Dissertation Proposal: The impact of ethnicity and race on French in Louisiana

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January 21, 2022

The idea of Louisiana in the public imagination is really that of South Louisiana and the New Orleans metropolitan area, specifically, as shown in Table 1. Indeed, the boundary between North and South Louisiana is traditionally a division in culinary practices, religion, and language (Trépanier, 1988, p. 309), which has led to a situation where even South Louisiana locals will sometimes derisively refer to North Louisiana as "South Arkansas", a reference to North Louisiana's general indistinguishability from the rest of the mostly Anglo, Protestant American South. For sociolinguists, South Louisiana is interesting for two reasons: The two major local ethnic categories – Creole and Cajun – have over time been redefined to align with the Black and White American racial binary, respectively, and French is spoken there as a heritage language where it was the dominant language as recently as the mid 20th century.

Figure 1: Map of South Louisiana and the New Orleans metropolitan area

Much of the variationist work on French in South Louisiana has been framed as a discussion of language death (Carmichael & Gudmestad, 2019; Dajko, 2009; Rottet, 1995). This work has often included ethnicity as a factor, though the linguistic implications of the intersection of race with ethnicity have not been examined in detail. Furthermore, as French in Louisiana has continued to decline, it is not clear whether those who continue to speak the language have had to broaden their personal social networks to be more ethnically diverse in order to find French interlocutors as this may additionally impact their speech patterns. The present study aims to replicate previous studies that looked at French subject pronouns, giving greater attention to the role of race in ethnicity and exploring what happens to the ethnic make-up of personal networks among speakers of a heritage language with the goal of shedding light on what is known about the role of ethnicity in language variation and heritage languages.

1 Ethnicity and race in South Louisiana

The complexity of ethnicity in South Louisiana is perhaps due to the variety of colonizing forces that have controlled it as well as immigration patterns. It was initially colonized by France, who turned over control to Spain in the 1760s, who then gave control of the region back to France very shortly before selling it to the United States as the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 (Fortier, 1884; Johnson, 1976; T. A. Klingler, 2003). Additionally, Louisiana has been the landing point for influxes of refugees from Saint-Domingue[1] after the slave revolts (Debien and Le Gardeur, 1981, as cited in T. A. Klingler, 2003), Acadia[2] after the mass expulsion known as the *Grand dérangement* (Fortier, 1884; T. A. Klingler, 2003; Neumann, 1985), and even the Canary Islands (T. A. Klingler, 2003). The result has been the formation of two general South Louisiana ethnic categories – Cajun and Creole – which have come to be redefined by the introduction of the Black-White racial binary of the United States (Dajko, 2012).

1.1 Cajuns

The typical description of Cajuns is that of an poor, isolated, and stigmatized people. Scholars in the early 20th century tended to claim that Cajuns were generally immobile (Smith & Phillips, 1939, e.g.,), which may explain why they were once called the nation's "largest unassimilated minority" (Gilmore, 1933, as cited in Rottet, 1995, p. 99): without opportunities to interact with outsiders, there was little chance that they would assimilate to those outsiders. Although Cajuns will sometimes claim the uniqueness of their culture that stems from this lack of assimilation as a badge of honor, it has also been the impetus behind them once being thought of as "poor white trash" (Rottet, 1995, p. 110). This negative evaluation, however, began shifting towards being more positive since the 1960s with the establishment of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) at that time as well as the broader American population and French people becoming more interested in the region (Brown, 1988, pp. 31-33). Of course, this increased contact with outsiders has also come increased Americanization and a loss of the uniqueness of culture that Cajuns prize, which includes the French language. Specifically, it has been claimed that assimilation into the broader American culture has been thrust forward first by compulsory education, then by the advent of mass communication, followed by involvement in World War II, and finally by the Louisiana oil boom that drew many new people to the state (Conrad, 1978, as cited in Brown, 1988, p. 28).

Along with the changes in Cajun culture and social evaluations of Cajuns have come changes in the criteria for membership into this ethnic group. In the early 20th century, several conditions needed to be

[1] Present day Haiti.
[2] Roughly the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in Canada.

met in order to be considered Cajun. Chief among them was the abililty to speak French (Smith & Phillips, 1939, p. 198), though others have also noted the importance of being rural and Catholic (Del Sesto and Gibson, 1975, as cited in Neumann, 1985, p. 15). Indeed, this criteria is not far off from those used by Trépanier (1988) to distinguish between North and South Louisiana, as mention in the introduction.

Another condition that allows one to claim Cajun as their ethnicity is ancestry, specifically ancestry that can be traced back to Acadia from before the *Grand dérangement* (Johnson, 1976, p. 19). Indeed, the term *Cajun* itself originated in mispronunciations of the term Acadian (Smith & Phillips, 1939, p. 198). Although the link is not obvious in English, *Acadian* in French is *acadien* [akadjɛ̃], which Acadian as well as French-speaking Cajuns today pronounce as [akadʒɛ̃], making it quite close to the English pronunciation of *Cajun* as [keɪdʒən]. Even recent scholars have implied that ancestry is what should ideally make define someone as Cajun as Giancarlo (2019) did when arguing that the parishes of St Landry and Lafayette are not actually dominated by Cajuns as Acadian surnames are not common there. Giancarlo (2019), citing Brasseaux (1992) and Stanford (2016), did acknowledge that surnames are not reliable for identifying ancestry as Acadians/Cajuns have intermarried since their arrival in Louisiana and Cajuns today trace their ancestry matrilineally (p. 33). Furthermore, although the importance of ancestry continues to be given as a defining feature of Cajun group membership, it ceased being a hard requirement since at least the 1980s (Brown, 1988, pp. 18-20). It appears, then, that Acadian ancestry is perhaps a sufficient condition for being Cajun on its own, but it is not a necessary conditon today.

Another condition for Cajun membership that is entangled with ancestry and has come to all but subsume the other conditions is race. At one time, Louisiana society's racial classification of Cajuns was somewhat ambiguous as they were considered to be better than Black but not quite White (Tentchoff, 1980; Walton, 2003, as cited in Giancarlo, 2019, p. 32). With the assimilation of South Louisiana into the broader American culture, including the American Black-White racial binary, Cajuns have generally been moved from being racially ambigious to being White. For instance, Spitzer (1977) and Esman (1985) both identified Blacks as participating in Cajun[3] culture yet not referring to themselves as Cajun (as cited in Brown, 1988, p. 43). Giancarlo's (2019) own research participants, each of whom self-identified as either Creole or Black, often defined Cajuns as White and Creoles as Black (p. 34). This remained the case even when it was admitted that Cajuns may be darker skinned Whites and Creoles may be lighter skinned Blacks (Stanford, 2016, as cited in Giancarlo, 2019, p. 32). As will be shown in the next section, just as the term Cajun has become more or less synonymous with White South Louisianian, so too has Creole become synonymous with Black South Louisianian.

[3]There is of course much debate over which cultural traditions in Louisiana are Cajun and which are Creole (Giancarlo, 2019) as well as who is Black and who is not (Susberry, 2004), but Spitzer and Esman's reports remain enlightening either way.

Table 1: The subject pronoun system of Louisiana French in South Louisiana

	Singular	Plural	Number
1st	*je, moi, mo*	*nous, nous-autres, on*	
2nd	*tu, vous, to*	*vous, vous-autres*	
3rd	*il, elle, ça, on*	*ils, ça, eux, eux-autres, yé*	
Person			

1.2 Creoles

Creoles, historically understood to be descendants of French and Spanish colonists and transplants from Haiti after the slave revolts (Fortier, 1884; Rottet, 1995) are today understood to simply be Black South Louisianians (Dajko, 2012).

2 Variation in Louisiana French subject pronouns

The categories of Cajun and Houma Indian have previously been found to be predictive for French subject pronoun realizations in Southeast Louisiana specifically (Dajko, 2009; Rottet, 1995). Although subject pronouns have not been analyzed in relation to Cajun and Creole ethnic identities, race in terms of being Black or White has been suggested to be related to variation in Louisiana Creole as spoken in both Pointe Coupee Parish (T. A. Klingler, 2003) and St Landry Parish (Neumann, 1985), which is significant given that Louisiana French and Louisiana Creole are not only so closely related that they are sometimes difficult to distinguish (Baronian, 2005; T. A. Klingler, 2005), but even which one a speaker claims to speak can be more related to whether they identify as ethnically Cajun or Creole than to the linguistic structure of their speech, including their choice of pronouns (Brown, 1988, p. 5); T. Klingler, 2013).

The subject pronoun system of South Louisiana is itself summarized in Table 1. While all of these linguistic variables are morphosyntactic, there is also phonetic variation at play. The 1st person singular pronoun also involves phonetic variation in that three different consonants may be used in the pronunciation so that one might here [ʒə], [hə], or [zə], all of which may also be metathesized. There is additionally a phonological process which causes devoicing of the consonant when followed by a voiceless consonant in the verb (Carmichael & Gudmestad, 2019). Similarly, other pronouns, such as *elle* and *eux*, are also subject to their own phonetic variations.

2.1 Ethnicity and subject pronouns in previous research

2.2 Race and variation in Louisiana in previous research

3 Personal social networks

4 Methods

4.1 Lafayette and the surrounding parishes

4.2 Data collection

4.3 Analyses

The first goal of the present study is to replicate previous variationist analyses of the subject pronoun system along ethnic lines with the addition of including speakers who identify as Creole. This will not only provide another time point for the system as the language continues to decline but also implicate general American racial categories and how they interact with local Louisiana ethnic categories.

The second goal of this study is to expand this quantitative analysis to explore the ethnic make-up of speakers' personal networks. This factor has been found to be important in language variation in previous studies (Li et al., 2000; Sharma, 2017), though it is not known how it interacts with heritage languages as they decline, nor has the ethnic make-up of personal networks in Louisiana been documented to date at all. It is possible that personal networks become more diverse as speakers search for interlocutors in a shrinking population of speakers.

The third and final goal of this study is to explore speakers' discourse on ethnicity, race, and French so as to better understand their stances in relation to the results from the quantitative analyses. In particular, despite being a declining language, little is known about current attitudes towards French in Louisiana as the most recent study on the subject was was conducted 26 years ago. (Dubois et al., 1995).

Ultimately, this study will expand researchers' understanding of how ethnicity interacts with language variation as well as heritage languages as they die off through an analysis of proniminal variation in the French spoken in southeast Louisiana.

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