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 Figure 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). As one of the goals of this study is to better understand not only how subject pronouns vary according to ethnicity with an emphasis on the role of race in ethnicity but to also better understand how Louisianians view ethnicity, race, and French, the following sections will review findings in the literature about how Cajuns and Creoles were defined historically and are defined today.

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 (R. A. 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,

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

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 R. A. 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 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[3] 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 (R. A. 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[4] culture yet not referring to themselves as Cajun (as cited in R. A. Brown, 1988, p. 43). Giancarlo's (2019) own research participants, each of whom self-identified as either Creole or

[3] A parish is the Louisiana equivalent of a county in other states.

[4] 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.

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.

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).

Today, many of Louisiana's cultural exports and landmarks have been branded as Cajun to the detriment of the role or even authorship of Creoles (Giancarlo, 2019). Despite this branding that erases Creoles from the landscape, local interest in Creole identity has persisted. This is perhaps a reaction to said branding, but other factors involved in this continued interest have also been noted, such as the census finally allowing Creoles to not have to identify as Black, the push for French language education, and the popularity of geneological research (Susberry, 2004, p. 14). The definition of a Creole has changed dramatically over time, though members of the ethnic group themselves today might define Creoles as being descendants of the original French and Spanish colonists in Louisiana, especially if Africans or Native Americans are found in that line of descent, or simply being multiracial people from South Louisiana (Susberry, 2004, p. 56). A common thread in all definitions, though, is the idea that Creoles are necessarily "not Cajun" (Giancarlo, 2019, pp. 26/42).

Historically, the term Creole was first applied to White people of French and Spanish descent during the colonial period (Kein, 2000, as cited in Susberry, 2004, pp. 7-8), matching how some still define Creoles today. This later came to include those coming to Louisiana after the slave revolts in Saint-Domingue after at the turn of the 19th century (Neumann, 1985, p. 11; Rottet, 1995, p. 6). In fact, by that time, the term Creole not only applied to people originating in the Louisiana but even foods and other objects (Johnson, 1976, p. 21). Mixed-race people were not Creoles then but were rather derisively called mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons. The negative stigma associated with these terms, however, led Free People of Color to co-opt the term Creole for themselves (Martin, 2000, as cited in Susberry, 2004, pp. 7-8), creating a three tier racial system that consisted of Whites at the top, Creoles in the middle, and Blacks (i.e., slaves) at the bottom.

After the Civil War and especially during the 20th century, there were strong societal forces in Louisiana

pushing to have Creoles identified simply as Black. As Neumann (1985) notes, whereas Creoles were understood to be Black or mixed-race francophones early in the century, they came to be understood as Black creolophones by the 1980s (p. 11), bringing the more stigmatized language variety of Louisiana Creole into the fold (pp. 23-25),[5] as well. Some Creoles resented being collapsed in with Blacks and so either attempted to pass as White if they were light skinned enough or otherwise became activists pushing for Creoles to continue to be seen as a distinct group (Susberry, 2004, pp. 12-13). In any case, what is clear from these definitions is that, despite *Creole* perhaps being best thought of as an ethnic label, race has always been a central aspect of historical definitions: Creoles began as Whites from Europe who were born in Louisiana before later being mixed-race free people.

While Creoles in the 21st century may still be seen as mixed-race by Louisianians, in the context of American society where everything is either White or Black or at least White or Other, Creoles are not necessarily precluded from being treated as *de facto* Black as opposed to being in a third racial category. This binarity is so pervasive that even activists and researchers who are purposefully holding onto a mixed- or third-race identity for Creoles will sometimes fall back into the binary. For instance, Giancarlo (2019) cited such activists and researchers as arguing that much of South Louisiana's local culinary traditions are in fact Creole and not Cajun because slaves would have been doing the cooking when these traditions began (pp. 39-40). However, this presumes that slaves were Creoles, though at the time of slavery, they were not considered Creoles but were instead considered Black, a notch below Creoles of Color and well below the White Creoles during the early colonial days.

2 Louisiana French

There are traditionally three French-based language varieties delineated in Louisiana: Colonial or Plantation French, Louisiana French, and Louisiana Creole. Colonial French is thought to be all but extinct but was spoken primarily by recent French immigrants after the Louisiana Purchase. While there are still francophone immigrants coming to Louisiana even today, they have not coalesced around a variety that might still be called Colonial French but have instead continued to speak a wide range of French varieties. Louisiana French, sometimes referred to as Cajun French[6], is the French variety that was the dominant language of rural South Louisiana up until the mid 20th century. Finally, Louisiana Creole is a French-based creole that has similarities with other Atlantic French-based creoles such as Haitian Creole but is not likely

[5] Neumann reported that English was the most prestigious variety in Louisiana at the time, followed by the local variety of French, and finally the closely related Louisiana Creole.

[6] It is somewhat *faux pas* to use this term today as it presumes that all speakers are Cajuns and all non-Cajuns are non-speakers, though even local francophones will sometimes use the term.

to be related (Dajko, 2012, pp. 280-281).

The linguistic focus of this study will be on ethnic variation in Louisiana French, broadly defined, meaning Louisiana Creole will not be excluded as these two varieties are quite close structurally, particularly in the parishes that are adjacent to Lafayette Parish where participants will be sought out. Indeed, in cases of code-switching Louisiana French and Louisiana Creole, it can be extremely difficult to distinguish where one variety ends and another begins (T. A. Klingler, 2005) as there are very few lexical differences (Neumann, 1985, p. 52; Rottet, 2000, as cited in T. A. Klingler, 2005, p. 352). It has also been noted that Louisiana French displays syntactic features that are closer to Louisiana Creole than other varieties of French in parishes where the two are in contact (Baronian, 2005). Furthermore, speakers and sometimes even researchers have defined these two varieties more by who the speaker is than by their linguistic structures in the sense that Creoles are said to speak Louisiana Creole even when their speech patterns ressemble French and Cajuns are said to speak Louisiana French even when their speech patterns ressemble Creole (R. A. Brown, 1988, p. 5); T. Klingler, 2013). Given these facts as well as claims that the two varieties are mutually intelligible (Neumann, 1985, p. 29), excluding Louisiana Creole would be difficult at best and questionable at worst, and so "Louisiana French" here may include speech that appears Creole-like.

As for the status of Louisiana French, the language was not long ago dominant of rural South Louisiana but is today likely considered a heritage language. It is oft repeated that estimates of French speakers in the state are hard to obtain – for instance, the census once gave only the option of "French" but not specifically local varieties of French, and speakers sometimes equated "French" to International varieties and not their own (B. Brown, 1993, p. 98) – and so the numbers given over the years have varied widely. CODOFIL (1969) suggested there were 1,484,440 speakers in the 1960s, whereas Smith-Thibodeaux (1977) estimated 300,000-500,000 and Neumann (1985) 500,000-1,000,000 (as cited in Rottet, 1995, p. 113). There is consensus, though, that the number of French speakers in Louisiana is generally dwindling. For example, though Rottet (1995) had no real difficulty finding francophone Houma Indians under the age of 30 in his study of Southeast Louisiana, he had much more difficult finding Cajuns in this age group who spoke French (p. 71). Americanization as discussed in Section 1.1 and general economic pressures from the oil boom that brought in many Texans and anglophone North Louisianians have been cited as reasons for the decline in French (Neumann, 1985, p. 49; Larouche, 1981, as cited in Rottet, 1995, p. 105), but whatever the cause, it is readily apparent that there are fewer speakers each day.

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			

2.1 Ethnicity and subject pronouns in previous research

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).

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.

2.2 Race and variation in Louisiana in previous research

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

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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