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Le Français in Louisiana: A Struggle For Identity

El francés en Luisiana: Una lucha por la identidad

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ABSTRACT

In the early 20th century, particular efforts were made by schools to rid ethnic groups of their own cultural traditions. The Cajuns of Louisiana were victims of these efforts. With the passage of a law in 1921 prohibiting the use of French in public schools, many Cajuns were assimilated into the mainstream Anglo-Saxon culture. Today, thanks to the efforts of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (Codofil), French language instruction is flourishing as many schools are even embracing French immersion programs where most of the courses are taught in French. The purpose of this paper is to show the political struggle waged by this unique cultural group, in order to bring the French language back into the public schools after a 47-year absence.

RESUMEN

Al inicio del siglo XX, las escuelas se esforzaron por despojar a distintos grupos étnicos de sus tradiciones culturales. La comunidad "Cajun" de Louisiana fue víctima de tales esfuerzos. Cuando se aprobó una ley en 1921, la cual prohibía el uso del francés en las escuelas públicas, muchos miembros de esta comunidad fueron asimilados a la cultura anglosajona dominante. Hoy en día, gracias a esfuerzos del Consejo para el Desarrollo del Francés en Louisiana (Codofil), florece la enseñanza en lengua francesa, e inclusive, muchas escuelas contemplan programas de inmersión en francés en los cuales la mayoría de los cursos se imparten en francés. El objetivo de este ensayo es el de mostrar la lucha política librada por este grupo cultural único para reinstaurar la lengua francesa en el sistema de educación público después de una ausencia de 47 años.

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Introduction

From the time of the Louisiana Purchase until the 1970s, Cajuns and other French-speaking peoples of rural Louisiana were held in low esteem by their fellow statesmen. Though once the primary language of communication, their mother tongue, French, was banned in public schools after the passage of a law in 1921. It was also restricted in the workplace and in government. This decision was influenced by the dominant political ideology of the times which stressed the forcible Americanization of non-Angle Saxon ethnic groups throughout the country. In order to discourage the use of Cajun French, school children, working people, and others were heavily penalized for using the language considered "ignorant French" (Landreneau, 1989, p. iii).

On the verge of extinction, the French language has undergone a resurgence thanks to the vision and initiative of former U.S. Congressman James Domengeaux. In 1968, while a multicultural sentiment was reforming the public schools throughout the country, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (Codofil) was created by the state of Louisiana, adopting the slogan, "l'école a détruit le français; l'école doit le restaurer," (school destroyed French; school must restore it). Hence, began an ambitious program aimed at reviving the French language and culture in Louisiana. With education being the main focal point,

this linguistic and cultural revival involved not only government officials from Louisiana, but also international intervention notably from the government of Quebec, Canada, and the president of France.

The purpose of this paper is to show the political struggle waged by this unique cultural group, in order to bring the French language back into the public schools after a 47-year absence. Just as the suppression of French coincided with a general attitude of assimilation in American schools, the recent change in attitude towards the use of French in schools comes at a time when multiculturalism has become a popular theme in public schools.

Today, French language instruction is regaining ground as many schools are even embracing French immersion programs where most of the courses are taught in French. But the success of these programs is not without a new concern: English-only proponents throughout the country who wish to eradicate programs taught in a language other than English.

History

Through the misfortunes of colonial wars and the destinies of history, the state of Louisiana became the principal haven of refuge to the exiled French inhabitants of Nova Scotia. This exile was affected in 1755, and during the next ten years streams of these unfortunate people flowed

from time to time into Louisiana, where they were warmly received because of the natural ties of race, religion, and nationality held in common from the mother country of France (Stephens, 1935, p. 397).

Originally established as a French colony in 1699, Louisiana became part of the United States after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Yet for a long time the French language remained a major means of communication. Originally used by creoles, descendants of the colonial settlers, the French language was now being reinforced by the new Acadian settlers from Canada (Ancelet, 1998, p. 345).

But in the twentieth century the legal status of the French language changed. While earlier constitutions had recognized French as an official language of the state, the Louisiana state constitution of 1921, Article 12, Section 12, established English as the sole language of instruction. It was generally believed that legislators banned French from public schools in the state constitution for fear that bilingualism would hurt the state economically (Ancelet, 1988, p. 345; Yardley, 1995, p. 14; Boulard, 1993, p. 7). When officials compared illiterate figures between French Louisiana and the rest of the state, they were reassured that education among French-speakers in Louisiana was retarded due to the natural cause of the difference in language between them and the English-speakers in the rest of the United States (Stephens, 1935, p. 398).

Thus, a battle was waged against the French language. "I was sent home on my first day of school to write 200 times 'I must not speak French on the school grounds!'" recalls one native of the area (Andersson & Bayer, 1970, pp. 173-174). Another resident, now in his mid-80s, remembers the consequences of using French in school. "I was put on my knees in the hallway at school on grains of corn because I spoke French in the playground and got caught...French was viewed as a language spoken by ignorant people" (Yardley, 1995, p. 14).

This same attitude was taken towards other ethnic groups. In 1918, Texas passed legislation with stricter requirements for the use of English. Directed towards the increasing use of Spanish, the legislation made it a criminal offense to use any language but English in the schools. In addition, laws were passed requiring that all school personnel, including teachers, principals, custodians, and school board members, use only English when conducting school business (Spring, 1997, p. 85).

With regards to Native Americans, the assimilation process began much earlier. For example, Patricia Graham (1995) explained that the 1884 Lake Mohank Conference resolved that, "the Indian must have a knowledge of English, that he may associate with his neighbors and transact business as they do." Graham went on to say "assimilation into American Society or, as some would argue, annihilation of family culture characterized

the principal mission of schooling in America during the early decades of the century." (pp. 12-13)

A change of tide

Then in the late 1940s, the tide seemed to turn. Cajun soldiers in France during World War II had discovered that the language and culture they had been told to forget made them invaluable as interpreters and made surviving generally easier. In commemoration of their contribution to the war effort, the Louisiana Public Broadcasting network premiered the documentary film "Mon Cher Camarade" in December 2008. The documentary tells the story – never before told – of the French-speaking Cajun soldiers in WWII. Hundreds of French-Louisiana Cajuns served as interpreters for their field commanders and several of them were secret agents who passed as locals to work with the French underground. According to historian Carl A. Brasseaux, professor at University of Louisiana in Lafayette, "Cajun translators were as important to the American war effort as the much acclaimed Native American 'Code Talkers;' yet, the Cajun translators' contributions have been entirely ignored." (Louisiana, 2008)

After the war, returning GIs, aching from foreign wars in faraway places, now were returning to their own culture. Dance halls throughout South Louisiana once again resonated with the familiar grassroots sounds of Cajun music. The Cajun cultural

revival was championed by political leaders like Dudley LeBlanc, a strong supporter of Acadian ethnicity since the 1930s. He used the 1955 bicentennial of the Acadian exile as a rallying point for the revitalization of ethnicity among Cajuns. Yet, more serious efforts would be necessary to preserve the French language, a cornerstone of the cultural foundation which was eroding at an alarming pace (Ancelet, 1998, p. 345). But there was hope as the melting pot model of assimilation was increasingly seen in negative terms throughout the country. In the 1960s, a cultural pluralism ideology and multiculturalism were now being discussed which complemented the growing political movements of antidiscrimination (Ueda, 1995, p. 116). The idea of multiculturalism in American schools opened the way for a Cajun cultural renaissance in Louisiana.

In 1967, a first step was taken when the Louisiana legislature passed Senate Resolution 64, which endorsed a closer relationship with Canada and its provinces. This move provided the legal and inspirational basis for further measures as French-speaking Canadians were engaged in a serious battle to protect their beloved language (Andersson & Boyer, 1998, p. 175). Then in 1968, the state of Louisiana officially sanctioned the Cajun cultural revival with the creation of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (Codofil). Former U.S. Congressman James Domengeaux, a believer in multiculturalism, was its founder

and first chairman (La.R.S 25:651 et seq.) (Ancelet, 1988, pp. 345-346). In addition, the Louisiana Legislature unanimously proclaimed the following laws:

- a) Foreseeing the teaching of French in the first 5 years of elementary school, and three years in high school (Act 408).
- b) Requiring that universities and colleges train qualified teachers in elementary French (Act 458).
- c) Recognizing the French language as official and authorizing publication of legal notices in French (Act 256).
- d) Authorizing the establishment of a non-profit television station (to promote local culture) (Act 458) (Domengeaux, 1972, p. 6).

Before the creation of Codofil and the passing of these reforms, no pupils were studying French in the elementary schools and very few in the private and parochial schools in Louisiana (E. Hubert, 1974, p. 5419). According to the reforms, the starting date of the implementation of French in Louisiana schools was to be no later than the 1972-73 school year. This of course did not exclude the use of English in the class and any parish or city school board could request to be excluded from the requirements of Act 408, and requests for exclusions were not to be denied. The Bill was signed by governor John H. McKeithen on December 27, 1968 (Andersson & Boyer, 1980, p. 175).

Due to the long absence of French instruction in Louisiana there was a shortage of French teachers. To resolve this problem, Codofil opted to recruit teachers from France, Belgium, and Quebec. The Quebec government, in order to work more closely with Codofil, opened an office in Lafayette in 1969. At the same time a separatist movement was brewing in Quebec. The Quebec government's first delegate to Louisiana was Leo LeBlanc, a bilingual Acadian married to an American. LeBlanc collaborated closely with Codofil personnel in forming policy and strategies for the Louisiana French movement between 1968 and 1972. He also worked closely with chairman Domengeaux to steer away from activities which might smack of separatism in the eyes of state and government officials (Ancelet, 1988, p. 347).

In 1972, during the Louisiana Teachers Association meeting, members officially recognized the courageous action of Codofil for its efforts in the renovation of French language teaching in Louisiana by voting the following resolution:

Be it resolved, that the Louisiana Teacher's Association recognize the contributions that some school boards and Codofil have made toward the promotion of bilingualism in the state of Louisiana and the rejuvenation of our pride in our French culture. (Domengeaux, 1972, p. 5).

In April 1972, during a conference of French states, incoming Governor Edwin Edwards expressed his support in a half-hour speech, all in French, in which he said: "if it concerns the French language in Louisiana, you will not have to stand in line in my office ... I will do everything I can to help the language live and prosper" (E. Hebert, 1974, p. 5419).

Governor Edwards did not wait long to seek additional help from outside sources. In July of 1972, Domengeaux accompanied a group of young Louisianans to France where they were to study French for three weeks at the Université Catholique d'Angers. During his stay, he had the chance to meet a number of prominent French people including the president himself, Georges Pompidou. Originally sent to deliver a letter from Governor Edwards, Domengeaux spoke with President Pompidou for almost 45 minutes. Here is what transpired between the two men in the words of Domengeaux (1974):

During our long conversation...M. Pompidou had interrogated me about the situation of French in Louisiana. He was openly interested in the drama of a population, having kept its language, its customs, and traditions for two centuries that was now having more and more difficulties. Being a good listener, he quickly understood what we wanted to do at Codofil because he shared our views and ambitions: he declared himself ready

to support our action with indispensable credits and exchanges to carry out the task (pp. 1-2).

Domengeaux went on to say how Pompidou adored his local accent and leaving behind the rigors of the formal language their conversation ended something like this:

- Mr. Pompidou, if ya don't help us, French is screwed in Louisiana.
- Mr. Domengeaux, I'll do all I can to help y'all.
- Mr. Pompidou, Louisiana's gonna help France also (pp. 1-2).
Although the first teachers from France arrived in 1970, totaling 39, this number augmented significantly in 1973-74 with a total of 233 teachers – 213 of them being from France and 20 of them from Quebec. They taught a total of 40,800 children in public elementary schools that year (M. Hebert, 1974, p. 93).

Grassroots Resistance

The mandate of Codofil, as a state agency, covered all of Louisiana, including the northern parishes where virtually no French was spoken. For this reason, Codofil was only able to press for the establishment of French as a secondary language in the elementary schools (Ancelet, 1988, p. 346). An act was passed in 1974 which authorized and encouraged the institution of French in schools, although it was not required. Domengeaux did succeed however in obtaining a more powerful act (La-

R.S. 17:273) under which French language instruction could be recognized by a petition signed by 25% of the heads of households in a given school district (Ancelet p. 346; Hillinger, 1990, p. 6; Jammes, 1975, pp. 65-66). It soon became clear, however, that due to lack of local support, this act was intended to be no more than a psychological weapon.

According to Ancelet (1988), despite its relative success on legal and political fronts, Codofil consistently found itself frustrated in its attempts to generate grassroots support among Cajuns (p. 346). Because of the melting pot phenomenon throughout the early 20th century, which successfully assimilated many French-speaking Cajuns into mainstream America, many Cajuns were leery of supporting such an ambitious program. They had been conditioned to relegate their language to a second class status and were careful not to speak it in public. And even when there was support, a conflict developed as to whether academic French or the local dialect should be taught in public schools.

Continued Success

In 1984, the state of Louisiana took an important initiative by ordering that all school districts begin teaching foreign languages in the 4th grade, moving up one grade a year until the program was in place, 4th through 8th, by 1988 (Lafayette, 1991, p. 41; Hillinger, 1990, p. 6). This was the first time in the history

of American teaching that a state required the learning of a language in a public elementary school (Lafayette p. 41). Although only seven of a total of sixty-six districts had implemented the program 100% by 1990, many others followed afterwards, though others still had a long way to go. Nonetheless, significant progress had been made, and in addition to the 220 foreign teachers, there were now 284 language instructors from Louisiana (Hillinger p. 6).

One of the popular slogans during the renaissance of the French language in Louisiana "parler français, c'est de l'argent dans ta poche" (speak French, its money in your pocket), has held true throughout southern Louisiana where foreign visitors from Europe and Canada have spent millions of tourist dollars. In Lafayette, street signs around the local courthouse and elsewhere are written in French (Personal observation, 2000). There are also radio and television programs in French. The nearby town of Erath approved a resolution in 1995 declaring itself officially bilingual in French and English (M. Hebert, 1974, p. 95; Yardley, 1991, p. 14). Due to the success of French language instruction in the schools and the general awareness of the importance of retaining French culture, in southern Louisiana, at the start of the 1995-96 school year, 13 different public schools in six parishes offered French immersion programs to more than 2,000 students who divide their day between French and English. More schools are expected

to offer the program next year (Yardley p. 14).

Present Situation

The French Minister of Education, the French Ambassador in the US, the Superintendent of the Louisiana Department of Education, the President of Codofil, the President of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the President of the Louisiana Public Broadcasting network gathered in Baton Rouge on October 25, 2008 for the signing of a 4-year cooperative renewal between France and the state of Louisiana. The France-Louisiana Cooperation Accords, established in 1978, were intended to preserve and advance the French culture in the state, while encouraging French to be spoken. The agreement is in three parts: elementary and secondary education, higher education and audio/visual. The education portions calls for France to provide native French speaking teachers, who will instruct foreign language classes and immersion programs at state schools. The higher-education aspect will explore cooperative research and exchange between universities. An audiovisual component further forged the relationship with Louisiana Public Broadcasting and the Consulate General of France in New Orleans to produce joint creations of content based in education and culture. Furthermore, the accord provides opportunities for scholarships, stu-

dent exchanges for employment and study abroad programs in French-speaking countries. "We recognize the impact and influence the French culture has had in Louisiana," Paul Pastorek, state superintendent of education, said. "From our food, music and architecture to our language and laws, our state is forever linked to France." (France, 2008; Harris, 2008)

With regards to K-12 school offerings of French, according to Codofil, in 2007-08 there were a total of 27 French Immersion programs in the public (26) and nonpublic (1) schools for a total of 2,833 students enrolled in the programs. The total Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) enrollments for grades 4-8 in French was 21,364, followed by Spanish with 13,525. Total enrollments in French language K-3 Special Programs was 12,092 (immersion programs included) and 2,833 in Spanish. Total enrollments for French in grades 9-12 was 18,934. Total Spanish language enrollments for the same grades was 44,217, with over half enrolled at level I (23,835).

Conclusion

In the early 20th century, particular efforts were made by schools to rid ethnic groups of their own cultural traditions. The Cajuns of Louisiana were victims of these efforts. With the passage of a law in 1921 prohibiting the use of French in public schools,

many Cajuns were assimilated into the mainstream Anglo-Saxon culture. But others were geared for battle to regain their culture and after years of struggle, the proponents of French culture and language seem to be enjoying a relative success. However, at the same time French immersion programs and French language status in Louisiana have made considerable advances, English-only advocates are calling for making English the nation's official language. Although the primary target of the English-only movement is large Hispanic communities, the State of Louisiana and the French immersion programs may eventually come under attack. Many of these advocates argue that a growing state of pluralism and multiculturalism can affect the future integration of the children of immigrants and other ethnic groups in the United States. By promoting different cultures and languages in the schools, students may be encouraged to see themselves according to official identity categories, not as individual citizens whose ancestry is adventitious, but as Cajuns, Latinos, Africans, and Asians (Ueda, 1995, p. 128). These are some of the challenges faced by Cajuns today. However, for the time being, the use of the French language in schools in Louisiana, thanks to the struggle of Domengeaux and others who believed in multiculturalism, will continue to find its proper place.

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