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Language labels and language use among Cajuns and Creoles in Louisiana

Language Labels and Language Use among Cajuns and Creoles in Louisiana

Thomas A. Klingler

1 Introduction

Francophone Louisiana has often been noted for the complexity of its linguistic situation. In addition to English, the dominant language both in status and number of speakers, observers have typically recognized three French-related varieties, commonly referred to in the literature as Colonial French, Cajun French, and Louisiana Creole.¹ Colonial French is a variety that differs little from Standard French in syntax and morphology, though depending on the speaker it may diverge from Standard French phonologically and lexically. The term “Colonial French” is something of a misnomer for this variety, since it did not become firmly implanted in Louisiana until the nineteenth century, after the end of the French and Spanish colonial regimes. For this reason I follow Picone (1998) in referring to it as Plantation Society French, a term that reflects its close association with Louisiana’s then-flourishing plantation economy and the sustained contact with France that it made possible.² What is typically referred to as Cajun French is best viewed as a collection of closely related varieties, the most widespread of which have their main source in the dialect or dialects brought to Louisiana by several waves of Acadian immigrants after their expulsion from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755. However, what can linguistically be considered Cajun French is also spoken by a number of groups who are not of Acadian descent, and for this reason I prefer to avoid the term “Cajun,” which strongly connotes a particular ethnic group of which the linguistic variety in question is not the exclusive domain. Instead, I will refer to this variety—or more accurately, this collection of varieties—as Louisiana Regional French (LRF hereafter). As for Louisiana Creole (LC hereafter), though its origin has been the subject of some debate, most would agree that it is a relatively young language that arose during the period of French colonial expansion through

¹ A complete inventory of the language varieties spoken in the region is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that such an inventory would have to include Native American languages, *Isleños* Spanish, and the languages of recent immigrant groups (such as Spanish, Vietnamese, Haitian Creole, and others).

² See also Speedy (1994:46-47) and Klingler (forthcoming) for discussions of the inappropriateness of this label.

contact that primarily involved speakers of French and enslaved peoples who spoke a variety of African languages. LC bears great affinity to the French-lexifier creoles of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, and it appears to resemble Haitian Creole most closely of all. Each of these varieties is itself characterized by considerable variation, and in some communities speakers of one variety have long lived in close contact with speakers of another, leading to extensive sharing of linguistic features and, at times, a blurring of linguistic boundaries. This is the case, in particular, in communities such as Vacherie, Lafayette, and Breaux Bridge, where both LRF and LC are spoken (see for example Marshall 1982, 1987 and Neumann 1985).

Attempts to untangle the many filaments that make up Louisiana's linguistic web are further complicated by the labels that francophone Louisianians use to identify what they speak.³ When they are asked to name their language variety (or varieties), speakers' most common responses include "Cajun," "Creole," and "French." The unsuspecting observer might assume that these labels refer to three distinct varieties, but this is not always the case. It is not uncommon, for example, for the label "French" to be applied to all three varieties mentioned above, as long as the context does not call for further specification. When there is a perceived need to make a distinction between Standard French and non-standard local varieties, however, Louisiana Francophones are more likely to insist that they do not speak "good French" (*le bon français*) and to call what they speak by other names, among them "broken French," "Cajun," and "Creole." If the label "French" can be misleading, one might suppose that "Cajun" and "Creole" would pose fewer problems of interpretation: the first ought logically to refer to what I am calling Louisiana Regional French, and the second to LC. Yet reports from ethnographers of French Louisiana suggest that these labels, too, must be interpreted with caution, since their use can vary with context and often correlates more closely with the ethnic identity of speakers than with the linguistic traits of the varieties they speak. According to Spitzer, for example, some "black Creoles" on Louisiana's prairies speak "Cajun" but call it "Creole," and similarly Le Menestrel, in her more recent study, notes that "...Even when they speak Cajun, black Creoles often designate their language as Creole. They thus make no distinction in their terminology between Cajun and Creole....Although [LRF and LC are] two distinct linguistic forms, it is the group to which the speaker belongs that determines the mean-

³ I am not the first to apply the metaphor of a web to the linguistic situation in Louisiana. See for example Hull (1988) and Eble (1993).

ing of the term used, and not the nature of the language" (Spitzer 1977:2, Le Menestrel 1999:97, my translation).⁴

In contrast to the interest that ethnographers have brought to the subject, linguists have paid relatively little attention to the imperfect match between language labels and language varieties in francophone Louisiana.⁵ Linguists' neglect of this problem is surprising, since the ethnographers' account of the situation could have profound implications for linguistic studies. If the ethnographers are right, then the names that Louisiana Francophones give to what they speak cannot be interpreted unambiguously and cannot, therefore, constitute a reliable basis for claims about the actual use of particular varieties; such claims must instead be based on the analysis of linguistic data.

My purpose here is to investigate, from a linguistic perspective, the ethnographers' assertions noted above by confronting Louisiana Francophones' use of language labels with an analysis of what they actually speak. The focus of my study is on self-described Cajuns and Creoles in St. Landry Parish, but a smaller set of data from Pointe Coupee Parish is included for comparative purposes. I first examine a group of linguistic variables that can be used to distinguish LRF from LC. I then present data for these variables gathered in interviews with Francophones in the parishes of Pointe Coupee and St. Landry, and discuss them in light of the labels used by these same subjects to refer to what they speak.

2 Linguistic Features of LRF and LC

For purposes of this study I have chosen to focus on a set of three linguistic variables, each of which has at least two variants, one strongly associated with LC and another strongly associated with LRF as these varieties have been described in the literature.⁶ The variables I have chosen are not the

⁴ « Or, même lorsqu'ils parlent cadien, les Créoles noirs désignent souvent leur langue comme du créole. Ils n'effectuent alors aucune distinction dans leur terminologie entre le cadien le créole... Bien qu'il s'agisse de deux formes linguistiques distinctes, c'est le groupe d'appartenance du locuteur qui détermine le sens du terme employé, et non la nature de la langue. »

⁵ Some linguists have, however, investigated the ways in which language use crosses lines of ethnicity. Tentchoff (1977), Neumann (1984), and Klingler (1998, forthcoming) examine LC as spoken by whites, and Tentchoff (1977) also includes data from black speakers of LRF in her study.

⁶ For LC, see for example Mercier (1880), Lane (1935), Neumann (1985), and Valdman and Klingler (1997). For LRF see Conwell and Juilland (1963), Guilbeau

only ones that could be used—indeed, my data include several others—but among the available candidates these three have the advantage of being especially easy to discern and to interpret unambiguously in recorded speech.⁷ The three variables are (1) the first person singular subject pronoun; (2) the expression of perfect tense; and (3) the form of the verb ‘to have.’ These variables and the main variants that occur in the data are summarized in Table 1a. Table 1b illustrates the use of the variants in recordings of interviews with speakers of LRF and LC. To facilitate reading, each example is written first in the phonetic notation used in the *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole* (Valdman et al. 1998) and then in Standard French orthography, modified as necessary.

Linguistic variable	LC variants	LRF variants
1) 1 st sg. subject pronoun	<i>mo</i> (<i>mwen</i> , <i>m</i>)	<i>je</i> (<i>j</i> , <i>ch</i> , <i>s</i>)
2) Perfect tense	Bare verb	Aux. + past participle
3) Verb ‘to have’	<i>gen</i>	<i>avoir</i> (various forms)

Table 1a. Linguistic variables examined

Variable	English cue	LC	LRF
1	<i>I have five dollars</i>	<i>Mo gen senk pyas / Mo gain cinq piastres</i>	<i>Je senk pyas / J'ai cinq piastres</i>
2	<i>They sold him their car</i>	<i>Ye van li ye oto / Yé vand li yé auto</i>	<i>Il on vundu son char / Ils l'ont vendu son char</i>
3	<i>I have five dollars</i>	<i>Mo gen senk pyas / Mo gain cinq piastres</i>	<i>Je senk pyas / J'ai cinq piastres</i>

Table 1b. Examples of variants in context.

To demonstrate the strong association of the variants in the second column of Table 1a with LC, Tables 2a-2c summarize data on the occurrence of these variables in excerpts of conversational interviews I conducted several years ago with five speakers, three black and two white, in Pointe Coupee

(1950), Oukada (1977), Smith (1994), Stäbler (1995a, b), and Papen and Rottet (1997).

⁷ An example of a variable that is less easy to interpret unambiguously is the 3 sg. masc. subject pronoun. The full forms of the variants are [il] in LRF and [li] in LC. However, [il] frequently loses its final consonant to become [i], while [li] may lose its initial consonant, resulting in the identical form [i].

Parish, where LC is spoken to the virtual exclusion of LRF. The columns showing percentages of LC variants are highlighted.

	je		mo		Zero	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Black (N=3)	0	0	127	98.4	2	1.6
White (N=2)	0	0	168	100	0	0

Table 2a. 1 sg. subject. Speakers from Pointe Coupee Parish

	V+PP		Bare V	
	N	%	N	%
Black (N=3)	0	0	79	100
White (N=2)	1	0.9	110	99.1

Table 2b. Perfect. Speakers from Pointe Coupee Parish

	avoir (eu)		gen	
	N	%	N	%
Black (N=3)	0	0	31	100
White (N=2)	5	10.4	32	86.5

Table 2c. 'Have.' Speakers from Pointe Coupee Parish

As is apparent from these tables, the LC variant predominates for all three variables among black and white speakers alike, representing nearly 100 percent of tokens for the 1 sg. pronoun and the perfect tense, and 86.5 percent for the verb 'to have.' For this variable, all five instances of a variant related to *avoir* in fact took the form *eu* [y], a past tense form identical to the French past participle and singular simple past forms of this verb. While this form is less basilectal than its semantic equivalent *te gen*, it does occasionally occur in the LC of black speakers in Pointe Coupee (Klingler forthcoming) and is common in the LC of Breaux Bridge (Neumann 1985:263-64).

What is evident from the above is that LC, linguistically defined, is spoken in Pointe Coupee Parish by members of both races. These data, though based on a small sample, serve as a convenient baseline against which to compare the data from St. Landry Parish, the main focus of this study, to which I now turn.

3 Methodology

The fieldwork for this portion of the study was conducted in Opelousas and nearby towns in 2001 by myself and the students enrolled in my course on French in Louisiana. The main objectives of the project were to determine the range of French-related varieties spoken by blacks and whites in and around the city of Opelousas and to explore the relationship between speakers' actual linguistic production, their ethnic identity, and the labels that they give to their speech. In particular, we wanted to know if the labels "Cajun" and "Creole," as used by speakers themselves, corresponded to distinct linguistic categories or whether different labels might be applied to the same language variety by different speakers, as claimed by Spitzer and Le Menestrel. Our focus was necessarily on residents of the area who were proficient in a local variety of French.

The linguistic data were gathered by means of a translation questionnaire that required speakers to translate a series of sentences, read aloud by the researchers, from English into whatever variety of French they spoke. The drawback of using a translation questionnaire, a procedure necessitated in this case by the students' lack of ability to speak LRF or LC, is that it creates a formal and highly artificial context for speech production. At the same time, however, it has the great advantages of producing a highly comparable set of data for each respondent and ensuring that tokens are recorded for each of the targeted variables.

From among the recorded translation interviews, we selected the clearest and most complete for analysis; 9 of these were from whites and 19 from persons of color. Among the latter group, all 19 identified themselves as Creoles and all who provided a name for their variety of French also called it "Creole" (four subjects did not provide a name). Of the 9 whites, all identified themselves as Cajuns and 7 also referred to their French as "Cajun" or "Cajun French"; one referred to her variety as "Louisiana French," and another referred to hers as "Louisiana French" and "French Creole" (it was unclear whether these were two names for the same variety or whether she claimed ability in two varieties).

4 Results

The data for the three variables that interest us here, summarized in Tables 3a-3c, show a strikingly different pattern from that just seen for Pointe Coupee Parish. Here, the LRF variant predominates for every variable and for both groups of speakers (the columns for LRF variants are highlighted).

However, black speakers show a somewhat higher percentage of LC variants for each variable, suggesting that the speech of blacks in the Opelousas area, while being closer to LRF than LC, nevertheless bears traces of greater influence from LC than does the speech of whites.

	je		mo		zero		Other	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Black (N=19)	221	83.4	24	9.1	12	4.5	8	3.0
White (N=9)	132	95.7	0	0	3	2.2	3	2.2

Table 3a. 1 sg. subject. Speakers in St. Landry Parish

	V+PP		Bare V	
	N	%	N	%
Black (N=19)	230	80.7	55	19.3
White (N=9)	142	90.4	15	9.6

Table 3b. Perfect. Speakers from St. Landry Parish

	avoir		gen	
	N	%	N	%
Black (N=19)	76	86.4	12	13.6
White (N=9)	48	100	0	0

Table 3c. 'Have.' Speakers in St. Landry Parish

A closer look at the data shows that the vast majority of LC variants used by this population were attributable to just four subjects, all of whom come from the towns of Leonville, Prairie Ville, and Arnaudville, situated on or near Bayou Little Teche, to the east and southeast of Opelousas. This fact is significant when one considers that the demographic heart of LC-speaking Louisiana lies just to the south of these towns, along Bayou Teche—the name given to the same waterway as it continues on its southward course through St. Martin Parish—in towns such as Cecilia, Breaux Bridge, Parks, and St. Martinville. It would appear, then, that this bayou, which was once flanked by plantations, forms an LC-speaking corridor that is more heavily Creole in St. Martin Parish and significantly less so along the bayou's non-navigable upper reaches in St. Landry Parish, though more LC-like features occur along the banks of Bayou Little Teche than in other parts of the parish.⁸ Tables 4a-4c again show the data for St. Landry Parish speakers, this

⁸ The idea that, within St. Landry Parish, more LC-like varieties are spoken to the east of Opelousas while LRF is spoken from Opelousas westward was first suggested to me by Etienne Viator and Barry Ancelet before the fieldwork for this study began.

time with those from the towns along Bayou Little Teche separated from the others. For the sake of consistency, the figures for two white speakers from Arnaudville, on Bayou Teche, have also been separated. The figures for the 15 black speakers from parts of St. Landry Parish other than Bayou Little Teche are highlighted.

	je		mo		Zero		Other	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Black (N=15)	174	89.2	2	1.0	11	5.6	8	4.1
Black, Teche (N=4)	47	67.1	22	31.4	1	1.4	0	0
White (N=7)	101	97.1	0	0	1	1	2	1.9
White, Teche (N=2)	31	91.2	0	0	2	5.9	1	2.9

Table 4a. 1 sg. subject. Speakers in St. Landry Parish, with those on the Little Teche separated

	V+PP		Bare V	
	N	%	N	%
Black (N=15)	199	90.9	20	9.1
Black, T (N=4)	16	32.7	33	67.3
White (N=7)	110	91.7	10	8.3
White, T (N=2)	32	86.5	5	13.5

Table 4b. Perfect. Speakers from St. Landry Parish, Little Teche speakers separated

	avoir		gen	
	N	%	N	%
Black (N=15)	60	100	0	0
Black, T (N=4)	11	47.8	12	52.2
White (N=7)	36	100	0	0
White, T (N=2)	12	100	0	0

Table 4c. 'Have.' Speakers in St. Landry Parish, Little Teche speakers separated

As these tables show, the proportion of LC variants among black speakers drops dramatically for most variables when speakers from the Bayou

It was also discussed by Spitzer (1986:70-71, 151, 164, 175-76, 181). This insight, which the results of this study confirm, was instrumental in focusing my attention on the relationship between geography and language variation within St. Landry Parish.

Little Teche area are removed, greatly reducing the differences between the speech of whites and blacks in St. Landry Parish.

5 Discussion

The data from St. Landry and Pointe Coupee Parishes provide confirmation of ethnographers' claims about the variable use of language labels in Louisiana and about the complex relationship between these labels, ethnicity, and language use. In particular, the data show that, for the areas under study, the choice of a language label has more to do with ethnicity than with the nature of the language variety spoken: Francophones of color refer to their French-related variety as Creole because that is the ethnonym they apply to themselves, just as white Francophones who call themselves Cajuns also tend to apply this same label to the type of French they speak.⁹ The use of a particular language variety, on the other hand, is closely tied to geographical location. In Pointe Coupee Parish, whites and blacks alike speak LC, whereas in St. Landry Parish, LRF appears to be more common among speakers of both ethnic groups. It seems, however, that a further geographical distinction must be made within St. Landry Parish, since the data, though limited in quantity, show blacks along the Bayou Little Teche using a higher frequency of LC-like features in their speech than those on the prairies to the west of the Bayou, whose use of the variables examined here is virtually identical to that of their Cajun neighbors.

The highly variable use of language labels described by ethnographers, and confirmed by the data examined here, demonstrates that such labels cannot be relied upon to yield an accurate picture of the language situation in Louisiana. This is one reason why it is necessary to exercise caution in interpreting U.S. Census data on language use. In its tabulations from the 1990 census, the Bureau of the Census distinguished three categories of French-related varieties in Louisiana: "Cajun," with 27,613 speakers, "French," with 227,717 speakers, and "French Creole," with 6,310 speakers (U.S. Department of Commerce 1990: Table 24). As should be apparent from the above discussion, there is reason to believe that many of the 227,717 speakers of "French" simply used this generic label to refer to the varieties that I am here

⁹ The use of language labels is not as strictly tied to that of ethnonyms among whites in Pointe Coupee Parish. While most white Francophones consider themselves Cajuns and are likely to refer to their language as "Cajun" in some contexts, all with whom I have spoken also use and accept the term "Creole" in reference to what they speak. In contrast, I have never heard blacks in Pointe Coupee apply the term "Cajun" either to themselves or to their language.

calling LRF and LC. Yet, in an instructive example of the danger of taking language labels at face value, Dubois (1998) and Dubois and Melançon (2000) employ an overly specific interpretation of those used by the Census Bureau that leads them to make some questionable claims about the language situation in Louisiana. Most surprisingly, Dubois and Melançon interpret the Census Bureau's "French" rubric to refer to "Standard French," such that one of the tables in their coauthored article shows that in 1990 there were 227,755 people claiming to speak "Standard French" in Louisiana (2000:246 Table 1).¹⁰ This is a highly suspect interpretation, and there can be little justification for revising the Census Bureau's label in this way. Louisiana Francophones virtually never use the term "Standard French" to refer to their own speech—indeed I do not recall ever having heard it in the course of interviews with Louisiana Francophones—and, as just noted, neither did the Bureau of the Census use the label in any of its tabulations.¹¹ To be sure, there are Louisianans who do speak Standard French, either because they are originally from a francophone region where the standard is in widespread use, or because they learned French in school. But there is no reason to suppose that speakers of this variety constitute a majority of the 227,775 persons who claimed to use "French" in the home.

More germane to the present discussion are the conclusions that Dubois (1998) and Dubois and Melançon (2000) draw from the census figures for speakers of "Cajun" and "French Creole." Noting in her 1998 study that only "9.6% of individuals (607 of 6,310) claiming to speak Creole French are of Caucasian origin, while 4% (1,167 of 37,613) of individuals claiming to speak Cajun French are African-American," (1998:335 n. 1, my translation), Dubois concludes that:

For now, faced with a lack of solid information proving the contrary, the surest and most objective hypothesis is that, on the linguistic level, distinct varieties of Cajun and Creole exist, that this distinction reflects an ethnic correlation—89% of individuals speaking Creole are African American; 94% of those speaking Cajun are white—and that the number of speakers using a mixture of the two

¹⁰ It is not clear why Dubois' and Melançon's figure for speakers of "Standard French" differs slightly (by 33) from that found in other sources for Census Bureau tabulations, which show a total of 227, 717 speakers of "French." Their figures come from special tabulations that they requested from the U.S. Census Bureau rather than from published census reports, and it is possible that this is the source of the discrepancy (Dubois and Melançon 2000:256 n. 10).

¹¹ Rosalind Bruno, Education and Social Stratification Branch, Population Division of the Bureau of the Census (personal communication, March 26, 2002).

varieties is small, if one excludes borrowing and codeswitching phenomena" (1998:336, my translation).¹²

The data from Pointe Coupee and St. Landry Parishes show that it is indeed possible to posit Cajun French (which I call LRF) and LC as two distinct language varieties. At the same time, however, they cast doubt on the correlation between ethnicity and the use of one or the other variety that Dubois asserts on the basis of census data. Although she states that 89 percent of Creole speakers are African American while 94 percent of Cajun speakers are white, the census figures in fact show these percentages for blacks and whites who *label* their speech as "Creole" or "Cajun." As we have seen, however, these labels are not a reliable indicator of which variety speakers actually use, if these varieties are defined linguistically rather than ethnically.

Using the same census data, Dubois and Melançon (2000:247) go a step further, challenging previous claims about the absence of a link between race and the use of LC in Louisiana: "It is apparent that Creole French is still used in Louisiana, and that it is linked to race, contrary to what other researchers have claimed (Chaudenson 1979, Neumann 1985)" (247). But again, we know that what the census figures show in reality is a link between race and the use of the term Creole as a language label; they tell us little about the relationship between race and the use of particular French-related varieties. Neumann's claim that the use of LC is not linked to race in Louisiana is based on her observation that LC is the first language of substantial numbers of whites as well as blacks, a circumstance that distinguishes Louisiana from some other creole-speaking societies where there is a much stronger correlation between the use of the local creole and membership in a particular racial group.¹³ Like the findings of this study, those of Neumann

¹² « Dans l'immédiat, face au manque d'information solide prouvant le contraire, l'hypothèse la plus objective et sûre est, qu'au niveau linguistique, des variétés distinctes de créole et de cadien existent, que cette distinction reflète une corrélation ethnique—89% des individus parlant créole sont afro-américains ; 94% de ceux qui parlent cadien sont blancs—et que le nombre de locuteurs utilisant un mélange des deux variétés est peu nombreux, si l'on exclut les phénomènes d'emprunt et de changement de code. »

¹³ Neumann notes that "the use of Creole in Louisiana is not linked to race as in most other creole-speaking territories except Réunion and Saint Barthélemy"; she further observes "the absence of a tight link (*un lien étroit*) between the use of Creole and ethnic membership in Louisiana" (1985:22, 40, my translation). Neumann also cites previous research by Haas (1980:28) and Tentchoff (1977:2) supporting the claim that the use of LC is not strictly linked to ethnicity in Louisiana. I was

and others she cites (e.g., Haas 1980 and Tentchoff 1977) are based on linguistic data collected in the field, and it hardly seems warranted to challenge them, as Dubois and Melançon do, on the basis of census data that at best give us highly ambiguous information about actual language use.

Following their discussion of census data, Dubois and Melançon go on to present the results of their own study of Creole identity, based on a survey of African Americans in Opelousas and Breaux Bridge. Part of their analysis involved dividing their sample into four groups defined by language ability and ancestry:

(a) Individuals who speak Creole French fluently and have Creole French ancestors (parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc.)

(b) Individuals who speak Creole French but not fluently, and have Creole French ancestors.

(c) Individuals who speak only English and have Creole French ancestors.

(d) Individuals who speak only English and do not have Creole French ancestors (2000:249).

As with the census, however, language use in their survey was determined not by linguistic analysis but by self-reporting on the part of respondents. Given what we have seen thus far, it should be evident that, while these self-reports may tell us something about subjects' use of a local French-related variety, they do not necessarily tell us about their ability to speak LC *per se*. Indeed, in light of the data seen earlier from St. Landry Parish, it is possible that many, if not most, of Dubois' and Melançon's 60 respondents from the Opelousas area claiming some ability to speak "Creole French" in fact spoke something linguistically closer to LRF.

6 Conclusion

These examples from two recent sociolinguistic studies illustrate the hazards of relying on the names that Louisiana Francophones give to what they speak in order to draw conclusions about their linguistic behavior. Understanding the complex relationship between ethnicity, language labels, and language use is one of the essential tasks of untangling the web of Louisiana's linguistic situation. Fortunately, linguists can seek help in this endeavor from the

unable to find in Chaudenson (1979) any treatment of the relationship between language and ethnicity in Louisiana (Dubois and Melançon do not indicate a page number for their citation of Neumann's and Chaudenson's work).

insights of ethnographers who have an in-depth knowledge of Louisiana's francophone communities. The data I have presented lend support to the ethnographers' claims that the use of language labels is highly variable and often has more to do with ethnic identity than language use. Any claims about the use of a particular variety must therefore be based on the analysis of linguistic data, not merely on subjects' self-reporting of what they speak.

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