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French Language in the Americas: Quebec, Acadia, and Louisiana

Katelyn Gross

The French language underwent many changes between the development of French from Latin, to Old French, and to Middle French. French would continue to develop inside of France thereafter, but the French language would also be exported to other parts of the world and those varieties of French would have their own characteristic changes.

French explorers and colonizers moved into the Americas, permanently settling what is today Quebec, many parts of Canada, and Louisiana in the United States. In this paper, I will focus on the linguistic differences between metropolitan France and French spoken in Quebec, Acadia, and Louisiana. These three clusters of French have extremely similar roots, and so are very similar to each other.

The French language that arrived in present-day Quebec, Canada, was brought with the French explorer Jacques Cartier in 1534, and was more concretely established starting in 1608, with the foundation of Quebec City by Samuel de Champlain; these are the historic roots that made the French of the 1600s from a certain region in France the brand of French that has become today the Quebec French dialect¹.

As for the history of the French language in Canadian regions east of Quebec, a region known as Acadia, French settlers came from France at around the same time as the settlers to Quebec, which means that these two areas, Quebec and Acadia, had two distinct linguistic histories. However, because both of these regions were settled by French-speakers, and these regions apparently interacted with each other after they were originally colonized, these two modes of French speaking probably borrowed some words and dialectical characteristics from

¹ Sonia Vaupot, "Particularités phonétiques et phonologiques du français parlé en Europe et au Québec," *Linguistica* 57, no. 1 (2017): 333.

each other over time, even if Quebec and Acadia remained somewhat distinct in terms of their French language dialect.

Les premiers colons français sont arrivés en Acadie en 1604 et les premières familles s’y sont installées en 1630. Celles-ci parlaient différentes variétés de français. En effet, selon Claude Poirier, les colons provenaient du nord-ouest, du centre, et surtout de l’ouest de la France (région de l’Aunis, du Poitou et de la Saintonge) [...]. Le français en France était alors à peine codifié; l’Édit de Villers-Cotterêts fut proclamé en 1539, l’Académie française fondée en 1634. La langue des premiers colons arrivés en Acadie portait des traits morphologiques et lexicaux propres à leurs régions respectives dont certains sont encore en usage aujourd’hui².

This citation demonstrates how the French of Acadia came from a specific region in France from a specific time, not that Acadian French was the same as metropolitan French today and developed its own characteristics separately from French in France. Although there have of course been some separate developments, the Acadian French at its base is a historical remnant of a variety of French from a certain region and time period in France. As for the standardization of French in France, at the time of colonization in Canada, the French language was distinctly its own language, far more developed than its ancestor, the Vulgar Latin, spoken widely and reinforced in a standard form by various texts in French.

Quoted in the article *La Construction des représentations linguistiques, le cas de l’Acadie*, Poirier says this about Acadian French:

Il ne peut, d’aucune façon, être considéré comme le continuateur direct d’un dialecte de France; l’acadien présente au contraire un ensemble de traits hérités de la grande région du Sud-Ouest du domaine d’oïl (notamment du Poitou et de la Saintonge). Ses caractéristiques phonétiques et morphologiques se rattachent, dans une large mesure, au français de jadis. L’acadien est donc une variété de français différente de celles qu’on trouve aujourd’hui en France et originale à maints égards par rapport au québécois avec lequel il est plus immédiatement apparenté³.

² Annette Boudreau, “La construction des représentations linguistiques, le cas de l’Acadie,” *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics / La revue canadienne de linguistique* 54, no. 3 (2009): 442.

³ Annette Boudreau, “La construction des représentations linguistiques, le cas de l’Acadie,” *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics / La revue canadienne de linguistique* 54, no. 3 (2009): 442.

From this citation, the idea is reinforced that although Acadian and Quebec French had geographically different beginnings, the two have influenced each other enough over time that they are more similar to each other than either of them is to French spoken in France today. This is probably mostly because these two varieties of French came from the same time period in France. Similarities between Acadian, Quebec, and metropolitan French may be due to cultural exchange or the “drift” concept seen in languages fundamentally similar to each other but in separate environments.

The Cajun dialect of French spoken in Louisiana is directly related to Acadian French. Politics and war influenced the development of this language. This citation describes what happened to the Acadians:

Expelled from their original lands by the British in the eighteenth century and subsequently only allowed to resettle in small groups, the Acadians today live in a number of geographically scattered communities which have remained isolated from each other and from the rest of the French-speaking world. The linguistic consequences of this situation make the Acadian speech community very different from that of Quebec, for example, in terms both of the language itself and of the sociolinguistic patterns which prevail⁴.

Settlers in Acadia were pushed south into the United States and into Louisiana and eventually became the French speakers of the South. These groups of French-speakers formed a significant culture and linguistic environment.

The data consist of written occurrences of *Cajun/cadien*, a derivative of *acadien* [...] which refers to the people and culture of Acadie, a region on the Canadian Atlantic coast. *Cajun/cadien* is now used to designate the group, language and culture of people assumed to descend from the Acadian exiles who settled in Louisiana after their deportation from Canada in 1755. A key word here is “assumed” because the definition of *Cajun/cadien* is still a knot of confusion despite a long presence in Louisiana and a surge of commercial and scholarly interest [...]. One issue is unanimously agreed upon: there would have been and there would be no Cajuns if Acadians had not settled in Louisiana between 1765 and 1785. The rest is a matter of debate⁵.

⁴ Karin Flikeid, “The Integration of Hypercorrect Forms into the Repertoire of an Acadian French Community: The Process and Its Built-In Limits,” *Language & Communication* 12, no. 3/4 (1992): 237.

⁵ Jacques Henry, “From ‘Acadian’ to ‘Cajun’ to ‘Cadien’: Ethnic Labelization and Construction of Identity,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17, no. 4 (1998): 30.

The Acadians who settled in Louisiana and became Cajuns must have a similar language to the French still spoken today in Acadia, although there may have been some characteristics that developed separately that distinguishes Cajun French from Acadian French. The Cajun dialect has also survived several centuries and is still spoken today despite being surrounded by a largely English-speaking populace, which makes its survival impressive.

These American dialects of French have certain characteristics that distinguish them from metropolitan French. The French of Quebec, or *français québécois*, differs, for example, from standard metropolitan French in the sound of the nasal vowels:

Les voyelles nasales, en français québécois, semblent moins nasalisées que celles du français standard [...]. La voyelle nasale postérieure [ɑ̃] est souvent réalisée en français québécois comme une voyelle antérieure nasalisée [ã], parfois légèrement fermée en [æ̃]. La prononciation avec [ã] est majoritaire, les mots en [ɛ̃] sont surtout touchés par la fermeture, tandis que les mots en [ɑ̃] et ceux en [ɑ̃], prononcés [æ̃], sont les moins touchés⁶.

French-speakers in metropolitan France will be the first to tell you that the Quebec French sounds very different from standard French. This explanation above provides a technical description of the differences heard between the *québécois* French and French spoken in France. Another trait of Quebec French is that it “ne connaît pas [...] de différences de longueur vocalique en syllabe ouverte phonologiquement pertinentes. Toutefois, en syllabe fermée, le [a] antérieur et le [ɑ] postérieur du franco-québécois s’opposent distinctement »⁷. One characteristic of Quebec French that speakers of metropolitan French would say is the biggest difference between the two regional varieties is that Quebec French sounds much more nasal, which is due to this phenomenon in the pronunciation: “En français québécois, comme en français standard, le son [ɥ] se prononce [y], séparant la syllabe en deux : *nuage* se prononce [ny.aʒ] et non [nɥaʒ]”⁸. This analysis of the language shows how perhaps the differences

⁶ Sonia Vaupot, “Particularités phonétiques et phonologiques du français parlé en Europe et au Québec,” *Linguistica* 57, no. 1 (2017): 333-334.

⁷ Sonia Vaupot, “Particularités phonétiques et phonologiques du français parlé en Europe et au Québec,” *Linguistica* 57, no. 1 (2017): 334.

⁸ Sonia Vaupot, “Particularités phonétiques et phonologiques du français parlé en Europe et au Québec,” *Linguistica* 57, no. 1 (2017): 335.

between Quebec and metropolitan French do not render the two groups into completely different languages—after all, they are still mutually intelligible—it does imply that Quebec French and metropolitan French may almost be two dialects rather than accents, although I do not think there is enough evidence to fully substantiate this claim.

However, even though Quebec French and metropolitan French are both French, there has been many differences in their developments due to historical and geographical factors already mentioned. Another characteristic that distinguishes one from the other is the difference in diphthongization.

Il semble que la diphtongaison soit plus présente en français québécois. En effet, les voyelles longues sont souvent réalisées comme des diphtongues, c'est-à-dire des voyelles dont le timbre change en cours d'émission. Ainsi, les voyelles longues [ɛ, a, o, ɔ, œ, œ̃, õ et ã] peuvent être réalisées diphtonguées en syllabe fermée accentuée : [a] dans *pâte* [pɑ̃t]~[pa:t] ; [o] dans *zone* [zɔ̃n]~[zo:n] ; [œ] dans *peur* [pœ̃ʁ]~[pœ:ʁ] ; [ø] dans *neutre* [noẽʁ]~[nø:ʁ]. Les voyelles brèves, [ɛ, a, ɔ et œ] peuvent aussi se diphtonguer quand elles sont allongées par les consonnes [ʁ] et [z] en syllabe accentuée : [ɛ] dans *père* [pæ̃ʁ]~[pɛ:ʁ] ; [ɔ] dans *fort* [fɔ̃ʁ]~[fɔ:ʁ]. Devant les sons [v] et [ʒ], les voyelles brèves sont allongées, mais ne se diphtonguent pas (p.ex., dans *fleuve* ou *loge*)⁹.

The pattern of diphthongization between Quebec French and French spoken in France is significant even though these are still the same recognizable language. These differences and others between these two varieties of French demonstrate the ways in which geographical and historical changes have manifested themselves in the production and development of these two forms of French.

The French spoken in Acadia, east of Quebec, has its own unique characteristics.

Le français acadien renvoie de façon générale aux variétés de français parlé dans les trois provinces maritimes, soit le Nouveau-Brunswick, l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard et la Nouvelle Écosse. Ce français, qui tire ses origines de la France du 17^e siècle, est habituellement décrit comme une langue très conservatrice, qui a maintenu, à des degrés divers, des traits dits archaïques. À titre d'exemples, sur le plan phonétique, on trouve l'ouïsme (*houmme* pour *homme*), la palatalisation (*tchoeur* pour *cœur* ou *djeule* pour *gueule*); sur le plan

⁹ Sonia Vaupot, "Particularités phonétiques et phonologiques du français parlé en Europe et au Québec," *Linguistica* 57, no. 1 (2017): 335.

morphologique, l'usage du suffixe en *-ont* ou en *-iont* à la 3^e personne pluriel, comme dans *ils chantont, ils chantiont* pour *ils chantent, ils chantaient*¹⁰.

Acadian French differs from Quebec French in especially the archaic way in which Acadian French is written. Some of these differences may directly affect the way in which the language itself is pronounced, making it somewhat difficult for someone who has studied standard metropolitan French to understand Acadian French without some practice and exposure first. With these examples, we also see how although the French in Acadia and in Quebec came from around the same time period, they differ a bit from each other either because of the different regions they came from in France or because of separate developments in either of these two language varieties.

Even more specifically among the Acadian French varieties, there is a type of Acadian French called *le chiac* that has its own particularities; “le chiac est une variété du français acadien qui se caractérise par l’intégration et la transformation, dans une matrice française, de formes lexicales, syntaxiques, morphologiques et phoniques de l’anglais »¹¹. Even though this particular variety of Acadian is not widely spoken, the language in itself is a good example for seeing how languages may evolve. For an example of how this language functions, we can analyze some common phrases in chiac that combine French and English words: *je viendrai back*, instead of standard French *je reviendrai* meaning “I will come back”; *c’est right bon*, meaning “it’s right good” instead of standard French *c’est tres bien* for “it’s very good”; *je te phonerai à soir*, instead of standard French *je t’appellerai ce soir* meaning “I will phone you tonight”—instead of using the literal verb *appeler* (“to call”) from French, and also saying “at night” instead of “this night” (*ce soir*), as is usually done in standard French; *embarque dans le*

¹⁰ Annette Boudreau, “La construction des représentations linguistiques, le cas de l’Acadie,” *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics / La revue canadienne de linguistique* 54, no. 3 (2009): 442-443.

¹¹ Annette Boudreau, “La construction des représentations linguistiques, le cas de l’Acadie,” *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics / La revue canadienne de linguistique* 54, no. 3 (2009): 443.

char or “embark in the car” as opposed to *aller en voiture* in standard French, meaning “to go by car”¹². These constructions are very different from a standard French perspective, but it is interesting to see how English and French have interacted in Acadia within this chiac variety to produce such unique constructions.

Characteristics of Cajun French are similar to Acadian French, since it is directly related to it, but Cajun French has also developed its own unique characteristics. One of the differences between these two varieties of French is even represented in the change of the name of this variety from Acadian to Cajun. “The introduction of the letters *j* or *g* accurately symbolizes the oft-noted shift in both Acadian and Cajun French from [d] to [dʒ] when followed by an open vowel [i]. Such a shift is found in *Dieu* [d̥ioe] pronounced [dʒoe], *diable* [diabl] pronounced [dʒab]”¹³. It is interesting to note that a shift like this can be documented between different dialects or accents even of the same language.

Louisiana is one of the U.S. states where there is a substantial concentration of Cajun French speakers. Today, however, in this region there are very few native French-speakers remaining. According to the US Census of 2000 (US Bureau of Census 2003), 1.8% of the population in the age-group 5–17 years and 5.5% of the population age 18 years or older are reported as speaking French at home¹⁴. Even though there is not a large population of French-speakers in Louisiana, there is recognition of French as an important historical and cultural force for the region.

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, there have been efforts to revitalize the use of French in Louisiana. Among these are the establishment, in 1968, of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), based in Lafayette. French was reinstated as a co-official language of the State of Louisiana. CODOFIL developed programs for French as a second language in public schools, as well as French immersion

¹² Annette Boudreau, “La construction des représentations linguistiques, le cas de l’Acadie,” *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics / La revue canadienne de linguistique* 54, no. 3 (2009): 443.

¹³ Jacques Henry, “From ‘Acadian’ to ‘Cajun’ to ‘Cadien’: Ethnic Labelization and Construction of Identity,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17, no. 4 (1998): 36.

¹⁴ Nicole Müller, “Aging with French: Observations from South Louisiana,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 24, no. 2 (2009): 146.

programs in elementary schools, importing teachers from French-speaking countries [...]. In addition, there is an increasing number of cultural activities that use French as their medium of communication (e.g. radio programs, festivals); the University of Louisiana at Lafayette offers courses in Cajun French [...]. These efforts [...], laudable though they are, have no discernible direct impact on the language practices and preferences of older generation French speakers¹⁵.

The attempts at making the French language relevant again to the Louisiana area is important for revitalizing these historic and cultural roots of the French language in this region, but, as this quote suggests, these programs cannot undo lost time of the past generations of French-speakers in Louisiana who have gradually been losing their language; if French is reinstated in Louisiana, it will be a significant move, but it will be an artificial reconstruction of keeping this language alive. Still, I think it is commendable to continue practicing this language as it pertains to an important historic and cultural story of the Louisiana area, which is a story that connects back to the Acadian migrants who settled in the area after being forced out of Canada many generations ago.

Another characteristic of Cajun French different from standard French is present in the pronunciation of /ɔ/ before the R and the L in Cajun French. Standard French at one time also had this characteristic, and it gradually changed in standard French, but Cajun French is standard French as it was at the time of American colonization, frozen from being separated from metropolitan French and developing instead its own characteristics over time.

Après la présentation des origines latines du /ɔ/ en français moderne et son parcours diachronique devant R et L du 16^e au 20^e siècle en France, nous retraçons la présence des variantes en français acadien au Canada et en français cadien en Louisiane. Nous montrerons que la variation linguistique entre [ɔ], [o] et [u] en français cadien est un héritage direct de l'état de la langue française au temps de la création de la colonie louisianaise¹⁶.

¹⁵ Nicole Müller, "Aging with French: Observations from South Louisiana," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 24, no. 2 (2009): 146-147.

¹⁶ Sylvie Dubois and Carole Salmon, "Étude diachronique du /ɔ/ devant R et L en français cadien dans le parler de quatre générations de femmes cadiennes," *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 9, no. 2 (2006): 194.

This particular French region's accent became where the Cajun accent came from, settlers from this region in France settling into the Americas and not having contact with any other French speakers outside of their community probably for a few generations. These factors "froze" this language until it became the Cajun French still spoken today. Meanwhile, in France, this same language was changing. In the 18th century, standardization slowly started in France¹⁷.

Metropolitan French continued to evolve into what it is today, whereas Cajun French kept its past qualities relatively intact by comparison.

This same phenomenon can be seen with the Acadian French in Canada that was also the result of a past form of metropolitan French from a specific region in France freezing in its form after settlers to America were separated from other French speakers for a period of time. One difference between Acadian French and modern metropolitan French is even seen in the conjugation of a common verb in the present tense. For the verb *parler* ("to speak") in the present tense, for example: in standard French, the third person plural form is *parlent*, but in Acadian French, it is *parlont*¹⁸. For the verb *dire* ("to say"): in the second-person plural form in standard French is *dites*, but in Acadian French it is *disez*; in the third-person plural form in standard French, it is *disent*, but in Acadian French, it is *dison*¹⁹. Another important characteristic of the Acadian French is that the "we" form uses the same pronoun as the "I" form, but the verb is still conjugated in the same way that the "we" verb is conjugated in standard French. For example, to say "we speak" in standard French, it is *nous parlons*, but in Acadian French it is *je parlons* ("I speak", with *speak* being conjugated as if it were with the *nous*

¹⁷ Sylvie Dubois and Carole Salmon, "Étude diachronique du /s/ devant R et L en français cadien dans le parler de quatre générations de femmes cadiennes," *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 9, no. 2 (2006): 196.

¹⁸ Karin Flikeid, "The Integration of Hypercorrect Forms into the Repertoire of an Acadian French Community: The Process and Its Built-In Limits," *Language & Communication* 12, no. 3/4 (1992): 244-245.

¹⁹ Karin Flikeid, "The Integration of Hypercorrect Forms into the Repertoire of an Acadian French Community: The Process and Its Built-In Limits," *Language & Communication* 12, no. 3/4 (1992): 244-245.

pronoun)²⁰. These changes seem extremely bizarre from the perspective of someone who has learned French from a standard French approach, but the Acadian forms are just as much a part of the French language and differ only because of historical differences or because the language developed on its own over time in a way that is different from the way metropolitan French developed.

In conclusion, French has undergone many changes from the time it developed from Vulgar Latin, which was discussed in my previous paper, and the changes that resulted from exploration and colonization that gave rise to different forms of French all over the world, three of which are the French varieties of Quebec, Acadia, and Louisiana studied in this paper. These forms of French are not different enough from each other to qualify as different dialects, but even as accents or other type of regional variety, the linguistic changes can be mapped and documented and differentiations can be made between these different regional forms of French.

²⁰ Karin Flikeid, "The Integration of Hypercorrect Forms into the Repertoire of an Acadian French Community: The Process and Its Built-In Limits," *Language & Communication* 12, no. 3/4 (1992): 244-245.

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