Professor Carl Blyth teaching his Cajun culture class.

Cajun culture
Advocate staff photos by Lori Weiselchuk

Carl Blyth dances with Andrea Saunders, a student in his class, at a Cajun dance. The students are learning the two-step as part of their education about the Cajun culture.

Professor hopes course keeps French alive in La.

By MAURY LANDRY

It's always been possible to take French at LSU, then travel to Paris, Quebec or Casablanca and make yourself understood. Now, you can take French at LSU, travel to Abbeville, Pierre Part or Kaplan and get the same results!

In French 4065, "Louisiane: Les Cadiens et les Creoles," Professor Carl Blyth takes students through the history of the Cajun/Creole French language and culture that includes personal experience with its people and customs.

"It's a senior-level class although I have accepted people in the class who are not French majors," says Blyth. "I have students from all over the university — engineering, business, English majors. They take it because they're personally interested. For lack of a better cliche, they want to find out about their roots."

Blyth has a Ph.D. in linguistics from Cornell University and his specialty is sociolinguistics. "That means how language is used in a social setting — how it changes over time and how it varies with different classes and ethnic groups," he says. Blyth's dissertation was on the Canadian Quebecois and Acadian dialects. When he was interviewing for jobs, a position in Louisiana was a natural.

"When I was finishing my dissertation in Montreal, my wife and I sat down and I asked her to list the four places where she wished I could get a job and I did the same thing. We both put Louisiana at the top of the list." (A temperature that night of 20 below in Montreal was only a contributing factor in their decision, he says.) The study of Cajun French, says Blyth, is a wide open field.

"There's been little linguistic work done on Louisiana French," he adds. "A lot of research on folklore and history but very little scholarship on the linguistic aspects of Cajun French. You can go to the library and find old-fashioned grammars, but they're not written by linguists, they're mostly just a labor of love by different people."

"This place is a laboratory for me," Blyth says of South Louisiana. "I'm interested in language obsolescence or language death. That's what's happening to Cajun French. The same thing is happening to languages all over the world, he says.

"Languages are disappearing now at a faster rate than at any other time in the world's history," Blyth points out, adding "it's ironic that French is dying. It's a major world language. Most of the languages that are dying off are small dialects, but it's a minority dialect here."

When he talks about the factors that bring about the end of a language, it "makes a lot of people uncomfortable," says Blyth. "I talk about language shift, how cultural changes come about in a community, the role of the schools, the role of the government." Sociolinguistic studies show that television plays only a small role in the death of language, says Blyth.

"It has to do with notions of wanting to fit into a community, wanting to..."
be part of an ascending or dominant group, or conversely, not wanting to be part of a stigmatized group which of course is the case with Cajun history."

Linguistic minorities face a constant pressure to assimilate.

If a natural death is claiming a language, why not just let nature take its course?

"If you look at it only from the perspective of political efficiency, then you can make a case for monolingualism," says Blyth. "But people are always trying to find a way to identify themselves within a large group. It's a good idea politically to have a standard language that serves as a lingua franca so we can all communicate but that does not eliminate the need to express ethnic, regional or racial identity."

Blyth likes to make an analogy between linguistics and biology, and points out that species, too, are dying out at a faster rate than ever before in the earth's history.

"Linguistic and cultural diversity is important. We can learn things about ourselves from different cultures and the same is true of studying different languages. We can learn a lot about the human mind by studying different languages."

Blyth is hopeful that his efforts as well as those of other Cajun French language preservationists across the state will help the French language and culture remain intact in Louisiana.

"I think there has been a real change about cultural attitudes," says Blyth, "that does not mean the French language will make a huge revival. I don't share a lot of the optimism that the language will make a big comeback. Within the movement, you find a real range, from those who are extremely optimistic, to those who are completely pessimistic."

"By all indicators, it's pretty clear that most of our efforts of education and promoting the language have not been very successful. Even though there has been a cultural consciousness-raising, it has not led to a regeneration of French-speaking," he continues.

"Where are the kids hanging out in the mall speaking French?" he asks.

"That's not to say that French can't live on in some kind of vestige or form. It will always be in evidence here," Blyth says. Blyth does see an increased desire on the part of Louisianians to learn French as a second language. Learning a little bit of French, he feels, is a way for Louisianians to pay homage to their cultural background.

In his course, Blyth tries to get his students to improve their comprehension of spoken Cajun French and they study the differences between Cajun French and other varieties of French. He uses videos and tapes and has his students go out to interview Cajun French speakers.

"My ulterior motive is to get them in contact with Cajun speakers so they can improve their French," he says.

Blyth hopes to be able to offer the course every year or every other year. The class has already caught the attention of the Cable News Network, which came and filmed the group in September as part of a documentary on Cajun culture and lifestyle. The feature is scheduled to air on CNN Newsroom at the end of this month.