

Spatial diffusion of language practices within the Catholic Church in Louisiana

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1 Introduction

Our case study examines a revealing aspect of the switch from French to English using data from the Sacramental Registers of more than 173 Catholic churches in South Louisiana, starting in 1844 (the earliest switch) and ending in 1954 (the last switch). We consider these registers as a vital measuring tool because, following Wenger (1998) and Meyerhoff (2002), we can confidently define the Roman Catholic Church in Louisiana, with the Archdiocese of New Orleans as its administrative base for the entire Louisiana territory, as a *community of practice*. During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, this community of practice stood as the last vestige of French cultural dominance and the last prestigious stronghold for the written French language in Louisiana, and therefore its official records have uncommon linguistic value if carefully used in conjunction with other data.

The common goals of the Louisiana Catholic Church as a community of practice (afterward LCCCP) are spreading and maintaining the Catholic faith and its teaching among the local people. The LCCCP's membership is comprised of high-ranking clergymen and local priests who participate in the daily administration of the LCCCP. At the top is the Archbishop, the liaison between the "Louisiana Province" and Rome; he represents the LCCCP but has no jurisdiction over the dioceses. The Bishops act as the LCCCP executive officers and each presides over a diocese. They are surrounded by core members of their upper administration (known as the Curia). The non-administrative members are the "secular" priests (also called "diocesan" priests) and the "religious" priests who belong to an order (such as the Jesuits, Dominicans, Josephites, etc.) under the authority of the Bishop, who appoints them to a parish. (Official Catholic Directory 2004)

2 Resources used in this study

Perhaps the most important LCCCP resources available to language scholars are its extensive, well-maintained, and searchable archive collections. The archival material that we selected for this study is the Sacramental Registers, which record the baptisms, marriages, and burials of individual practitioners

of the church parish. These important moments in the Catholic faith are cataloged in the form of separate textual entries rather than simply as lists of names. Each entry is usually handwritten and signed by the priest and the witnesses to the event. Depending on the style and handwriting of the priest, one register volume may cover ten years of local history while another may cover 50 years.

The study of the Louisiana Sacramental Registers is not without its ingrained problems, of course, as even a cursory look at them makes clear. There is not always a clear and easily-explicable language break in the registers; there is also the problem of abrupt language changes at the beginning of new pre-printed registers that appeared in some Louisiana churches at the turn of the twentieth century. While there are language changes in the Registers that can be attributed to the arrival of a new English-speaking priest, yet many others are initiated by new or long-time established French priests. Sometimes priests decide to switch from French to English at the beginning of a new year or when they start a new register. Many times there are simply no clues emanating from the registers to explain the change of practice.

Because of these silences in a series of records in which commentary is spare, it became clear in our research that LCCCP social constraints and the language attitudes of its membership must be taken into account if we wanted to elucidate not only the speed but the source of the language change. To do so, we turned into an additional LCCCP archival collection, its Antebellum Correspondence, which allowed us to flesh out these social constraints and attitudes only implied in the Registers.

Our hypothesis is that the language used in the Registers was a reflection not only of its status but also of the church's perception of its utility in the local communities and thus the pattern of language switching displayed by the Registers helps us understand better the spatial diffusion of language practices within and without the LCCCP. Accordingly, Sacramental Registers can shed light on the extent of collective bilingualism over time in Louisiana.

3 Language change within the LCCCP

Although switching the most critical records of the Catholic Church from French to English clearly reflected an important social change in Louisiana, significantly no top-down language policy was apparently ever issued by the LCCCP. There is no evidence from the literature about LCCCP, its internal reports, or the Antebellum Correspondence between the bishops and the local priests that a decree, ruling, or even guideline about language preference ever came from the local ordinary before or after the Civil War. Although

LCCCP is known for its conservatism, the upper ranks of the church understood that priests were often more in touch than the Archdiocese with the local practitioners. Language choice in Registers (as well as sermons) was a matter apparently left in the hands of the local pastors, who had a better understanding of the local congregation's needs. In this case, the need to defend the faith by using the locally preferred language trumped any conservatism on the part of Francophone priests. Letters from Archbishop Antoine Blanc at the end of his period of influence (1830-1860) show that he was no longer interested in hiring monolingual French priests, preferring bilingual pastors, and he often proposed sending away many local priests to learn English. Even in the old French-speaking parishes, English-speaking priests were needed to better serve new booming English-dominant towns, as indicated by several letters from local priests. What we can observe from the correspondence is not just the need for English speakers but the need for bilingualism, for fluent English as a second language. Yet the demand for English-speaking priests emphatically did not imply the suppression of the French language. This *laissez-faire* and accommodating language policy within LCCCP contrasts vividly with what happened at the state government level, where decrees about English-only language use were issued for the legal and education domains (e.g. the 1868 and 1921 constitutions).

Since we were looking for churches with a French-to-English switch in the Registers, we eliminated from our initial analysis two kinds of churches. First, no Catholic church established after 1900 has registers written in French with the exception of four churches, two in Lafourche parish, one in St. Landry, and one in St. Mary. We also removed from our sample the eighty-three churches with English records at the time of their foundation before 1900, leaving ninety churches where a switch occurred.

Table 1 shows the mean of language switch over time in Registers according to the diocese and the parish. It makes clear that most of the language changes in LCCCP registers happened at the turn of the twentieth century. Churches which belong today to the Archdiocese of New Orleans (or closely located around New Orleans) switched on average a decade earlier (1892) than the ones from the diocese of Baton Rouge (1906). Churches within the diocese of Lafayette maintained French records until 1915 and the diocese of Houma/Thibodaux switched in 1920, approximately twenty-eight years after New Orleans' switch. Figure 1 is a histogram that displays language shift during that time span. Several parishes changed their language practice at the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century but the majority shifted between 1900 and 1930. In fact, 46% of churches switched between 1880 and 1920. Most south Louisiana parishes which switched after the 1920s are located in the west (Iberia and St. Martin)

and in the south (Lafourche and St. James).

Geographical Scale		Switch Mean	
Louisiana (90)*		1906	
Archdiocese New Orleans (27)		1892	
Diocese Baton Rouge (25)		1906	
Diocese Lafayette (27)		1915	
Diocese Houma/Thibodeaux (11)		1920	
Parishes	Switch Mean	Parishes	Switch Mean
East Baton Rouge	One church 1863	St. John the Baptist (4)	1908
Orleans (11)	1884	Terrebonne (4)	1910
Ascension (2)	1887	St. Landry (4)	1911
Iberville (5)	1887	Lafayette (3)	1905
Jefferson (3)	1887	Acadia (5)	1916
Pointe Coupée (3)	1890	Assumption (6)	1919
St. Tammany (3)	1893	Vermilion (5)	1921
St. Charles	One church 1898	Iberia (3)	1923
St. Bernard	One church 1899	St. Martin (3)	1924
Plaquemine (4)	1900	Lafourche (7)	1926
W. Baton Rouge (2)	1901	St. James (5)	1930
St. Mary (4)	1906	Livingston	One church 1934
CHURCH RANGE: 1844-1954			

Table 1: Switch mean from French to English in Sacramental Registers in Louisiana, by dioceses and parishes. Numbers in parenthesis represent the number of churches investigated.

Perhaps the most important observation to be made here is that the average switch in Louisiana (1906) happened much later than would be expected (Figure 1). By and large, scholars who described the nineteenth-century language situation in Louisiana have described the shift to English as a very sudden event at the end of the Civil War, like the abolition of slavery. It has often been claimed or implied that French-speaking people stopped writing French and switched to English almost overnight. The evidence here suggests something different. No one will deny that important social changes in the wake of the Civil War conditioned the language choices local priests made. But even if we regard Reconstruction as the catalyst to English mono-

lingualism, the switch to English as the language practice by a majority of LCCCP priests took two more decades and, in some parishes, until World War II.

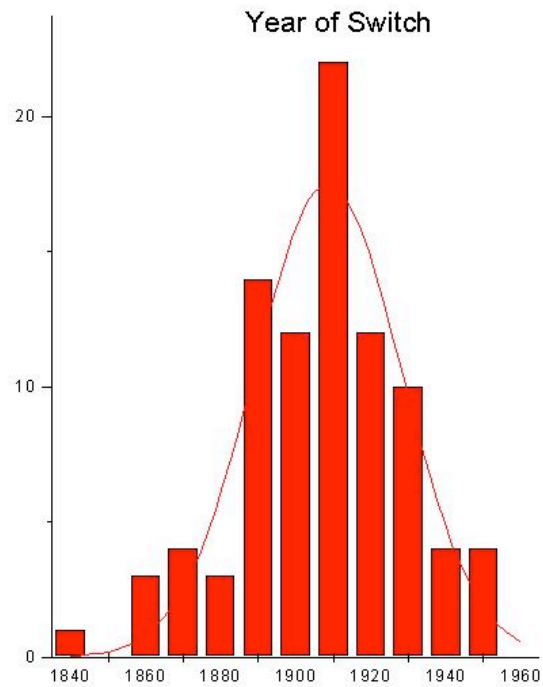


Figure 1. Periodization of language switch over time in ninety Catholic churches.

4 Spatial diffusion of language switch in Sacramental Registers

Let us now examine the dates of language shift according to the geographic location of the churches. To obtain a longitudinal display of the evolving language situation within LCCCP in south Louisiana during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we factor in the fifty-one churches with English records from their founding.

The origin and spatial spread of language change is charted below in six

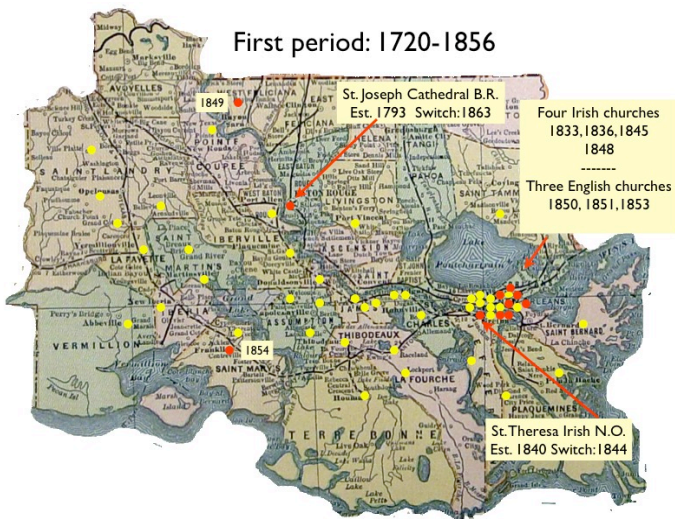
maps over six distinct time periods which naturally emerged from the overall distribution of all switches over time (French records in yellow; English ones in red¹). Before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, eleven Catholic churches were established. The first Catholic church with English records from our database is Saint Patrick's, an Irish church in New Orleans established in 1833 (Nolan 2000). Map 1 shows that writing Sacramental Registers in English was clearly a practice introduced by recently established Irish churches in New Orleans. From the start, all their Sacramental Registers were written in English. The only exception is St. Theresa of Avila, another Irish church, where the switch from French to English occurred four years after its establishment. This wave of new churches conforms to the new demographic importance of the Celtic population in Louisiana. If only by the sheer weight of numbers, the Irish became the first challengers to the French dominance of Catholicism in Louisiana. The number of English registers was subsequently increased by new English-language churches in the new towns in the northern part and the western part of south Louisiana.

Interestingly, the second period, illustrated by Map 2, is a consolidation of the French language practice. Although the number of new churches with English records, mainly in the northern part of south Louisiana, was on the rise during the Civil War and Reconstruction period, a total of 29 new churches used French in their Sacramental Registers, more than twice the number of English churches. Seven churches switch from French to English, three of them shortly after their foundation. The robust presence of French is particularly striking because it again suggests that an extensive period of bilingualism existed and was maintained even after mass English migration was over. During this period, LCCCP can be seen as truly bilingual. This result also implies that the loss of French as a prestige language or everyday language was by no means a forgone conclusion; the "triumph" of English was thus by no means a given but rather the result—at least in part—of sociolinguistic events which happened in the next decades.

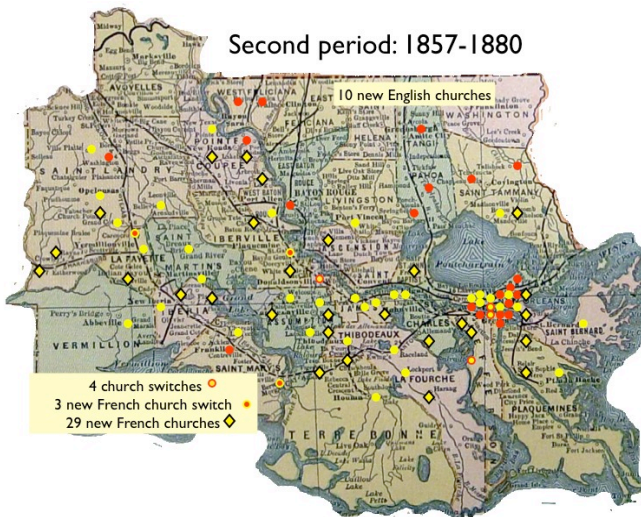
Map 3 visually displays the language switch in the Sacramental Registers at its full swing at the end of the nineteenth century when more than 22 church registers shifted to English. Two spatial directions can be observed: 1) more churches in New Orleans and in surrounded parishes adopt English and 2) a movement of English registers from the northern parishes to the southern ones is discernable. English churches are also established in predominantly French areas, most of them being Josephite churches, which were maintained by a Catholic Anglophone order invited by Archbishop

¹A version of this article with color maps can be downloaded from www.ling.upenn.edu/papers/pwpl.html

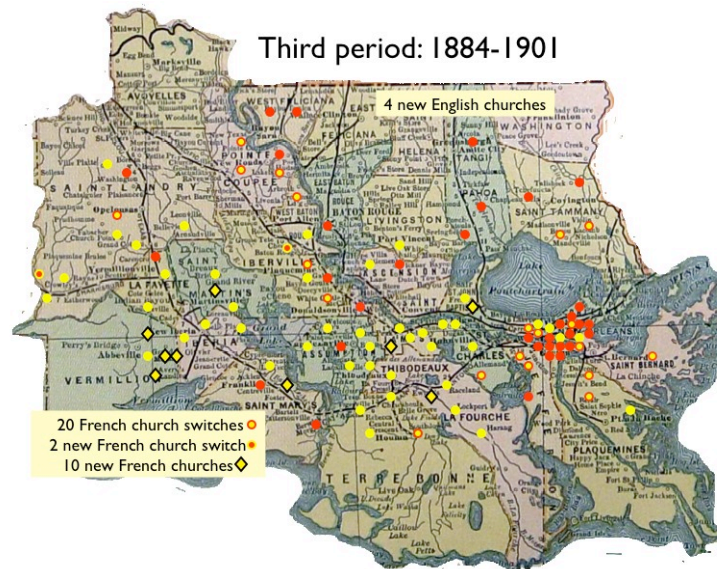
Janssens in 1888 specifically to serve the Black community in the Deep South (St. Augustine in New Roads in Pointe Coupée parish, Saint Benedict the Moor in Bertrandville in Assumption Parish).



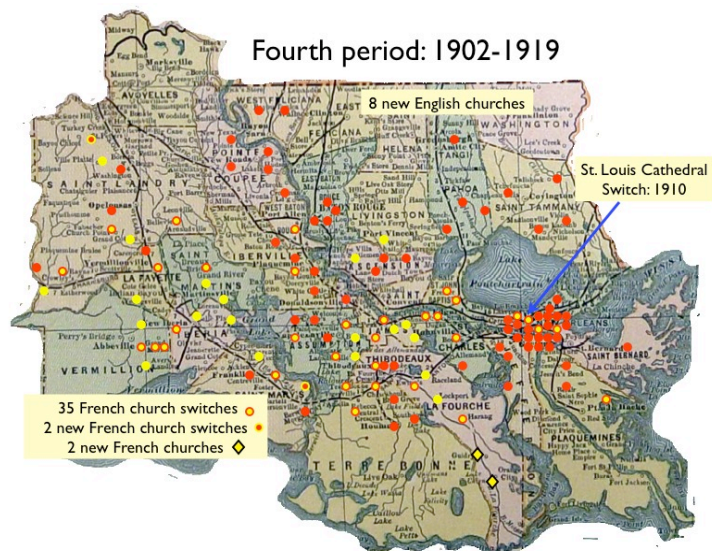
Map 1: First period: 1720-1856.



Map 2: Second period: 1857-1880.

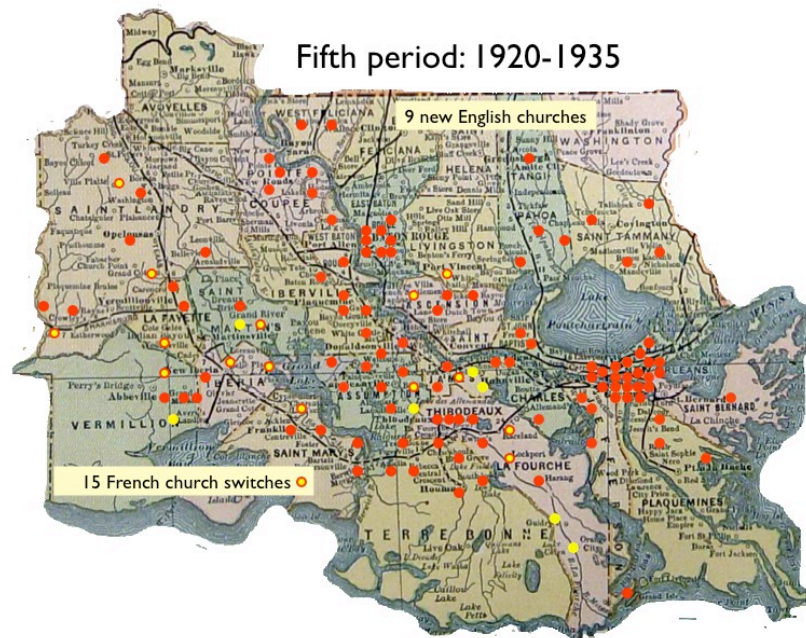


Map 3: Third period: 1884-1901.

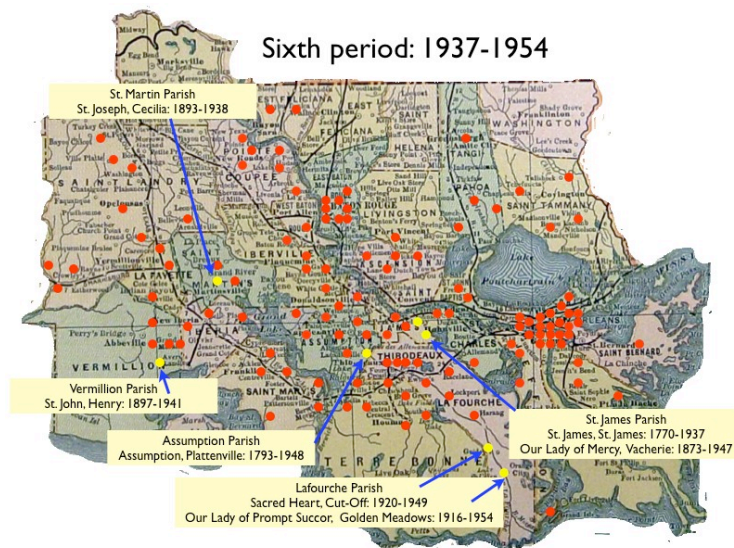


Map 4: Fourth period: 1902-1919.

In the next period (Map 4), the diffusion is even more accentuated; the shift around New Orleans is now completed and English registers are more numerous in southern parishes along the river as well as in the western area. Map 5 illustrates the last fifteen strongholds which switched before WWII and Map 6 displays the end of French as a language practice in LCCCP with seven last-standing churches clinging to French records during World War II, one in St. Martin parish, one in Vermillion parish, one in Assumption parish, two in St. James parish, and two in Lafourche parish.



Map 5: Fifth period: 1920-1935.



Map 6: Sixth period: 1937-1954.

5 The source of language change

We would like first to discuss the source of language change in Sacramental Registers. Since the “Irish Catholics” represent the most significant origins of non-French Catholics in Louisiana, they are the basic source of language change within the LCCCP. In other words, LCCCP as a French Catholic community of practice is thus the context for the formation of the English Catholic community of practice, and this Louisiana Irish Catholic community of practice is the locus of language change. Besides the clear implication of the numbers and distribution of English-language registers, two important historical factors emerge to support this hypothesis.

First, despite their on-going troubled history with the English language, the Irish very quickly and firmly established English as a language of power in New Orleans. While many Irish would have learned French, the prestige language and the language of business in early nineteenth-century New Orleans, as devout Catholics they would likely have been unhappy listening to sermons in French (Niehaus 1966/2004). Second, the Irish came to New Orleans with a critical legacy which none of the previous immigrant groups possessed, including the French: a tradition of political activism. Thus when they settled in Louisiana, their political tradition was intact, Catholicism suddenly became not only tolerated but dominant, and—at last combining

religion and politics openly and freely—they quickly yearned for their own church where “God spoke in English” (Niehaus 2004:429). The Irish Catholics had the aptitude, the will, and soon were numerous enough to begin affecting the LCCCP, which was a soft target since French Catholics in Louisiana came from cultures in which Catholicism was assumed and never seriously challenged (or not to the same extent as in Ireland).

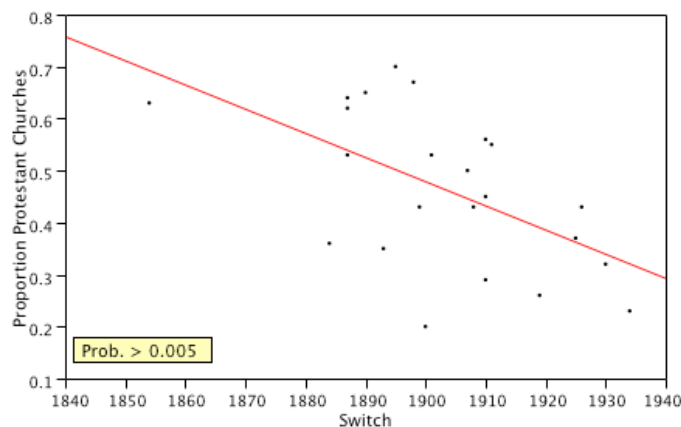
The effect of the Irish on LCCCP has at least two interesting aspects. First, they changed the LCCCP from within, without significant struggles. No battle for the souls was fought between the Irish and the French. However, they had their own set of ethnic practices and spoke the language of the new rulers. Their aspiration was to create a separate community and they succeeded in doing so by introducing and sustaining tension with the French Catholics. They changed the LCCCP because they saw themselves as being more true to the Catholic religion than their slack French co-religionists and—surprisingly—the French church higher-ups agreed and took their side on important issues (Doorley 2001). In this case, religious purity trumped ethnic affiliation.

6 Internal constraints for change: hints from other data

Let us now turn to the field of social geography for explanatory models that can elucidate the spatial trajectory of English records in LCCCP. Satisfactory spatial causes and motivations that we have found so far using regular statistical methodologies alone to determine the LCCCP language practice are few. The only significant geographical motivation is that highly populated cities (thirteen urban centers with more than 2,000 inhabitants) all switched earlier. LCCCP priests first started to write Sacramental Registers in English in high-density localities to accommodate the ever-growing number of English speakers as well as the French families of successful planters who became bilingual and even monolingual in English. If population density and distance fail to explain language shift, what social and perceptual constraints not accounted for in geographical models can condition language change in LCCCP?

Our results show that individual bilingual priests had an important impact on the language shift in record keeping and that many of them looked for easy transition times—new register, new calendar year, the practitioners’ first language—to make the switch to English. Additionally, population growth in urban centers, decreasing number of French-speakers requesting church services in their language, and new printed register formats available in English no doubt put pressure on several local priests to initiate a language shift.

The evidence also suggests, however, that the priests' overriding motivation for language change is rooted in important societal changes taking place in their locality as well as within LCCCP. At the turn of the twentieth century, that is, when most of the switches occurred, LCCCP was particularly concerned with the increasing number of Protestant institutions setting up all over south Louisiana as well as this other community of practice's influence over state affairs, not to mention English-speaking local practitioners. Did the increasing number of Protestant institutions in parishes once dominated by the LCCCP trigger the language change at a local level? The assumption is thus that a higher proportion of Protestant organizations in one location would have compelled local LCCCP priests to shift from French to English early on, not only to lure more parishioners to the Catholic faith but also to avoid losing the ever-increasing number of English-speaking Catholics of French origin. Using the 1890 statistical report, we calculated the proportion of Methodist, Southern Baptist, Colored Baptist, and Evangelical churches to the number of Catholic churches in each parish (U.S. Census 1890). Graph 2 shows the only significant correlation, that is between the proportional number of Protestant churches and the switch date from French to English. Simply put, the higher the proportion of Protestant churches, the earlier the parish switch. Conversely, we can observe that bilingual practices in LCCCP were preserved until World War II in several parishes where the number of Protestant churches and its level of competition were low.



Graph 2: Proportion of Protestant churches per parish correlated to the parish switch from French to English.

In conclusion, the source of LCCCP bilingualism was rooted in the massive migration of the Irish Catholics, who had challenged the idea of Mass being conducted in French and Sacramental Registers being written in French (or Latin). But the fate of LCCCP bilingualism was sealed by socio-geographical and attitudinal constraints at their zenith at the turn of the twentieth century. Among these constraints, the spatial establishment of Protestant organizations throughout south Louisiana was a critical influence on the spatial diffusion of language change in Sacramental Registers.

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