Le français ou les français: The Feasibility of Teaching Variability in the Louisiana French Classroom

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On the one hand, linguists point out that Louisiana French represents a treasure, a linguistic flag, an oral genealogy. On the other, teachers can treat this language variant as a pedagogical problem, an error to be corrected, with all the best intentions, to provide the Cajuns with access to the French-speaking world. I propose that this linguistic schizophrenia is not necessary, that it is based on a false dichotomy, and that there are ways to validate variability and to integrate it into pedagogical and writing strategies that also include referential academic French. This issue need not polarize participants in this project into opposing camps of academics and popularizers. The positions need not be mutually exclusive. We have too long been isolated from the rest of the French-speaking world by external forces; we should not tear ourselves apart from the inside. It is not necessarily a choice between standard or dialectal French; they can coexist. But this requires essential changes in educational philosophy, and these changes must come from both sides. The educational system must be open to considering the possibility and the value of the vernacular and the potential richness of natural variability. This is not easy to realize because language education is generally designed to reduce vernacular variability and to discourage dialectal differences in an effort to take students toward the standard. But the universe is composed of an infinity of localities. We would do well to learn to not only tolerate them, but to celebrate them. At the same time, our regional communities must consider the importance of communication and the needs of educators to teach predictable and widely applicable concepts. Regional bickering over regional minutia and which local elements to feature can only hopelessly mire down the process and jeopardize any chance that might exist to regionalize the teaching of French in the state. And one should not think that this proposal requires a choice between a viable future and a folkloric past. We can and should slip between the horns of this dilemma. This is not about closing doors, but rather utilizing local resources to open them instead, ideally without smashing our fingers in the process.

The first examples of this effort to validate the vernacular came in quick response to CODOFIL's initial efforts. As early as the mid-1970s, activists and educators alike tried to encourage the educational system to consider the importance of integrating Louisiana French. Each side debated the problem of graphic representation. A high school French teacher, James Donald Faulk, proposed a graphic system based on English phonetics (1977), reasoning that his students could already read that language. The way he articulated his position, "tu lis ça en anglais et ça sort en français," raised concerns among proponents as well as opponents of the concept to integrate Louisiana French into the classroom. His phonetic transcription – which started out as a pronunciation guide – produced a written version of Louisiana French that was illegible to anyone educated in French. For example, to render the expression "il est après arranger son char" (in referential French: il est en train de réparer sa voiture"), he proposed "eel a ahpra arohnja sohn shahr," which virtually no one in the Francophone world would have intuitively understood. There was a huge outcry, with the issue debated in the press, as well as in the streets.

Some, including Shirley Abshire, David Barry, Richard Guidry, Amanda LaFleur, Brenda Mounier, and Earlene Broussard, were convinced that there is a way to preserve both the specificity and the Frenchness of Louisiana French by using the French orthographic strategies to write what Cajuns say. Faulk's line would be then "il est après arranger son char," not something a French speaker from France or Québec or Belgium would say, but French nevertheless. There is at least the possibility of visual communication with some negotiation.

To develop new conventions for the writing and teaching of French in Louisiana, cultural activists and pedagogical specialists turned to the obvious source for contextual language, oral tradition. The first step was to collect a representative corpus of recorded material. The folklore collection at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette already had hundreds of hours of recorded oral tradition, spoken and sung, the result of interviews with native speakers in most cases by other native speakers. Some of the spoken material was the performance of folktales and jokes, most of the collection was oral history interviews – people just talking about growing up Cajun and Creole in South Louisiana. The second step was to standardize conventions for transcribing the recorded material so that there was consistency in the transcriptions. Some of this was done with the publication of the folktales in mind. The initial conventions were quite simple:

1. Eliminate nothing. The transcriber should include all the words of the speaker, except when the speaker is obviously editing himself or herself.
2. Add nothing. The transcriber should refrain from adding words not said by the speaker (cf. the absence of the *ne* in the negative [j'ai pas faim] and the possible absence of the relative pronoun *que* [c'est homme j'ai vu hier).
3. Avoid inventing. The transcriber should use the French orthographic system as much as possible. One should not change orthography simply to render pronunciation (*table* for [tab], *quoi* for [ko] as well as [kwa], *voir* for [war]). If a word is not in the standard dictionaries (*Robert, Larousse,* etc.), check etymological, historical and regional dictionaries. Transcribers should strive to preserve the principles and spirit of French grammar, especially when developing necessary syntactic changes (je vas, t'as, ils alliont). Invent only in consultation with other Louisiana French research team members to insure collaborative consistency.

These initial rules, which coincided remarkably with the transcription conventions independently developed by editor and folklorist Jean-Pierre Pichette for the publication of folktales in his series Mémoires d'homme in Québec (1978), served for several test drives, including the oral histories of musicians in *The Makers of Cajun Music* (1984) and the stories in *Cajun and Creole Folktales* (1994).

La chasse-galerie (Stanislaus Faul, dit Tanisse, Cankton)

La chasse-galerie, c'est un homme qui avait été à la messe dimanche matin, tu connais. Et l'église était dans la prairie. Et il y a quelqu'un avec des chiens qui les avait suit. La messe était juste bien commencée, les chiens ont sorti

> au ras de la porte ayoù il était assis avec un lapin, à courser un lapin. Il a sorti dehors et il a parti à la course derrière lui aussi et il est après galoper toujours.
>
> C'est ça ils ont appelé la chasse-galerie. Pendant des années, il a galopé sur la terre, mais asteur, il peut plus. Ça va dans l'air, ça. Mon père et mon beau-frère ont resté un soir un arpent avant de rentrer dans la savane à l'écouter passer. "Hou, hou, hou," ils écoutaient, comme si c'était des cloches et des chaînes. Supposé, il passe dans chaque pays tous les sept ans. (1994: 216)

It is immediately obvious that the style of expression, as well as certain vocabulary items *(ayoù, juste, asteur)* and grammar items *(il a sorti, il est après galoper)* are not referential French. It is also obvious, however, that this is nevertheless a variety of French that is not impossible to understand in written form, especially if the orthographic system is familiar to the reader.

Teaching Louisiana French requires a thorough understanding of its nature as well as its diversity. There are a number of historical descriptions, most of them from the 1930s and 1940s (Read 1931, Ditchy 1932, Phillips 1936) and few more recent ones (Guilbeau 1950, Conwell and Juilland 1963, Brown). Several contemporary graduate students have added significantly to the discussion especially the area of sociolinguistics and attitudes about language learning (e.g. Deslauriers, Tornquist, Banzar). The problems of the most recent lexical sources, Daigle (1984) and Lavaud-Grassin (1989) have been addressed. The multi-university research team that prepared the new *Dictionary of Louisiana French* includes native Louisiana French-speakers who have been long active in the effort to revitalize French in Louisiana, as well as linguists who have long been interested and involved in the Louisiana French context. The dictionary is designed to represent the way French is actually spoken in Louisiana, based on fieldwork going back several decades, as well as on contemporary fieldwork designed to elicit contextual examples and verify the lexical and phonetic values described by a number of linguistic studies through the years. The relative richness of the entries found in the *Dictionary of Louisiana French* comes from the stories, songs and conversations recorded among native speakers. Thus they represent the essential elements of the French we should seek to preserve in the Louisiana context, if this French is to effectively and affectively express the cultural and social values of those who would use it. Since the words came directly from the stories and songs, one can fairly assume that they are the words that one needs to tell those stories and sing those songs in a culturally and socially appropriate way. This is of course applied linguistics with a socio-political edge. The science can be solid and still be of service to the community.

Contextual examples included in many of the entries required additional considerations to insure consistency in the transcriptions. We found that the devil is in the details. We determined, for example, that there is a distinction between *bien,* the adverb, and *bein,* the interjection; between *plus,* more, and *pus,* the negative none. We determined that predictable phonetic variation, such as the [dj] value of "di" as in *dieu* and *diable* and *cadien*, or the [tch] of initial "qu" and "cu", as in *queue* and *cul*, can be rendered with the standard orthography. We determined that there were legitimate historical linguistic reasons for variable lexical forms such as *tiendre* and *soufferre*, *cil* and *cez* or *ceuz*, *eusse* and *asteur*, and so they should be preserved. Further explorations

have exposed the predictability of other variable forms such as *petit*. One hears from the same speaker [ti] or [tit] in certain positions – *un tit garçon, une tite fille* – but not in others – *combien de petits elle a?* and *donne-moi la plus petite.* So it is not that Louisiana French speakers deform or cannot produce the initial [p]; it is rather that they distinguish consistently between the two forms. So then should we.

Variability in the lexicon is one thing. Variability in the grammar is quite another. Using the folklore transcription conventions as a basis, we found ourselves needing to go on to essentially describe the grammar of Louisiana French, as we found ourselves faced with the need to tease out such details as how to render the regular conjugations of verb groups and how to handle past participle agreement. We determined, for example, that Louisiana French does not generate agreement through *avoir*. In the expression, "elle est morte" (she is dead), *morte* is an adjective. "Elle a mouri" (she died) expresses the past perfect of the verb *mourir*. We hear no agreement consistently in cases where the agreement would produce an audible difference: *Ayoù la banane? Je l'ai pris.* So we conclude that there is no reason to include it in other cases where it is not heard: *Ayoù la banane? Je l'ai mangé.* In the imparfait, Louisiana French varies regionally. One hears both *ils alliont* and *ils allaient.* The simple solution, once the older form is validated, is to write whichever is actually said.

While considering how verbs work, we also noticed that there are consistencies in pronoun variability. Some of these have been recognized for a long time: the use of *on* in the first-person plural, the variant use of *ils, ça, eux, eusse, and eux-autres* in the third person plural, the minimal use of *vous* as a formal second person singular and the general use of *vous-autres* as a second person plural (conjugated as a third person singular: *vous autres va*). A bit more problematic has been the not yet fully resolved usage of *i/il* and *a/alle* in the nominative third person singular. While *il* and *elle* can occur, one finds with significant consistency, *il* or *alle* before verbs beginning with a vowel: *il oublie, alle oublie*; and *i* or *a* before a verb beginning with a consonant: *i mange, a mange*. The latter forms have not yet been fully resolved. Interestingly, there was considerably less resistance within our group to *i* than *a*. In an apparent temporary compromise, it was determined to use *alle* to render all occurences of this variation, but this suggests an utterance that does not actually occur in Louisiana French: *alle va* [al va]. There was also the suggestion that *alle* could be reduced to *al*, producing the elegant parallel *i/il* and *a/al;* This suggestion met with considerable resistance, mostly due to esthetic reasons; it was also pointed out that this would represent a radical departure from French orthography. The issue remains unresolved for the moment. Ultimately, I suspect, the forms *i* and *a* will eventually be integrated, given the consistency of the usage. Once again, it is not that Louisiana French speakers deform *elle* into *alle* and *a*. In fact, *elle* is consistently used in other positions, such as apposition and object: *Elle, a part demain; elle, alle a pas faim; je parle avec elle tout les jours.* Louisiana French speakers distinguish consistently between the two forms. So then should we.

Clearly there is consistency in Louisiana French; variant forms are not simple the result of error or deformation; they are often preservations of older forms or the result of consistent evolution. Only after the lexicon and the grammar have been described in this way does it become possible to consider teaching the language in its own terms. Without extensive materials and textbooks, teaching strategies must be improvised. A number of Louisiana French teachers including Richard Guidry, Amanda LaFleur, Earlene

Broussard, Brenda Mounier, Kirby Jambon, and Helena Putnam have devised ingenious methods and materials to integrate the vernacular language and the culture it expresses into the classroom. Most of these involve using real people as living resources in one way or another. Some also make use of an evolving base of cultural and linguistic resources, including documentary films, stories from archival collections, and songs from commercial recordings. One example is the project my wife Caroline devised for her middle and high school students. The initial assignment was for each student to record someone in his or her affective circle (immediate or extended family, friend, neighbor…) telling a joke in French. The interview process established the existence of French in the real world of the students. Next, the students transcribed the stories in group sessions which necessarily raised lexical and grammatical issues that needed to be resolved. The students learned grammar and vocabulary, not for their own sake, but because they needed them. The ground rules for transcription were essentially the same as those used by our research team. Then Caroline assigned each student to learn the story he or she had recorded and transcribed, reproducing only the exact words, but also the inflection, rhythm, and timing of the original. And finally for French night, instead of singing Frère Jacques or performing a skit adapted from a Molière play, the students performed the jokes they had collected. The audience, members of their families including many of their resource people, heard them tell their stories in their own French. People who had been punished for speaking their native French at school now saw it validated and even celebrated in the school setting. In a related individual case, Cajun musicians Dirk Powell, accordionist and singer with Balfa Toujours originally from Ohio, and David Greely, fiddler and singer with the Mamou Playboys band, both learned to speak Louisiana French by listening to tape recordings of stories from the university archives while following along with the transcriptions that had been produced for publications and the dictionary project. Both became fluent, not only in French but in the Louisiana French that expresses the sentiments of the song lyrics that they sing. Others are now following this model. Teachers such as Amanda LaFleur, Brenda Mounier and Earlene Broussard have been active in adapting such resources in their adult literacy classes where native Louisiana French speakers learn to read and eventually write what was erroneously considered only an oral language.