

7 French in the USA

Albert Valdman

Introduction

French is the fourth most common non-English language spoken in the US (Table 1.1).¹ However, it is also one of the four languages among the top twelve that experienced a decline in the number of speakers between 1990 and 2000, and again between 2000 and 2007. This is due to both low levels of immigration of French speakers to the USA and also low rates of intergenerational transmission of the language. This chapter provides a general presentation of French in the USA with a focus on two communities established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that have endured to the present: the New England and Louisianan Franco-American communities, where there still exists some severely limited intergenerational transmission of the local vernacular bolstered by grassroots efforts to maintain and revitalize these varieties. Brief mention will be made of small geographically isolated communities where the local vernacular is moribund. After exploring the history of French in the USA, this chapter provides demographic information about the various communities, the public presence of French, and aspects of language shift and language attrition that affect these various communities.

History

Numerous French place names including Butte, Des Moines, Eau Claire, Terre Haute, and Baton Rouge serve as an eloquent testimony to the former French presence on the territory that forms a large part of the present-day USA. But even though French *coureurs des bois*, (adventurers, hunters, and fur traders) from present-day Québec province criss-crossed much of the territory during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they have left few linguistic traces except for these toponyms.

The major and relatively cohesive present-day francophone communities in the USA spread from two original settlements: New France (part of which is present-day Québec Province) and Acadia (present-day Nova Scotia and New Brunswick). Samuel de Champlain first established a trading post on the tiny

island of Sainte-Croix (in present-day Maine) in 1604. From an original group of seventy-nine settlers, by 1755 the Acadian population had grown to 14,000 residents. That community has had an influence on the expansion of French far greater than its original low demographic weight. Victims of a brutal expulsion from their native land, which their descendants label *le grand dérangement* (the great removal), Acadians were scattered in France, in the West Indies, and in the American colonies. Between 1765 and 1780, about 4,000 Acadians found a permanent refuge in Louisiana which, at that time, was under Spanish rule.

But it is New France that constituted the principal bastion of francophony in North America. The first French settlement in New France was established in 1608 near the present site of Québec City (Québec) by Champlain. In 1642, a second settlement was established at the site of present-day Montréal. It was from the Montréal and Québec regions that expeditions were launched along the Great Lakes region, the Illinois country, and the banks of the Mississippi down to the Gulf of Mexico. Although the colonists of the original French settlement in Louisiana came directly from France rather than down the Mississippi, they were led by a Canadian, Lemoine d'Iberville. It is also from Québec province that the demographic streams, driven by economic hardships, originated, that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries settled in the New England textile mill towns and, to a lesser degree, in the upper Midwest.

Demographics

Three fundamental features distinguish the francophone communities in the USA from other communities such as Spanish speakers. First, current migratory currents bringing francophone speakers to the USA are limited. Second, the presence of standard French (SF),² reinforced by its use in schools, negatively affects the maintenance of indigenous vernacular varieties. Third, in any case, these varieties assume a limited functional role.

With regard to current migratory currents, except for very small numbers of expatriate groups living in the New York area, California, and major cities like Atlanta, Chicago, and Philadelphia, the francophone communities are not renewed by a large and steady flow of immigrants. In 2005, only 4,399 permanent immigrants arrived from France out of a total of 1,122,373 holders of permanent resident cards (Lagarde 2007). To be sure, there are large cohesive Haitian diaspora communities in Boston, the New York area, and southern Florida totaling more than one million persons that are bolstered by new arrivals (Zéphir 2005). But most of these immigrants, especially those newly arriving, are primary speakers of Haitian Creole, not of French.

French migratory currents toward the North American continent, particularly the Canadian part of “New France,” were not substantial. In the late seventeenth and in the eighteenth centuries, French colonial policy favored the plantation

Table 7.1. *Language spoken at home for selected areas: 1990 versus 2000*

State/Region	Census 1990		Census 2000	
	French	French creole	French	French creole
LA	227,376	34,797	194,100	4,470
New England	338,923	18,554	263,125	56,265
NY	183,868	52,208	174,080	114,745
CA	129,986	3,393	134,405	4,105
FL	110,725	83,121	125,650	208,485
TX	57,081	7,233	61,770	3,505
Total	1,047,959	199,306	953,130	391,575
US total	1,701,655	220,626	1,624,030	453,370

Source: US Census Bureau 2000a: Population 5 years and over.

islands of the Caribbean with their potential for lucrative cash crops to the “acres of snow” of Canada referred to by Voltaire. For example, between 1663 and 1679, only 2,000 French migrated to New France (Charbonneau and Guillemette 1994: 163). At the time of the conquest of New France by the English in 1760, its population had reached only 70,000. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, a high birth rate which the French Canadians call *la revanche des berceaux* (the revenge of the cradles) fueled a demographic expansion, and the population of former New France had risen to nearly a million (Thibault 2003: 899). It was this demographic vitality combined with economic difficulties that spurred migration in all directions from the province of Québec.

Beginning in the early 1960s, a new francophone community termed Floribec was established north of Miami by retiring Québécois “snowbirds” fleeing the icy winters of their homeland. This community of about 60,000 retirees, supplemented by Haitian immigrants, accounts for Florida’s standing as the American state with the largest combined francophone and creolophone population. Between 1990 and 2000, there was approximately a 4.5 percent reduction in the number of persons declaring the use of French at home, but a 100 percent increase in the number of those declaring the use of French Creole, as displayed in Table 7.1. Most of the latter are speakers of Haitian Creole living mainly in Florida, New York, and Massachusetts. The figure for French Creole in Louisiana refers most likely to speakers of Louisiana Creole (LC), an indigenous variety differing from Haitian Creole that developed in the early years of the eighteenth century. Research by Klingler (2003) confirms that LC is moribund. The two long-established communities, New England and Louisiana,

Table 7.2. *States with the largest French-speaking populations*

	Ages 5 +	Percentage of all US French speakers
New York	141,017	10.64
Louisiana	129,910	9.80
California	129,454	9.76
Florida	103,095	7.77
Massachusetts	58,308	4.39
Texas	57,992	4.37
Maine	54,599	4.11
Maryland	46,959	3.54
Pennsylvania	42,732	3.22
New Jersey	41,243	3.11
Total in USA	1,355,805	

Source: Modern Language Association 2009, US Census Bureau 2007c.

show sharp declines in the use of French, whereas there are slight increases in California, Florida, and Texas.

Table 7.2 shows the ten states with the largest French-speaking populations. That New England and Louisiana remain the communities with the highest concentration of French speakers is obvious because Louisiana and Maine are near the top of the list, despite having much smaller total populations than some of the other listed states. The relatively high numbers in Florida are also evident, and California can be seen to have a large number of speakers though, with its large population, this accounts for a relatively low concentration.

Vernacular French communities

The six New England states, northern New York state, and south Louisiana (the latter region often referred to as Acadiana or the Francophone Triangle) constitute the bastions of francophony in the USA. It is not so much because of their demographic preponderance – together they account for only about a quarter of US users of French at home – but because they have preserved indigenous vernacular varieties of the language. These varieties are being eroded, primarily by language shift to English, and they show language contact phenomena that will be discussed ahead. The other major concentrations of French speakers are in the New York City area, southern Florida, and southern California, as shown by the cited US Census. Most of the speakers of French in southern Florida are most probably bilingual members of the Haitian diaspora. Some reported home users of French in New York state are also bilinguals of Haitian

Table 7.3. *The complex diglossia of the “Francophone Triangle”*

English <i>Dominant language</i>	Louisiana French <i>Vernacular varieties including Plantation French, Colonial French, Cajun French</i>	Louisiana Creole <i>Lowest level vernacular</i>	Standard French <i>Limited official status</i>
He had a car.	Il avait un char.	Li te gē ē far.	Il avait une voiture.
He was playing when I arrived.	Il était après jouer quand j’ai venu.	Li t ap yue kō mo vini.	Il était en train de jouer quand je suis arrivé.
He would be fishing now if it weren’t raining.	Il serait après pêcher asteur s’il serait pas après mouiller.	Li s ape pefe aster, si la pli se pa tōbe.	Il serait en train de pêcher maintenant s’il ne pleurait pas.

Note: There is no standard spelling for Louisiana Creole. The International Phonetic Alphabet is used here.

origin, and others are members of the expatriate French community. Persons who declare the use of French at home in California are mostly expatriates or relatively recent immigrants from francophone countries (Lindenfeld 2000).

Louisiana

The French presence in Louisiana dates back to the beginning of the eighteenth century when, sailing from France, the Canadian Lemoyne d’Iberville and his brother established settlements first in Mobile, Alabama and Biloxi, Mississippi, then in New Orleans about a decade later, in 1718. It was not until the French ceded Louisiana to Spain in 1763 that the colony experienced a significant demographic increase with, in particular, the arrival of Acadian refugees between 1764 and 1783.

The linguistic situation of Acadiana is characterized by a complex hierarchical diglossic relationship involving four languages: English, the dominant language; standard French (SF), which still has a limited official status and enjoys prestige; vernacular indigenous varieties of French, collectively referred to as Louisiana French (LF); and Louisiana Creole (LC) (Picone and Valdman 2005), as displayed in Table 7.3.

There is no full agreement about the genesis of Louisiana Creole. Evidence suggests that it resulted from the attempt on the part of slaves speaking a variety of African languages to acquire the form of vernacular French (not standard French) spoken by European settlers, indentured servants, military personnel, etc. However, following the Saint-Domingue slave revolt, a large group of French settlers (about 10,000) from that colony arrived in Louisiana with their slaves in 1809.³ This group constituted about 25 percent of the

population of Louisiana at that time. Thus, Saint-Domingue Creole spoken by these immigrants may have influenced the indigenous creole.

As for LF, three vernacular varieties of French are generally recognized: Colonial French, which evolved from the variable usage of the founding period; Plantation French, closer to SF, which reflects the speech of settlers that immigrated directly from France attracted by Louisiana's flourishing economy in the first half of the nineteenth century; and Cajun French, the evolved speech of the original Acadian settlers.⁴ Today, these three varieties are neither neatly localized nor easily distinguishable from one another. The label "Cajun" is generally used to subsume all three because features associated with that variety differ most from corresponding features of SF and, furthermore, it is the best preserved variety because of the relative isolation of its original speakers. For that reason, I will refer to these three varieties globally as Louisiana French (LF). In regions where LC and LF coexist, speakers, both whites and blacks, may frequently switch between them. LF and LC differ primarily at the grammatical level, and they are not mutually intelligible. Also, Louisianans who use these two varieties will often switch between them with the result that a continuum forms between them.

LF is fairly well described. Descriptions include the pioneering study of Conwell and Juilland (1963) and several more recent studies with more solid empirical bases (Brown 1988; Byers 1988; Dubois 2000; Rottet 2001, 2005), the latter focusing on the issue of language shift and loss. The lexical resources of the language, first described in the 1930s (Read 1931; Ditchy 1932), are now well documented by inventories of progressing thoroughness and adherence to standards of lexicographic research (Daigle 1984; Griolet 1986; Lavaud-Grassin 1988; Valdman *et al.* 2009). From a structural viewpoint, two major variables distinguish areas settled by Acadians from other parts of the Franco-phone Triangle: (1) the interrogative pronoun referring to inanimates *qui* (*Qui tu vois?* "What do you see?") that refers only to humans in non-Acadian areas; (2) the third person plural verb ending – *ont* (*ils chantont* /ʃāt-õ/) versus Ø (*ils chantent* /ʃât/) in other parts of Acadiana. At the phonological level, dental and velar stops may be palatalized, as shown by the pronunciation of *cadien* /kadʒẽ/. In the Ville Platte region, in the northern part of Acadiana, /t/ and /d/ are assibilated before high front vowels, as they are in Québec and in most varieties in New England: *tu dis* [tʰydʲi] "you say." In Lafourche parish, in the southern coastal area, the voiced postalveolar fricative /ʒ/ is replaced by the glottal aspirate /h/: *j'ai jamais mangé* /he hame mâhe/ "I never ate." This local particularity reflects an origin in the regional dialects of the western French province of Saintonge.

LF shows features surviving from the speech exported to North American and Caribbean French colonies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, notably the progressive periphrastic structure *être après*, also found today in French regional speech: *je suis après travailler* "I'm working" (*je suis en train*

de travailler).⁵ In comparison to SF, the lexicon of LF shows numerous particularities, some of which are shared with other North American varieties, such as *catin (poupée)* “doll,” *chassis (fenêtre)* “window,” *bessons (jumeaux)* “twins,” *char (voiture, auto)* “car,” *graffigner (égratigner)* “to scratch,” and others that are shared with French-based creoles, notably Haitian Creole: *chérant (cher)* “expensive,” *siau (seau)* “bucket,” *quitter (permettre, laisser)* “to allow,” *rester (habiter)* “to reside.”

New England

An estimated 900,000 immigrants from Québec province and the Maritime Provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick began to stream into New England and northern New York state between 1840 and 1930, attracted by the labor needs of textile mills and shoe factories. In the various mill towns in which they settled, these francophones formed tight-knit self-contained communities, referred to as *Petits Canadas*, served by a Catholic church and a parochial school offering bilingual education. The use of French was also fostered by the establishment of numerous associations, including mutual aid societies, and art and musical clubs, and was enhanced by a wide variety of newspapers and periodicals. But after 1930, various social movements and political events, such as access to higher education on the part of the second and third generations and World War II, eroded the relative self-sufficiency of Franco-American communities and increased the social mobility of their members, who became progressively assimilated into mainstream American society (Miller 1969; Quintal and Cotnoir 1983; Richard 2002).

As pointed out by Fox (2007: 1279), research on the linguistic situation of New England French (NEF) has been sporadic and narrowly focused. Most studies, beginning with Sheldon (1887) and continuing with Locke (1946) have dealt with borrowing and the pronunciation of small numbers of speakers. Although beginning in the 1990s there appeared articles resting on more solid empirical grounds and dealing with morphosyntactic and lexical issues (Charbonneau 1997; Fox 1998; Russo and Roberts 1999), there exist neither major descriptions of the structure nor documentation of the lexical particularities of the various local varieties of NEF comparable to what has been accomplished in Acadiana. A major collaborative project undertaken by the State University of New York at Albany and the University of Maine has begun to fill the many gaps in our knowledge (Fox and Smith 2005; Fox 2007). That study focuses on eight communities, half in northern New England and half in southern New England, differing with regard to the proportion of speakers declaring francophone ancestry and use of French at home (Table 7.4).

Table 7.4. *Use of French at home in eight New England communities*

		French ancestry (%)	Use of French at home	
			1990 (%)	2000 (%)
North	Van Buren, ME	82	76	75
	Berlin, NH	65	38	32
	Biddeford, ME	60	32	21
	Waterville, ME	39	13	8
South	Woonsocket, RI	55	20	10
	Gardner, MA	37	10	5
	Southbridge, CT	41	9	5
	Bristol, MA	24	7	5

Source: Fox and Smith 2005.

The high level of use and retention of French in Van Buren, located in the Upper Saint John River Valley that borders New Brunswick, Canada, stems from the constant contact with French speakers across the border (Price 2007). Elsewhere, despite the sizeable proportion of persons declaring French ancestry, Table 7.4 shows a sharp decline in the use of the language. Fox and Smith (2005: 123) posit two geographical axes determining variation in the speech of these communities resulting from patterns of migration: a north/south axis characterized by the level of English influence, greater in the South than in the North; an east/west axis wherein eastern varieties are more likely to show features associated with Acadian French, such as the palatalization of velar stops before front vowels.

Francophone isolates

There exist a number of francophone isolates in the USA in addition to these two primary bastions of francophony, which cannot be examined in detail here due to space constraints. Nonetheless, they provide valuable insight into the use of French in the USA and deserve mention. The nature of the French imported into North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – Colonial French – may be inferred from local varieties experiencing severe language loss in Old Mines, Missouri (Dorrance 1935; Carrière 1937; McDermott 1941; Thogmartin 1970, 1979; Thomas 1981), and Red Lake Falls, Minnesota (Benoit 1975, 1988; Creagh 1988; Papen 2005). A related variety imported from the islet of Saint Barth, a dependency of Guadeloupe, in the late nineteenth century exists in a section of the harbor called *carénage* or Cha-Cha French-town in Charlotte-Amalie, the main town of Saint Thomas, in the US Virgin Islands (Highfield 1979; Calvet and Chaudenson 1998). A variety of French

historically distinct from Colonial French was introduced in the central Pennsylvania hamlet of Frenchville by settlers from eastern areas of France in the mid-nineteenth century (Caujolle 1972; Uritescu and Mougeon 2003; Bullock and Gerfen 2004). Another isolate, Valdese, North Carolina, features a variety of Occitan (southern French dialects), the vernacular language of Waldensian settlers from the mountainous western part of Piedmont, Italy (T. G. Pons 1973; C. R. Pons 1990). Valdman (1979) provides further details on these varieties.

Public presence of French

Media

Though not nearly as omnipresent as Spanish-language media, there are important sources of francophone media in the USA. In New England in 1937, there were twenty-one French-language newspapers and four monthly publications (Ham 1938). At present, the only existing periodical in that region is the *Forum*, published quarterly by the Franco-American Center at the University of Maine, which contains articles in French and English. In Louisiana, Centenary College publishes *Tintamarre* which, although it is widely distributed in the Francophone Triangle, appears irregularly. The newspaper *France-Amérique*, published twice monthly in New York, provides French-language news coverage to an estimated 60,000 readers. It is the largest US-based French-language newspaper and is also the international version of *Le Figaro*, a daily newspaper in France. Interestingly, the French-medium print media outlets with the broadest impact are two weekly newspapers serving the Haitian diaspora, *Haiti Progrès* and *Haiti en Marche*, most of whose articles are in French rather than Haitian Creole. For example, of the twenty pages of *Haiti en Marche*, only one contains material in Haitian Creole.

For the two indigenous francophone communities, radio stations appear to be the main French language media vectors. In New England, WNRI in Woonsocket broadcasts two programs on weekends totaling five hours. In Louisiana, access to French via the airwaves is far easier. For example, KRVS, the Lafayette public radio station, provides thirty hours weekly of material in LF and LC and one hour in SF. Ten hours weekly of SF and LF programs are broadcast by KBON and KEUN (Eunice), KVPI (Ville Platte), and KLRZ (Lafourche parish) and two hours weekly by WWNO (New Orleans), WYNK (Baton Rouge), and KSCL (Shreveport). With regard to television, three Lafayette stations, Channel 3, Channel 10, and the Cox Cable Acadiana Open Channel provide access to weather information and some news on a regular basis. However, it seems that most people in Louisiana are exposed to French and local culture, particularly Cajun music, via the internet, particularly

Radio CODOFIL, Radio Louisiane, and the site of the French consulate in New Orleans.⁶

Education

In New England, until the 1960s, schooling largely took place in parochial schools and the language of instruction was French. At that time, many parochial schools closed due to a variety of external forces, and francophone students entered the public school system, many facing difficulty because use of French was stigmatized and punished (Hagel 1981; Jacobson 1984). In Louisiana, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, parochial school, whose main language of instruction was French, did not reach the majority of speakers of LF relatively isolated in the bayous and marsh areas, among whom the rate of illiteracy remained high. The constitution of 1921 instituted English as the sole language of instruction in all of Louisiana, and Cajuns of that generation who had to write numerous times “I shall not speak French on the school grounds” were shamed into not passing on to their children a stigmatized tongue (Ancelet 1988). Following the enactment of the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, the language maintenance or transitional programs it funded were stretched in both New England and Louisiana to attempt to rejuvenate the eroding vernacular French varieties and LC.

The most striking difference between these two bastions of US francophony is the depth and intensity of discussion about which variety of French should be taught. As Ancelet (1988) stresses, after World War II, Cajun soldiers whose knowledge of their community language translated into positive experiences in France contributed to a revalorization of their language and culture. Perceiving the advantage for the tourist industry of a revived competence in French, James Domengeaux, an influential Lafayette lawyer and former US congressman, persuaded the Louisiana legislature to establish and fund the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). Interestingly, the original mission of CODOFIL was defined as: “do any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization, and preservation of *the French language as found in Louisiana* (emphasis mine) for the cultural, economic and touristic benefit of the state.” The mission was later changed to the development of French *in Louisiana*.

Proclaiming *L'école a détruit le français, l'école doit reconstruire le français* (Schools destroyed French, schools must rebuild French), CODOFIL launched a massive program for the teaching of SF at the elementary school level throughout the state. Because most Louisianan elementary teachers lacked proficiency in SF, CODOFIL began importing French, Belgian, and Québécois instructors, referred to collectively as the “International Brigades.” But another slogan of CODOFIL announced *Tu sauves la langue, tu sauves la culture* (You save the

language, you save the culture). This strategy triggered a reaction from local Cajun activists who failed to see how an imported variety not mastered by most Franco-Louisianans could revive their culture. They prepared materials for the teaching of LF for use at school and, especially, at university levels (Faulk 1977; Abshire-Fontenot and Barry 1979) or those focusing on SF but incorporating features of LF (Gelhay 1985). For example, the latter author provides matching SF and LF lexical equivalents, for example, *fenêtre* and *chassis*, respectively, for “window.” Except for Faulk, who devised an autonomous spelling difficult to decipher for users of SF, Cajun activists wisely adhered to the conventional French spelling but retained local grammatical and lexical particularities (Ancelet 1993).

In high school French courses and in immersion programs, the introduction of LC and LF is hampered by the dearth of native Louisianan teachers mastering these varieties. Tornquist (2000) found that of 110 instructors teaching in immersion programs in Acadiana only three were Louisiana natives and twenty eight were naturalized residents of the state. On the other hand, one detects among all teachers a growing interest in local language and culture that translates into the introduction of LF in the classroom. In addition, local universities, in particular Louisiana State University, have introduced classes in LF as an option for fulfilling the language requirement.⁷

Regarding the teaching of French as a foreign language, of the 1.4 million students in US colleges and universities studying a foreign language in fall 2006, 13 percent (more than 200,000) were studying French, making it the second most popular language of study after Spanish (Modern Language Association 2007). This number is up 2.2 percent since 2002. French is also the second most studied language at the secondary level, with 8 percent of language students choosing French, for a total enrollment of more than 1 million (National Center for Education Statistics 2002b). There are also ninety total or partial French immersion programs in the USA spread among many states, of which twenty seven, the largest number in any state, are located in Louisiana (Center for Applied Linguistics 2006a).

Religion

The Catholic church has played an important role in the history of French in the USA. The intimate link between Catholicism and the French language is symbolized by the motto *Qui perd sa langue, perd sa foi* (Losing one’s language is losing one’s faith). From the first waves of francophone immigration until the 1960s in New England, the church played a particularly important role in the maintenance of French. Brault (1972) notes that Catholicism was integral in defining Franco-American identity in New England, and Fox (1995) claims that francophone communities centered on the church, which offered services in

French and ran parochial schools where the language of instruction was French. As parochial schools lost influence and closed in the 1970s, though, this impact waned. In Acadiana, French-speaking priests were no longer replaced and the Catholic church moved toward the exclusive use of English in religious services (Ancelet 1988).

Evidence of language shift to English and of French maintenance

Signs of shift

Few speakers of vernacular varieties of French in the USA do not possess competence in English as well. In fact, around 92 percent of Census respondents who speak French at home claim to speak English “well” or “very well” (US Census Bureau 2007c). Bilingualism, which entails a high level of language contact, leads to borrowing, calquing, and code-switching, phenomena amply discussed in Chapter 2 of this volume. Moreau (2000) suggests that in a bilingual situation, these phenomena may also reflect a conscious choice on the part of speakers, akin to the switching between styles and registers. For example, for a speaker of LF, the use of *elle est gone à la grocery* instead of SF *elle est allée à l'épicerie* (she went to the grocery store) may stem from a conscious choice that has sociolinguistic significance. The period during which a form adopted from the dominant language is considered external may be relatively short, as is attested by the rapid grammatical assimilation of borrowings. For example, in Red Lake Falls French, the inflections for plural on nouns and the past participle of verbs are eliminated in loanwords: *les farms* /farm/ rather than /farmz/ and *self propel* rather than *self propelled*. Picone (1996) interprets such accommodations, which often result in forms that differ from both the external language and the home language, as part of an intercode from which bilingual speakers may draw to enrich their vocabulary or effect stylistic distinctions. For example, in the LF sentence *Ils voulaient check sur la situation* “They wanted to check out the situation,” the verb *check* is neither assimilated to SF, *ils voulaient checker*, nor does it preserve the correct English form, *ils voulaient to check*.

Borrowing is predictable when speakers of French vernaculars which have evolved in a rural context are exposed to terms absent from the traditional culture. For example, in Frenchville French, which lacks the word *usine*, speakers have adopted *factory*.⁸ Calques, on the other hand, involve expressing a concept from English with vocabulary from French, resulting in expressions that are often not comprehensible to nonbilinguals. For example, in Old Mines French, Thogmartin (1979: 116) notes the use of *courir* modeled on the polysemous verb *to run* instead of SF *opérer* [*une machine*] “to run a machine,” *tenir* [*un magasin*] “to run a store” and the compound *to run out of* for *manquer de*:

Table 7.5. *Use of French varieties in Louisiana*

	Age group				
	0–19	20–29	30–44	45–64	≥65
	N = 14	N = 56	N = 128	N = 176	N = 147
Louisiana Creole (%)	7.1	5.3	8.5	10.8	8.8
Cajun French (%)	35.5	57.2	57	58.5	59.2
Standard French (%)	57.1	37.5	34.4	30.7	32

Source: Henry 1994.

il[s] ont couru ennehors de sel “they ran out of salt” (*ils ont manqué de sel*), *i’courait une groc’rie* “he ran a grocery store” (*il tenait une épicerie*).

Code-switching involves inserting multiword segments from the external language into sentences of the home language. Clear-cut examples are offered by New England French (NEF) *What for you m’a vendu une hache non-garantie?* “sold me an ax not guaranteed” (Locke 1946: 420), and Frenchville French *Oh, it’s better for you, well, I come up on sixty-three, il y a vingt-cinq ans* “25 years ago” (Caujolle 1972). But it is often difficult to distinguish between one-word code-switches and borrowings, for example, LF: *On communiquait sur le shortwave, sur le radio, FM frequency, on parlait en français sur l’air* “We used to communicate on the shortwave radio, FM frequency, we spoke in French on the air.”

It is a truism that the survival of language varieties fundamentally depends on their transmission through communicative networks anchored in daily use in the home. For all US francophone communities, there is scant intergenerational transmission of vernacular varieties of French. In a study conducted in thirty-five Acadiana communities in which subjects were asked which language they spoke better, Trépanier (1993) found that French was chosen by 41 percent of the young adults, compared to 92 percent for their grandparents, 84 percent for their parents, and only 3 percent for their children. Also in Louisiana, the only community for which solid data exist, there appears to be considerable use of LF on the part of older speakers but, a shift to SF on the part of the younger generation; see Table 7.5 (Henry 1994).⁹

LF and NEF became endangered with the onset of modernization of the US, especially after World War II. In New England, as the textile industry moved to the southern states, Franco-Americans left the *Petits Canadas* to seek broader economic opportunities, and they had greater access to higher levels of education conducted exclusively in English. In Louisiana, with the economic boom triggered by the development of the oil industry, Cajuns progressively abandoned traditional occupations that involved close social networks, such as

Table 7.6. *Forms of the third person plural subject pronoun + verb in LF*

	ils: total (%)	eux-aut' (%)	eusse (%)	ça (%)
55+	27	31	33	9
30–54	5	14	66	15
<30	1.5	1.5	79	19

Source: Adapted from Rottet 2001.

farming, ranching, fishing, trapping, and fiber crafts, as well as cultural events based on cooperation with neighbors, such as *boucheries* (slaughtering cattle and sharing the meat) and *bals de maison* or *fais-dodo* (dances organized in the home).

Because of their limited intergenerational transmission, vernacular varieties of French in the USA are experiencing severe attrition which, ultimately, is leading to their loss of true functional value and is threatening their survival. They also show features of language attrition whose study proves difficult for the vernaculars spoken in most of the isolates because the lack of sufficient data gathered over an extended period of time makes impossible the comparison of language structures over several generations. But the more thorough and revealing studies conducted in the two US communities where some intergenerational transmission still perdures, New England and Louisiana, have yielded robust data, particularly in the case of the latter community (Rottet 2001).

Language attrition is often accompanied by a reduction of stylistic variation. Research on this phenomenon in LF (Rottet 2001, 2005) has shown that extensive variation in the pronominal and verbal systems tends to be reduced among younger speakers with limited competence in the vernacular. The excerpt below produced by an older LF fluent speaker reveals four variants of the third person plural pronoun and verb form:

Mais sho', eux-autes serait contents, tu les appelle 'oir, parce que ça travaille tard, eusse a ein grand jardin en arrière, et ils travaillent tard, des fois ils sont tard dans la maison, so tu peux les appeler quand-ce que/ oir équand tu pourrais les prendre. (Rottet 2001)

(But, sure, they would be happy, you call to see them, because they work late, they have a large field in back, and they work late, at times they are (come back) late at the house, so you may call them to see when you can get them.)

As Table 7.6 indicates, there is a decrease in the number of variants directly related to age group: whereas older speakers use three forms with nearly the same frequency, the youngest groups have narrowed down the variants to one, *eusse*. Younger speakers, who are in fact semispeakers rather than fluent

speakers, possess a more limited repertoire of forms that could be used potentially to effect stylistic shifts.¹⁰

Signs of maintenance

Because the LF community is more cohesive, it has been possible to launch initiatives for the preservation and renaissance of the traditional culture. The combined action of educators and researchers, at the school and university levels, combined with the reorientation of the policy of CODOFIL, now staffed by Cajun activists, toward valorizing local varieties of French, have had a positive effect on the maintenance of LF. Of particular importance has been the rejuvenation of Cajun culture, particularly in the musical and culinary spheres. It has contributed to a grassroots movement toward the valorization of that culture and attracted tourists from francophone countries, thus providing native Louisianans an incentive for maintaining or re-acquiring a mastery of French. Of particular importance in efforts for the revalorization and maintenance of LF is the production of literary works (Gravelles 1979; Ancelet 1988).

It has been more difficult for New England Franco-American activists, scattered across six states, to launch a cohesive set of initiatives. In 1947, leaders of various organizations and representative of some postsecondary institutions (but not the prestigious Ivy League universities) founded the Comité de la Vie Franco-Américaine (Committee for Franco-American Life) designed to coordinate the activities of member associations (Quintal and Cotnoir 1983). The initiatives of these associations were generally top-down, and failed to generate the type of grassroots support enjoyed by Cajun activists (Richard 2002). They tended to stress the historical and culture link with Québec province (Brault 1986). One of the more successful initiatives of the Comité was to persuade state legislatures to create local commissions for the promotion of Franco-American culture. The New Hampshire Commission attempted to launch the CODOFINE (Council for the Development of French in New England) on the model of the CODOFIL, but without success because of the lack of funds (Quintal and Cotnoir 1983). The film *Réveil* (Levine 2003) documents other French revitalization efforts in this part of the USA.

The question of French-language maintenance among the francophone African communities in the USA has only barely begun to be addressed. Current research in Chicago (Cornell 2008) has found that many African-origin immigrants studying at local universities find ways to use French to their professional advantage. It remains unclear to what degree French survives in these communities by way of intergenerational transmission. Upon arrival in the USA, parents who were educated in French and speak one or more regional language from their native country in Africa must choose how often and in what situations to use which languages with their children. Perhaps they choose English, the new

language of their children's education, or they try to pass on the French they learned in school, or they use the regional language(s) they grew up speaking.

Language and identity

Attitudes toward SF and local varieties constitute a major factor in the use and maintenance of French in Louisiana and New England. Fox (2007) reports that some speakers are intimidated when confronted with SF, whereas others are reluctant to converse with interlocutors whose speech they perceive as marked by vernacular features, such as the use of /we/ for /wa/ in the pronouns *moi* "me" and *toi* "you" (/mwe/, twe/ versus SF /mwa/, /twa/, respectively). Particularly negatively marked are borrowing and code-switching. On the other hand, many fluent speakers do not consider that these strategies affect the quality of their speech, as is demonstrated by the following excerpt (Fox 2007: 1289):

Parfois elle mêlait des mots d'anglais avec des mots de français pis quand j'essayais de la corriger elle me reprochait "je parle un aussi bon français que vous hein parce que j'ai étudié avec les Sœurs de la Présentation quand j'étais jeune."

(Sometimes she would mix English with French words and when I tried to correct her, she reproached me "I speak as good a French as you, you know, because I studied with the sisters of the Presentation Order when I was young.")

Although SF is the preferred variety in most of New England, in areas such as the Upper Saint John Valley where Québécois and Acadian French are available, either from the media or Canadians, the latter varieties tend to be preferred (Price 2007).

With the decrease of the use of French at home, schools constitute a primary vector for the maintenance of French. The crucial factor in the debate about the choice between SF and local vernacular varieties in school programs is the attitude of parents. In a survey involving about 800 parents of pupils in immersion programs in Acadiana, Tornquist (2000) reports that, although most favored the use of SF, these parents, most of whom do not possess competence in the local vernaculars, nonetheless are prepared to accept the use of these varieties in the classroom provided that SF remains the main target; see [Tables 7.7](#) and [7.8](#).

Conclusion

In the absence of constant demographic renewal, the presence of French in the USA is expected to diminish. The considerable increase in speakers of Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, and Russian in the USA between 1990 and 2000 and between 2000 and 2007 shown in [Table 1.1](#) is due to recent immigration. In comparison, the flow of primary immigrants from France or other

Table 7.7. *Parental opinions on teaching local vernaculars*

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Teach LF	45	19
Teach LC	38	21

Source: Adapted from Tornquist 2000.

Table 7.8. *Parental opinions on the variety of French they would like their children to speak*

Variety (or varieties)	Percentage
SF	38
SF+LF	29
LF	10
LC	2
SF+LF+LC	9

Source: Adapted from Tornquist 2000.

French-speaking regions is negligible. Although immigration from Haiti is significant and will no doubt continue, these immigrants are primarily speakers of Haitian Creole, not French. Their linguistic impact is reflected by a nearly 100 percent increase of speakers of that language between 1990 and 2000, as noted in Table 7.1. But the small proportion of habitual users of French in that diaspora cannot be expected to have any significant impact on the maintenance of French. The low level of intergenerational transmission in New England and south Louisiana is leading to serious attrition of the endogenous varieties of French. At best, in these two traditional bastions of francophony in the USA, there might be an increase in school acquirers of SF. However, there are hopeful signs, especially in Louisiana where there is a valorization of the indigenous vernacular varieties as part of an educational strategy focusing on the teaching of SF in schools.

From a scholarly perspective, the study of indigenous vernacular varieties of French is of particular interest for specialists in the language sciences. It contributes to a better understanding of the various interrelated phenomena that language shift triggers (such as borrowing, calquing, and code-switching) as well as of language attrition and loss. For specialists in French studies, it makes it possible to reconstruct the varieties of French exported to the American

colonies and, given that they evolved independently of SF, they reveal the evolutionary tendencies of spoken French. US vernacular varieties also serve as repositories for linguistic forms and structures that have been eliminated in France by the diffusion of SF and the resultant elimination of regional dialects.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast the prospects for French maintenance and shift in the two primary endogenous francophone communities in New England and Louisiana. Which factors are the same and which are different? Do you think differences in the situations of these communities will differentially impact the maintenance of French?
 2. How do status and ideology play a role in language maintenance or shift? Specifically, consider the case of standard French (SF) versus vernacular varieties in US francophone communities. Why do parents in Louisiana want their children to speak SF, a variety that they themselves do not speak? What does this augur for maintenance of LF and LC? How have community activists approached the issue of status? Can you think of similar situations in other communities?
-