been successful in other ancestral language learning scenarios, I deduce that Cajun French can see meaningful revitalization if programs aimed at its revival are community-centered, culturally relevant, and contextualized in the real world.

Note: The title of this thesis, *Contre Vents, contre Marées*, is derived from a song of the same name by Cajun artist Zachary Richard. The phrase means “against all odds”.

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1. Introduction

Voulez-vous recevoir cette bande de Mardi Gras? (“Would you like to receive this Mardi Gras band?”) Each year at Mardi Gras, masked Cajun men dressed in brightly colored costumes ride on horseback (or in pickups) through the country, knocking on the door of every house they see and posing this question to whoever may answer. Almost always, the answer is yes – at which point, the men dismount and the festivities begin.

From among the flock of chickens in the barnyard, the owner of the house will select one fowl to take part in the *courir de Mardi Gras* – a tradition in which Cajun men must catch a loose chicken to add to a large, communal stew called a *gumbo*. After being hand-picked for the chase, the unlucky bird is released into the air and given a narrow head start. The men, decked in masks, pointy hats, streamers, and bells, take off through the muddy rice fields in hot pursuit. Once the chicken is apprehended and killed, the family of the house is invited to join the Mardi Gras *bande* at a potluck dance later in the evening, where they will dine on the spoils of their hard (and hilarious) labor.

Traditions such as the *courir de Mardi Gras* are inextricably linked to the language of the Cajun people – Cajun French. Language connects us, allows us to understand each other; it is the collection of meaning through which culture is born and transmitted. Language is the conduit for culture. When a language is imperiled, so is its culture.

Cajun French, an integral part of the memory and cultural identity of the Cajun people, now faces the risk of extinction. The Cajun French dialect is a variety of French spoken by the descendants of the Acadians, a group expelled from France in the 18th century. Though mutually intelligible with international French, Cajun French is a dialect

influenced by English, Spanish, and Native American tribal languages such as Coushatta and Houma.

Though spoken for hundreds of years after the arrival of the Acadians in South Louisiana, Cajun French has experienced a rapid decline in the last century due to a number of factors. Beginning in the early 20th century, nationwide efforts to unify Americans beneath a single language led to the discouragement of the use of Cajun French, and the dominant cultural mentalities of the era stigmatized its speakers.

Harsh restrictions on the use of the language in schools and public spaces, as well as negative attitudes regarding the merit and class status of the language, led to a disinclination among Cajun community members to speak the language openly or teach it to their children. Opposition to Cajun French was particularly notable in public schools, where children were punished harshly for speaking their native tongue.

Moreover, dominant mentalities regarding alternate language use further perpetuated the notion that Cajun French was an inferior language, reserved only for the truly backwards and uneducated. Cajun parents became reluctant to speak Cajun French with their children, in the fear that it would inhibit their chances of upward mobility. These practices led to an intergenerational decline in the use of the language.

Deciphering the number of Cajun French speakers is difficult for a number of reasons. The 2010 census indicates an approximate population of about 25,000 speakers; however, the number is likely much smaller. As per linguist Sylvia Dubois' 1997 findings, semi-speakers and passive speakers of the language are likely to overestimate their linguistic competence, leading to skewed survey responses (69). Due to irregular survey practices in the past (census takers in the 19th and early 20th centuries often

overlooked Cajun settlements situated deep in the bayou) it is impossible to know exactly how many speakers of Cajun French there were at its peak use.

Regardless of these obstacles to accurate data reporting, the census still serves to paint a clear picture of language decline: in 1970, there were a reported 572,000 Cajun French speakers; in 1980, a reported 263,500; and in 1990, a reported 262,000 (Blyth, 28). Although this decline appears to be stabilizing, young children are learning Cajun French as their first language at lower and lower rates, with current rates of intergenerational transmission estimated to be under 3% (Lewis et. al).

It is clear, therefore, that something must be done to revitalize this language. The purpose of this paper is to explore methods of revitalization used in other situations of language peril and propose how they may be used in the Cajun community to successfully reinvigorate the use of Cajun French.

2. Cajun History and Culture

In brief, Cajun history began when settlers from western France arrived in the 17th century in what is now Nova Scotia. Nearly a century later, in 1710, the British conquered French Acadia and began to deport the French-speaking locals, known by that time as Acadians. This period, known as the Grand Dérangement, reached its peak in 1755 when the British expelled the Acadians completely, sending thousands of the former French nationals south along the eastern coast of the United States. Upon arriving at the mouth of the Mississippi, many Acadians settled and began to make a life in what is now southern Louisiana.

Quickly, the Acadians established themselves in the area and began to interact with other ethnic groups around them, including native tribes, black slaves, and earlier settlers from Spain, Germany, and England. Many of these groups subsequently adopted the Acadians' language and traditions, and the Acadians, in turn, adopted cultural artifacts from these groups. Within a few generations, "this cross-cultural exchange produced a new Louisiana-based community: the Cajuns" (Ancelet "Music Makers", 20).

The history of the Cajuns is complex and heterogeneous, and its culture is no different. Like most cultures, it is subject to great nuance and personal variation, and attempting to provide a truly comprehensive definition of the Cajun community or what makes a Cajun is a fool's errand. However, there are several irrefutable markers which Cajuns consider to be integral parts of their ethnic and cultural identity: their faith, food, music, and language.

2.1 Faith in the Cajun Community

The Cajun community is largely a catholic one. Before the French revolution, France was characterized as one of the leading catholic nations of the world; as such, the French emigrants who settled in Nova Scotia were predominantly Catholic. When these settlers were expelled from Nova Scotia in the mid-18th century, they held on to their Catholic faith, and have continued to do so in modern times.

However, over the years, this faith has evolved, incorporating new cultural practices and beliefs. For example, although the Catholic Church has no official stance on limbo, Cajun Catholics hold a common belief that an unbaptized soul wanders as a *cauchemar* (“nightmare”) after death. There also exists in the Cajun community the role of the *traiteur* – a folk healer who uses herbal medicine as well as prayer and ritual to heal common ailments such as arthritis or warts. These Catholic healers do not see their practice as being in conflict with their faith; rather, they view their faith as the source of their powers (Gaudet). For these reasons, the type of Catholicism common to Southern Louisiana is can be classified as “cultural Catholicism” – Catholicism that extends beyond official doctrine to incorporate local cultural beliefs.

Practice of this faith is highly influential in the daily lives of most Cajuns – not only does it serve to influence their cultural beliefs, worldview, and identity, it acts as a social nexus through which members of the community meet, interact, and share experiences. For example, it is common in the Cajun community for all generations of a family to attend the same church; on Sundays after service, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles gather for a large meal and a day of leisure in the company of a large extended family. In fact, this ritual is an integral part of the rhythm of daily life in most Cajun communities – church is not only a religious, but a social institution as well.

2.2 Cajun Food

Cajun food, first and foremost, is a social experience. Meals are family-centered, often involving multiple generations. Within a multi-generation extended family, individual nuclear families often take turns hosting the rest of the family for supper or lunch, resulting in large family meals that take place several times a week. Recipes and food preparation are learned not from cookbooks but from parents and grandparents; from hours in the kitchen watching, listening, and tasting. The lively experience of Cajun mealtimes reflects the lively taste of Cajun food – spicy and rich, with plenty of fat and cayenne pepper.

Cajun food is the result of over two hundred years of cross-cultural borrowing between the Acadians and the various ethnic and cultural groups with whom they cohabited. Derived from the one-pot soups common among Acadians in Canada, Cajun food began to expand and flourish upon the arrival of the Acadians in south Louisiana, using local game and fish and drawing inspiration from groups such as the native Choctaw and Algonquin tribes, as well as Haitian refugees and African slaves.

Perhaps the most characteristic Cajun dish is a meaty soup called gumbo, made with any variety of chicken, sausage, wild game, or seafood. Easily adapted to accommodate the ingredients any Cajun cook may have on hand, gumbo is so popular in Louisiana's Cajun community that State Supreme Court Chief Justice Joseph A. Breaux once identified it as their "national dish" (Brasseaux and Brasseaux 34). The name *gumbo* is derived from *ngombo*, the Bantu term used by many slaves to refer to the okra plant – a common ingredient in many gumbos.

In spite of the Cajun community's affinity for gumbo of any type, seafood is often misidentified by outsiders as the hallmark of Cajun food. In reality, before the invention of refrigeration, most Cajuns (who lived inland from the coast in rural areas) had little access to seafood. However, the introduction of refrigeration along with the improvement of Louisiana's road systems in the 1920s and 1930s "provided the underpinnings of a culinary and dietary revolution" that led to the increased consumption of seafood even by land-locked Cajuns (Brasseaux and Brasseaux, 34).

Likewise, crawfish (a small shellfish now widely used in many Cajun dishes) played only a minor role in Cajun cuisine until the mid-twentieth century. Although crawfish were customarily eaten during Catholic Lent, when the consumption of meat was prohibited, they bore significant social stigma as the "poor man's food," and as such were treated with a level of culinary disdain. However, the establishment of the Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival in 1959 gave rise to an improvement in the public's perception of the crustacean, and it is now a fixture in popular Cajun cuisine (Brasseaux and Brasseaux, 34).

There is, however, an important distinction between "public" Cajun fare and "private" Cajun fare. Although most Cajun restaurants serve primarily fried seafood, home-cooked meals more commonly feature wild game, beef, and rice. Write Brasseaux and Brasseaux in the *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 7: Foodways*,

"This culinary duality has created considerable confusion among outsiders about what actually constitutes the hallmarks of Cajun cooking, and the problem was compounded by the national discovery of Cajun cuisine in the 1980s. Widespread interest in Cajun cuisine spawned a host of imitators hoping to

cash in on the national craze. National restaurant chains began to market “Cajun” products, such as McDonalds’ Cajun chicken sandwich and Pizza Hut’s Traditional New Orleans-Style Cajun Pizza. Usually the only link between corporate America’s products and actual Cajun dishes was cayenne pepper, which the imitators used to great excess” (36).

Clearly, Cajun food, and by extension Cajun culture, is still an “other” to mainstream American culture.

2.3 Cajun Music

Cajun music, perhaps more than any other element of Cajun culture, is a result of the process of cross-cultural borrowing. In adopting musical elements from neighboring cultures, the Cajuns had a particularly eclectic taste: from the Spanish they adopted the guitar; from the Houma tribe they learned wailing styles and dance rhythms; they learned blues and percussion from Afro-Creoles, and new fiddle tunes from Anglo-Americans. In the 19th century they adopted syncopated Caribbean beats from Haitian refugees, at the same time that they began to use diatonic accordions imported by Jewish-German immigrants (Ancelet “Music Makers”, 50).

However, the Acadians, who spoke their own variety of French, continued to write their lyrics in the language. In contrast to the folk music of the era, which was often linear and narrative in nature, the developing Cajun music created a tradition of “intense, condensed, and often-impressionistic lyrics that suggested a feeling or an idea instead of telling the whole story” (Ancelet “Music Makers”, 50).

For example, the lyrics to the traditional ballad “J’ai Passé Devant ta Porte”, although variable depending on the region, all conjure the same image: a man passes by

the door of his lover's house and is forlorn when she does not answer. However, he realizes upon peering inside that he is, in fact, witnessing her funeral. The entire song is as follows:

<i>J'ai passé devant ta porte</i>	I passed by your door
<i>J'ai crié « bye-bye » à ma belle</i>	I cried out "bye-bye" to my beautiful
<i>Y'a personne qui m'a répondu,</i>	Nobody answered me
<i>Ay, ay, ay, ay, mon cœur fait mal</i>	Ay, ay, ay, how my heart hurts
<i>Quand je m'ai mis à observer,</i>	When I looked closer,
<i>J'ai vu des chandelles allumées</i>	I saw the lighted candles
<i>Tout autour de son cercueil</i>	All around her coffin
<i>Ay, ay, ay, ay, mon cœur fait mal</i>	Ay, ay, ay, how my heart hurts

The song hovers between narrative and image, brief and yet dense with feeling. Not only does it exemplify a common lyrical tendency of Cajun music, it exemplifies how inseparable the Cajun dialect is from traditional Cajun music. Although many modern Cajun songwriters write predominantly in English, in order to sing classic tunes, they must have a working understanding of Cajun French. Although it is possible to understand the literal meaning of the English lyrics here, they fall flat – it would require a highly skilled translator to transfer the message of the original while maintaining its meter and lyricism. In this way, Cajun music serves an important role in preserving the Cajun French language.

2.4 Cajun French

Perhaps one of the most noticeable factors distinguishing Cajun culture from mainstream American culture is its linguistic history. Although the use of Cajun French has been rapidly declining over the past century, the Cajuns maintained the use of their ancestral tongue for over a hundred years after their expulsion from French Canada. However, just as any language does, their French began to shift and take on new characteristics through the passage of time and influence by other neighboring languages. These changes are integrated into the structural, phonetic, and lexical framework of Cajun French.

For example, when the Acadians arrived from Canada in the mid 18th century, Louisiana was still under Spanish rule; this influence can be seen in the Cajun French /r/, which is pronounced dentoalveolarly, as it is in Spanish. This is a contrast to the French of France, in which /r/ is a uvular fricative.

Cajun French also retains some archaic elements found in colonial French that have since disappeared from the modern Standard French repertoire. For example, Cajun French retains the aspirated /h/ in words such as *haut* (“high”), a characteristic of colonial-period French that was not preserved in France.

The influences of indigenous languages are notable in the Cajun French lexicon: in particular, words for local flora and fauna are borrowed from the languages of the Choctaw, Algonquin, Iroquois, Tupí-Guarané, and Houma. *Plaquemine* (*piakimin*, “persimmon”) from Algonquin, *ouaouaron* (“bullfrog”) from Iroquoian, and *chaoui* (*shau*, “raccoon”) from Choctaw are all examples of this phenomenon.

West African slaves contributed words that tend to be associated either with food or with magical-religious practices: from Ewe, *voudou* (“voodoo”); from Bantu, *ngombo* (*gumbo*, first used to refer to the okra plant and then to the soup which commonly employs its use), and from indeterminate West African origin, *gri-gri* (“magic charm”).

However, it is imperative to note that lexical, grammatical, and phonological features vary greatly depending on region, age, and education level of speakers – scholars have by no means reached a consensus on how to define Cajun French. Rather, the dialect is viewed as a continuum, existing somewhere between a basilectal pole formed by the variety of Creole most structurally distant from Standard French to an acrolectal pole formed by the Standard French (Klinger et. al, 154).

Although Louisiana Creole, a variety of French heavily influenced by various African languages, may be easy to distinguish from Standard French, it is much more difficult to demarcate the French varieties that exist somewhere between the two. This is true even for individual speakers: according to Klinger et. al, “different utterances by the same speaker may range considerably across the continuum” (154). For example, a Cajun French speaker who lives in an area with a high density of Creole speakers may begin to imitate structural features of Creole; likewise, a heritage Cajun French speaker who has studied Standard French may reflect those traits in his or her speech.

Thus, it is nearly impossible to provide an accurate definition of Cajun French; however, for the purposes of this paper we will use the linguistic continuum model.

3. Mechanisms for Language Revitalization

Language decline is, ultimately, the result of the loss of intergenerational transmission – one generation stops speaking their mother tongue to their children, and so these children grow up with a different native language from their parents and little linguistic ability in their parent’s mother tongue. This second generation, in turn, is inclined to speak their own native language to their children, and this third generation of children has so little exposure to the mother tongue of their grandparents’ generation that they can no longer acquire it naturally.

The halt of intergenerational transmission is often due to social and cultural factors – particularly notable is the effect of colonialism on language transmission. According to linguist Salikoko Mufwene, “the main reasons for language endangerment today are socioeconomic, political, and cultural” (Mufwene, 18). When a tribe or region is colonized by another, the language of the powerful takes over, and the colonized are often forced to abandon their language. In the United States, for example, it was common during the colonial and post-colonial eras to kidnap indigenous children from their communities and place them in boarding schools where they were punished harshly for speaking their mother tongue. As adults, these children were less likely to teach their mother tongue to their own offspring, either because they had forgotten how to speak it or because they feared their children would endure the same torment they had.

In recent years, the problem of language decline and language death has come to the forefront in the linguistic community, and a number of scholars have set out to combat it. In 2010, Fernando et. al developed a comprehensive mathematical model to predict the successful components of a language revitalization movement. According to

their model, a language can be maintained by three types of interventions. “(1) Increasing the perceived status of the low-status language so that bilingual families will choose to teach the low-status language to their children and children will be more motivated to use it; (2) increasing the amount of the low-status language heard in society, thus increasing exposure to the language and facilitating the learning of the language as well as raising its status; and (3) formal language teaching of the low-status language to children who would otherwise speak only the high-status language” (Fernando et. al, 53-54).

Usually the first step in a language revitalization program is to institute formal teaching of the language. As Fernando et. al have noted, this is a critical step in the language revitalization process. Before a language can be used in any capacity, it must be learned. Because language decline necessitates that a significant number of children are unable to learn their ancestral language in the natural context of intergenerational transmission, explicit, formal education is needed for them to gain linguistic competence. This approach has been seen in a number of language communities around the world: Irish children learn Irish Gaelic in school, many Hawaiian children receive Hawaiian lessons as part of their daily curriculum, and the Maori of New Zealand are known for their *Kōhanga Reo*, or school “language nests”.

However, many formal language programs aimed at addressing community language loss fall short of their goal of revitalization. Children may learn the language in structured school lessons, but do not speak it outside of the classroom, and upon reaching adulthood, no longer have any environment in which they continue to use the language. According to Fernando et. al, “previous teaching efforts have concentrated on teaching the minority language in schools as a foreign or second language to semispeakers or

nonnative speakers” (54). This, perhaps, is the reason many revitalization movements focused solely on formal education are unsuccessful: the model for foreign language acquisition is largely not applicable to students seeking to relearn their ancestral tongue.

This proposal is supported by Frederick White’s assertion that education programs targeted towards ancestral language learners must be reformulated away from the second language acquisition model upon which they are currently based. In his studies on the revitalization movements of Native American languages, White writes, “more often than not the main effort to salvage Native American languages falls on the local school board. [...] The result is that many Native American students now learn or study their ancestral language only as a second language within a school context. The problem is that when Native American students study a language in school, it usually stays in the school” (92).

The model for second language acquisition has been largely informed by studies of English as a second language (ESL) learners, and is dependent upon ten basic assumptions, many of which are simply not applicable to ancestral language learners. These assumptions are as follows:

1. Target language learners are foreigners
2. There is an intended length of residence
3. There is an age of arrival
4. There is social distance
5. There is social and linguistic enclosure
6. The target language is the one of social dominance
7. Similarities of cultures are lacking

8. The target language is the language of wider communication

9. Motivation to learn the language is instrumental/integrative

10. Language learning is motivated by a communicative need

(White, 94)

The first, and most glaring, discrepancy here is that Native students seeking to learn their ancestral tongue for the first time are not foreigners. They were born in the United States, and their ancestors were here long before the ancestors of members of the dominant culture. They have no “age of arrival”, because they are natives of this country. The “intended length of residence” assumption is also not applicable to ancestral language learners, particularly Native students: their desire to learn the language involves no plan to leave their home country any time soon.

Moreover, in the actual instruction of ancestral languages, problems arise when they are taught as second languages. The assumption that language learners are culturally and linguistically disparate from their target language is entirely inapplicable in the case of ancestral language learners. In fact, the English speaking practices of ancestral language learners are often highly influenced by the ancestral language itself.

Writes White, “important metalinguistic aspects that would be important factors in ancestral language learning, including turn taking, narrative pauses, narrative form, appropriate social speech requirements (such as kinship or elder respect), etc., which come from the ancestral language, are already present in the English that Native American students currently speak” (105). Therefore, to approach this type of language learning from the assumption that the mother tongue of learners is completely different from their target language is simply not helpful.

The third, and perhaps most important, set of assumptions about second language learning that do not apply to ancestral language learners pertain to motivation. The idea that language learning is motivated by a communicative need and that the target language is the language of wider communication do not apply in these cases. Ancestral language learners are infrequently (if at all) exposed to environments in which their ancestral language is required for successful communication. In fact, this is precisely the issue of language attrition – the language is no longer used for communication, except perhaps between a small number of community elders. The motivation of ancestral language learners is not instrumental or practical; more often, it is cultural and emotional.

According to White, “many Native Americans want to learn their ancestral language to identify more completely with their history. The instrumental factor suggests that there is an academic, economic, or social component that will benefit from learning the second language, but with Native American ancestral languages there is little such motivation for most people on the reserves/reservations” (96). In fact, Joshua Fishman, the leading scholar on language revitalization, recognized and named the phenomenon of “language loyalty,” which is the “tendency of people to maintain their languages far beyond what might be predicted, not necessarily because the language is serving any practical purpose in their lives but instead because it carries important meaning as a badge of identity and key to their continuity as a people” (Hinton, 49).

Ultimately, White argues, “what is necessary is for the old thinking and the old model (which has produced meager results concerning language status among Native Americans) to pass the torch onto a model that is culturally relevant” (105). In order to be successful in revitalizing a language, formal education in the language must be culturally

validating. This is where the studies of Joana Jansen, Janne Underriner, and Roger Jacob come into play.

Jansen, Underriner, and Jacob have been working with Native communities in the Northwest United States to develop curriculums for K-12 education that are culturally relevant to the tribes in which they are implemented. Their focus is on revitalizing languages using Identity Through Learning (ITL) and place-based curriculums, which stress input from community members and elders. The three basic principles of this teaching style are that lessons are Community-Centered, Experiential, and Collaborative. Write the authors, “Place-based curriculum provides meaningful educational experience for Native students as it promotes authentic learning that supports communities in revitalizing their worldviews and associated lifeways. It honors the connection to one’s home, family, community and world” (Jansen et. al, 221).

Place-based curriculum is an attempt to address the problem identified by White: that usually, when children learn a language in school, the language stays at school. ITL and place-based curriculum, on the other hand, are “intimately dependent on the world outside the classroom” (Jansen et. al, 225). Native educators working with the team design curriculum centered around “traditional foods and nutrition, longhouse and sweathouse protocol, and legends that link powerful moral lessons with sites on traditional lands” (Jansen et. al, 225).

These lessons not only provide students with linguistic competence in their ancestral language, but they provide students culturally relevant contexts in which the language has real, tangible uses. In this way, the language can claim domains of use outside of the classroom, which is critical for sustainable revitalization.

In the 1990s, Hawaiian islanders made an effort to expand the use of Hawaiian outside of the classroom by establishing Hawaiian-speaking volleyball and softball teams (Warner, 320). Hawaiian, which was banned as a method of school instruction in 1897, had been on the decline for the better part of a century when Hawaiian language immersion programs were introduced in public schools in 1987. These programs were largely successful in creating new fluent speakers of Hawaiian; however, problems arose when these students graduated from high school. Outside of an immersion school setting, there was no environment in which speakers could communicate in the language, and their linguistic capacities began to decline.

Softball and volleyball teams were established as a means of retaining the abilities of already-fluent speakers and introducing new students, who had not had the opportunity to receive immersion schooling, in an activity that would be accessible and appealing. The teams, which are still popular today, provide language lessons while practicing various drills and exercises, reviewing the rules, instructing the players, and performing other activities related to the game. Writes Sam No'Eau Warner, "The purpose is to begin to claim domains in which the Hawaiian language can be used, not just for the duration of the project, but in the years to come" (321). These teams provide an outlet in the everyday lives of the players where Hawaiian has a relevant, tangible use, thereby grounding the language in the "real world".

Activities such as these also create social nexus related to the language. In the case of the Hawaiian-speaking sports teams, players socialize, bring food, play music, and often stay much longer than the three hours designated for the practice. The friends and families of players attend games to cheer on the players and tailgate, turning games

into significant social events that increase public exposure to the language. The fact that both volleyball and softball games are called in Hawaiian serves as a motivator for onlookers to expand their own vocabulary in the language.

Along with this social and community aspect, the Hawaiian-speaking sports teams are important because they bring the language into the public sphere. According to Fernando et. al, “continuous intervention that increases the use in public domains is approximately twice as effective as interventions that use formal teaching. Teaching can achieve an initial concentration of speakers of the low-status language, and this concentration can be maintained with other interventions” (70).

4. Strategies for the Revitalization of Cajun French

It is clear that the revitalization of Cajun French hinges on its ability to claim a domain in the everyday lives of Cajun people. Revitalization efforts can only be sustained if they succeed in making the language relevant in a real-world setting. As Fernando et. al demonstrated, use of a language in the public sphere is the biggest predictor of success in revitalization. As such, the movement to maintain Cajun French must seek to move beyond the classroom and into the world.

This is not to say that formal education is the enemy of revitalization – in fact, as corroborated by Fernando et. al, it must be the foremost step in any revitalization movement. However, it must be done in such a way that expands, rather than limits, the use of the language. As it stands, the efforts of Louisiana schools to reinvigorate Cajun French have fallen towards the latter.

In 1968, James Domengeaux founded the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) with one goal: reverse the loss of Cajun French by teaching it to children in public schools. Thus began the Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) program, and Louisiana elementary schools began offering daily 30-minute French lessons taught by instructors from France and Quebec. By 1972, 25,000 pupils were enrolled in the program, and just four years later, there were twice as many (Degrave, 2). In 1996, with 80,000 pupils enrolled in the program, the then-director of CODOFIL announced, “*Nous avons réussi notre mission originale* (‘We have accomplished our original mission’)” (Degrave, 2).

However, reality told a different story – one in which schoolchildren “repeatedly proved unable to communicate in French with their grandparents” (Degrave, 2) and

teachers were foreigners unable to teach the Cajun dialect. CODOFIL attempted to address this latter problem by creating a program called Second Language Specialists designed to replace foreign teachers with Louisiana locals; however, the program was underdeveloped and valued quantity over quality, resulting in a grossly under-qualified teaching force (Degrave, 2).

Moreover, it became clear that daily 30-minute lessons were simply not enough to create a base of fluent Cajun French speakers, and in 1993, immersion programs were introduced into several schools. Although these programs have been more effective than their predecessors, they are concentrated in elementary and middle schools, and the vast majority of students who wish to continue with immersion schooling after the eighth grade are simply unable to do so. Thus, the use of Cajun French is restricted to classroom learning rather than real-world experience, and the number of fluent speakers continues to decline.

CODOFIL's history of inefficiency is due in large part to the model on which their French programs are based: the foreign language acquisition model identified by Frederick White. Cajun students seeking to learn Cajun French are not foreign language learners, but rather ancestral language learners, and therefore the aforementioned model is largely inapplicable in this scenario. Many of the assumptions upon which the foreign language acquisition model is built are not true or relevant in the case of the Cajun community.

In the first place, Cajun students (the target language learners in this situation) are not foreigners. Though Cajuns are descended from French immigrants, Cajun culture developed in the United States. Cajuns are not foreign; rather, they are a subgroup of

Americans and their variety of French is an American dialect. Ethnic Cajuns who seek to learn the language of their ancestors are not seeking to learn a foreign language; rather, they are seeking to learn a language that is already theirs.

Like Native American students, Cajun students were born in the United States and have no “age of arrival” or “intended length of residence” – unless otherwise specified, it can be safely assumed that most Cajun students plan to spend their entire lives in the U.S.

Moreover, Cajuns learning Cajun French are not seeking out a tongue that is entirely linguistically disparate from their own. The English of ethnic Cajuns is heavily influenced by the language of their ancestors: Cajun French.

Perhaps the most salient similarities between Cajun French and Cajun English lie in their phonological parallels. For example, the deletion of /r/ in the medial and final position can be seen in both languages. In Cajun English, “tired” is pronounced “tied” and “water” pronounced “watuh”, while in Cajun French *soulier* (“shoe”) is pronounced “souliay” and *chardon* (“thistle”) is pronounced “shadoh”.

The influence of Cajun French on Cajun English can also be seen in the grammatical features of Cajun English. For example, the use of intensifying pronouns is common in both: *Moi, je viens* and “Me, I’m coming”. One can also see in Cajun English the overgeneralization of plurals that are irregular in English but regular in French. In Cajun French, “gray hair” is *cheveux gris* (a plural noun); in Cajun English, this regular plural is reflected: “gray hairs”.

Additionally, the English speech of Cajuns contains numerous Cajun French colloquial phrases, such as *cha* (“darling, precious”), *bouder* (“to pout”), *lagniappe* (“a little extra”), and many, many more. The teaching of Cajun French should reflect the fact

that Cajuns already have an implicit understanding of the phonological and grammatical features of their ancestral tongue.

Perhaps the most important flaw in the use of the foreign language acquisition model is the assumption that the target language is the language of wider communication, and that learning it serves a communicative need. This is simply untrue in the case of Cajun French – in fact, the reason Cajun French must be taught through formal education in the first place is that it is no longer the language of wider communication. It is a dying language. Cajuns seeking to learn Cajun French do not do so for practical, instrumental, or integrative needs, but out of a sense of cultural and linguistic loyalty.

If any headway is to be made in teaching Cajun French, students' reasons for learning the language must be addressed first and foremost. When considered, these reasons completely reshape classroom learning. As can be seen in the implementation of ITL and place-based learning in Native communities, it is critical that dying ancestral languages are taught within the context of social and cultural institutions.

For example, the Yakama nation of Washington state, who speak Ichishkiin, have developed a curriculum for high school students in their first year of Ichishkiin that has raised rates of comprehension and participation of students (Jansen et. al, 235). The curriculum centers around local plants, which hold great import in Yakama culture. In addition to speaking and writing exercises, students learn to prepare plants in traditional ways, speak with family members about their plant preparation practices, and record a community elder speaking about their plant-centered practices, all in Ichishkiin.

As is intended in ITL and place-based learning, this curriculum differs from traditional classroom learning in three fundamental ways: it is community centered,

experiential, and collaborative. Students learn their language through lived interaction with their community and traditional culture. Language does not exist in a vacuum – when we learn to speak our mother tongue, we do so largely through experience in context rather than formal instruction.

This is the primary issue with current CODOFIL programs: they provide students with no context or domain in which the target language can be used outside of school. Currently, even CODOFIL's most rigorous immersion program provides for French language learning in four subjects: math, science, social studies, and French language arts ("French Immersion", 13). Although this is certainly more substantive than the lessons most students receive (in 2010-2011, there were 3,416 students enrolled in immersion programs, compared to the total number of about 700,000 students in Louisiana public schools [Louisiana Department of Education]) these subjects are still largely restricted to the classroom, rather than forming a part of the daily lives of students.

As French studies scholar Jérôme Degraeve asserts, "No educational system has ever been able to recreate a situation of bilingualism and save a minority language in the process if pupils are not given the opportunity to speak and hear that language outside the school premises" (9). For this reason, programs designed to teach students Cajun French must be community-centered, experiential, and collaborative if they are to succeed.

But how does one connect classroom learning to real-world experience? In what social and cultural domain is Cajun French still relevant? According to Cajun scholar, folklorist, and ethnomusicologist Barry Jean Ancelet, "the ideal vehicle for [language revitalization], expressing both language and culture, is Cajun music" (19).

Although other prominent aspects of Cajun culture – notably food and religion –

no longer require any use of Cajun French to be considered authentic, Ancelet states that “many have long thought that if Cajun music is not sung in French, it is not really Cajun music” (172). One of the most iconic elements of Cajun culture – its music – still requires some degree of linguistic loyalty to be considered truly Cajun.

While it is true that times are changing and many young Cajun artists do write songs in English, it is necessary to create at least some music in Cajun French in order to avoid being rejected outright by the community. At a recent Festival de Musique Acadienne, a young Cajun group performed their set entirely in English; they were not invited back the next year (Ancelet, 172).

Moreover, Cajun music festivals, radio programs, and events have swelled in popularity since the 1970s; Cajun music is now known around the globe for its lively rhythms and heartfelt ballads. Locally, music festivals are exciting social events that draw attendees of all ages to dance, eat, and celebrate their culture. These events are no small deal – in 1974, the very first Tribute to Cajun Music Festival drew a crowd of 12,000 to a “rainy, Tuesday-night concert” (Ancelet, 32).

Four days a week, Louisiana’s public radio station, KRVS, broadcasts programs such as *Bonjour Louisiane*, *Rendez-Vous de Cajuns*, *Le Reveil*, and *Dimanche Matin*. These programs bring new and old Cajun tunes to listeners, and all are broadcast almost entirely in Cajun French (“Programs”). Smaller local stations, broadcasting from towns such as Lake Charles, Jennings, Eunice, and St. Martinville, feature a host of Cajun music programs in both Cajun French and English.

For Cajun French learning to be community-centered, experiential, and collaborative – and therefore remotely successful – it must be deeply embedded in this

cultural institution. Cajun French and Cajun music are already inextricably linked – involvement in the Cajun music scene will allow students to experience their culture in a social, community setting that brings their language to life in tangible, enjoyable ways. “If someone is to bother learning French,” says Barry Jean Ancelet, “there must be something worth doing, reading, seeing, and hearing in the language” (353).

5. Conclusion

If the Cajun French revival is to truly succeed, it will require participation from the entire community, in many different domains of life. Although music is an important conduit for the language and can provide necessary social and cultural context, music alone cannot save Cajun French. In order to give rise to a pervasive and impactful revitalization, we must turn to other facets of Cajun culture in which Cajun French could have import. Most notable among these facets are food and faith.

Attending church is an important part of life for most Cajuns. Faith is a domain of serious influence – it affects the worldviews, cultural beliefs, and identities of those who practice it. As in most communities, it is also a social institution. Church is a place to see neighbors and friends, and catch up on local happenings and events. The church could be instrumental in reintroducing Cajun French into public daily life – for example, if the priest were to select hymns in Cajun French (of which there are records) or read certain selections in both Cajun French and English.

Food, on the other hand, offers an opportunity to experience the language in a private, rather than public, domain. The social element of Cajun food is fundamental to its experience. Meal preparation and consumption are integrally linked to family and community life – there is no way to have a Cajun meal without friends and family around. For this reason, food could serve as an important domain in which to reintroduce the use of Cajun French.

But how could this be done? The kitchen may be a social nexus for Cajuns, but it is a private one – it is more difficult to reach into a people's private social affairs than

their public life, and Cajun recipes and foodways are learned from older generations, not classes or cookbooks.

As a matter of fact, this reality may be used to the advantage of language planners attempting to revitalize Cajun French. Most Cajuns in the “grandparent” generation (born between 1930 and 1950) have a proficient knowledge of Cajun French, even if it is not their dominant language (Dubois, 63). If this generation were encouraged to use their French in teaching food practices to younger generations, Cajun French could begin to reclaim the kitchen as a domain of use.

Language, at its core, serves social purposes – we use words to communicate with others. For this reason, it is crucial that language learning be social: an act experienced in the context of real, person-to-person communication. Both Cajun food and the Catholic faith hold cultural and social import in the Cajun community. The church and the kitchen are perhaps the two greatest social nexus in Cajuns’ daily lives – if we could find a way to reintroduce Cajun French into these two domains, we could see the effects for generations to come.

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